**HOW TO CONDUCT NARRATIVE INQUIRY**

by Simon Moss

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| **Introduction** |

Narrative inquiry, also called narrative analysis, is not actually one specific approach but a diversity of approaches. However, all these approaches revolve around stories, called narratives.

**Two main kinds of narrative inquiry**

Researchers often distinguish two main kinds of narrative inquiry. The following table summarises these two main kinds. The first kind revolves around analysing the stories people recount. The second kind revolves around constructing stories from various sources of data.

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| Kind | Details |
| **Analysis of narratives**: The researcher analyses people’s stories | Stories may be derived from diaries, autobiographies, letters, photos, or interviews about the lives of various people |
| **Narrative reasoning**. The researcher constructs a narrative from data about some phenomenon | Rather than analyse stories, the researcher, in essence, derives stories from interviews, observations, documents, or other forms of data to represent some topic, event, or phenomenon. |

But, even within these two kinds, the approaches that researchers utilize vary dramatically. For example, when analysing narratives, some researchers primarily direct their attention to the features of stories, such as how negative events tend to follow positive events. Other researchers primarily direct their attention to the motives, feelings, and insights of participants—that is, the meaning of these stories instead of merely the structure.

**What is a narrative?**

In short, when researchers conduct narrative inquiry, they analyse or construct narratives. But what is a narrative or story? How does a narrative or story differ from other data or descriptions of data?

In essence, a narrative or story entails two key features. In particular

* the narrative describes some experience over time. That is, the narrative captures the sequence of events or changes in the life of a person or collective over time
* the narrative relates the experience of individuals to the context, setting, or circumstances of the culture or environment.

To illustrate, in many qualitative methodologies, including narrative inquiry, the researcher will interview participants—such as people who have experienced an important event, such as a civil war. However, when researchers conduct narrative inquiry, instead of some other approach, the interview is different. Rather than ask a series of specific questions, the researcher will typically prompt the participants to recount their story about some facet of their lives (Sarantakos 1998). The following table differentiates the narrative interview from other interviews.

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| Narrative interviews | Typical structured or semi-structured interviews |
| When you are ready, tell me the whole story about how you became a model. | What are the benefits of being a model?  What are the drawbacks of being a model?  Why did you become a model?  How has modelling changed your life? |

**Why is narrative inquiry important?**

According to proponents of narrative inquiry, this methodology is important because people utilize stories and narratives to understand and guide their lives. Therefore, learning about their stories and narratives helps researchers appreciate the thoughts and perspectives of people that explain their choices and lives.

In addition, narratives are utilized to sustain cultures. Stories help communities remember important events in the past, demonstrate morals and values, and engage the members. Therefore, narrative inquiry can be utilized to understand how cultures evolve over time.

**Is narrative inquiry prevalent?**

Narrative inquiry is becoming increasingly prevalent in many fields of research, especially in the social sciences and health (e.g., Gorman & Toombs 2009; Lai 2010; Mattos; 2009; Pepper & Wildy 2009). For example, narrative inquiry has been utilised to appreciate

* the experiences of children as they learn to resist temptations and mature
* how and why the personality, character, and attributes of people change over their lives
* how social movements developed over time

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| **Should I utilize narrative inquiry?** |

To decide whether you could utilize narrative inquiry—either as the primary methodology or as a complement to your other approaches—you should appreciate some of the advantages and disadvantages of this perspective. The following table outlines these advantages and disadvantages.

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| Advantages | Disadvantages or complexities |
| **A fuller perspective**. The researcher can appreciate how the experiences and decisions of participants are related to previous events and the surrounding circumstances. Hence, the researchers can really value and understand the perspective of other people (Gorman & Toombs 2009; Pepper & Wildy, 2009) | **Challenging**. Narrative inquiry is challenging because the researcher needs to be able to understand and report the context and circumstances in which the story evolved. |
| **An accurate perspective.**  People construct stories to guide their choices and understanding of reality. Therefore, to appreciate the experiences, choices, and assumptions of individuals and cultures, the researcher needs to understand their stories | **Collaborative**. Usually, narrative inquiry is a collaboration between the researchers and participants: The participants might often contribute to the analysis. Researchers who do not collaborate effectively and tolerate changing perspectives may not enjoy this approach |
| **Improves dissemination of experiences**. The narratives and stories of participants are interesting to readers. Consequently, narrative inquiry enables researchers to disseminate their research in a way that will interest many people (Chilisa 2011). |  |
| **Powerful for participants**. The participants in these studies are granted more opportunities to direct the course of conversation and research (Gorman & Toombs 2009). So, narrative inquiry is more empowering for participants. |  |
| **Wellbeing for participants**. The opportunity for participants to relate their stories can enhance wellbeing; when distinct upsetting events are integrated into a story, the emotional impact of these events dissipates (Pepper & Wildy 2009). |  |

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| **Collection of data** |

Like all research, to apply narrative inquiry, researchers start with a research question—perhaps a problem they want to solve or a phenomenon they want to understand. For example, the researcher might want to understand how people chose to become models. They might then identify the people, organizations, or communities they want to study. This section discusses the next step—how to collect the data. For example, researchers may

* conduct narrative interviews in which they ask participants to tell their story about some facet of their lives--such as a mental disorder, a life choice, or a hobby—that is relevant to the research question
* collate written descriptions, such as diaries, autobiographies, or letters
* complement this information with observations, photos, and other artefacts to understand the context better

To construct an honest, comprehensive, and insightful narrative, researchers tend to apply a range of practices. The following table outlines these practices.

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| How to collect data effectively | Details and justifications |
| Begin with a general question or two, such as “Tell me the story about how you…”. | * If you ask more specific questions at the beginning, you might impose your own preconceptions on the topic (Pringle et al.,2011) * Later you might be able to ask a few additional questions to clarify the narrative   To illustrate, you could ask   * why is this object or event so important to you? * how do you feel about the circumstance now? * what else was happening at that time for you? * why did you reach this choice? * and so forth |
| In many circumstances, you should develop rapport before you start the interviews or before you record their answers | * You could spend time with your participants to understand their lives better * This phase is vital if your culture differs appreciably from your participant’s culture |
| With each participant, you should often conduct the interview over several sessions—perhaps across a few weeks or months | * This procedure may enable participants to develop and clarify their story over time |
| At the beginning each of session, you could summarise the discussion in the previous section | * This reminder facilitates the continuity of these stories and narratives * Participants might not entirely agree with the summary and can thus clarify their story. |
| Depending on the underlying philosophy or purpose of your research, you might also want to record nonverbal cues as well, such as tone, facial expressions, and mannerisms |  |

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| **Analysis of data** |

To analyse the data, researcher can apply range of approaches. In general, the researcher will often but not always

* transcribe the interview or other data
* assign segments of data, such as sentences, to codes or symbols
* integrate these codes to generate relevant themes or features

The following table outlines a sample of these approaches. These approaches are typically designed to separate extraneous details from the key insights, called narrative smoothing (Polkinghorne, 1995).

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| Techniques or methods to analyse data | Examples of details |
| **Thematic analysis**—as illustrated by Braun and Clarke (2006). The researcher extracts key themes from the data | * Initially, reduce many of the sentences or ideas into specific codes like “spoke to friend” * Then, integrate these codes to generate broader themes—often concepts, categories, theories, and perspectives that underlie the choices and behaviors of individuals * Some themes might be “dissociation between my reputation and self-perception” or “Variation of confidence across settings” |
| **Chronological organization** (Polkinghorne, 1995). The researcher attempts to clarify how the story is shaped by the context—the culture, circumstances, history, and people in the environment—often chronologically | * Each story usually includes a beginning in which the circumstances are clarified, a middle in which a conflict or change unfolds, and an end in which the participants experience some resolution * Hence, as the researchers read the transcripts, they attempt to extract these key parts, such as the beginning, middle, end, and effects of context |
| **Functional approach (Bruner, 1991)**. The researcher focusses more on the function of these stories—that is, how the stories help people understand their lives and how the stories guide their choices. | * The researcher might strive to explore the random, unpredictable, and chaotic events that participants experienced * The researcher could then consider how the story helped people unify these events into a coherent story—and how this coherent story shaped a sense of purpose and influenced the goals and decisions of individuals |
| **Synchronic Organization (**Labov, 1972**).** The researcher attempts to identify several common narrative features: what the story is about, the circumstances—that is, the time, location, and people involved—a complication, the impact of this complication, and the upshot or outcome |  |

In narrative inquiry, the researcher often collaborates with the participants—sometimes individuals but sometimes in teams—to code the data and identify themes or other features (Reid et al. 2005). The benefit is that participants can

* delete material they feel is irrelevant or inaccurate
* elaborate on the material
* correct any misconceptions of the researcher

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| **Writing the narrative** |

The techniques that researchers use to report these narratives also vary. For example

* Some researchers like to write a report that resembles a fictional short story or a biography
* In contrast, other researchers like to write a report that resembles a scientific paper, in which each theme is discussed in a separate section, rather than integrated into a story

In most instances, the researcher is attempting to capture the perspective of participants, something like an autobiography. However, unlike an autobiography

* the researchers write in third person, such as “David felt that…”, and
* the researchers appreciate their own preconceptions about the world will bias these narratives inadvertently.

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| **Underlying philosophy and theoretical perspective** |

When researchers apply narrative inquiry, they can adopt a variety of philosophical and theoretical perspectives. Nevertheless, most researchers in this field adopt a few assumptions in common

* rather than attempt to extract one truth, the aim of narrative inquiry is to construct a coherent account that closely represents the words of participants
* these stories that people construct, rather than only tangible behaviour, are regarded as worthy of investigation
* many events, including the mental state of individuals and behaviour of researches, shape the stories that people tell
* stories help people understand their lives, despite the complexity and ambiguity of experiences

Excellent narrative research tends to be

* credible: that is, the experiences, decisions, relationship, and culture seem real and truthful
* powerful: that is, the story often evokes strong emotions in readers
* insightful; that is, the story uncovers some interesting paradoxes and complexities of life
* reflective: that is, the author has demonstrated sensitivity to their biases, the ethics of this research, and the challenge of attempting to recount another person’s stories.
* pleasing: that is, the narrative is engaging, interesting, and nuanced.
* informative; that is, after reading this narrative, the reader feels they have learned something about social life and human nature

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