Abstract: Narrative as a research method in understanding experiences in nurse education

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The purpose of this core paper is to explore narrative research methods. In particular it considers them as a tool for research in the area of nurse education and researching the experiences of nurse educationalists. Narrative derives from a long history of litererary 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. The paper concludes by outlining the possibilities available for collecting and presenting narrative data.

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). 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' (Denzin1989:47). 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 and but also the lack of neat categories. The use of narrative although fitting the aim of the final research study remains a many-sided concept.

Narrative may be used in shaping the presentation of an individual's view of how they see themselves inspirationally and literally. Culturally it can be used to 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 narrative is where the individual tells the stories of themselves or about themselves, classified as ontological narrative. The second order narrative is the researchers' account of the other stories used to present explanations of social and cultural knowledge, described as representational narrative (Somers and Gibson 1994). Narrative is broken down into elements of social context where from one perspective the focus is on the individual, the interaction and narration of their everyday lives and conversations, the '….joint actions in local contexts' and the other, where the focus lays with the individual within their social environment and society in general '….into wider negotiated social worlds' (Plummer 1995:24).

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. It can neat and logical, in stark comparison to the ubiquity of real life experiences. This logicality omits to tell the whole story, presenting one aspect of experience, generally one that the respondent prefers to project or feels is most relevant to the researcher and a tension may arise when the respondent narrative is presenting as something it is not in actuality representing and does not uphold their purported view (Silverman 2006:167).

Narrative is a form of communication that is either presented in the first person, as the account of the first person or relates to characters in a story, told by another. The narrative approach is seen as pertaining to form and structure as well as the discovery of social information and is employed within the qualitative paradigm (Silverman 2006). Narrative is often ascribed to the data acquired through research; utilising story telling, life history, in depth interview, biography and focus group (Letherby 2003). There is increasing interest in relating the concept of narrative to techniques within quantitative paradigms. One example of this is the chronological approach exhibited in statistical data handling; including not only the temporal element but also the knowledge and meaning from which the framework of the acquired data develops and hence variables are unfixed (Elliott 2005)

This core 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 summarises the exploration of narrative.

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