

An exploration of narrative as a research method

Abstract

Narrative derives from a long history of literary tradition and is increasingly used as a research method. Narrative in essence is the stories of our lives and the stories of the lives of others. Narrative is open to interpretation. This interpretation develops through collaboration of researcher and respondent or story teller and listener. Narrative, explored through interpretive research allows access to the respondent reality via their socially constructed stories. As a term it is a many sided concept. This paper considers the distinct features of narrative, highlighting the potential for overlap within the terms of life history, life incidents, story telling, biography and autobiography.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explore the potential of narrative for use as a research method. The term narrative may relate to both the research method and the phenomenon (Pinnegar and Daynes 2006) or the phenomenon and the process (Connelly and Clandinin 1990). Researching the meaning of the term and wondering where the boundaries lay in defining it can be difficult as *'the terms of life history, autobiography, biography, life story and narrative define one another in terms of difference'* and *'every term carries a trace of the other terms'* (Denzin 1989:47). Narrative as data acquired through research may utilise story telling, life history, in depth interview, biography or focus group (Letherby 2003). These definitions highlight not only the similar features within narrative but also the lack of neat categories. The use of narrative is well discussed but remains a many-sided concept.

This paper assesses narrative for unique features and applications. It is structured in four sections, the first of which is 'types of narrative'. This looks at the meaning of narrative, as a research method and a vehicle for providing the individuals story. Then discussing life history, life incidents, story telling,

biography, autobiography; affording the opportunity to outline the distinguishing characteristics of each approach whilst identifying potential for overlap. The next section 'Collecting narrative data' reviews the possibilities of interviews, diaries and secondary sources, discussing the pros and cons of each source of data collection. The next section 'Presenting narrative data' looks at the variety of ways narrative data might be presented including thick transcript, poetry, plays, video clips, audio clips and diaries. The final section concludes the paper drawing together findings and summarising the exploration of narrative.

Narrative

The concept of narrative arrives from a long history of literary tradition and Silverman (2006:164) discusses narrative in relation to Saucerres science of signs and Semiotics. This science views linguistics as language made up of groups of words each with culturally relevant meaning attached to it (Silverman 2006:250. Polkinghorne (1988:13) describes narrative as personal and social histories, myths, fairytales and stories which are made up to explain behaviour. Culturally it can facilitate the sharing of belief systems and the positioning of shared values (Barthes 1975).

Narrative has been defined as first and second order (Carr 1997). The first order is the telling of the individual's story, the ontological narrative. The second order is the researchers' account of other stories, presenting explanations of social and cultural knowledge. This is what Somers and Gibson (1994) term the representational narrative. Narrative is defined by Plummer (1995:24) as either: individual's interacting, narrating everyday lives and conversations or the individual within their social environment and society.

Narrative is either presented in the first person, as the first person's story or relates to characters in a story, told by another. The narrative approach pertains to form and structure as well as the discovery of social information and is employed within the qualitative paradigm (Silverman 2006). The presentation of

narrative generally forms a linear style, commencing in a certain place and then moving forward logically having a beginning, middle and end (Denzin 1989). It can be *'neat and tidy'* (Sikes 2001:46) in stark comparison to the ubiquity of real life experiences. A logical structure assists in data collection but may mask the full story (Silverman 2006:167). Data can be highly subjective displaying what Czarniawsa (2004:50) terms *'cultural repertoire'* and *'familiar narrative construct'*. Silverman (2001:105) suggests narratives emerging from interview come from the social world and this world exists outside the interview.

Goodson and Sikes (2001:15) attach the increasing popularity of the individual voice to *'...the move away from modernist, master narratives' and the emancipation of self, acknowledged as subjective and individual'*. The respondents and researcher generate data shaped by an inter-subjective reality in what Clandinin and Connelly refer to as three dimensional inquiry (2000). Blaikie (2000) suggests that joint collaboration between researcher and respondent generates meaning, which in turn is a construction of social reality. Establishing definitive meaning from this multi-dimensional space is difficult. Subsequently, the reader will never be assured of the subjectivity of the text (Barthes 1977:146).

Life history

Life history emerging from the earlier disciplines of biography and autobiography, has been a distinct method since the 1920's when increasing interest unfolded in fields of sociology and anthropology (Silverman 2006, Silverman 2001, Goodson and Sikes 2001, Gubrium and Holstein 1997, Burgess 1984). Its focus differs from biography although it is accepted that the terms overlap (Hagermaster 1992). It was welcomed in the 1920's as a voice articulating the relatively unknown. This was generally the voice of the powerless, of individuals from other cultures and as such, presented new information on how people lived, their influences and values. The emergence of life history relaying this new voice presented a challenge to academics and intellectuals. Goodson and Sikes (2001:7) state that

'conducted successfully, life history forces a confrontation with other peoples' subjective perceptions'. This approach highlights the respondents' social reality, looks at the perceptions of the individual, their socio-cultural background and then interconnects this individual way of living and being with the research question.

A renaissance in life history in the latter 20th Century follows an earlier decline in interest. The decline was influenced by the increasing trend towards modernism. Sociological methods were influenced by what Goodson and Sikes (2001:12) called *'the pervasive drift of academic disciplines towards abstract theory'*. This positivist influence criticised it as methodologically weak and deficient in contributing to grand theory; suggesting the results provided no more evidence following analysis than could be acquired through a more simplistic, quantitative survey. The research preference at this time was the readily quantifiable theoretical construct, supported with easily accessed statistical evidence.

The life history renaissance is demonstrated in feminist, naturalist and humanist research studies (Denzin 1989). Life history, chronologically, may be limited to particular life events or experiences and include the study of life documents or individual interview. Life history can be *'retrospective or contemporaneous'* (Hitchcock and Hughes 1985). Retrospective emphasises the past and contemporaneous the present or recent past. Despite using a current temporal range contemporaneous still acknowledges the influences that shaped the individual exist in the past.

Data generated through respondent reflection and recollection from memory is by definition subjective and one sided. It is a socially constructed account which assembles as it is relayed to the researcher through an inter-subjective reality (Denzin and Lincoln 2000). Life History observes how the individual copes with and is shaped by their experiences; life events are the real features that interest the researcher (Pole and Morrison 2003:35-39). Mandelbaum (in Burgess 1982)

describes how the impacting social, biological and cultural dimensions bring about change or turning points in an individual's life. As a consequence the individual's ability to adapt to the changes empowers them to make sense of the present and the future. The distinguishing feature of life history is that it embeds the individual being researched. It sets them contextually within their life and experiences. The tools used to record life history are varied and may include writing by the individual or the researcher or tape recordings, transcribed at a later date.

Life incidents

Life incidents are significant in that they are events which impact on an individual's life. They are described by Denzin (1989:23) as '*turning points*' that may alter the structure of a person's life. He calls these '*turning points*'-'*epiphanies*' and outlines how these may have different levels of significance. He categorises these epiphanies in four forms: the major epiphany, the cumulative epiphany, the minor epiphany and the re-lived epiphany. He writes how they can be positive or negative, arise from crisis or change, present in a variety of forms but receive their meaning retrospectively (1989:71).

Story telling

Storytelling is a vehicle often used in sociological research in which the individual tells others about themselves. Through the story that is told and the form in which the story unfolds, the individual defines meaning through construct (Berger and Quinney 2004). This meaning provides validity, which comes from the power of the individual's story to tell the meaning of their experience (Berger and Quinney 2004). Story telling is described as a narrative feature in which the individual can tell their story, their way (Holloway and Freshwater 2007). This is further defined by Denzin (1989:43) as '*self-stories*' which are '*personal narratives*' and contextually specific.

Denzin describes how '*self-stories*' are stories that evolve through the telling, they do not exist independently prior to the telling, but 'after it has been told, it can take on the status of a story that can be retold' (1989:43). He suggests that personal narratives may take the form of personal experience narratives. Separating personal experience narratives and self stories he says that the former are often everyday more commonplace experiences whereas self stories position the self centrally to the story and often involve critical life incidents (1989:44). Storytelling may form a story in relation to an individuals experience or thoughts. It may present as an oral history if the focus of the research is to obtain an oral account of an individual's life and in this is similar to biography (Morse and Field (1996).

Biography

Biography is a unique narrative record of an individual's life often chosen to record major life events (Denzin 1989). The biographical approach builds information up to provide an overview of the events that have shaped a persons life resulting in a complex analysis of emotion, experience and personality. The category of biographical writing is broad and includes sub categories of: individual biography, autobiography, life history and oral history (Creswell 1998, Hagermaster 1992). These are often placed within a typology of narrative (Holloway and Freshwater 2007). Biography may be recorded through live interviews or life documents such as diaries, letters producing coherent text and may include other forms of recording such as plays, poetry, video or audio clips.

Cresswell (2007) describes how the biographical approach centres on the individual and illustrates how a life incident or epiphany (Denzin 1989) has influenced their life. This epiphany is set contextually by the author and the researcher. Cresswell suggests that in making a good study the researcher should: gather significant information relating to the epiphany or specific issues, develop a chronological timeline linking different elements, re-tell the individuals story in a persuasive, literary way and distinguish themes that will build a broader

picture (2007:215). He goes on to suggest the possible use of the three-dimensional space model (Clandinin and Connelly 2000) to structure the story into the elements of personal, social and interactional (2007:226). This assists in bringing persuasive elements of the story together. Alternatively he suggests structuring the story around a central plot or theme (2006:226). In summary biography is an account of someone's life often described as presenting the view of others in contrast with autobiography which is said to be the voice of the individual (Holloway and Freshwater (2007:17).

Autobiography

Through autobiography individuals define themselves, through their own voice to connect '*the present with the past and the future*' (Holloway and Freshwater 2007:17). Often used for emotional closure and meaning can arise for the storyteller through the vehicle of autobiography. Denzin (1989) adds another dimension describing autobiographies and biographies as '*conventionalised, narrative, expressions of life experiences*'. He suggests they '*shape how lives are told*' and create '*real appearances of real people*'. They involve assumptions of culture, family, class and gender; the position of authors and observers and the assumption that truthful statements are distinguished from fictions. He suggests that meaning derives out of the interaction between writers, readers and the text (1989:17). Highlighting the presence of structural bias in stories and that all stories are in fact fictions (1989:75-77). Denzin's view is that all stories are '*open ended, inconclusive and ambiguous*' and '*subject to multiple interpretations*' (1989:81).

Burgess deriving from Allport (1984:126) describes autobiographical data as taking several forms: The *comprehensive* autobiography, centred on the main features in an individuals life. The *topical* autobiography with a life story constructed on a central theme and the *edited* autobiography in which the researcher selects, positions and excludes items. In autobiographical research studies, the researcher often has control over what data is discussed and

presented. Holstein and Gubrium (1995:39) welcome active construction by the respondent to ensure a productive result in data generation.

Conclusion

The previous sections define narrative as an individual method and as a vehicle used to deliver the telling of individual's story. Narrative may also indicate the form of data collection and the method of recording such as through interview, using personal diaries or biography. It may characterise the temporal features of the collected data, relating to themes or aspects of an individuals life or refer to the form of presentation such as in autobiography or biography. Subjectivity features heavily in the use of narrative as does the importance of the story being told, what has influenced the story and how the individual imposes meaning on to their life experience. Narrative can be described as both a singular research method and a sign post to the data content, derived from a typology of narrative approaches. Narrative methods give the individual the chance to present their story, their influences and how they coped with these experiences during their life. Narrative methods are chosen by researchers who are interested in real people, real life events and the stories told by and told about these individuals.

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