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RESEARCH APPROACHES

The potential of narrative analysis for HPE research: Highlighting five analytic lenses

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Abstract

Context: Health professions education (HPE) has increasingly turned to qualitative methodology to address a number of the field's difficult research problems. While several different methodologies have been widely accepted and used in HPE research (e.g., Grounded Theory), others remain largely unknown. In this methodology paper, we discuss the value of narrative analysis (NA) as a set of analytic approaches that offer several lenses that can support HPE scholars' research.

Methods: After briefly discussing the 'narrative turn' in research, we highlight five NA *lenses*: holistic, situated, linguistic, agentive and sequential. We explore what each lens can offer HPE scholars—highlighting certain aspects of the data—and how each lens is limited—obscuring other aspects. To support these observations, we offer an example of each lens from contemporary HPE scholarship. The manuscript also describes methods that can be employed in NA research and offers two different typologies of NA methods that can be used to access these lenses.

Conclusions: We conclude with a discussion of how different analytic methods can be used to harness each of the lenses. We urge the deliberate selection and use of NA methods and point to the inherent partiality of any NA approach. Reflecting on our position as narrative scholars, we acknowledge how our own lenses illuminate some areas and conceal others as we tell the story of NA. In conclusion, we invite other researchers to benefit from the potential NA promises.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Contemporary health professions education (HPE) researchers are faced with a number of wicked problems[1]: interprofessional collaboration, experiences of shame in medical learning and how racism affects minoritised physicians and trainees, to note a few.[2–12] Part of what makes these problems wicked is their social nature; the particular experiences, beliefs and choices of individuals involved in these challenges mean that they defy definitive formulation or explanation since the multiple people involved all bring their own subjective interpretations. Given these social roots, qualitative research methods can be helpful in understanding HPE's wicked problems and constructing some partial, context-bound solutions.[13] Qualitative analyses addressing these problems have generated valuable insights, but many

of them have relied on a similar set of qualitative methods and methodologies: studies of interprofessional collaboration have generally used qualitative approaches using a combination of observation, interview and focus group methods to unpack what enables or hinders interprofessional collaboration.[4,12,14–16] Investigations of shame have harnessed phenomenology with data collected via one-on-one interviews.[6,7] Explorations of racism's effects on physicians and trainees have also used one-on-one interviews to collect data, often from a critical theory perspective.[8–10,17,18] Analytically, approaches to these wicked problems have included constant comparative and thematic content analysis, among others. Another set of analytic approaches that may help provide additional, complementary insights relies on a central tool many individuals use to make sense of their world: narrative.[19,20] Bruner argued that stories are a principle means

by which individuals 'purpose-build the very events of a life'[19, p. 15]; he believed the stories people have of their experiences offer insight into humans' basic meaning-making processes. Methods of *narrative analysis* (NA) can be valuable assets as HPE researchers seek to tap into the narrative ways of knowing[19] by which clinician educators and HPE learners may understand their lives. To harness these assets, it may be helpful to review the possibilities different NA lenses can provide. *Analytic lenses* are particular 'styles' of doing qualitative research[21, p. 1]; unlike theories, they do not prescribe what we see but, like Blumer's sensitising concepts, 'suggest directions along which to look', shaping the questions asked and the claims made.[22, p. 148]

This Research Approaches article highlights five analytic lenses NA methods can offer researchers: holistic, situated, linguistic, agentive and sequential. We preface this description by reviewing the 'narrative turn' in social science research.[23,24] We then describe each of the five lenses—holistic, situated, linguistic, agentive and sequential—discussing their use (past and potential) in HPE and limitations. We also discuss two approaches to understanding specific NA methods that can be used to access the lenses. We conclude by exploring the both the promise and partiality of NA, reflecting on our own lenses and experiences.

2 | BACKGROUND: THE 'NARRATIVE TURN'

The mid-1980s marked the 'narrative turn' in social science research, when Jerome Bruner and others firmly established the legitimacy of narrative inquiry.[23,24] In so doing, they challenged positivism and promoted narrative—versus paradigmatic or categorical—ways of knowing.[19,23,25,26]

Scholars explored these ways of knowing through *narrative inquiry*, which encompasses any study *of* narrative (or collections of narratives) as well as studies interpreting practices and events *as* narratives.[20,26,27] Scholars have used narrative inquiry across multiple research paradigms, academic disciplines and methodologies, but they all value and harness this narrative mode of thinking, either studying how participants construct the stories of their experiences or drawing on researchers' storytelling to better understand participants.[28–31]

It is from within this orientation that scholars develop their approach to *narrative analysis* (NA), that is, orientations through which they carry out a narrative inquiry. NA methods are wide-ranging and can be flexibly interpreted and applied, so there is no single list of NA methods we draw from or point to. Instead, below, based on the NA literature and our own experiences,[23,25,26,32] we offer five *lenses* NA can offer HPE researchers. Each lens highlights some aspects of the data and research context while deemphasising others, so research designers must carefully select from among them.

3 | PROCESS: FIVE LENSES ON NA

The *holistic lens* on NA preserves the status of a story as a complex and integrated unit.[23] Rather than categorising data into separate chunks or themes, this lens focuses on connections within a story, an event or even a series of stories and events that build a systematic whole.[33] This bird's eye lens on narrative asks the researcher to synthesise data into a single (or small number of) interpretation(s), perhaps generating an overall theme, moral or style. This allows comparison across stories, as Price and colleagues[34] did in their study of millennial nurses' accounts of their career choice (see Table 1). The holistic lens provided an understanding of each participant's story that was both complex and coherent, maintaining what Price and colleagues call, 'ongoing connection to the wholeness of the participants' stories'.[34, p. 308] This lens allows for a coherent account of participants' stories, examining not just how one event or moment may have affected the narrator but how all the events and moments of a story work together to create meaning.

A foundational challenge that researchers using NA's holistic approach must contend with is delineating what is a 'whole' unit, a 'whole' story. In other words, scholars using the holistic NA lens must decide how much of a person's story is the 'whole' to be analysed. This decision can be highly variable, ranging from a long and multi-part life story down to 'small stories' of just a few phrases or sentences.[32,38] And, as Mishler argued, the lines delineating what is and is not a story and how to represent that story are part of the interpretative process.[39] Moreover, a holistic *researcher* perspective may not align with the ways *participants* see the whole of their stories. Scholars using the holistic lens, then, must be aware of the potential primacy of their interpretations and work to include participants in the NA process.

The *situated lens* on NA foregrounds the particular cultural context(s) in which individuals create narratives.[23,40] This lens seeks to understand what is contested and what is normalized or 'typified'[31, p. 239] in these contexts, considering audience, the purpose(s) or function(s) of the narrative and the cultural resources narrators draw upon.[23,40] From this perspective, stories can be seen as *co-constructed* by the teller and hearer using the narrative resources available in the culture; researchers fully explore how the narrative connects with the *context* in which it is told or enacted.[41] For instance, researchers might focus on the interactions between teller and hearers to see when and how hearers affirm, contest or even take over the story.[41] As they trace these interactions, researchers attend to social constructs (e.g., gender, racial or ethnic identity) and cultural constructs (e.g., the overworked resident, the supportive nurse and the heroic surgeon) on which story co-creators draw.[23,42] A study by Sargeant and colleagues[35] used a situated lens to explore how simulated patients position themselves vis-a-vis medical learners in their narratives about their work (see Table 1). This situated lens supported researchers' insights into the ways social and cultural beliefs and structures shape a narrator's understanding of their world. In this[35] study, simulated patients drew on the cultural notion of *family* (among others) to understand themselves as parental figures to the medical learners.

As with any scholarship using a situated lens, however, researchers ultimately choose which elements of the local and cultural context to foreground in the analysis, interpretation and eventual research narrative. Influenced by their own experiences, cultural

TABLE 1 Narrative analysis lenses and exemplar HPE studies

Lens	Paper title	Authors, year and country	Purpose	Methodology/methods	Data	Lens affordances
Holistic	Choosing nursing as a career: a narrative analysis of millennial nurses career choice of virtue[34]	Price, McGillis Hall, Angus, & Peter, 2013 (Canada)	Understand how millennial nurses explain, account for, and make sense of their choice of nursing as a career	Qualitative methodology/ semi-structured interviews, participant journals, researcher field notes	12 × 2 verbatim interview transcripts, 12 journals, field notes	-Comparison across stories highlights nursing as virtuous career choice -Complex understanding of each story points to career entry as initially narrated around a traditional understanding of nursing -Nuanced account of the whole stories makes more visible how a stereotypical understanding of nursing influenced participants
Situated	Applying positioning theory to examine interactions between simulated patients and medical students: a narrative analysis[35]	Sargeant, McLean, Green, & Johnson, 2017 (Australia)	Explore teaching and learning relationship between medical students and simulated patients (SPs) and how this relationship might affect feedback and assessment	Qualitative methodology/ semi-structured interviews with SPs	14 verbatim interview transcripts	-Highlighted how social structures of occupation (as student and/or doctor) and family (e.g., as family member to be proud of) shaped SP understandings -Pointed to how embodied SP roles working with students co-construct responsibilities as 'patient' and trainer
Linguistic	Narrative, emotion and action: analysing 'most memorable' professionalism dilemmas	Rees, Monrouxe, & McDonald, 2013 (UK)	Explore the *whats* and *hows* of written narratives by medical students of their most memorable professionalism dilemmas.	Qualitative methodology/ written narratives of medical students from 29 UK medical schools	680 written narratives	-Brought out connotation of emotion word choices, particularly negative ones (e.g., anxiety, sadness) as they make sense of professionalism dilemmas -Emphasised identity work these professionalism dilemmas do
Agentive	Medical student stories of participation in patient care related activities: the construction of relational identity[36]	Warmington & McColl, 2017 (Australia)	Explore how medical students' identities are constructed and how their emerging identities are shaped by their narrative characterizations of the	Ethnographic methodology/ participant observations, semi-structured interviews and textual materials	Field notes, 47 interview transcripts, course handbooks, lecture notes	-Made narrators' perceptions of their own commitment more visible -Made narrators' transforming perception of patients more visible

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Lens	Paper title	Authors, year and country	Purpose	Methodology/methods	Data	Lens affordances
			relationships between themselves, patients and clinical teachers			- Revealed how initially disorienting experiences were rhetorically constructed as part of developing agency
Sequential	The narrative (re)production of prestige: How neurosurgeons teach medical students to valorise diseases[37]	Johannessen, 2014 (Norway)	Understanding how notions of disease prestige are (re)produced through neurosurgeons' telling of disease narratives in medical education	Ethnographic methodology/ non-participant observation, audio-recording of lectures, informal interviews	Field notes of observations (732 pages) and 13 interviews, transcribed recordings of lectures (24 hours)	- Highlighted surgeons' perceptions of their roles as prestigious through construction of a heroic story - Made more visible causal connection between disease narrative and masculine, lifesaver identity of surgeons

background and theoretical and conceptual frameworks, researchers' interpretation of the work a particular narrative is doing may overemphasise some aspects of the context and obscure others. As Mishler noted, narrative scholars are, like their participants, storytellers: 'It is clear that we do not *find* stories; we *make* stories. We retell our respondents' accounts through our analytic redescriptions. We, too, are storytellers …'.[25, p. 117]

NA's *linguistic lens* interrogates both the form and structure of a narrative as well as its content.[40,42] Human languages offer grammatical resources that provide an infinite number of potential combinations of words, phrases, inflexions and meanings for storytelling,[43] and this lens examines the choices narrators make about those resources.[40,42,44,45] For instance, while narrating what is arguably the same mental state, 'I don't know' (i.e., I haven't the knowledge required to answer your question) has different connotations from the statement 'you [generic] just can't know' (i.e., nobody has the knowledge to predict the future).[46] These differences are brought into focus with NA's linguistic lens. A central benefit of the linguistic lens is what it can reveal about narrator identity,[32,40,42] as demonstrated in Rees, Monrouxe, and McDonald's[47] study of medical student narratives of professional dilemmas (See Table 1). In a line-by-line analysis of one student's dilemma, the researchers showed how she used language to construct herself as a 'VERY strong woman', despite being a victim of bullying.[47] This linguistic lens highlighted how this participant used narrative to do the identity work of 'gain[ing] control over her negative experience' and persisting in her medical career.[47, p. 92]

Like all research orientations, NA's linguistic lens has limitations. First, a focus on the words alone can miss the important messages communicated in other ways, i.e., paralinguistic cues like intonation, gesture or body positioning. An analytic focus on the transcribed word can obscure the other things being 'said'. Second, by fragmenting the data into discrete linguistic categories (e.g., linguistic markers of hesitation), researchers may lose the overall purpose of the narrative, abandoning the potential that, for instance, a holistic or situated lens offers. Bleakley argued that analytical, paradigmatic approaches like that of the linguistic lens, 'tend to idealisation, encouraging researchers to force stories into preset categories … missing how specific narratives work for specific social occasions'.[20, p. 536]

An *agentive lens* on NA highlights *agency*—i.e., the intentional activity of humans as they choose and execute actions amidst constraints.[48,49] Many scholars position telling a story as an agentive act: narrators interpret and evaluate experiences for and with the listener.[23,28,29,50] This lens attends to the narrator's choices in part to understand the purposes of a story: what is this narrative agent (or group of agents) trying to *accomplish*?[23,42,50] For example, Capps and Ochs[42, p. 15] focused their analysis of the participant with agoraphobia on her 'struggle to achieve coherence and continuity', on the interpretative *work* she did as a narrative agent rather than on her story's alignment with some 'objective truth'. This agentive lens supports understanding not only of narrators' own intentions and actions, but also of how they see the intentions and actions of others. For example, Warmington and McColl's[49] study of the ways medical students narrate patient care experiences, while not using the word

'agency' explicitly, framed the students as agentive storytellers, 'positioning' themselves vis-a-vis patients and instructors (see Table 1). Warmington and McColl's[49] participants used their stories to justify, with reservations, ignoring some consent procedures (e.g., getting full consent for a medical student to practice rather than just implying it is not a choice). This lens highlights the rhetorical moves narrators make with their stories.

While the agentive lens can provide insights into participants' intentional activities, these strategies also reflect how the narrator is *positioned by* existing norms and discourses (recalling the situated lens above).[41] Narrative agents are constrained by situations and structures in which they find themselves, so those using an agentive lens must also account for these constraints.[48,49] Moreover, in constructing research narratives, scholars exercise their own agency, further complicating an agentive lens. Whether analysing participant narratives or creating narratives from events and experiences, researchers co-opt some narrative agency in their own telling.

The final lens NA offers is *sequential*: the ordering of events in a story (i.e., the story world) and in experience (i.e., the life world).[41] Riessman included both story world and life world ordering in her basic definition of narrative: 'a bounded segment of talk that is temporally ordered and recapitulates a sequence of events'[23, p. 116] and took 'attention to sequences of action' to be the distinguishing feature of NA.[23, p. 11] Sequencing of actions is one way many people make sense of their world, often imputing causality from temporal ordering.[31,40] Attending to the sequence of events—either in the story world or the life world—supports an understanding of how participants understand the different events and individuals in their lives, how they interact with each other and how they experience some events and actions causing others.[31,40] For example, in Johannessen's study of disease prestige in neurosurgeons' narratives, he argued that the sequence of events in these narratives—rupture, diagnostics, treatment and return to normality—mirrored heroic stories with a strong masculine hero in Western culture (see Table 1).[37] In this case, the sequential lens revealed a particular *type* of story structure, offering insight into how those neurosurgeons conceived of their actions and consequences, building prestige for their identity as neurosurgeons.[37]

Like the linguistic lens, the sequential lens can lead to fragmentation and difficulty seeing the overall narrative purposes. Also, like the agentive lens, this lens can overemphasise the agency of the *narrator* in making sequencing choices. Moreover, the philosopher, Galen Strawson,[51] argued that the basic diachronic understanding of the self as someone who stretches across past, present and future is not innate to everyone. Some conceive of their temporal selves as episodic and, therefore, have no sense of their lives as narratives.[51] For such individuals, sequential choices are likely not reflective of underlying causal understandings or ways of sense-making.

As the descriptions above illustrate, the five NA lenses we discuss hold different kinds of potential that HPE researchers can harvest. In order to illustrate this potential, we offered examples above from five HPE articles whose analytic approaches, we believe, correspond to these five lenses. We summarise these in Table 1. They are from a variety of countries, using a variety of methodologies and methods to give the reader a diversity of approaches to NA.

4 | FROM LENSES TO METHODS: NARRATIVE ANALYSIS TYPOLOGIES

As the examples we use above demonstrate, the holistic, situated, linguistic, agentive and sequential lenses each offer potential benefits and limitations. But these lenses are not, themselves, methods: researchers have used various methods to address their research questions like plot analysis,[52] dialogic narrative analysis,[36] the Brown Educational Guide to the Analysis of Narrative (BEGAN)[53] and, perhaps, the most widely used approach, Labov and Waletzky's structural analysis.[35,47,54–56] Scholars have described different typologies to try to make sense of this variety of methods.[20,25,26,32,41] One approach is to classify NA methods according to which 'level' of the narrative they attend to.[25,41] For instance, Bamberg[41, p. 137] approached the actual text of the narrative itself, the interactional co-construction of the narrative between teller and hearer, and how teller and hearer 'establish and display particular notions of selves' each as separate *levels* of analysis. Bamberg comes to understand narratives through stepwise interpretation of the content and context at each level. Warmington and McColl,[36] for instance, used 'dialogic narrative analysis' to examine all three of Bamberg's levels, examining the stories themselves, the interactions between narrators and interviewers, and the professional identities narrators were creating for themselves.

In a slightly different approach, Polkinghorne[26] and Bleakley[20] each typologised NA similarly, based on the role narrative plays: whether narratives are the *object* of paradigmatic analysis (i.e., categorical analysis and chunking up stories) that researchers think *about* or, instead, whether narratives are the *product* of synthetic analysis (i.e., narrative analysis and creating a new story) that researchers think *with*. Within this approach, some methods of NA take stories as data and break them down, while others use the data of experiences and events to create stories to better understand them. Thus far, HPE scholars have mainly taken the former approach, using NA methods to make sense of participants' stories,[20] as with the five HPE studies we discussed above (see Table 1).[34–37,47] Thinking with stories is a potentially powerful, but untapped, methodological tool for tackling HPE's wicked problems because, unlike a paradigmatic approach, it does not threaten to reduce stories to mere data, sacrificing the potential 'affective impact' of narrative.[20, p. 538]

5 | PEARLS: THE PROMISE AND PARTIALITY OF NARRATIVE

In choosing an NA lens—as well as the potential benefits and limitations that come with it—researchers must consider how various analytic methods (i.e., the level of analysis and synthetic versus paradigmatic analysis) shape that lens. For instance, researchers could access the potential insights of a situated lens—an understanding of

how social and cultural contexts shape narrators' understandings of the world—through Bamberg's[41] interactional level of analysis. Alternatively, scholars could go one level 'down' in Bamberg's schema to the textual level to gain the potential insights of the sequential lens, understanding what particular sequences of events in the text itself reveal about narrators' constructions of cause and effect.[41] In contrast, an analysis one level 'up', with its focus on identity, could support the agentive lens and the rhetorical moves participants make to represent their own and others' intentions and actions.[41]

Working from Polkinghorne's[26] analytic typology, those seeking a complex and coherent understanding of a full story through the holistic lens might use a synthetic approach, *re*storying participants' experiences. In contrast, researchers who want to better understand the choices narrators make in representing themselves, and their world through the linguistic lens might use paradigmatic analysis.[26] The range of analytic approaches and the variety of NA lenses hold the promise to enrich the research practices of HPE scholars.

Yet, none of the five lenses we outline here map perfectly onto any analytic approach, nor do they offer 'off the shelf' solutions to HPE's wicked problems. The NA lenses must be deliberately woven into a study design, concordant with the conceptual framework, the specific research questions, the data collected and *how* and *by whom* it is collected. Furthermore, the NA lens selected must be congruent with the problem or question the researcher is trying to address, speaking to the audience for whom she is trying to address it. Doing NA is a particularistic endeavour, specific to the conditions of research.[13] Stories have the power to create a kind of commonsense reality, what Linde[40, p. 195] called 'an issue of morality disguised as an issue of universal factuality'. We maintain that NA methods and lenses can also have this power. Having chosen a method and a lens, it is easy to believe that the truth that 'emerges' is *the* truth. For instance, a sequential lens on a Black physician's stories of racist treatment might highlight the ways repeated experiences build on each other, but this may mask the resistance to racist power structures that might be clearer with an agentive lens. Moreover, neither of these lenses may reveal what *participants* experience as truth, potentially diminishing their agency in telling the story in the first place. In other words, each NA lens both obscures and reveals. Riessman[23, p. 186] framed it this way: 'Narrative truths are always partial—committed and incomplete'.

This partiality holds for each of us as authors of this piece as well. We bring to this work our own theoretical, methodological and personal lenses. Abigail is a linguist, educational psychologist and qualitative and mixed methods researcher who writes about experiences of agency. As a researcher, teacher and parent who has moved across fields and across the country, she is learning to embrace the agency of her own storytelling—personal and professional. Lara is a theorist and qualitative methodologist who has explored a range of topics in HPE, most of which focus on the foundational premises through which individuals engage with groups and vice versa. She sees stories as powerful means of sharing research, of impacting actions and challenging assumptions. Renee is an educationist, a theorist and qualitative methodologist. She writes about workplace learning, workplace

guidance and the interprofessional learning and teaching dynamic within the workplace. She believes in the power of stories in teaching and research to provide deep and meaningful learning and understanding. Given these experiences, we may attribute power and utility to stories that may not be there for everyone, and we may see the lenses of NA differently than others would. Just like the five NA lenses we present, our own lenses illuminate some areas and conceal others. Our story about NA, like all stories, is 'a triumphant configurer of experienced reality'.[42, p. 53] We await others' configurations using NA lenses, with the hope that they can help us move forward as a field with our research problems, wicked or otherwise.

DISCLAIMER

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

No human subjects were involved in this commentary, so we did not seek ethical approval.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

A Konopasky, L Varpio and R Stalmeijer worked together in the conception, writing and revision of this piece.

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