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Narrative Analysis: Uncovering the Truth of Stories

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Abstract: *The use of narratives as a data source has come under scrutiny (Phillips, 1994, 1997). The purpose of this session will be to discuss “truth” as it relates to narratives and to demonstrate methods of narrative analysis using data from a study concerning identity formation in HIV-positive adults.*

The use of narratives as data has come under scrutiny (Phillips, 1994, 1997). Phillips' concern is that educational researchers who use narrative as a data source may be more interested in obtaining a *good* story (e.g. stories that seem plausible and have an “engaging plot” (Phillips, 1994, p. 13)), than a *true* story. Narratives are re-fashioned in light of present life experiences and are often judged on coherence and plausibility rather than “truth.” Further, whether the teller believes the story is true does not prove its veracity (Phillips, 1997). Phillips (1997) asserts that in some cases “such as when policy or future weighty actions hang on acceptance of the narrative” it is important that the narrative be true (p. 102).

Phillips's (1994, 1997) articles raise questions worth discussing. What is “truth” in narrative research? How can we uncover the “truth?” Whose “truth” is it, anyway? The researcher's? The participant's? Both? What ethical issues does this raise? Why are stories as a data source under scrutiny?

A second issue for those using narratives as a data source is how to analyze them. The field of narrative analysis within qualitative research is broad-based. There is no definitive approach or methodology. The types of analysis most explored are: linguistic, psychological, and biographic.

An example of the linguistic approach is Labov and Waletzky's (1967) structuralist technique which slices stories into clauses. These clauses are identified by the functions they serve and together they form a core narrative. For example, a separate group of clauses orient the reader to the narrative, describe the action, and resolve the action. A second linguistic approach is Gee's (1990) sociolinguistic method. Gee's (1990) method moves from the part to the whole. First, he notices the “prosody of the text” which includes the “pitch, loudness, stress, and length assigned to various syllables as

well as the way in which the speaker hesitates or pauses” (pp. 104-105). He also examines the cohesion of each sentence, how these sentences form larger units and recognizes how the themes of the text are organized.

The psychological methods of analysis concentrate less on the particulars of language and more on the meaning people create through words. Alexander's (1988) psychobiographical approach uses nine “principle indicators of salience” which help reduce the data to manageable portions (p. 269). *Primacy* looks at the first idea mentioned in the narrative. *Frequency* is indicated by the number of times an identity is mentioned. The *uniqueness* of a statement is indicated by phrases such as, “ ‘Nothing like this has happened to me before or since’ ” (p. 272). *Emphasis* is brought to one's attention by phrases such as, “ ‘I want you to know that...’ ” (p. 273). The salience indicator of *omission* generally is seen when people tell a story and neglect to mention their feelings or reactions to an event. When a phrase or series of phrases does not fit with the rest of the story, it indicates *isolation*. *Incompletion* is demonstrated by a story that does not have closure.

Denzin's (1989) biographical method of analysis takes into account the influence of society on the individuals' narratives. Denzin (1989) notes the importance of turning points in people's stories. He values the importance of “family beginnings” saying that all narratives are grounded in the family (p. 18). Denzin considers the impact of gender and class on the narrative and recognizes that the audience influences how the story is told.

These approaches to narrative analysis place different lenses on the data. Denzin's (1989) and Alexander's techniques will be applied to narratives concerning the incorporation of HIV/AIDS into a person's identity over time.

In sum, with the burgeoning of qualitative research in general, and the use of narrative analysis

in particular, it is important to address the “truth” of narratives as well as the methods of narrative analysis. The approaches to narrative analysis are linguistic, psychological, biographical or a combination of these types. This roundtable discussion will benefit those wanting to explore narrative analysis as a methodology and to discuss the “truth” of narratives.

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