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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Narrative interviews: an important resource in qualitative research

ENTREVISTAS NARRATIVAS: UM IMPORTANTE RECURSO EM PESQUISA QUALITATIVA

ENTREVISTAS NARRATIVAS: UN RECURSO IMPORTANTE EN LA INVESTIGACIÓN CUALITATIVA

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This methodological study explain and emphasize the extent and fertility of the narrative interview in qualitative research. **Method:** To describe the narrative method within the qualitative research. **Results:** The qualitative research method is characterized by addressing issues related to the singularities of the field and individuals investigated, being the narrative interviews a powerful method for use by researchers who aggregate it. They allow the deepening of research, the combination of life stories with socio-historical contexts, making the understanding of the senses that produce changes in the beliefs and values that motivate and justify the actions of possible informants. **Conclusion:** The use of narrative is an advantageous investigative resource in qualitative research, in which the narrative is a traditional form of communication whose purpose is to serve content from which the subjective experiences can be transmitted.

## DESCRIPTORS

Qualitative Research  
Methodology  
Narration

## RESUMO

**Objetivo:** Este trabalho consiste numa contribuição metodológica em que se explicitam e se enfatizam o alcance e a fecundidade da entrevista narrativa no âmbito da investigação de natureza qualitativa. **Método:** Descrever o método da narrativa no âmbito da investigação qualitativa. **Resultados:** O método qualitativo de pesquisa caracteriza-se por abordar questões relacionadas às singularidades do campo e dos indivíduos pesquisados, sendo as entrevistas narrativas um método potente para uso dos investigadores que dele se apropriam. Elas permitem o aprofundamento das investigações, a combinação de histórias de vida com contextos sócio-históricos, tornando possível a compreensão dos sentidos que produzem mudanças nas crenças e valores que motivam e justificam as ações dos informantes. **Conclusão:** As narrativas mostram-se muito úteis em estudos de abordagem qualitativa, uma vez que a narratividade é uma forma artesanal de comunicação cujo objetivo é veicular conteúdos a partir dos quais as experiências subjetivas podem ser transmitidas.

## DESCRIPTORIOS

Pesquisa qualitativa  
Metodologia  
Narração

## RESUMEN

**Objetivo:** Este estudio es un aporte metodológico en que se explica y destaca el alcance y la fertilidad de la entrevista narrativa en la investigación cualitativa. **Método:** Describir el método de la narrativa en la investigación cualitativa. **Resultados:** El método de investigación cualitativa se caracteriza por abordar las cuestiones relacionadas con las singularidades del campo y de las personas encuestadas, siendo las entrevistas narrativas un método potente para uso de los investigadores que toman posesión de ella. Permiten que la profundización de la investigación, la combinación de historias de vida con los contextos socio-históricos e la comprensión de los sentidos que producen cambios en las creencias y valores que motivan y justifican las acciones de los posibles informantes. **Conclusión:** El uso de la narrativa se presenta un recurso de investigación ventajosa en la investigación cualitativa, la narrativa es una forma tradicional de comunicación cuyo objetivo es servir contenido a partir de la que se pueden transmitir las experiencias subjetivas.

## DESCRIPTORIOS

Investigación Cualitativa  
Metodología  
Narrac

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## INTRODUCTION

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"People may forget what you did, what you said, but they will never forget how you made them feel." Fernando Pessoa.

The narrative interviews are characterized as unstructured tools, in-depth with specific features, which emerge from the life stories of both the respondent and cross-examined the situational context. This type of interview aims to encourage and stimulate the interviewee subject (informant) to tell the interviewer something about some important event of his/her life and the social context<sup>(1)</sup>. Based on the idea of reconstructing social events from the point of view of informants, the influence of the interviewer in narrative should be minimal. In this case, we use the everyday communication of telling and listening to stories.

Jovchelovich and Bauer<sup>(1)</sup> highlighted the importance of the interviewer using only the language that regards the informant without imposing any other way, since the method assumes that the perspective of the informant is best revealed when using their spontaneous language. These assertions are based on the understanding that the language used is a particular worldview and therefore is indicative of what the person wants to investigate: "here" and "now" of the ongoing situation.

In the narrative interviews there is an important collaborative feature, since the story emerges from the interaction, exchange and dialogue between interviewer and participants<sup>(2)</sup>.

Lukacs<sup>(3)</sup> discussing the transformation of literature over time discusses the contrast between the composition and description of the narrative structure principles: the narrative implies ownership position assumed by the writer in the face of life and the problems of society. In this sense, there is engagement between the interlocutors. The description, in turn, relates to a position of observation, unveilings of the fact itself, without necessarily causing interfaces between fact and subjects belonging to it, in the context of the narrative.

Benjamin<sup>(4)</sup> considers that in the narrative process the subject is found implicated in a series of events and evoked happenings, whereas in describing the subject is separated from the account that acquires a more objective and observational dimension.

The descriptive style, genre of strong literary expression of the second half of the nineteenth century, accompanied by capitalism and academic pragmatism, gradually sought to suppress an important feature of the narrative: the exchange between practice and the subjective life. The tendency to observe and describe brought greater objectivity to the process, however, resulted in the loss of artistic significance of things, reducing men to the same level of inanimate things<sup>(3)</sup>.

Benjamin<sup>(4)</sup> has the experience as a central concept of

his theory, and how this expression, narrative, which for him would be the most appropriate form of communication for human beings. In addition to the informative characteristic, the narrative is a traditional way to communicate meaningful content, from which experiences can be transmitted<sup>(4)</sup>.

Thus, when constructing his narrative, the author does not tell about his experience, but relies on it, taking with it the opportunity to think about something that had not even thought<sup>(6)</sup>.

Considerations of Lukacs<sup>(3)</sup> and Benjamin<sup>(4)</sup> indicate a direction that allows a critical position (epistemic), where methodological option of using the narrative interview technique involves thinking about the experience of the researcher and the researched at the interview moment. Which is implicit in the inset of narrative cadence, and what marks an appointment by previous experiences of both, thus transcending the traditional role assigned to each one of them.

The narrative thus can elicit different emotional states in listeners, since it has the characteristic to sensitize and make the listener assimilate the experiences according to their own, avoiding explanations and opening up to different possibilities of interpretation. In this sense, the possibility of narrating the lived and passing to another person his/her life experience, makes the experience that is finite, infinite, and of fundamental importance for the construction of the collective notion<sup>(7)</sup>.

The oral form of communication reframes the time lived, the things of life, and concomitantly to it, brings out the historical past of the people from his/her own words<sup>(8)</sup>. Thus, one of the functions of the narrative interview is to contribute to the historical construction of reality and from the report of facts of the past, promoting the future, because in the past there was also the potential to project the future.

The narration is a resource that aims to investigate the privacy of the interviewees and enables, in result, contribution to new knowledge that can lead to a closer view at the social reality investigated, or even a critical contribution to a particular study area, in that the prospect of movement captured by discursive relation provides analysis with great detail and the emergence of new questions<sup>(9)</sup>.

Given that social interactions articulate macro processes, using the technique of narrative interviews, unknown or hazy features about the social reality can be highlighted in the individual discursive practices, from iconic elements expressed and shared or not in their collective.

Finally, this research aims to contribute to a critical reflection of the narrative research method, in view of the extent and fertility of the theoretical and methodological aspects of the study of discursive practices, substantially present in the roots of social interactions, the peculiarities and diversities expressed about the social reality that is

experienced and retold by each individual (setting a field of ideas and intentions).

## THE NARRATIVE METHOD

In narrative interviews we consider that our memory is selective, we remember what “we can” and some events are deliberately or unconsciously forgotten. In this perspective, the important thing is that the person recorded in his/her history, what he/she experienced, what is real to her/him and not the facts themselves (past versus history).

Thus, the narratives are considered representations and interpretations of the world and therefore, are not open to evidence and cannot be judged as true or false, they express the truth of a point of view in a particular time, space and socio-historic context<sup>(1)</sup>. There is not access to the experiences of others, we are dealing with representations of these experiences to interpret them from the interaction established<sup>(8)</sup>.

Thus, what is important is what is happening at the time of the narration, and the present, past and future time are articulated, since the person can project experiences and actions for the future and the past can be re-framed in order to remember and narrate experiences. The narrative interviews are therefore techniques to generate stories and therefore can be analyzed in different ways after the capture and transcription of the data<sup>(10)</sup>. Involved in this process are the characteristics for-language (tone of voice, pauses, changes in intonation, silence that can be transformed into narratives not heard, expressions etc.), fundamental to understanding the unspoken, because in the narrative analysis process explores not only what is said, but also how it is said. It is also worth noting that although the interviews comprehend research tools already consolidated, narratives can be gathered from different forms of data collection such as observation, documents, images, and other sources<sup>(2)</sup>.

The following table presents in a structured way the process of obtaining narrative interviews:

**Table 1** - Main phases of the narrative interview

Phases of the Narrative interview	Rules for the interview
Preparation	Exploring the field Formulating <i>exmanent</i> questions.
Initialization	Formulation of the initial topic for narration. Use visual aids
Main narration	No interruptions. Only non-verbal or paralinguistic encouragement to continue telling the story Wait for signals the end of the (“coda”).

Continued...

...Continuation

Questioning phase	only question: What happened then? no opinion or attitude questions no arguing on contradictions do not ask: Why? Go from <i>exmanent</i> into immanent questions
Small talk	Stop recording. Only question allowed is why? Make note immediately after the interview.

Source: JOVCHELOVICH E BAUER (2002)

The *exmanent* questions refer to research questions or the researcher’s interest that arise from her/his approach to the topic of study, when developing a literature review and deepening the topic being researched (field exploration). These questions must be transformed into immanent, being a crucial task in the research process, which should at the same time anchored *exmanent* questions in the narration, always using the language of the informant. The immanent questions are themes and topics brought by the informant, they may or may not coincide with the *exmanent* question.

It is important to mention that initially the informant should be told about the context of the research and the procedures of the narrative interview. Then, the interviewer exposes the central topic, which has the function to lead narration, the development criteria of this topic should follow the following guidelines<sup>(1)</sup>:

1. Need to be an experiential part of the interviewee. This ensures his or her interest and lead to a richly detailed narrative.
2. It should be personal, social or communal significance.
3. The interest and investment in the topic of the informant should not be mentioned, in order to avoid taking positions or taking on roles from the beginning.
4. The topic should be wide enough to allow the informant to develop a long history, from initial situations, going through past events, leading to the current situation.
5. Avoid indexical formulations, ie by not referring explicitly to dates, names or places, which should be brought only by the informant, as part of his/her relevant structure.

Therefore, the behavior of the interviewer is important in the narrative results and if there is more than one interviewer in the same research, it could cause problems, since the method takes into account the interaction between researcher and informant. If there is more than one interviewer, they should be in constant dialogue with each other to align the potential problems and so there are exchanges that can enrich the research, since each stage is prepared collectively<sup>(5)</sup>.

It is also important that the researcher warmly welcome the informant and have a committed listening, which gives clues to capture the password, which is the gateway to the informant. So, to get good results the researcher should have a great capacity to interact with others, a psychological willingness to listen and skills to write the experiences analyzed<sup>(5)</sup>.

Another important factor to be observed is the size of the narrative, because it reveals aspects that should be analyzed in each case, it may be bigger or smaller depending on the researcher, on the informant or the social context.

The narratives combine life stories and the socio-historical contexts. While the narratives reveal individual experiences and may shed light on the identities of individuals and the images they have of themselves<sup>(2)</sup>, they are also constitutive of specific socio-historical phenomena in which biographies are rooted. The narrations are more likely to reproduce structures that guide the actions of individuals than other methods using interviews. Thus, the objective of narrative interviews is not only to reconstruct the life history of the informant, but to understand the contexts in which these biographies were constructed and the factors that produce change and motivate the actions of informants<sup>(1)</sup>.

The interpretation of narratives remains a challenge to researchers who may follow different techniques or methods. And, at the same time that specific techniques is required, there is no intention to exhaust the possibilities of analysis, but rather to perform an analysis in order to open the senses<sup>(5)</sup>.

Shutze<sup>(1)</sup>, outlines a form of analysis of narrative interview quite didactically:

1. After transcription, we separate the indexed from the non-indexed material:
  - The first corresponds to the rational, scientific, concrete content of who does what, when, where and why, ie, it is ordained (consequently, it is consensual order, collective)
  - The second, the non-indexed information goes beyond the events and express values, judgments, refers to the wisdom of life and therefore is subjective.
2. In the next step, using the indexed content, events are ordered for each subject what is called trajectories.
3. The next step is to investigate the dimensions that are not indexed in the text.
4. Then, we group and compare individual trajectories.
5. The last step is to compare and establish similarities among individual cases thus allowing the identification of collective trajectories.

To analyze the interviews it is recommended to gradually reduce text, operating with condensation of meaning and generality, it splits the content into three columns, the first is transcription, in the second column the first reduction and in third column only key words. Then, we develop categories for each of the first narrative interviews, which are arranged in a coherent system for all interviews in the research, being the final product the gathered interpretation of the relevant aspects to both the researcher and informants.

For further analysis of the data, we ask the following question proposed by Erving Goffman: what is happening here and now? This question points to the indicators of situational context (here) and the moment of interaction going on (now). The framings and contextual clues can help us in this process, the framings are how we build and signaled the context of the ongoing situation and "contextualization clues" are very important in the signaling of framings. These clues lead us both to the local traits, situational context, as for the macro context, leading information from institutional, cultural and social nature.

Still, for the establishment of categories and the resulting categorizations are used in both the coding procedure based on data such as the encoding based on concepts. Prior reading of the available literature that focuses on this topic as well as the focus of research interest provided the prior definition of a few categories. Moreover, the data obtained in the field can build new categories.

We must therefore extract from the data, which in fact they mean, not imposing an interpretation based on preexisting theories. Most researchers move between the said and the unsaid of the current discourse, favoring a more framed narrated context analysis<sup>(12)</sup>.

## **NARRATIVE AS A RESEARCH TOOL IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH**

Minayo<sup>(13)</sup> refers to the verb understand as the main action in qualitative research, in which questions such as the singularity of the individual, his/her experience and expertise within the group and the community to which he/she belongs, are critical to contextualize the reality where he/she is inserted. In seeking to answer questions in a given space-time or historical-social context, qualitative studies are not generalizable. This does not mean that they are somewhat objective, inaccurate or they do not have scientific credibility, but they address and treat the phenomena otherwise<sup>(14,15)</sup>.

On one hand qualitative research is concerned with capturing a level of reality that cannot be measured quantitatively, on the other, the researcher can only develop a critical view that qualifies in the deepening of data collected, if they remains in an active search and alert for new interlocutors and field observations, in order to articulate



and enrich the information collected, since the object of research is always a constructed object<sup>(13,14,16)</sup>.

Schraiber<sup>(17)</sup> states that the narrative is the objectification of thought, as the externalized thought is apprehended in its form of oral reporting. The narratives thus, according to the author, are a suitable tool for the qualitative study, which aims to investigate representations of reality of the interviewee. From these representations, we can capture the context in which this informant is inserted.

In this perspective, narratives advocate in its collection instrument the central question<sup>(18)</sup>. This way of approaching the subject of research suggests collecting texts from a very different positioning of the semi-structured interview using a semi-structured script with questions defined at which to circumscribe a given object to be investigated<sup>(14,18,19)</sup>.

The use of a semi-structured script since pre-tested and researcher previously understanding the objectives of each question, allows the interview to flow by the order of the interviewee, allowing the interviewer to ignore a structured script that overall, breaks down naturalness and creates restrictive impositions both for the researcher as for their own research subject. Still, the directivity of each question points to a focus, thus limiting the subject to respond within a previous defined and delimited field by the researcher<sup>(20)</sup>.

It is necessary to emphasize that in the narratives the non directivity proposes the apprehension of meanings in which the subject speaks, and to build own discourses in narratives, and can rethink the events he/she set out for themselves. Interference with specific questions for any clarification, targeting the content focus of research, are performed after the recording. This is because framing in depth requires the interviewer one to learn to listen to both narration as pauses, silences, rhythms and the scenario that will be setting the course of a story that is told there<sup>(18,21)</sup>.

The construction of intimacy between interviewer and interviewee allows the researcher to loosen up the role of controlling the narrative of the participant, whether it is adequate or not the material that the researcher aims to obtain<sup>(10)</sup>. By proposing that the participant should narrate freely from an open question, research enables non conditioning of responses, which provides for the research subject the gradual construction of a story with its own trends, in which the implicit and unspoken content, may emerge with greater naturalness and commitment to the everyday reality<sup>(21-23)</sup>.

The richness of the narrative method also proposes another challenge to the researcher: to become part of the process, to listen in depth what emerges from the participants involved in their own stories, admits it is crossed by the uniqueness of the interaction of meanings that is created for each subject<sup>(12,22)</sup>.

Thus, the narrative interviews are more appropriate to report detailed stories, life experiences of an individual or a few individuals. We should spend considerable time with each informant and obtain information through different types of sources, which may be from personal, familiar or social origin. Examples include letters, photographs, documents, correspondence, diaries, among others. The researcher must also be careful to contextualize personally, culturally and historically the subject of research, as well as rewriting the reports and other information obtained in order to build up some type of structure to subsequently insert the story in a chronological sequence<sup>(2)</sup>.

For its fecundity, narratives can potentially report circumstances in which the researcher aims to investigate mediation between experience and language, structure and events, or situations involving the collective memory and political actions. Narratives are a way for humans to experience the world, going beyond the simple description of their lives, because in rethink their stories - those that tell and hear - reflect who are continually reconstructing meanings about themselves<sup>(18,24)</sup>.

In this sense, Clandinin and Connelly<sup>(23)</sup> understand the narrative as a way to understand the experience, being the experience key to be reported from interview. Therefore, the researcher collaborates with the interviewee and engages in research, so that both leave this meeting sensitized<sup>(2)</sup>.

Finally, the narrative research extends the connection between the researcher and the field, its context and confection, to allow the tension of research enigma (the problem in question) is not lost, since the collected material provides rich consistency of experiences and meanings - for prolonged listening and the notion of the importance of the sequence of events that allow us to report narratives, and does not precipitate in the search for reconstructing experiences and assignments from interviewed by anchoring the theoretical frameworks that empiricism itself revealed in the field<sup>(23)</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

The qualitative research method is characterized by addressing questions related to the singularities that are unique to the field and the individuals researched. The qualitative study through the narratives can reveal the tensions of the field, so that the resonances and dissonances of meanings that emerge through the narratives are problematized from the sequence of topics to form the biographical reports in which and experienced facts cross. Narratives allow researchers to go beyond the transmission of information or content, making the experience revealed, which involves fundamental aspects to understanding both the subject interviewed individually as the context in which she/he is inserted.

By breaking with the traditional form of questions and answers based interviews, the method of narrative reveals to be an important tool to conduct qualitative research. Providing researchers data for producing scientific knowledge committed to the apprehension of reliable re-

ports and originality of the data presented, since they allow the deepening of research, combining life stories and the socio-historical contexts, making the understanding of the senses that produce changes in the beliefs and values that motivate (or justify) the actions of informants.

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