Doing narrative research

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Not one of the most popular forms of qualitative research in the UK

No clear guide book

Multiple approaches can be confusing

Many different forms of story

Doing narrative analysis: an introduction
  ◦ Background
  ◦ Methods
  ◦ Example
I. Background (Sools, 2013)

a. Narrative approaches

- Definition and scope
  - Story and storytelling as root metaphor for human beings
  - Meaning-centred
  - Contextual – connecting person with context

- Increased popularity and pluriformity
  - Different approaches with narrative research
  - Often used loosely
b. Key aspects of narrative approaches

- Complex, contextualised accounts are favoured of how events are connected into a meaningful whole

- Critical of reductionistic explanations of causes and mechanisms and neutral observer–role

- Central role attributed to language

- Focus on the particular
c. Difference from other qualitative approaches

- Connects experiences within cases rather than breaking them into themes
- Integrates conflicts, contradictions and uncertainties
- Considers the meaning(s) at the centre of the story
- Connects discourse to the embodied person
- Connects person to the immediate and broader social context
d. Big and small stories
(Ochs & Capps, Georgakopoulou & Bamberg, Sools & Schuhmann)

- Big stories – focusing on complete, coherent stories
  - reflective, retrospective meaning construction; making sense of life by connecting past, present and future

- Small stories – concerned with the process of storytelling within the interpersonal context, story pieces
  - everyday meaning co-construction; ongoing negotiation
e. Connecting levels of narrative analysis (Murray, 2000)

- Link personal, interpersonal and social levels

- Personal story is told in interpersonal context and engages with larger social story

- The sick person’s narrative
  - Engages with the listener
  - Engages with social story of pain and suffering
  - Engages with health story of the good patient

- Countering dominant stories, continuing process
2. Narrative analysis (Murray & Sools, 2014)  
a. Storyline (Personal) analysis

1. Agent/character: Who?  
   ◦ Detailed description of main character

2. Means and/or helpers: With what/whom?  
   ◦ persons or means that are helpful or hinder achieving the goals/intentions of the story.

3. Setting/scene: Where?  
   ◦ The physical, social and psychological setting
4. Purpose, intention, desired or feared goal: What for?
   - In health research, a desired end state of well-being might be taken-for-granted and therefore not named explicitly, while ill persons might not talk about undesired end states such as an expected lack of healing.

5. Breach:
   - an imbalance between two storyline elements.
   - E.g., an imbalance between the purpose and the means

Overlaps:
- These components do not necessarily come in sequence
- They can overlap
- Not proscriptive, a guide
b. Interactional analysis

- In this part, the question to be answered is what happens to storylines in interaction.

- *Positioning of storyline:*
  - the focus is on how storylines are positioned by storytellers/listeners in the interaction.
c. Societal analysis

- To gain more insight by placing the narrative in the relevant wider context of stories in which individual stories are embedded.

- Positioning of storylines in the wider social, societal, and political context:
  - This might entail providing contextual explanations for the storyline, and connecting them to the literature.
3. Example: Community workers’ life stories

some notes from interviews
Community development promoted as means of overcoming social and economic challenges at a local level

Community workers at the front-line of government initiatives to implement government policies at the local level

Positioned between the interests of the state and those of local residents
Call–Me Project
(Murray & Crummett, 2010)

- Call–Me project designed to explore the potential of local initiatives to engage older residents of disadvantaged neighbourhoods

- Range of local projects developed with local residents

- Evaluation identified enthusiastic response from residents

- Challenge was sustaining local initiatives
Interviews with community workers

- Life history interviews conducted with 12 community workers
- Interviews lasted 30 – 180 minutes.
- Interviews read, re-read and reviewed to identify key themes
- Similar structure of ongoing struggle
All community workers committed to improving local conditions

Redemption story
- Often from similar background and keen to give back

All had moved into the work because they felt it reflected their values
- Social justice was an underlying value
Narrative analysis

- Overall case
- Storyline analysis
  Purpose, setting, means, agent, breach
- Interactional analysis
- Contextual analysis
- Comparative analysis
Community workers’ life stories
(Murray, Ziegler & Sools, In prep)

- Social activist
  ◦ challenge social inequality and promote social change

- Consumer advocate
  ◦ concerned with providing good services to residents

- Manager
  ◦ concerned with measuring the effectiveness of interventions
Alison: Community health worker
Social activist

Introduction:
- Works for health action agency
- *We should challenge health inequalities; we should challenge inequality in general*

Storyline
- *Becoming almost nothing to offer a tiny little bit of change*
Agent (who)

- Alison
  - Grew up in the area
    - *When I was a kid I used to live around here*
  - Trained as a psychiatric nurse but found the work tedious and then a new opportunity for a community health worker was advertised
    - *thought that this was a dream come true ... Had to take a small pay drop ... But the job looked absolutely fantastic. Working in health equalities and local area ... Everything about it just sounded fantastic*
I’m working in a job like this but you could be a community worker, a health worker, a council worker, but you’ve got to learn about so many aspects really quickly and then, you’re almost nothing in the end, you’re a jack of all trades ... I spent some time cleaning and moving furniture and other times I’m embroiled in...
Purpose (what for): a little, tiny bit of change

- It meets my belief that we should challenge health inequalities, we should challenge inequality in general. It meets my beliefs so much, cos you know, I’d love to imagine that there was some impact, and I’d like to be meeting people who have got, erm, challenging lives and offer, you know, a little, tiny bit of change. And I also love, erm, the fact that we can work in a slightly, well we have been able to work in a very creative way ... And it really does make a difference, because people’s ambitions and their horizons are damn low.
Working in disadvantaged community

- *Positive words used are vibrant and diverse, but to scratch the surface is so much more complicated*

- *I think as more and more pressure is put on people they have less and less time, and it’s very sad to know that there’s such a lot of families who are not only financially poor but are time poor as well*

- *the divisions within working classes*
Translating

It felt like the job was a lot about translating, err, interpreting I should say, between the community and the statutory services.

There’s a lot of talking at the beginning about these hard to reach communities, but then there was discussion about, well actually they’re not that hard to reach, they’re there. It’s us who are hard to reach, and us who don’t try to reach out in the right way.

So how can we help workers to understand that when they go and talk to people they need to be able to communicate with them and I don’t just mean the language but try to put themselves in the other person’s shoes for a while.
Yeah, what can we do? And, but these are also like a red herring in a way because if I, the minute I go out into the community and talk to people about their issues or needs in terms of health, very rarely, unless I really push it is it about diet and exercise ... It’s a difficult one and it’s not a simple lifestyle choice ... Naivety is probably a kind word for it! It’s very frustrating because that’s not the reality at all, and it’s not, particularly if you’re working in a very poor community with all sorts of pressures on you.
I do think that that idea that something like a campaign to tell people that if only they’d stop eating crisps, take-aways and cakes and run about a bit more with their kids is going to have an impact on the people that we’re trying to ... It may well impact people who have already got a bit of access to facilities, maybe they’re dropped out of the squash club or the pony club or whatever they were already doing, and oh a little bit of guilt: ‘Oh yes, we’ll start doing that again’.
Means: sharing small stories

- Need to be around and share in their lives
  - *Our job is to be very consistent, always be ready and keep providing information because one time you provide information and help if you’re just there. You’re available which is another part of the job – you’ve got to be around, you can’t withdraw.*
Means: sharing small stories

- Working with residents
  - And that just made sense to me. But there’d be no professional who works in community development work, you know, to give a little of yourself. There might be, I don’t know, I’ve not been on the course, have I? [...] they feel more comfortable with you, they feel more open to talk about things.

- Keep going:
  - someone will get on that cycle of change
Breach

- Difference between what she sees in the community and what she thinks should be there

- Targets
  - It kind of brings with it, err, targets which aren’t necessarily easy with community work. So the targets might be around reducing, for instance, cancers
I go to art galleries and look at stuff in exhibitions and I’m, you know, interested in all of that, but for a lot of people, it’s just not even in their, erm, life. Now I don’t think it is up to me to force them to go to the opera, but to bring something back in which might be a little bit out of their scope. Cos I think in my life, erm, things, experiences outside of my normal, everyday existence helps me to develop a little bit, and I think that’s what we’re missing.
Breach: Need for more horizons are so damn low

- It really does make a difference, because peoples’ ambitions and their horizons are so damn low! And I don’t believe we as a service are doing anything to change that, in fact I think, I must say, my biggest criticism is that I think we are really boxing people into a corner and saying: ‘You can be ... the best you’re going to be is working at a supermarket checkout, and you’ll be damn glad of that job an’ all.'
Summary

- Social activist looks for ways she can improve the lot of others.

- Frustrated by the lowered ambitions held by others and argues for the need for a more expansive agenda for community change.

- Accepts uncertainty
Overall narrative analysis

- All workers were trying to create a better world for the residents
  - Their common story was one of the change agent but it took different forms

- The world had many injustices
  - Big story was the expectation that the residents deserved little and would achieve little

- Community change has potential
  - Work was to engage residents in this big story of potential

- Their work was pervaded by value of social justice
  - in everyday practice the importance of little stories
Value of narrative analysis

- Connecting person with their context
- Unique but also generalisable
- Conflicts between formal expectations and lived reality
- Integrates themes into a meaningful whole
- Living with contradictions
References


- Murray, M., Ziegler, F., & Sools, A. (In prep.) Community workers life stories.


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www.keele.ac.uk/callme

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