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Heather Fraser

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ARTICLE

Doing Narrative Research

Analysing Personal Stories Line by Line

Heather Fraser

Faculty of Social Work, University of Manitoba, Canada

ABSTRACT

This article seeks to contribute to discussions about how narrative analysis might be undertaken. I do this by exploring one method of narrative approach to analyse personal stories. Before considering some of the issues associated with narrative research, I comment on the rise of the ‘narrative moment’. I then provide ways to conceptualize narrative research. In the final part of the discussion, I discuss ways to conduct narrative research. In so doing, I provide concrete details about how personal stories might be analysed line by line.

KEY WORDS:

critical social
work

interpretation

narrative analysis

social context

storytelling

subjectivity

Part of being human involves narrating stories to ourselves and to others (Plummer, 1995). Located in imaginary worlds, as well as those that are materially based, human beings use narratives to express emotions and convey beliefs about how 'things should be' (Berger and Luckman, 1966; Chanfrault-Duchet, 1991; Cotterill and Letherby, 1993). Through the retelling of stories, they represent their identities and societies (Brunt, 2001; Ezzy, 1998; Jackson, 1996; Plummer, 1995; Riessman, 1990, 1993, 2003).¹ Storytelling is such an important activity because narratives help people to organize their experiences into meaningful episodes that call upon cultural modes of reasoning and representation (Berger, 1997).

Narratives are integral to human culture because culture is constituted through the '... ensemble of stories we tell about ourselves' (Geertz, 1975, cited in Plummer, 1995: 5). Culture produces the conventions for living. Whether it is in the general community, workplace or home, culture shapes how individuals envisage their world and speak about their places in it (Berg, 1998; Berger, 1997; Brown, 1990). At the same time, however, culture is made by people who do not always do as they are told. Whether it is by accident or design, individuals do not always take up the types of narratives that they are 'meant to'. And neither do they always voice them in the ways that are intended (Cranny-Francis, 1994; Simon, 1996). From a critical social work approach – that is, an approach that draws ideas from feminism, critical theory, post-modernism and/or post-colonialism – this means that narratives may be used to reinforce but also contest dominant social practices (Franzosi, 1998; Milner, 2001; Plummer, 1995, 2001; Riessman, 1993, 2003; Young, 1997).

The purpose of this article is to describe, justify and explain the use of one type of narrative research. I begin with a discussion about the rise of narrative research because it is within these politics that narrative analysis may be located. I then consider some of the challenges associated with social workers conducting narrative interviews. In the final section, I offer practical suggestions for analysing personal stories line by line.

THE RISE OF NARRATIVE RESEARCH

In the academy and elsewhere, post-positivist research has become increasingly legitimized (Leonard, 1997; Reinharz, 1992). With the greater acceptance of postmodern research methods, personal storytelling is now seen as a valid means of knowledge production (Cotterill and Letherby, 1993; Riessman, 1990, 1993; Skeggs, 2002). Plummer (1995: 19) describes this period as the 'narrative moment'. He says that,

'[S]tories' have recently moved centre stage in social thought. In anthropology, they are seen as the pathways to understanding culture. In psychology, they are

the bases of identity. In history, they provide the tropes for making sense of the past. In psychoanalysis, they provide 'narrative truths' for analysis. (Plummer, 1995: 18)

Yet, in (Anglo-American) social work, the 'narrative moment' has been slower to arrive (Solas, 1995). Among other reasons, this may be due to some social workers' reluctance to adopt methods of knowledge production that defy the orthodoxies of science and professionalism (Margolin, 1997; Riessman, 1993). Nevertheless, many other social workers – who are increasing in number – have been drawn to narrative methods, integrating them into a range of social work methods across a variety of fields (see Brunt, 2001; Cohler, 1994; Eisikovits et al., 1998; Milner, 2001). With the help of other disciplines, they have ensured that an assortment of narrative approaches have worked their way into the discipline (see also Ellermann, 1998; Solas, 1995; Poindexter, 2002; White and Denborough, 1998).

As many others have pointed out, narrative approaches have much to offer social work. For a start, they provide ways to make sense of language, including that which is not spoken (Riessman, 1990). Apart from encouraging a plurality of truths to become known, they also provide ways to understand the interactions that occur among individuals, groups and societies (Jackson, 1998; Plummer, 1995, 2001; Riessman, 1993, 2002). Having the capacity to attend to context as well as idiosyncrasy, they subdue the inclination to posture as an expert and may be used to stimulate different kinds of discussions (Drewery and Winslade, 1997; Milner, 2001; Plummer, 1995, 2001; White and Denborough, 1998). Most importantly, they are able to authorize the stories that 'ordinary' people tell (see Gubrium and Holstein, 1995; McCabe and Bliss, 2003).

With the capacity to recognize people's strengths and engage people in active, meaning-making dialogues, narrative approaches – notably those informed by critical ideas – may help social workers move beyond a strict problem focus to more generally explore social phenomena. Carefully used, they may be effective methods in cross-cultural work (McCabe and Bliss, 2003) and community work (Brunt, 2001). Emphasizing curiosity and 'reflexivity' (Myerhoff and Ruby, 1992; Skeggs, 2002), narrative methods may aid those who seek to democratize professional relationships. By more obviously opening up points of contest and difference, they are, therefore, (potentially) compatible with social work values, especially those pertaining to social justice and self-determination (Leonard, 1997; Milner, 2001).

As with all new trends, however, questions must also be asked about the risks associated with social workers using a narrative approach. Laird (1994: 185) asks,

[H]ow might we understand the meanings of the infatuation with constructivist/narrative pursuits in this time and space? Why have we become so entranced with a search for meaning, for language, with its elegant and seductive philosophies? Is it because our social surround is falling apart?

These questions are hard to ignore given the rise of the narrative movement has occurred during a sustained period of economic conservatism, at least in most of Anglo-American societies. Pointing out that governments have ‘... destroyed the social programs we cared about and rechannelled resources to the already rich’, Laird (1994: 185) wonders whether ‘... there is something “escapist” about the story metaphor?’

Having wrestled with this question during the last seven years, I recognize that narrative approaches are escapist if they ignore ‘... the politics of narratives and the extent to which they support or contest social structures and practices’ (Jackson, 1998: 62). They are also escapist if they assume that social hierarchy is inevitable or immutable; or conversely, that the practices of domination and social exclusion are mere fictions; fictions that are amenable to simplistic notions of reframing and positive self-talk. Understanding this helps researchers to avoid becoming either a ‘witless relativist’, that is, someone who erases the impact of social structures and cultural-political contexts; or a ‘social determinant’, that is, someone who focuses so much on social structures and cultural contexts that individual agency is denied (see Gubrium and Holstein, 1995).

Narrative research should not only reflect ‘reality’ but also challenge taken-for-granted beliefs, assertions and assumptions, including those made by revered social theorists (Jackson, 1998; Worthington, 1996). For as Drewery and Winslade (1997: 42) contend, ‘... although we do not have complete control over the possibilities of our lives, we can only ever speak ourselves into existence within the terms or stories available to us’. This means that narrative researchers retain an awareness of social conditions as they consider how culture, and social structures, surface in the stories participants and researchers tell (Lawler, 2002; Riessman, 1993, 2002, 2003).

CONCEPTUALIZING NARRATIVE RESEARCH

In contrast to the metaphors often used to describe research that claims to be neutral, objective and factual, narrative research is often envisaged through a range of non-scientific metaphors. For instance, narrative researchers may be likened to chefs who see cooking as an art form and who do not try to stay true to traditional recipes (see for instance Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). So too, may they be likened to artists who paint, sketch and draw their impressions; or craftspeople that sculpt, mosaic or build their works; sometimes with the scraps that other people have left behind.

As well, the metaphors of sewing, knitting and travelling may also be used to describe narrative research. Piecing together fragments of the fabric of conversations, researchers may be understood to sew ideas together. Similarly, we may be seen as knitters who ‘spin a yarn’ by weaving together the threads of different stories (see Cotterill and Letherby, 1993). Finally, we may be compared to travellers who embark on a journey and who try to use maps and compasses. Looking for signposts but not always finding them, we are often challenged by the ‘forks in the road’ or the ‘crossroads’ that may appear before us (see Olson and Shopes, 1991).

Although there are risks associated with using such metaphors – namely that they may be seen to romanticize narrative research – I believe they have utility for three main reasons. First, they are useful because they shake off the scientific illusions of objectivity to foreground, instead, researcher subjectivity (Ellerman, 1998; Lawler, 2002; Plummer, 2001). Second, they are useful because they refer to activities that are familiar to many ‘ordinary’ people (Berger Gluck, 1991). Third – apart from demystifying practices that have long been associated with (orthodox) masculinity – the practical association of the metaphors of cooking, knitting, sewing and travelling help many of us to envisage some of the concrete tasks involved in narrative research.

As I have intimated, narrative researchers are not tempted to sanitize research by appealing to scientific facts and linear trajectories (Ezzy, 1998; Franzosi, 1998; Plummer, 2001). This means that we do not use the language of certainty but instead present ideas in ways that are more tentative, circular and multiple (Borland, 1991; Hyden, 1994). Employing methods that allow for ‘thick’ or ‘rich descriptions’ (Denzin, 1989; Plummer, 2001; White and Denborough, 1998), we accept that ‘... research is frequently a muddled, piratical affair, and we do no service to anyone pretending otherwise’ (Stubbs, 1983: 246).

Expressing concerns about the inevitable utility of measuring social phenomena and extrapolating results to wider populations, many of us look further afield than ‘samples of convenience’, such as university students (Borland, 1991; Langford, 1999; O’Connell and Layder, 1994). As well as using ‘live subjects’ that are not always easy to reach (Riessman, 1993), we conduct ‘unobtrusive research’ by analysing ‘secondary texts’, including those from popular culture (Kellehear, 1993). Through the fine-grained analyses produced, we often reiterate the idea that research is a form of storytelling (Denzin, 1989; Jackson, 1999; Solas, 1995). In so doing, we destabilize the fantasy that ‘scientific research’ is apolitical (O’Connell and Layder, 1994).

Many of us – especially those of us influenced by feminism, critical theory and postmodernism – go to great lengths to qualify the interpretations that we make (Jackson, 1998; O’Connell and Layder, 1994; Reinhartz, 1992; Riessman, 2003). We do this because we accept that ‘... “research” is a “reading” of the world, and the task is always on persuasion rather than proving’ (Kellehear,

1993: 25). Sometimes using ideas from philosophers such as Foucault (1978, 1984), Nietzsche (1977) and Derrida (1991), we examine the nexus between knowledge/power and individual/society (see Plummer, 1995, 2001; Riessman, 1990, 1993, 2003). As we do so, we understand that narratives are often used to ‘. . . explain to outsiders what practices, places, or symbols mean to the people who hold them’ (Young, 1997: 72).

CONDUCTING NARRATIVE RESEARCH

Many researchers, particularly qualitative researchers, elect to use interviews (Fontana and James, 1998). We use them not only because we wish to delve beneath statistically driven generalizations that are made but also because they have the potential to validate the knowledge of ‘ordinary’ people,² especially ‘ordinary’ women who are liable to be omitted from many research projects (Benmayor, 1991; Coates, 1996; Eisikovits et al., 1998; Reinharz, 1992). As Anderson and Jack (1991: 18) suggest, ‘. . . the interview is a critical tool for developing new frameworks and theories based on women’s lives and women’s formulations’.

By entering into dialogue with others, narrative interviewers may unearth hidden or subordinated ideas (Anderson and Jack, 1991; Borland, 1991; Harrison, 1996). These ideas are important because they may cast doubt on official accounts and established theories (Brown, 1990; Olson and Shopes, 1991; Reinharz, 1992; Stanley and Wise, 1991). In turn, the ‘findings’ produced may lead to the development of new theories that resonate more with people’s lives (Hyden, 1994; Stanley and Wise, 1991; Worthington, 1996).

Minister (1991) provides a practical guide to researchers who use narrative interviewing as one of their methods. From my reading of her work, I suggest that interviewers might *consider* how to:

- Prepare for the interviews by studying the socio-historical contexts of participants’ lives;
- Respond to different communication styles;
- Avoid ‘mining’ interviewees for information or ‘cross-examining’ them;
- Demonstrate sensitivity to the time frames of participants as well as our own;
- Facilitate a climate of trust;
- Allow participants to ask questions of their own, as well as how we might respond to any questions they raise;
- Reveal our own investment in the research;
- Share some of the interpretations we make; and,
- Appreciate the politics involved with making knowledge.

Because narrative research is orchestrated around storytelling, researchers ordinarily use a conversational style of interviewing (Coates, 1996; Riessman,

1993). Engaging participants in relatively informal and friendly ways, we sometimes process stories with participants along the way, and allow for stories or comments that do not appear to be immediately relevant (Coates, 1996; Hollway and Jefferson, 2000; Laird, 1994). Blurring the boundaries between speakers and listeners, we take care not to rush speakers (McCabe and Bliss, 2003) or infer that their stories ‘don’t make sense’ (Coates, 1996; Hey, 1997).

Taking the time to ‘really listen’ (Anderson and Jack, 1991), researchers may refer to a topic-based interview schedule but are not governed by it. More responsive to the idiosyncrasies of each conversation, we try to create interviews that are ‘interviewee-oriented’ rather than ‘instrument-oriented’ (Reinharz, 1992: 38). Questions such as, ‘how did it begin’ and ‘then what happened’ may be used to invite participants to translate their personal experiences into stories (Hyden, 1994: 101). However, little energy is usually expended trying to create the ‘right’ questions because it is more important to concentrate on the ‘. . . narrator’s self-evaluative comments, meta-statements, and the overall logic of the narrative’ (Berger Gluck and Patai, 1991: 9).

Because we are interested in understanding how narrators interact with a range of narratives, we may look for ways to present our initial interpretations – as well as other theorists’ interpretations – along the way. For example, in a study I conducted about love and abuse, I offered participants the chance to comment on the meanings that were springing to (my) mind. I also offered them ideas about how other feminists might understand their stories (Fraser, 2002). As with all other questions, however, I knew that this needed to be done sensitively if I were to avoid ‘hijacking’ the conversation or foreclosing their chosen direction and focus. I also knew that these interpretations might be relinquished for others I might make at a later date.

Narrative researchers usually recognize that participants may use qualifying statements and hesitating ‘riders’ to convey complexities and invite responses from ‘listeners’ (Minister, 1991). Similarly, we appreciate that personal stories often contain circular, overlapping and ‘slightly chaotic’ utterances (Coates, 1996: 56). Because we value connectedness and appreciate uncertainty, we do not treat this style of communication as inferior to more literal and linear question/answer forms of talk. Exploring the ways meanings are created among conversants, including those who collaborate to narrate a single story, we are particularly sensitive to the ways fragments of ideas might be expressed (Coates, 2003). We are especially conscious of this when we are discussing matters of a ‘personal nature’ (Harrison, 1996; Hyden, 1994; Solas, 1995).

PHASES OF LINE-BY-LINE NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

Narrative research may be used to produce a wide range of analyses (Brunt, 2001; Reinhartz, 1992; Riessman, 1993, 2002). For instance, they may be used

in large-scale and mid-scale studies to deconstruct the use of specific discourses. However, because line-by-line narrative analysis produces such fine-grained 'data', and is so labour intensive, it is rarely used in projects where the participant number is greater than 50. And if it is, it tends to be used for illustrative purposes only.

Ordinarily, large-scale projects have different aspirations and thus, different research designs that do not seek to 'get up close' to the interview material. Smaller studies, on the other hand, may involve analysing sections of narratives and may incorporate the highly detailed material that comes from analysing stories line by line. However, even studies with relatively few participants are liable to produce many more stories than can be possibly analysed in any one article, report or thesis (see Eisikovits et al., 1998).

In the passages below, I consider some of the more practical activities associated with 'doing' narrative research. Having already established that narrative analysis is not meant to be governed by formulas or recipes, I offer these ideas as a rough guide to help prospective researchers get started. Fully accepting that others will need to modify, reorder and/or challenge the ideas that I outline, I offer these (overlapping and un-sequential) phases of the research not to imply linearity but rather, for explanatory purposes.

PHASE ONE: HEARING THE STORIES, EXPERIENCING EACH OTHER'S EMOTIONS

During the interviews and then after they have been conducted, the first 'phase' of the analysis may involve hearing the stories narrated and experiencing the emotions of participants and interviewer(s) (Borland, 1991; Kleinman and Copp, 1993; Olson and Shopes, 1991). This is most important to those of us who seek to avoid reproducing the rational/emotional dichotomy, or 'over-intellectualizing' personal stories. Registering emotions stimulated through the discussions, we reflect on the body language used and the feelings depicted and/or described. We do this because they often provide clues about the meanings made.

A journal may be used to describe the feelings that emerge. Taking notes about the time, place and emotional climates of the interviews might prove useful because they are likely to affect the subsequent interpretations made (Anderson and Jack, 1991). Listening to the audiotaped stories as if there were a radio show may help to think in more lateral ways. Noting points of agreement and disagreement between interviewers and interviewees is also advised because they often provide insights about the ways the conversations unfold.

Considering how each interview starts, unfolds and ends can be a productive exercise because it often provides clues to the genres of stories narrated (Cohler, 1994; Plummer, 2001). For instance, some of the participants I interviewed started the interview with stories of triumph that involved them

Table 1 PHASE 1 QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

-
- What 'sense' do you get from each interview?
 - How are emotions experienced during and after the interview?
 - How does each interview tend to start, unfold and end?
 - How curious do you feel when you listen to the narrators?
 - How open are you to developing further insights about yourself, including insights that are derived from raking over past experiences that are painful?
 - Do you have adequate support to engage in work of this nature?
-

'overcoming the odds' and displaying 'forms of resilience'. In some instances, I understood this to mean that the participants were keen for me to develop an initial impression of them as women of strength. However, one woman began by telling stories that were shocking and tragic, stories that did not have a 'happy ending'. Apart from possibly testing my 'mettle' as a researcher, she may have done this to let me know that her stories were not going to be 'pretty' (see Fraser, 2002).

In Table 1, a series of questions are listed to guide researchers through this phase. As I have indicated above, it is important to remember that while typologies can be useful for heuristic purposes, they do tend to reduce and (over)simplify. To be sure, the relevance of the questions will depend on the aims of the study undertaken and the specific interests of researchers.

PHASE TWO: TRANSCRIBING THE MATERIAL

In the second 'phase', the interview material is transcribed. Transcriptions are useful because they offer a more accurate record of the interview than memory alone. Transcriptions are also necessary for researchers who hope to analyse the stories line by line. Depending on their purpose, researchers may (or may not) attempt to 'clean up the speech'; that is, remove comments made by interviewers, erase repetition and sentences that are not finished, and so on. Silences and pauses may be indicated at the points at which they occur because they too, are likely to have meaning.

While time consuming, transcribing the interviews yourself carries many benefits. The main benefit derived is how close you are able to come to the stories. For instance, by the time I had transcribed each interview I could cite specific lines. This helped me to piece together new meanings in the latter

Table 2 PHASE 2 QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

-
- Have you got the time to transcribe the material yourself?
 - Can you touch type? If not, have you got the space to learn before the fieldwork commences?
 - If others are asked to transcribe the interviews, are they able to maintain confidentiality?
 - Has briefing and debriefing of the transcribers been built into the research timetable? If so, are the prospective transcribers willing and able to engage in such processes?
 - How skilled are you at debriefing?
 - Are sufficient resources available to remunerate transcribers for the time spent being briefed and debriefed?
 - If you are intending to send the transcripts back to participants to check for accuracy, have you sought their permission?
 - Have you omitted or misheard any of the material?
 - Bearing in mind the aims of your research, how detailed will your transcription be? For instance, will you specify interruptions, break-offs and so on? Or will you concentrate more on 'what' is said rather than 'how' it is said?
-

phases of analysis. Yet, there are other benefits from transcribing the material yourself. As social workers are well aware, the disclosure of personal information – particularly disclosures of trauma and distress – can be hard to hear, especially for people who are not accustomed to doing so. Not having others transcribe the material also means that analysts do not have to spend time and energy briefing and debriefing transcribers. Furthermore, because decisions have to be made about how to represent the utterances, transcribing is as much a form of interpretation and analysis as it is a technical activity (see Mishler, 1991; Riessman, 1993).

Again – depending on the aspirations of the research – checking back with participants about the accuracy of the transcription is another possible activity. This may be done by sending a copy of the transcripts to participants who are asked to return amended copies. However, since this can involve raking over potentially painful stories – as well as the time and energy that this requires – care should be taken to ensure that participants are under no obligation to

do so. One way to approach this issue is to ask participants at the end of their interviews, whether they are interested in reading over the transcripts, as well as letting them know that it is perfectly reasonable if they later change their mind.

In Table 2, a summary is provided by way of a list of questions to consider. As will become evident, some of these questions are very practically inclined.

PHASE THREE: INTERPRETING INDIVIDUAL TRANSCRIPTS

In the third 'phase' of the analysis, researchers may want to note some of the specificities of each transcript. This may involve identifying the types and directions of the stories, as well as any contradictions. For instance, narrators may tell stories that circle around particular themes or try to drive home a particular point. Some may tell stories that seem to be well rehearsed, almost 'perfected'. At other times, they may try to describe events and experience never before vocalized. In terms of contractions, these may occur through the content of the stories or through the manner in which a story is told. For instance, a narrator's tone of voice and bodily expressions may seem out of step with the statements s/he is making. This may, or may not, be conscious or deliberate.

Perhaps one of the main challenges of this phase, however, is trying to disaggregate long chunks of talk into specific stories, or segments of narratives. Sometimes this is difficult to do because one story ebbs seamlessly into another. At other times it may be hard because a speaker hops from one subject to another, producing stories that are not discrete or self-contained. One way forward is to divide the talk into sets of ideas expressed and scene(s) in which some sort of plot unfolds. Scanning for characterization and/or chronology might be another way to segment the material (see Chanfrault-Duchet, 1991). However, the disadvantage of using chronology is the artificial order it can imply when many participants' use of chronology is far from straightforward (see Riessman, 1987).

Alternatively, researchers might try to decipher stories by looking for where each line might be seen to begin and end. Once a collection of lines are established, a story may come into view. Sometimes narrators make it easy by using literal conventions such as, 'It all started with . . .'. At other times, the first line is not so obvious until the whole story is told. Even then, there may be disputes about the exact point of the story starting. Similarly, middle parts of the stories may not be immediately obvious, although I tended to find that this is the place where narrators tend to give the most details. Often, it is the place where commentaries and explanations are given. Whereas at the end of many stories, declarations may be made to signal that the story is closing. For example, declarations such as, 'So, that's why I left' or 'It all went to shit after that' may be obvious end points. Still other stories, however, end by attrition,

with narrators losing interest in one story and jumping to another story that has just captured their interest (Plath Helle, 1991). Sometimes this occurs when a speaker leaves a sentence unfinished.

Appreciating that judgements made about stories are bounded by cultural conventions of speaking, narrative researchers using this method usually number the lines and stories that they have disaggregated (see Coates, 2003; Riessman, 1993). The main reason for using numbers is the greater ease it provides to readers when the author refers to different segments of the interviews. While the convention is that clauses are used as lines, I tend to use complete sentences so as not to unnecessarily fragment participants' speech. In addition to numbers, I also name stories so that I can extend my recall of the sets of ideas they contained. For example, I called one participant's story, 'Paying the debt' and I displayed the sentences taken from the middle of it in the following way:

Christina:

And I realised years ago that I always had this feeling because I'd received so much charity in my life that I had to give back to society.

Table 3 PHASE 3 QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

-
- What are the common themes in each transcript?
 - Are there 'main points' that you can decipher from particular stories?
 - Where are the vocal inflections? What might they signify?
 - What words are chosen and how are they emphasized?
 - What kinds of meanings might be applied to these words?
 - What other vocalizations and non-verbal gestures are present?
 - What contradictions emerge?
 - Are there notable silences, pauses or gaps? If so, how might they be distinguished and what might they suggest (for instance, disagreement, boredom, distress?)
 - Are there any other useful ways to disaggregate the stories and lines? If so, which form of disaggregation will be used?
 - If stories are to be named as well as numbered, how are the names derived? Is the logic of this system made clear to readers?
-

(Pause) Because that's what you were brought up with (- uh-ha)?

The notion that you'd received so much, that it's time for you to give it back (-mmnn)

[story 41; lines 10–12 of 35]

The name I gave to this story emerged from the main theme I distilled. However, I also named stories from the actual phrases or words that narrators used. For instance, while analysing the performance of conventional gender roles in heterosexual marriage, I called one story 'That was my role',

Cecilia:

(10) That was my role; being feminine, caring and succumbing.

(11) And then beyond all of that – 'That would be good because someone would look after me'.

[story 43, lines 10–11 of 16]

Table 3 contains questions that are designed to assist researchers weave personal narratives into their written accounts of their research.

PHASE FOUR: SCANNING ACROSS DIFFERENT DOMAINS OF EXPERIENCE

To prevent researchers from fixating on one dimension of life and to avoid the problems of social determinism and (hyper-)individualism, narrative researchers may want to scan stories for different domains of experience (McCabe and Bliss, 2003; Segal, 1999). This is particularly relevant to those who aim to unearth insights about how people interact with different dimensions of their environments. To do this, personal stories may be examined for their intrapersonal, interpersonal, cultural (Gagnon and Simon, 1974; Simon, 1996) and structural aspects (Mullaly, 2002). Again, these (artificial) distinctions are made not in the belief that such 'domains' can or should be neatly separated from one another. Rather, they are suggested for explanatory purposes; for use by prospective researchers who are interested in examining the social role of stories but are not sure how to approach the task.

Intrapersonal aspects of stories may be seen to be those that involve intra body–mind experiences (Simon, 1996). Sometimes they are evident through narrator self-talk and may involve rehearsing possible courses of action or

Table 4 PHASE 4 QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

-
- Are there aspects of the stories that highlight intrapersonal experiences that are concealed from others? If there are, what bearing might this have?
 - Which parts of the stories relate to interpersonal relationships and interactions? How do they relate to the other aspects of the stories?
 - Are cultural conventions – or transgressions to cultural conventions – evident? If so, what are the effects?
 - Is there any evidence of popular culture emerging in the stories? If so, what is it?
 - Are social structures – institutionalized or otherwise – present? If so, how do they appear and what is being said about them?
 - If only one domain of experience is being analysed, what are the implications? Is this made clear at the start?
 - If different domains of experience are to be made explicit in the analyses, how might they be linked?
-

‘confessing’ to thoughts and feelings that are concealed. For example, narrators may say, ‘And I said/thought to myself . . .’

Interpersonal aspects of stories are quite literally those that involve other people (Gagnon and Simon, 1974; Simon, 1996). Again, narrators might recite direct quotes to indicate this. Sometimes they appear through lines in stories that involve ‘reported speech’, or speech that uses ‘I said – s/he said’.

Cultural aspects of stories often refer to larger groups of people and sets of cultural conventions. References might be made to news items, social conventions, ‘folklore’, ‘wives tales’, or ‘research findings’. Often these ideas are broadcast through popular culture (Mullaly, 2002; Plummer, 1995). In so doing, dominant discourses may surface through appeals made to ‘common sense’.

Lastly, *structural aspects of stories* overlap with the other aspects of stories but are distinct by the claims made about the influence of public policies and/or social systems. For instance, they may be evident when narrators refer to social systems, laws and conventions. In so doing, references are often made to class, gender, ethnicity and other modes of social organization (Mullaly, 2002).

In Table 4, guiding questions are provided about how stories might be analysed across different domains of experience.

PHASE FIVE: LINKING 'THE PERSONAL WITH THE POLITICAL'

Over many decades, feminists have underlined the importance of linking 'the personal with the political' (see Jackson, 1998; Rienharz, 1992; Segal, 1999; Yeatman, 1994; Young, 1990, 1997). Overlapping the phase where analysts scan across the different domains of experience, this phase involves researchers deliberating how dominant discourses and their attendant social conventions constitute an interpretative framework for understanding the stories (Coates, 1996, 2003; Hyden, 1994; Riessman, 2003).

During this 'phase', attention is deliberately given to references made to popular discourses (see Brown, 1990; Cranny-Francis, 1994; Riessman, 1993). For instance, this is evident when people speak of 'falling in love' (Ellwood, 1996; Westlund, 1999) or 'coming out' (Plummer, 1995). In trauma narratives, the popular metaphors of 'the aftermath', 'recovery' and 'rebuilding' may be used (Herman, 1992; Plummer, 1995). Often these metaphors are a shorthanded way of constructing meanings through speech patterns that have already been established in popular vernacular. Sometimes popular understandings are expressed through attempts at humour. Whether it is irony, satire, sarcasm or literal puns,

Table 5 PHASE 5 QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

-
- What relationship do the stories have to particular discourses?
 - How do you imagine other theorists are likely to analyse the stories?
 - What might other social theorists say about the interpretations you have made?
 - Do the stories support, negate or unsettle specific claims made about relevant discourses?
 - Are there ideas raised that theorists/social commentators do not mention?
 - What do the stories say about the (multiple) lived experiences of class, gender, race, sexual orientation, age, dis/ability, religion and/or geographical locations?
 - Have you clearly distinguished participants' accounts from your own? Or are their accounts becoming too subsumed by your analyses?
 - What responses might/do the participants make about your analyses? If there is disagreement, will it be signalled? If so, how?
 - Are revisions to your analyses now required?
-

humour may be used, however, not just to entertain but also to convey a complex array of meanings.

As Riessman (1993: 70) explains, ‘. . . how someone tells her tale – shapes how we can legitimately interpret it’. Given that humour, metaphors, language choice and narrative style are usually mediated by time, place, gender, culture, class – and a host of other ‘variables’ that researchers may not have in common with ‘their informants’ – ‘crossed-wires’ or other forms of miscommunication are possible (Olson and Shopes, 1991). Sometimes this only becomes apparent after multiple readings have occurred, while at other times, it is immediately obvious. Alternatively, narrators and analysts may share a general understanding about what the story ‘means’ but disagree on the political implications that might then be drawn (see Borland, 1991). In this instance, there is no ‘resolution’ as such, other than ‘owning’ one’s analyses and giving due recognition to contrasting views (see Table 5).

PHASE SIX: LOOKING FOR COMMONALITIES AND DIFFERENCES AMONG PARTICIPANTS

If it has not already occurred, this phase involves researchers examining the transcripts for commonalities and differences that exist among and between participants. Similar to the work undertaken on individual transcripts, this may be done by comparing and contrasting the content, style and tone of respective speakers. Patterns may surface that are worth exploring. For example, in the love and abuse study I conducted, I noticed that many of the women used a form of mocking laughter to convey their disgust towards perpetrators of violence. Yet, when it came to questions of shame, blame and ongoing impact, there were notable differences (see Fraser, 2002).

Similarities and differences may become more apparent after the stories are listed, numbered and named. Connecting plots, events and/or themes may be clustered together for analysis. For instance, I classified the women’s stories using themes such as ‘Being daddy’s princess’, ‘Being captivated by The One’ and ‘Moving on’ (see Fraser, 2002). Within these broad headings for discussion, I then short-listed the stories that I intended to analyse line by line.

Irrespective of how stories are short-listed, explanatory notes about the criteria used to select might be provided so that readers have the chance to reflect on the logic underpinning the analyses. For instance, I signalled my intention to short-list stories that, (1) illustrated how women interacted with dominant stories of romantic love; (2) demonstrated how sexual conventions were reproduced and/or transgressed; (3) highlighted some of the connections between love and abuse; and, (4) cast new light on feminist discourses associated with women, love and sexuality (see Fraser, 2002). So as to embed the stories in their social contexts, I also made references to material categories such

Table 6 PHASE 6 QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

-
- What are the emergent themes or patterns across the transcripts?
 - How are common patterns or plots unveiled?
 - How are differences in themes, plots, characters, settings and temporal orderings enunciated? If so, are they relevant to understanding the social role of stories?
 - On what grounds are you short-listing the stories?
 - Are sensational, provocative or contentious stories deliberately fore-grounded – or conversely – avoided? If so, what are the implications?
 - How are the experiences mediated by the material conditions in which narrators are living?
 - Are stories that challenge the views on which the research is predicated given sufficient analytical attention? If not, how is this rationalized?
-

as social status, access to health and welfare services, income, housing, work (paid and unpaid), and involvement with counselling. Historical considerations, such as the times the women experienced particular social conventions, were also included. Again, this is in keeping with a critical social work approach.

Differences and similarities are thematic of other aspects of the analysis. While considering how stories align with the initial assumptions of our research, narrative researchers may also want to note ‘findings’ that are inconsistent, counter-intuitive, surprising and/or anomalous (Worthington, 1996). It might also involve exploring ideas that are confronting and/or unpopular. In Table 6, these points are highlighted.

PHASE SEVEN: WRITING ACADEMIC NARRATIVES ABOUT PERSONAL STORIES

Narrative researchers are aware that in the process of pulling together threads of others’ stories, we will be telling stories of our own (Ellerman, 1998; Ezzy, 1998; Solas, 1995). This is particularly important as we translate oral talk into some form of written analysis. A central part of the writing process is honing the analyses. Often many drafts are needed before the analyses are worthy of formal presentation.

Rather than hoping to produce ‘the right’ knowledge, or indeed, ‘the truth’, narrative researchers realize that there are multiple possibilities for

Table 7 PHASE 7 QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

-
- Are your analyses relevant to your research questions? If not, should the discussion or the research questions be altered to reflect the new foci?
 - Are the interpretations that you have made fair? Are any too understated – or conversely – bordering on the grandiose?
 - Have you developed blind spots that undermine the veracity of your claims?
 - Are some arguments becoming repetitive? If so, how should they be edited out?
 - Do your analyses maintain a respectful tone towards participants? If not, how do you justify this?
 - Does your writing style acknowledge that your subjectivity mediates the interpretations being made? Alternatively, is your tone too apologetic?
 - Have drafts been circulated so as to get a preliminary response to the ideas being raised? If so, how are others responding? If not, why?
 - Has sufficient time been allocated to the final editing process? If not, does the project completion date need to be re-negotiated?
-

representing stories. We also know that humility is an important trait for us to demonstrate if we are to ‘stay true’ to the philosophy of the method. Yet, humility need not be an enemy of conviction. The two may coexist if one accepts that, ‘[A] narrative is never concluded, it is always subject to reconstruction and reinterpretation’ (Hyden, 1994: 109). That said, for the research to be coherent and credible, narrative analysts may want to keep checking that the written analyses they are producing correspond to the stories told, as well as to the objectives of the research. In Table 7, I clarify these ideas further.

SUMMARY

Culturally ubiquitous, stories are an important vehicle for creating meaning. Whether it is at home or work, stories are used to construct our lived realities. With the rise of the narrative moment, which has made narratives more credible in the production of knowledge, many of us have turned our hands at narrative analysis. Along the way, some of us have incorporated ideas from feminism, critical theory and postmodernism (Fraser, 2003; Jackson, 1998; Laird, 1994; Milner, 2001; Plath Helle, 1991; Riessman, 1990, 1993, 2002, 2003). And many

of us have done this because we believe that narrative analysis offers us a way to understand the role personal stories play in the making of socio-political worlds (Plummer, 1995, 2001).

Specifically designed to help (prospective) narrative researchers, this article has sought to contribute to the material available about how narrative analysis might be done. However, while I have outlined seven possible phases of the work, this is by no means a definitive approach. Rather, it is simply a rough guide that I offer for others to siphon ideas from, modify and rework in light of their own research experience, interests and goals. Similarly, while I have included a wide range of quite concrete questions to consider, they are not exhaustive. And neither are they meant to imply that the work is a technical exercise. As I have suggested earlier, narrative analysts may be likened to chefs who do not feel the need to adhere to recipes. Perhaps the greatest difference between chefs and narrative researchers is, however, that the latter – especially those using a critical social work approach – have a keen interest in and an espoused commitment to understanding the politics of everyday life.

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Notes

- 1 Broadly defined, narratives may be understood to be ‘events [that] are selected, organized, connected, and evaluated as meaningful for a particular audience’, and stories may be defined as a subtype of narratives (Riessman, forthcoming).
- 2 For an excellent definition of ‘ordinary’ see Gubrium and Holstein (1995).

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Heather Fraser works as an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Social Work, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Canada. She teaches courses on feminist perspectives of social work and narrative research. She has spent many years working as a social worker, primarily with women and children victims/survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault.
[email: fraserh@cc.umanitoba.ca]