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Narrative Inquiry

Key words: Collaboration, Dewey, Experience, Narrative authority, Narrative ethics, Negotiation, Place, Relational research, Research puzzle, Response communities, Sociality, Story, Temporality, Tensions, Thinking narratively

Abstract: Narrative inquiry, a relatively new qualitative methodology, is the study of experience understood narratively. It is a way of thinking about, and studying, experience. Narrative inquirers think narratively about experience throughout inquiry. Narrative inquiry follows a recursive, reflexive process of moving from field (with starting points in telling or living of stories) to field texts (data) to interim and final research texts. Commonplaces of temporality, sociality and place create a conceptual framework within which different kinds of field texts and different analyses can be used. Narrative inquiry highlights ethical matters as well as shapes new theoretical understandings of people's experiences.

Glossary Terms: We have defined terms within the text where necessary.

Suggested Cross-References to other Articles Ethics; Participant observation; Unstructured interviews; Forms of representation; Field notes.

Emergence of Narrative Inquiry on the Research Landscape

Narrative inquiry is a ubiquitous practice in that, Human beings have lived out and told stories about that living for as long as we could talk. And then we have talked about the stories we tell for almost as long. These lived and told stories and the talk about the stories are one of the ways that we fill our world with meaning and enlist one another's assistance in building lives and communities. What feels new is the emergence of narrative methodologies in the field of social science research (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 35).

Given this newness it is important to define terms and how they are lived out in data collection and analysis within the emerging field of narrative inquiry. This is the project of this entry.

Terms and Definitions

Even though Reissman and Speedy (2007) point out that "narrative inquiry in the human sciences is a 20th century development; the field has 'realist', 'postmodern', and constructionist strands, and scholars and practitioners disagree on origin and precise definition," (p. 429), there is some agreement on the following definition:

People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories. Story, in the current idiom, is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the

world is interpreted and made personally meaningful. Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience. Narrative inquiry as a methodology entails a view of the phenomenon. To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular view of experience as phenomenon under study (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 375).

A. Commonplaces of narrative inquiry

Narrative inquiry is a way of understanding and inquiring into experience through “collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20). Three commonplaces of narrative inquiry, temporality, sociality, and place, specify dimensions of an inquiry and serve as a conceptual framework. Commonplaces are dimensions which need to be simultaneously explored in undertaking a narrative inquiry. Attending to experience through inquiry into all three commonplaces is, in part, what distinguishes narrative inquiry from other methodologies. Through attending to the commonplaces, narrative inquirers are able to study the complexity of the relational composition of people’s lived experiences both inside and outside of an inquiry and, as well, to imagine the future possibilities of these lives.

i. Temporality

“Events under study are in temporal transition” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 479). Directing attention temporally points inquirers toward the past, present and future of people, places, things and events under study. The importance of temporality in narrative inquiry comes from philosophical views of experience where the “formal

quality of experience through time is [seen as] inherently narrative” (Crites, 1971, p. 291). Drawing on philosophers such as Carr (1986) who shows that “we are composing and constantly revising our autobiographies as we go along” (p. 76), narrative inquirers need to attend to the temporality of their own and participants’ lives, as well as to the temporality of places, things and events.

ii. Sociality

Narrative inquirers attend to both personal conditions and, simultaneously, to social conditions. By personal conditions, “we mean the feelings, hopes, desires, aesthetic reactions and moral dispositions” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 480) of the inquirer and participants. Social conditions refer to the milieu, the conditions under which people’s experiences and events are unfolding. These social conditions are understood, in part, in terms of cultural, social, institutional and linguistic narratives. A second dimension of the sociality commonplace directs attention to the inquiry relationship between researchers’ and participants’ lives. Narrative inquirers cannot subtract themselves from the inquiry relationship.

iii. Place

Connelly and Clandinin (2006) define place as “the specific concrete, physical and topological boundaries of place or sequences of places where the inquiry and events take place” (p. 480). The key to this commonplace is recognizing that “all events take place some place” (p. 481). Indeed, for narrative inquirers such as Marmon Silko (1996), our identities are inextricably linked with our experiences in a particular place or in places and with the stories we tell of these experiences.

B. Possible Starting Places for Narrative Inquiries

While most narrative inquiries begin with telling stories, that is, with a researcher interviewing or having conversations with participants who tell stories of their experiences, “a more difficult, time-consuming, intensive, and yet, more profound method is to begin with participants’ living because in the end, narrative inquiry is about life and living” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 478). Furthermore, from either starting point, narrative inquirers situate themselves in more or less relational ways with their participants. Some narrative inquirers see themselves and their participants as co-composing each aspect of the inquiry as well as their lives as they live out the inquiry. Other narrative inquirers see themselves and their participants at more of a distance, and acknowledge the relational aspects as less important. We discuss a special form of narrative inquiry, autobiographical narrative inquiry, in a separate section.

Within each section, we outline ways of analyzing field texts. These ways of analyzing are framed by thinking narratively, that is, by inquiring within the three commonplaces: temporality, sociality and place.

i. Beginning with telling stories

Most narrative inquiries begin with asking participants to tell their stories, either in one-to-one situations or in groups. In one-to-one situations, participants are asked to tell their stories in a variety of ways: by responding to more or less structured interview questions; by engaging in conversation or dialogue; by telling stories triggered by various artifacts such as photographs or memory box items. In group situations, two or more participants meet together with the inquirer to tell stories of their experience when they have lived through similar situations. Texts are created from the told stories and these

texts are analyzed using different analytic frames. Chase (2005) identified five diverse approaches for analyzing told stories: a psychosocial developmental approach; an identity approach with a focus on how people construct themselves within institutional, cultural, and discursive contexts; a sociological approach with a focus on specific aspects of people's lives; a narrative ethnographic approach and an autoethnographic approach. While Chase's approaches do not have clear borders distinguishing one approach from another, they give a sense of the diversity of approaches used in analyzing texts when the starting point is telling stories.

ii. Beginning with living stories

As noted above, some narrative inquiries also begin with participants' living stories although telling or told stories also take their place within such studies. Craig and Huber (2007) summarize the tensions within narrative inquiries undertaken from this starting point. Others such as Bach (2007) using participants' photographs of their unfolding lives and Nelson (2008) highlighting change in participants' lives through engaging in narrative inquiry, also begin with living stories. Analysis and interpretation of living stories use some of the same approaches as narrative inquiry beginning with telling stories although tensions, bumping places and temporal threads are more commonly used as analytic tools.

C. Autobiographical Narrative Inquiry

Autobiographical narrative inquiry is a special form of narrative inquiry and is closely linked to autoethnography. Understanding "life as narrative" led Bruner (2004) to posit that "the stories we tell about our lives ... [are] our 'autobiographies'" (p. 691). Yet,

narrative inquirers understand that telling stories is not an untethered process. How people tell their stories and what their stories tell is shaped by “cultural conventions and language usage ... [and] reflect the prevailing theories about ‘possible lives’ that are part of one’s culture” (p. 694). Audience also shapes autobiographical narrative inquiry. Who the characters are in people’s stories, the plotlines people choose to tell and the audiences to whom they tell, all influence autobiographical narrative inquiry. As Freeman (2007) writes about autobiographical narrative inquiry “the interpretation and writing of the personal past ... is ... a product of the present and the interests, needs, and wishes that attend it. This present, however—along with the self whose present it is—is itself transformed in and through the process” (pp. 137-138). These ideas, highlighted in autobiographical narrative inquiry, are also present in narrative inquiries undertaken with others but are often less visible.

Research Design Considerations

Whether a narrative inquiry begins with telling or living stories and is more or less relational, there are generally agreed upon considerations in designing narrative inquiries. A more detailed description of these considerations are found in Connelly and Clandinin (2006) and Clandinin, Pushor and Murray Orr (2007). We outline the most salient design considerations in what follows.

A. Justification

In narrative inquiry it is important to think about justifying the research in three different ways.

i. Personal Justification

Narrative inquirers begin with personal justification, that is, by justifying the inquiry in the context of their own life experiences, tensions and personal inquiry puzzles. Personal justification is commonly only thinly described in published narrative inquiries. Narrative theses and dissertations include more detailed personal justification for the inquiry.

ii. Practical Justification

In order to justify narrative inquiry practically, researchers attend to the importance of considering the possibility of shifting or changing practice. For example, practical justifications are sometimes made in narrative inquiries around teacher education puzzles concerning the kinds of situations in which pre-service students might undertake practicum, deepening their understandings of who they are in relation with children and families or in medical education around puzzles concerning the conditions under which medical residents engage in reflecting on their clinical practice.

iii. Social Justification

Narrative inquiries are socially justified in terms of addressing the *so what* and *who cares* questions important in all research undertakings. We can think of social justification in two ways: theoretical justification as well as social action and policy justifications. Theoretical justification comes from justifying the work in terms of new methodological and disciplinary knowledge. Social action or policy justification comes in

terms of social action such as making visible the intergenerational impact of residential schools on Aboriginal youth.

B. Naming the phenomenon

i. Thinking Narratively about the Phenomenon throughout the Inquiry

Thinking narratively about a phenomenon, key to undertaking narrative inquiries, entails thinking within the three commonplaces of narrative inquiry—temporality, sociality and place. Thinking narratively about the phenomenon is necessary throughout the inquiry from framing the research puzzle, to being in the field, to composing field texts, and finally, to composing research texts. For example, as Paley (1997) thinks narratively about children's experiences in pre-school settings she attends to social, cultural and institutional narratives in which particular children's lives unfold. Thinking in this way, Paley attends to the particularities of the places in which each child lives and goes to school, to each child's particular interactions and relationships and how each child responds in particular aesthetic, emotional and moral ways. Thinking in this way highlights the shifting, changing, personal and social nature of the phenomenon under study. Thinking narratively about a phenomenon challenges the dominant story of phenomenon as fixed and unchanging throughout an inquiry. Thinking narratively also influences the living of a narrative inquiry. Many narrative inquirers draw on ideas such as self-facing, liminality, relational knowing, world-travelling, truth as communal, and un-knowing and not-knowing to describe their own and their participants' living throughout an inquiry.

ii. Framing a Research Puzzle

Framing a research puzzle is part of the process of thinking narratively. Each narrative inquiry is composed around a particular wonder and, rather than thinking about framing a research question with a precise definition or expectation of an answer, narrative inquirers frame a research puzzle that carries with it “a sense of a search, a ‘re-search,’ a searching again”, “a sense of continual reformulation” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 124).

C. Living the Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry is a process of entering into lives in the midst of each participant’s and each inquirer’s life. What this draws attention to is the importance of acknowledging the ongoing temporality of experience when it is understood narratively. Narrative inquiry always begins in the midst of ongoing experiences. In this process, inquirers continue to live their stories, even as they tell stories of their experiences over time. Inquiries conclude still in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling, the stories of the experiences that make up narrative inquirers’ and participants’ lives, both individual and social. The process of narrative inquiry is described as a recursive process among being in the field, composing field texts, drafting and sharing interim research texts and composing research texts.

i. From Field to Field Texts

Living in the midst of stories in the field is not an easy undertaking. The field can be the ongoing conversations with participants where they tell their stories or the living alongside participants in a particular place or places. Being in the field, then, involves settling into the temporal unfolding of lives. Sarris (1993) notes that stories are often not

shared in “chronological sequence” (p. 1) and hooks (1997) explains that people’s lived and told stories are not linear—they do not necessarily “move from point A to point B” (p. xx). These narrative qualities of lived and told stories arise from the temporal nature of experience in which people are simultaneously participants in and tellers of their life stories (Carr, 1986).

There are multiple ways to gather, compose and create field texts (data) from studying the experiences of participants and inquirers in a narrative inquiry. Field texts can include transcripts of conversations, field notes, family stories, memory box artifacts, photographs and other texts that are composed by narrative inquirers and participants to represent aspects of lived experience. Whether narrative inquirers are listening to participants’ told stories or living alongside participants as their lives unfold in particular contexts, interpretation of the stories lived and told is an essential, ongoing aspect. Being attentive to the relational aspects of working with participants within the conceptual frame of the commonplaces requires that narrative inquirers and participants acknowledge that they are always interpreting their pasts from their present vantage points. In this way, narrative inquirers actively attend to and listen to participants’ stories knowing that they “give shape to what ... [they] hear, mak[ing] over ... [participants’] stories into something of ... [their] own” (Coles, 1989, p. 19).

ii. From Field Texts to Interim Research Texts

“Dissection is an essential part of scientific method, and it is particularly tempting to disassemble” (Bateson, 1989, p. 10) people’s experience when narrative inquirers leave the field and begin analysis and interpretation at a distance from participants. Narrative inquirers work to resist this temptation. The movement from composing field

texts to composing interim research texts is a time marked by tension and uncertainty for narrative inquirers. While some interpretations are always underway as the inquiry continues to be lived out with participants in the field, at some point there is a move away from the close intensive contact with participants. Given the quantity of field texts from interview and conversation transcripts and possibly artifacts, documents, photographs, and field notes, all composed with attention to temporality, sociality and place, beginning the analysis and interpretation by drafting interim research texts allows narrative inquirers to continue to engage in relational ways with participants. In composing interim research texts, narrative inquirers continue to think narratively, that is, positioning field texts within the commonplaces. Interim research texts are often partial texts that are not closed to allowing participants and researchers to further co-compose storied interpretations open to negotiation of a multiplicity of possible meanings. Bringing back interim research texts to further engage in negotiation with participants around unfolding threads of experience is central in composing research texts. The dialogue with participants around interim research texts can lead the inquirer back for more intensive work with the participant if further field texts are needed in order to compose a more complex account of the participants' experiences.

iii. From Interim Research Texts to Research Texts

Mishler, in conversation with Clandinin and Murphy (2007) and reflecting on the enormous quantity of field texts narrative inquirers compose with participants, notes that what becomes shared in research texts is usually only a small portion of the overall data. Mishler encourages narrative inquirers to make visible in their research texts the process by which they chose to foreground particular stories. As earlier described there are

multiple approaches to analyzing field texts. However, as Gergen (2003) cautions, an “analytical method of deconstructing stories into coded piles” could undermine “the aims of the research” (p. 272) by directing attention away from thinking narratively about experience.

Working with metaphors, creating visual and textual collages, found poetry, word images and photographs, narrative inquirers create research texts that show the complex and multi-layered storied nature of experience. In this way, they create research texts that represent the complexity of people’s lives and experiences.

Ongoing negotiation with participants allows narrative inquirers to create research texts that both critically and deeply represent narrative inquirers’ and participants’ experiences while also maintaining each person’s integrity and their relationship into the future. When, for example, a narrative inquiry shows the bumping up of participants’ lives (and narrative inquirers’ lives) with dominant cultural and institutional narratives, various ways of working with fictionalization in research texts can enable these stories to be told without harming participants’ lives or the relationships composed by narrative inquirers and participants. Signature and voice both shape research texts. It is important that the voice of the inquirer does not write over the voices of participants in the final research texts by using an overly dominant researcher signature.

D. Positioning

i. In Relation to Other Research

Some forms of qualitative research focus on a search for common themes across participants’ stories or use participants’ stories to develop or confirm existing taxonomies

or conceptual systems. Because narrative inquirers attend to individual's lives as they are composed over time in relation with people and situations in a particular place or places, the focus remains on lives as lived and told throughout the inquiry. The knowledge developed from narrative inquiries is textured by particularity and incompleteness; knowledge that leads less to generalizations and certainties (Clandinin & Murphy, 2007) and more toward wondering about and imagining alternative possibilities.

ii. In Relation to Research Undertaken from Differing Epistemological and Ontological Assumptions

Working from a metaphor of borderlands between narrative inquiry and research undertaken from other epistemological and ontological assumptions, such as those underlying post positivism, post structuralism and Marxism, Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) delineated ways that narrative inquirers work from different assumptions. Beginning with ways experience is often viewed differently by narrative inquirers and researchers of other methodologies, Clandinin and Rosiek trace how a Deweyian view, in which experience “is understood as the continuous interaction of human thought with our personal, social, and material environment” (p. 39), shapes “the kinds of questions asked and methods employed” (p. 43) across methodologies. This understanding of experience also shapes ways in which the inquiry is both lived through and subsequently shared with a broader audience. Differences in views of reality, knowledge developed from an inquiry, the relationship between experience and context, and the relationship between researchers and participants all shape borders. Clandinin and Rosiek encourage narrative inquirers to understand and to learn from differing epistemological and ontological assumptions so as to strengthen the future of narrative research.

E. Ethical Considerations

Narrative inquirers comply with the legal and procedural aspects of ethics held by institutional research boards. However, because of the relational aspects of narrative inquiries, ethical considerations are of prime importance throughout the inquiry. Lieblich urges narrative inquirers to move beyond the institutional narrative of “do no harm” by learning an attitude of empathic listening, by not being judgmental and by suspending their disbelief (Clandinin & Murphy, 2007, p. 647) as they attend to participants’ stories.

Often woven deeply by “fidelity to relationships” (Noddings, 1986), the ethical considerations in narrative inquiries are commonly thought about as responsibilities negotiated by participants and narrative inquirers at all phases of the inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). These relational responsibilities are increasingly understood as long-term, that is, as attentive to participants’ and narrative inquirers’ lives both as the inquiry is undertaken and research texts are written and, as well, as their lives continue to unfold into the future (Huber, Clandinin & Huber, 2006).

The relational aspects of narrative inquiries compel narrative inquirers to pay attention to particular ethical matters as research texts are written. Narrative inquirers understand that a person’s lived and told stories are who they are and who they are becoming and that these stories sustain them. This understanding shapes the necessity of negotiating research texts that respectfully represent participants’ lived and told stories.

Negotiating research texts creates a space where participants’ narrative authority is honored. Issues of anonymity and confidentiality take on added importance as the complexity of lives are made visible in research texts. Strategies such as fictionalizing

and blurring identities and places are often used. Narrative inquiry research texts often call forward increased attentiveness to ethical matters.

F. Issues in Representation

As noted earlier, voice and signature are key considerations in composing research texts. There are a range of possible narrative forms. However, it is important to attend to forms that fit the lives of the participants and narrative inquirers being represented. Sometimes particular metaphors or genres become apparent in the field texts and are used in representational forms in final research texts. However, these cannot be imposed on the field texts a priori. It is often helpful for narrative inquirers to participate in response communities where, alongside narrative inquirers as well as researchers from differing methodological backgrounds, they share and respond to one another's thinking or writing in progress in ways that are attentive to the lives being represented.

Issues of audience are also important. Narrative inquirers need to be attentive to the features of the discourse communities where research texts are shared so that the lives represented are respected. Given that narrative inquiry is a new methodology some audiences are unfamiliar with criteria to judge and respond to narrative inquiry research texts. Criteria for judging narrative inquiries follow from the definition of narrative inquiry and the conceptual frame for thinking narratively.

Change Dimension in Narrative Research

A. Living, Telling, Retelling and Reliving Stories

Narrative inquirers see change as part of the process of narrative inquiry. Linking back to personal, practical and social justification, change is seen as possibly occurring in multiple dimensions. Through engaging with participants, narrative inquirers see themselves and participants as each retelling their own stories, and as coming to changed identities and practices through this inquiry process. Change also occurs as phenomena under study are understood in new ways and, in this way, new theoretical understandings emerge. In this midst, much possibility exists for social change, that is, for the creation of shifted social, cultural, institutional and linguistic narratives.

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Website

Website for Narrative & Research Special Interest Group of the American Educational

Research Association: <http://www.narrativesig.cahs.colostate.edu>

Biographies

D. Jean Clandinin is Professor and Director of the Centre for Research for Teacher Education and Development at the University of Alberta. She is a former teacher, counselor, and psychologist. She is the coauthor with F. Michael Connelly of four books and many chapters and articles. Their most recent book, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*, was published in 2000. She is the past Vice President of Division B of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) and is the 1993 winner of the AERA's Early Career Award. She is the 1999 winner of the Canadian Education Association Whitworth Award for educational research. In 2001 Jean received the J. Gordin Kaplan Award for Excellence in Research at the University of Alberta. Jean was awarded AERA's Curriculum Studies Lifetime Achievement Award was in 2002 and in 2003 she received a Killam Annual Professorship and in 2008 the Faculty of Education Distinguished Career Award. Jean has recently edited the *Handbook of Narrative Inquiry: Mapping a Methodology* (Sage, 2007).

Janice Huber is an Associate Professor at the University of Regina. She is a former elementary teacher. Janice completed doctoral studies at the University of Alberta in 2000. She is the coauthor of several chapters and articles and of the recent book, *Composing Diverse Identities: Narrative Inquiries into the Interwoven Lives of Children and Teachers*, with D. Jean Clandinin, Marilyn Huber, M. Shaun Murphy, Anne Murray

Orr, Marni Pearce and Pam Steeves (Routledge, 2006). In 2006 Janice received the Outstanding Narrative and Research Early Career Award from the Narrative and Research Special Interest Group of the American Educational Research Association.