Narrative approaches to case studies

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Abstract

This paper offers a view of narrative case studies as a form of narrative inquiry based upon social constructionist, constructivist and feminist ideas and practices.

Viewed from this position stories of lived experience (data) are co-constructed and negotiated between the people involved as a means of capturing complex, multi-layered and nuanced understandings of the work so that we can learn from it. This presentation addresses issues of relationship, methods, collaboration and ways of knowing.
What do I mean by Narrative Inquiry?

Narrative inquiry is an umbrella term that captures personal and human dimensions of experience over time, and takes account of the relationship between individual experience and cultural context (Clandinin and Connelly 2000).

Narrative inquiry is a means by which we systematically gather, analyse, and represent people’s stories as told by them, which challenges traditional and modernist views of truth, reality, knowledge and personhood.
Why stories?

Subjective meanings and sense of self and identity are negotiated as the stories unfold,

... bearing in mind that stories are reconstructions of the person’s experiences,

... remembered and told at a particular point in their lives, to a particular researcher/audience and for a particular purpose.

This all has a bearing on how the stories are told, which stories are told and how they are presented/interpreted.

They do not represent ‘life as lived’ but our re-presentations of those lives as told to us.
Bruner (1986): different ways of knowing

‘Paradigmatic mode of thought’
...draws on reasoned analysis, logical proof, and empirical observation - used to explain ‘cause and effect’, to predict and control reality, and to create unambiguous objective ‘truth’ that can be proven or disproved.

‘Narrative knowing’
Narrative knowledge - created and constructed through stories of lived experiences, and the meanings created. Helps make sense of the ambiguity and complexity of human lives.
What do we gain from narrative knowing?

Memorable, interesting knowledge that brings together layers of understandings about a person, their culture and how they have created change:

We hear struggles to make sense of the past and create meanings as they tell and/or ‘show’ us what happened to them.

Shape of a story helps organise information about how people have interpreted events; the values, beliefs and experiences that guide those interpretations; and their hopes, intentions and plans for the future.

We find complex patterns, descriptions of identity construction and reconstruction, and evidence of social discourses that impact on a person’s knowledge creation from specific cultural standpoints.

Knowledge gained in this way is situated, transient, partial and provisional; characterized by multiple voices, perspectives, truths and meanings.
Analysis

There are different forms of narrative analysis – some focus on ‘content’ of stories; others on ‘meaning’ (maybe both). Depends on philosophical position.

Stories can be viewed as a window onto a knowable reality and analysed using concepts derived from theory e.g. thematic analysis, or concepts derived from the data e.g. grounded theory – analysis of narratives.

Or stories can be viewed as socially situated knowledge constructions in their own right that values messiness, differences, depth and texture of experienced life – narrative analysis (Polkinghorne 1995).
Analysis (meaning making) occurs throughout the research process rather than being a separate activity carried out after data collection (Gehart et al 2007).

The emphasis is on co-construction of meaning between the researcher and participants. While being involved in/listening to/reading the conversations, researchers take in what is being said and compare it with their personal understandings, without filling in any gaps in understanding with ‘grand narratives’, but rather inquiring about how pieces of the stories make sense together.

The process of ‘data gathering’ and ‘analysis’ therefore becomes a single harmonious and organic process.
Re-presenting narratives

The stories are re-presented in ways that preserve their integrity and convey a sense of the ‘irreducible humanity’ of the person.

Narrative analysis treats stories as knowledge *per se* which constitutes ‘the social reality of the narrator’ (Etherington, 2004:81) and conveys a sense of that person’s experience in its depth, messiness, richness and texture, by using the actual words spoken. It includes some of researchers part in that conversation in order to be transparent about the relational nature of the research, and the ways in which these stories are shaped through dialogue and co-construction, as well providing a reflexive layer with regard to researchers positioning.
Philosophical roots and influences

Postmodernism

Social constructionism

Constructivism

Feminism
Postmodernism

Calls for an ideological critique of foundational knowledge and privileged discourses (‘grand narratives’);

Questions notions of ‘Truth’, certainty, and objective reality;

Examines taken-for-granted assumptions;

Views knowledge and language as relational and generative – contrasting with Western ideas of the individual as an ‘autonomous knower’ who can create or discover knowledge that can be passed on to others.
Social constructionism

Views knowledge and knower as interdependent and embedded within history, context, culture, language, experience, and understandings

Dispenses with notion of ‘absolute Truth’ and takes a pluralist position suggesting critical reflection on our truths.

Values local knowledge constructed between people who actively engage in its development - participatory or relational knowing

This kind of knowledge has relevance for participants as well as researchers – and can be transforming
Constructivism...often used interchangeably with social constructionism but they differ.

Constructivism is based on the idea that reality is a product of one’s own creation; each individual sees and interprets the world and their experiences through personal belief systems.

Narrative inquiry allows us to hear how individuals construct meaning from within these systems of belief; their attitudes, values and ideas that shape sense of self, identity.

NI moves between the internal and external world of the storyteller, across time, within their environments (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000).
Feminism encourages us to ...

View research relationships as consultancy and collaboration

Examine power issues within research relationships with a view to greater equality

Help create a sense of power and autonomy – especially for marginalised groups – by providing a platform from which those voices can be heard

Shows transparently *how* we discover what we know through reflexivity

Share ownership of data with participants, thereby undermining the bias of dominant paradigm and opening up its assumptions to investigation i.e. professionals are the experts.

These are moral and ethical issues
Narrative inquiry requires:

- Trust and openness in research relationship
- High levels of ethical and critical engagement
- Mutual and sincere collaboration, over time
- Storyteller having full voice, but both voices heard
- Reflexive engagement throughout
- Tolerance of ambiguity
- Valuing of signs, symbols, metaphors
- Using multiple data sources.
Collaborative inquiry is underpinned by...

Assumptions of uncertainty and interdependence (a reciprocal process where we educate each other)

Democratisation of knowledge – many ways of knowing

Acknowledgement of complexities of realities

Shift of focus from *only* outcomes to include processes

Use of reflexivity – focus on contexts of and relationships between researcher and researched as shaping the creation of knowledge.
Reflexivity

...a dynamic process of interaction within and between our selves and our participants, and the data that informs decisions, actions and interpretations at all stages. We are therefore operating on several different levels at the same time.

To be reflexive is to have an ongoing conversation about experience while simultaneously living in the moment....
Reflexive research...

...produces reflexive knowledge: information on *what* is known as well as *how* it is known.

A reflexive researcher does not simply report facts or ‘truths’ but actively constructs interpretations of his or her experiences in the field, and then questions how those interpretations came about. (Hertz, 1995).
Ethical issues

There are additional ethical issues to explore when we invite clients or ex-clients to become research participants:

Josselson (1996: 9) advocates that we should ask ourselves: ‘Do you really feel like interfering in his or her life? Will you be able to live with the consequences....? Is it justified from the interviewee’s own perspective?’

When I asked my ex-client if he had any anxieties about it he told me: ‘My greatest anxiety is that you change your mind about doing it’. (Etherington 2000)
Risks of using clients

Josselson goes on to say that by choosing clients we run the risk of aggrandising them:

‘In fact we have aggrandized our participants – we regard them as important enough to write about. But the experience of the grandiose self is always accompanied by shame and by an unconscious conviction of being in complete control of the Other, and this, I think, complicates people’s experience of being written about.’ (1996: 65)
Narrative case studies

Can be conducted with one’s own clients (Etherington, 2000, 2006; Wosket, 1999).

Or with other peoples’ clients (Etherington, 2007, and ongoing), or people who are not clients.

Can address many different practice or social issues e.g. impact of counsellor’s visual impairment on therapeutic relationship, drug misuse, illness stories.
An intimate encounter with Hope:
A client’s view of her experience of therapy
As you listen please notice...

The use of images and metaphors

How meaning making is invited and collaboratively co-constructed

How Hope reconstructs identity in counselling ... and further articulates this in the research conversation

How Hope’s attitudes to self and others are re-shaped

How she interprets and evaluates her experiences over time

My part in knowledge construction.

Impact of different forms of representation e.g. stanza’s and conversations
Stanza’d re-presentations

...capture rhythm and poetic quality of spoken words:

...allows readers to appreciate narrative structure, meaning and emotional impact (Mishler, 1991; Richardson, 2003)

...honour the speaker’s pauses, repetitions, silences, alliterations, breath points (Gee, 1991)

...help us recognise that text is constructed

...reach people outside the academy
When I first met Beate
I was wearing this necklace [Star of David]
   not because I’m Jewish
but I wanted a pentagon
   because I always felt like I was a witch,
I wanted a pentagon for protection.

But my daughter got this instead,
so I wear it everywhere.

It’s my drug,
Beate is German
and she asked, she said,
I’m German, she said,
and I see you’re wearing a star of David.
Is this good?
Would you rather see somebody else?

And she picked up on that,
she noticed,
and it was a very small detail
but she picked up on it.
And what did it mean to you, that she noticed?

That meant loads: that she was a very considerate and caring person and that she could pick up on the smallest details.

there were lots of moments, lots of moments like that, where it wasn’t necessarily what I said, but she picked up on… possibly… what I didn’t say so then she would ask the questions and instead of just sort of me waffling on and saying about this and that…
.....when we were talking about the child
I lost a baby,
he was 24 hours old when I lost him
and you know, she said,
she came into the counselling session
and she said,
I found this email address for you
to do with losing a child,
she said,
when you’re ready
you might want to get in touch with them
if you feel up to it.

So it wasn’t about just what was in the session,
she was interested enough in me,
to look at things outside the sessions.
So what was that like for you?

Oh, that was really nice, you know, because some of it has been in her free time.

She would have read an article and,  
‘Oh, Hope was saying something about that’;

and she made me feel valued, she made me feel worthwhile.

Yes, it wasn’t just about this hour that she spent with you. You were in her head at other times and she cared about you?
Yes, she was ... not ... like a friend in some ways, but what she done was above that, above being in the office. She didn’t have to, she could have read the article and thought, Oh, that’s interesting, and forgot about it. But she, the fact that it was like, Oh, I saw this and ... I thought of you, and it was ... why? And then it started to ... you know, because she thought I was worthwhile just for an hour I started to feel worthwhile about myself. And it was the smallest of things, it’s so subtle you can’t always even put your finger on it.

But you did put your finger on it, you told me those two little stories about her noticing what you were wearing and being considerate and sensitive ... and her remembering you outside the session, those things are really important, detailed stories aren’t they?

Yes, and they were important.

Yeah. Were there other stories like that that come to mind or...?
I can’t say that there was ...there wasn’t anything that I wished hadn’t happened although probably at the beginning I used to think, I don’t want to talk about that; I don’t like this; and things would make me feel uncomfortable.

Some of the things that we talked about was my dad; my dad was an alcoholic and he died with Delirium Tremors basically, that left him with PVS...

What does that mean?

Persistent Vegetative State, and he was like it for five months back in ‘92. So when we were exploring my childhood and we said that although we did have physical punishment, and I don’t think we were that different to any other family of the 60s...
What year were you born?

1958.....but we weren’t smacked as much but because dad drank we could ... he could be unpredictable ...as with any drinker. And erm one of the things I found really difficult, and I really didn’t like it but it needed to be done and faced up to...

I had my dad up on a pedestal that high [indicates], and I found it very difficult to acknowledge things that he’d done that hadn’t been so nice.
What was so hard about acknowledging that...what was your need to keep him on a pedestal?

[Pause] I don’t know... [pause] I don’t...I can’t answer that one, it’s just that I needed to...

You just needed to, yeah, and it was very hard for you to talk about those things?

Yes, because my dad was my friend and I suppose I didn’t want to acknowledge there was any bad in him, because if there’s bad in him there’s bad in me.

How does that follow?

Because I’m his daughter... [OK] his blood runs through my veins.
So what’s wrong with acknowledging there’s some bad in you?

Because I needed to be perfect.

You needed to be perfect. Yes, okay.

And you’ve got to have the perfect home, the perfect family and everything.

That kept you safe?

Yes. I just needed that to be, and I think as well if I acknowledged things that hadn’t been so nice it was actually acknowledging that I’d been a little bit ... I was less than perfect myself  erm not because of his blood running through my veins but I’m thinking back to when I was a teenager, perhaps, and times when he did overreact to me being a bit naughty, or very naughty actually, sometimes.
And I suppose if I had to think about what dad had done, then that also meant I was acknowledging I wasn’t perfect so I found that hard to do. But once I could acknowledge that he wasn’t perfect and I wasn’t perfect I could be proud that I’d moved on as the person I’d become [mmm] And … the relationship with my mum improved [right] because then I can acknowledge to my mum, no, dad wasn’t perfect, he’s not perfect … well, he wasn’t perfect. And I could acknowledge that mum had in a way protected me and my sister from seeing a lot of dad’s imperfections.
So how did that help to improve the relationship with your mother?

[Pause] Because I wouldn’t have anything bad said about my dad...

And she was trying to say he wasn’t all that good?

He wasn’t perfect...

Yeah. Oh, so you kind of disagreed about it and that was...

Yes, and it sort of put a wedge there and I think as well when I was younger mum sometimes used to say, oh, you’re just like your father! [laughter] As well ... I’m sure she’s not the first parent to say it. But it did put a wedge there, [her phone bleeps] erm ... but by exploring dad’s imperfections and being able to acknowledge that dad was an alcoholic and most alcoholics are quite volatile ... and argumentative, and that my sister and I were mostly blissfully unaware of anything like that going on between my parents’ relationship, and my mum did a good job of protecting us from that.
And that ... it was mum protecting us that made us think that Dad was perfect, if that makes sense? [yes] And it was, you know, that was sort of, wow, again, wow, my mum, and that’s when I started to realise that my mum did love me. Because again I think my mum, when I was small, had got into the trap of criticising the person and not the action, so when, you know ... that was really good that I could acknowledge.

And then I started seeing my mum every week and erm we’d go to the cemetery and we started cleaning up her great-granny’s grave together, and then we’d start going out for lunch and going shopping and everything. Mum would be my fashion parade! [laughter] And that relationship is now on an even keel.
So what was the end like?

The end?
Well I felt a bit sad that I wouldn’t see her;
that was ...
that was sad,
sad because I like her, she’s a nice lady.

...but I felt like a little bird leaving the nest, if you like,
and not one falling out [laughs]
and landing on the sand!

I felt ready for a whole new life
and she’s helped equip me
be able to deal with things,
to deal with my anxiety.
What difference has counselling made in your everyday life?

I’m able to... I suppose I’m more able to focus more people ... and it took a long time, because my mum drinks sometimes and sometimes when she’s drinking it makes me feel uncomfortable ... so it’s made me think, well how do I deal with that?

I ring her earlier on in the day before she’s drank, that way you can’t have any misunderstandings... well its less likely you have misunderstanding and arguments, whereas perhaps before I would have avoided ringing her, and then she would have got upset with me and I would have got upset with her.

So it’s made me look at problems and deal with them in an appropriate way, in ... a more adult way. I’ve learnt to listen to that upset Child in me, and that’s what I was, a very upset and angry little girl ... I’ve listened to that little girl as well and ... the other thing is, I can actually say no now without feeling guilty; if I don’t want to do something, go somewhere, I don’t need to please everyone all the time, I don’t need to do that.
So has there been anything you were hoping I might ask you that I haven’t asked you? Anything that you’d like to say that we haven’t talked about?

Not really ... but I do know if I hadn’t been going to Touchstone that quite possibly, by now, if I wasn’t dead I’d be dying, because of the harm I was doing to my body. And even if it hadn’t been as dramatic as that, Touchstone has saved the National Health Service a lot of money because I’m not going to the hospital and taking up a bed, and taking up resources and taking up ambulance spaces and things like that.
Ways of helping people tell stories

Begin from a ‘not knowing’ position – rather than ‘expert’ position.

‘Tell me about the/a time when….’ rather than ‘tell me about your experience of…….’ e.g. using drugs

‘Who were you with?’: invites other characters into story

‘What happened then ….?’: ‘How long did that go on?’ invites temporal nature of stories.

‘When did you realise that it couldn’t go on?’ – turning point

‘What kind of sense did you make of all that?’- meaning-making
We need to ask questions that pay attention to:

**Cultural contextual:** giving details of values, beliefs, habits etc

‘How did you know that...? ’
‘Why do you think that happened?
‘What did you think about that?
‘Was that something you usually did?
‘Was that OK with you?’
**Embodied nature** of the teller and their engagement in the events, their senses, feelings, thoughts, attitudes and ideas; thus locating the narrative in the experience of a real life.

‘What could you see/hear? How did it look to you?’

‘What was your sense of what was going on?’

‘How did you cope with that?’

‘How did that affect you/make you feel/think?’

‘How did you feel about what he did?’

‘Did you have any ideas about this at the time?’
Significance of other people: how does teller’s network of relationships impact on events? Who were the other characters?

‘What did your family think of that?’

‘Who told you?’

‘Did you ask anyone for help?

‘Was anybody else aware of what was happening?’

‘Where were your friends?’
**Choices and actions of the teller**: the teller is an active participant in events, making choices based on values, beliefs and aims.

‘What made you decide to go there?’

‘Why did you want to do that?’

‘What were you intending?’

‘What did you want to happen?’

‘When did you decide that?’
Historical continuity: we need to understand the teller as coming from somewhere (contextual information) and going somewhere.

‘What was happening in the rest of your life at that time?’

‘What year was that?’

‘How old were you?’

‘Were you still at school then?’

‘Did you get there eventually?’
Beginning, middle and an end: a story needs recognisable parameters or it will seem chaotic or meaningless. It starts with an event or decision or some recognisable trigger. The plot then develops toward some form of completion.

‘Where does your story begin?’

‘How did you get into that situation?’

‘What happened after that?’

‘When did you realise you were safe?’

‘What do you think about that now?’
Metaphors, symbols, and creative, intuitive ways of knowing: these create pictures that capture vivid representations of experiences.

‘What was that like?’

‘Do you have an image of that?’

‘Did that put you in mind of something?’

‘Could you draw me a picture of that in words?’

‘You say ‘it was like falling into a pit...’ can you say a bit more about that?’
Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that has been described as a ‘blend of ethnography and autobiographical writing that incorporates elements of one’s own life experience when writing about others’ (Scott -Hoy 2002: 276); a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context, (Reed-Danahay 1997).

Autoethnography is a word that describes both a method and a text.
Ethnography, has traditionally focussed on the ‘other’ as an object of study, observing people in other cultures and societies, but in more recent times, influenced by feminism, postmodernism and an increasing understanding of the role of researcher reflexivity, experimental methods have been proliferating among sociologists, anthropologists and more generally across disciplines such as communication studies, psychology, women’s studies, management and organisational studies, theatres studies, literature, health sciences, education and sport’s science (Ellis and Bocher 1996; Bochner and Ellis 2002).
Ethnography places an emphasis on exploring the nature of particular social phenomena, and increasingly in more recent times, working primarily with unstructured data, investigating small numbers of cases (maybe even a single case), in depth and detail. This may be followed by interpretation of the meanings of the data and critical reflections upon the purposes and motivations of social actions (Atkinson and Hammersely, 1998).

These studies might be represented in a variety of creative ways including art, photography and other audio and visual means, or performed through poetics, stories, theatrical and dramatic presentations, (Ellis, 1995; Ellis and Bochner, 1996; Bochner and Ellis, 2002; Ronai, 1995).
Bringing the ‘self’ (auto) into the field of ethnography has attracted counselling and psychotherapy researchers and practitioners who are increasingly becoming involved in using autoethnography (Cooper 2001; Rees 2001; Karma 2003; Kneeshaw 2000; Law 2002; Etherington 2000, 2003).

As counsellors and psychotherapists we have been taught to think about the cultures and family systems within which clients operate; likewise we have been trained to examine how our own culture and family systems impact on our life stories and on our relationships with others.

However, autoethnography does not merely require us to explore the interface between culture and self, it requires us to write about ourselves.
Ellis and Bochner (2000: 739) describe the process of how researchers create autoethnography:

As they zoom backward and forward, inward and outward, distinctions between the personal and the cultural become blurred, sometimes beyond distinct recognition. Usually written in the first-person voice, autoethnographic texts appear in a variety of forms—short stories, poetry, fiction, novels, photographic essays, personal essays, journals, fragmented and layered writing, and social science prose. In these texts, concrete action, dialogue, emotion, embodiment, spirituality, and self-consciousness are featured, appearing as relational and institutional stories affected by our history, social structure, and culture, which themselves are dialectically revealed through action, feeling, thought, and language.
Janice Morse criticises and questions the ethics of autoethnography in an editorial of *Qualitative Health Research* (2000:1159) saying:

‘With due respect to autoethnography, I usually discourage students from writing about their own experience. There are many reasons for this. First, the narrative is rarely their own. It includes information about others who are, by association, recognizable, even if their names have been changed. As such, writing about others violates anonymity. If these ‘others’ do not know about the article, it still violates their rights, for they have not given their permission and they do not have the right of withdrawal or refusal the informed consent provides’.
Criteria

Does the work make a substantive contribution to my understanding of social life? Does the writer demonstrate a deeply grounded social science perspective and demonstrate how it is used to inform the text?

Does the work have aesthetic merit? Does the writer uses analysis to open up the text and invite interpretive responses? Is it artistically shaped, satisfying, complex, and interesting?

Is the work reflexive enough to make the author sufficiently visible for me to make judgements about the point of view? Does the author provide evidence of knowledge of postmodern epistemologies that convinces me of their understanding of what is involved in telling people’s lives? Am I informed how the author came to write the work and how the information was gathered? Have the complexities of ethical issues been understood and addressed? Does the author show themselves to be accountable to the standards for knowing and telling participants stories?

What is the impact of this work on me? Does it affect me emotionally, intellectually, generate new questions, move me to write or respond in any other way?

Does the work provide me with a sense of ‘lived experience’? Does it seem to be a truthful, credible account of cultural, social, individual or communal sense of what is ‘real’?


