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Brief Encounters with Qualitative Methods in Health Research: Narrative Analysis.

Louise Rowe

Affiliations

Louise Rowe, Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Health and Wellbeing, University of Cumbria.

Corresponding Author: Louise Rowe, Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Health and Wellbeing, University of Cumbria, Bowerham Road, Lancaster. LA13JD. Email: louise.rowe@cumbria.ac.uk.

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Summary.

Narrative research is a recently-developed approach to qualitative investigation in health settings, and is growing in popularity. The methods and analytic procedures used, however, are diverse, have developed in very different disciplines and are often not well prescribed in the literature. This can make it difficult for those new to this approach to assess what narrative research actually is. The aim of this article, therefore, is to introduce the process of narrative research and open a discussion on what constitutes a 'narrative,' and the defining features of narrative analysis. Some examples of narrative research in health will then be presented.

1. Introduction

Narrative research “...refers to any study that uses or analyses narrative materials” (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber, 1998, p.2). Put simply it is the study of a story. The approach evolved from the study of literary works and folklore, but has since been adopted by a wide range of disciplines. It is a more recent qualitative method to emerge, with a rapid increase in popularity in the last few decades (Murray, 2000).

Although many other qualitative methods use some form of narrative as their object of study, narrative research is characterised by the use of methods and analytic procedures that examine the way that the story is told, and preserve the voice of the participant. These elements are often lost in other qualitative research procedures. For example Overcash (2003) notes that ethnographic accounts of experience (see Benkwitz, this issue), despite putting the participant at the centre of the research, are often over-reliant on the voice of the researcher to describe the phenomena under investigation. Narrative researchers also criticise standard thematic analysis, and grounded theory (see Earnshaw, this issue), for mechanistically dissecting text into disjointed segments which are then rebuilt into themes. This can break the narrator’s intended connection between sequence and consequence, and also disrupt or obscure meaningful narratives. This cause-effect in personal meaning-making is an essential feature of narrative data.

Personal narratives can take many forms, such as research interviews, observations of conversations, journals, written accounts or even reports or discussion documents. Online stories in the form of blogs, or YouTube videos, have also been used (When-Ying et. al., 2011). A unifying feature is the requirement of the research objects under scrutiny to recount some event from history which can then be analysed systematically using narrative theory.

This “brief encounter” will seek to explain the philosophy behind narrative research and explain how this should influence the methods employed. A brief review of narrative research in healthcare settings follows, which serves to illustrate its applications.

2. Philosophy & Tenets of the Approach

Narrative analysis is a qualitative-interpretative method that has gained significant popularity in recent years. The story, or narrative is the most common vehicle with which humans represent their experiences (Frank, 2012), but the retelling of events is proposed to provide more than a simple factual account (Mishler, 1995). Instead, those events are given meaning by us when they are woven into a spoken narrative which has a beginning, middle and an end. Narratives provide a “continuity of self” (Adler, 2012), linking past experiences to present and future events and in doing so actively constructs or preserves our self-identity. Riessman (1993) proposes that stories are the organising principle for human action and, therefore, the story metaphor can be adopted to deconstruct peoples’ experiences.

In addition to personal meaning-making, Frank (2012) observes that personal narratives are rarely exclusively our own. Multiple voices can be heard in any story, including the voices of the other actors in the story and embedded “cultural narratives.” Murray (2000) identifies four levels at which narratives operate: (a) the personal level representing lived experience; b) the interpersonal level which is co-created with other; (c) the positional level between the researcher and participant and (d) the societal level which draws on wider cultural narratives. Identity, therefore, is viewed as socially constructed and the stories that people tell can be used to study wider social phenomena such as gender and power relations (Emerson and Frosh, 2009). As such, narrative research

emerges as a flexible methodology which can provide a multi-layered approach to reveal the complex layers of human experience (Sparkes and Smith, 2013).

In order to draw out this complexity, narrative research analyses data on two levels: the textual level, which focuses on the content of what is said, and the “narratology” which relates to the manner in which the information is told. However, the degree of emphasis placed on content versus narrative, and the proposed relationship between them, often differs from one study to another depending on the philosophical orientation of the researcher.

Some narrative analysts argue that the reality of “the self” cannot be disentangled from the narrative or rhetoric that is used to describe it (Emerson and Frosh, 2009) and that, therefore, the relationship between the content and the representational nature of the language is not hugely important. In this case the participant’s story is their experience and the research logically focuses more on the content of the narrative in an attempt to understand the lifeworld (a core phenomenological concept, see Cronin and Lowes, this issue) of the participant (a debate articulated by Smith and Shenshav, 2011).

Contrastively, some researchers adopt the more classically positivistic ontological view that an objective reality exists independent of the narrative, and that the participant’s story offers an insight (either directly or indirectly) into the truth of a broader existence. In such cases, the representational nature of language becomes more important because linguistic devices, such as the form of expression, metaphors chosen, and roles the narrator assigns to themselves and other actors within the story tell the researcher something about the reality of the self or social world. As it is for practitioners of Conversation Analysis (see Miller, this issue), the function of language for these narrative analysts is primarily to

modify the way in which we present ourselves to others, and its use becomes a performative act designed with others in mind.

Researchers that take this latter position will place more emphasis on the representative nature of the story and the interpretation of its true meaning. If the content of the narrative is not taken at face value it becomes more important for researchers to articulate the relationship between content and representation and to show the reliability of their research claims. For this reason, researchers undertaking narrative enquiry are advised to declare their ontological position and clarify the relationship between narrative and “truth” before embarking on their project (Smith and Shenshav, 2012).

2.1. What constitutes a narrative?

In narrative research, collected data must be either autobiographical in nature or reflective of the unfolding of a story over time. All narrative research, therefore, places events in some sort of unfolding order. The timeframe examined could be very long, as in a life story, or much shorter, as in the recounting of a critical incident or encounter (Murray 2000). In addition, the analytic methods used should preserve the holistic nature of this account by identifying narrative themes that recurrently permeate the story.

Despite these common features, there are differences in the way that narratives are defined, collected and analysed in the literature and this often proves confusing to those new to this approach. Smith and Shenshav (2011) provide a helpful ‘typology’ of narrative types and make the distinction between classical and post-classical schools. Classical narratology takes an objectivist stance, viewing the narrative as something which exists as an entity. Thus a narrative is defined by a set of temporal characteristics, clause structures or other relational linguistic properties. The researcher identifies them by applying a set of

analytic procedures to the text (for example, the structuralist framework proposed by Labov, 1997) in an objective manner. Some analysis procedures define the whole story as one narrative identifying plot-lines and story ‘types’ whilst others identify the many smaller narratives which are embedded into larger ones (Stenhouse, 2012). Regardless of the analytic framework applied though, classical approaches identify narratives using the temporal and structural properties of the text.

Post-classical approaches take a more subjectivist view of narrative, and maintain that it is never possible to objectively represent the experiences that are voiced in research interviews. Since the process of telling a story is the result of an ongoing negotiation between the teller and the listener, the researcher plays an active role in shaping the collected narrative. This school of thought, thus, treats narratives as more fluid and context-dependent because they are produced in response to the interlocutor. If this view is taken, then a more conversational interview is seen as an acceptable way to generate the research narratives. It also requires the researcher to recognise the vagaries of the researcher – participant relationship in the analysis.

The post-classical position is also grounded in the contention that narratives are not always characterised by organised stories with recognisable temporal coherence, but are often disjointed, contradictory and lack closure (Emerson and Frosh, 2009). This is particularly true in health research, which often focuses on people confronting difficult challenges like disability, trauma or illness. The challenge for the researcher is to recognise these inconsistencies and show how they reveal the tension between individuals and the social worlds they inhabit (Smith and Shenshav, 2011). This requires a more discursive form of analysis, such as Gee’s (1986) poetic line-breaks, or the use of metaphors which emphasise meaning over and above the structure of clauses. If these

analytical methods are taken then the transcription of the interviews also needs to record the participant's emotions, pitch, tone and emphases and the interpretation of these is also more subjective.

In reality many studies combine these two approaches. Often, classical methods will be used to identify narratives or plots followed by a more subjective interpretation of meaning. It is this variety and combination of analytical approaches in narrative research which perhaps most confuses those new to the field.

3. Brief Review of Health Research Studies

Stories help to make sense of our experiences, particularly those which surround challenging or significant life events like illness, disability, childbirth, death and dying. For this reason narrative methods are becoming increasingly popular in health-care settings, and can provide a useful insight into the life-world of patients and service-users (Albright, Epstein & Duggan, 2008). Munhall (2012) explains that the field of "Narrative Medicine" allows people to give voice to their experiences, producing an account with which others can identify. The "others" in this statement refers both to medical professionals, who can use narrative research to individualise patient care, and also to patients themselves, who can use the narratives of peers to better understand the challenges they face and develop effective coping strategies (Overcash, 2003).

Examples of narratives which focus on the personal level of the lived experience are plentiful in contemporary health research. Stenhouse (2012), for example, interviewed psychiatric patients about their recent experiences on an acute psychiatric ward, and uncovered their key concerns about safety. "Psychological safety" was identified as a key concern for patients, and distinguished from physical safety. By explicitly recognising the

concerns of patients and identifying institutional factors which affected them, recommendations to improve patient care were made. Another recent study in the domain, meanwhile, focused on personal experience related to women's use of Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAMs) during pregnancy (Mitchell, 2014). Through narratives, the author identified key concerns for pregnant women relating to control over their physical, emotional and spiritual wellbeing in pregnancy, and reflected that the traditional medical model of maternity care typically neglected these things.

In addition to providing useful insight into participant perspectives, narrative research has been used to explore the experience of healthcare professionals. Greenhalgh (2012), for example, writes extensively on the process of clinical decision-making, and details how the study of narratives has revealed the subjectivity of clinical diagnosis and the role of experience in effective practice. Kucera et al. (2010) conducted interviews with Australian advanced nurse practitioners, asking them to recount the everyday experience of their professional practice. From these, narratives were identified which detailed the key tacit skills required for the job. These were then developed into a model detailing a set of competencies for use in training future professionals.

The personal narrative has always played a central role in mental health, with Adler (2012, p.595) arguing that "...stories are the currency of psychotherapy" [emphasis added]. Coherent personal narratives which show a high degree of personal agency are often taken to be indicative of psychological wellbeing. Disrupted life-narratives can result from mental illness and psychological trauma, and research has demonstrated that increases in personal agency and coherence in patients' stories throughout their treatment can be strong predictors of their recovery (Adler, 2012).

Therapists' narratives have also been examined alongside those of their patients to elucidate common concerns or perspectives which are associated with good treatment outcomes. The co-constitutional nature of narratives was particularly explored in a recent study focused on meaningful encounters between patients, their next-of-kin and health-care professionals (Gustafsson et al., 2013). Participants were asked to give written descriptions of a critical encounter. This approach combined both classical and post-classical perspectives by performing a structural analysis to identify story plots, followed by a deeper analysis through metaphors and finally an interpretive or dialectic account of the encounter. The results have relevance to medical staff from all fields that would like to improve the caring nature of their interactions with patients. An example of research which focused more on the socially constructed aspect of narratives in health, meanwhile, was conducted by Busanich et al. (2014) who analysed narrative interviews provided by a male and female distance runner, both with eating disorders. As well as illuminating personal narratives relating to the participants' experiences, the authors revealed that these were affected by social constructions of gender which had an impact on health behaviour.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this review of narrative research in healthcare has ideally shown that the approach has many useful applications in the field, and has already been used extensively to gain insight into the lifeworlds of patients and practitioners. Narrative analysis is distinguished from other forms of qualitative research through its use of multi-staged analytic procedures which focus on the expression of the narrative itself. Some qualitative researchers have criticised the narrative approach for placing too much emphasis on its verbal expression, highlighting that not all experience can be expressed verbally. Perhaps, because of this, narrative research has been accused of being ethnocentric because it ignores other expressive acts which might be prevalent in certain cultures (Roberts and Shenshav, 2012).

Narrative analysis uses a diverse range of practical methods and its analytic procedures are not well prescribed in the literature (Cresswell, 2006). Although this may cause confusion in those new to the approach, this freedom offers great flexibility to the researcher. In navigating the field it is useful for researchers to identify their ontological position on the relationship of the narrative with the world as it actually exists. Further, they should clarify whether the narratives are viewed as something that can be objectively recounted and defined, or whether their existence is more subjectively defined. For those attempting a narrative study for the first time, the reader is referred to Whiffen et al. (2014) who published in detail the analytical processes they went through in their narrative research.

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