Narrative Research

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Narrative research is a qualitative research methodology in the narrative inquiry tradition that elicits and analyzes stories in order to understand people, cultures, and societies. The knowledge gained through narrative inquiry about individuals and society is narratively constructed and understood through the study of the content and structure of stories (i.e., scripts, texts, visual images). In sociology, and other social science disciplines (e.g., psychology, anthropology, communication, education), narrative inquiry was an outcome of social constructionism (Berger and Luckmann, 1966), which presented lived experience as a social epistemology stemming from shared meanings. However, it was in the 1980s that narrative inquiry emerged with the "narrative turn," an intellectual shift in the social sciences away from valuing only objective and generalizable knowledge (positivist and structuralist) to also valuing subjective and contextualized knowledge. Social psychologist Elliot Mischler (1986) is often credited for advancing narrative social science, alongside other social psychologists and sociologists such as Donald Polkinghorne (1988), Jerome Bruner (1986), and Alasdair MacIntyre (1981). Mischler introduced narrative as a central mode of human cognition that offers insight into individual and collective identity and experience. The narrative turn signaled academics' attunement to the importance of story and the belief that people's lives are forged through stories. However, as social theorist Roland Barthes (1977) noted, the history of narrative begins with the history of people; "there nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative" (p. 79).

The function of stories to convey important cultural and social norms, familial histories, traditions, and rituals certainly predates the wave of theorizing that legitimized narrative inquiry as a methodology of western social science. Researchers conducting narrative inquiry, particularly with members of indigenous diasporas or communities, are challenged to avoid further privileging western academic approaches to narrative inquiry and demonstrate sensitivity to the sacredness of stories remembered and relived. Jeong-Hee Kim (2016) similarly highlighted the importance of narratives in indigenous and other societies as preservers of sacred rituals and knowledge.

There are multiple ways to understand and frame different approaches, traditions, and practices within narrative inquiry. Kim (2016) pointed to broad traditions in narrative inquiry: narratives of the self, narratives and society, and narratives for/of social justice. Within these traditions, different qualitative methods may be used to generate, elicit, and analyze narratives.

Narratives of the self. Some narrative inquiries focus on individuals and how narratives construct and convey their sense of self and related experiences, and make use of interviews and reflective writing. For example, psychologists and social psychologists use narrative inquiry to understand how individuals story their lives in social and political contexts. They are often interested in how individuals' stories change, signaling growth and well-being in response to narrative therapy. Others are more interested in narratives as socially available discursive productions of subjects (selves), and critically analyzing them for how those productions are singular and/or multiple, and compliant or resistant (Wolgemuth, 2014).

Other narrative inquiries focus on life writing (English, 2006), such as microbiographies of individuals or macrobiographies conducted longitudinally to illustrate the social lives of individuals who make up a collective (Ryder, 1965). Autoethnography and collaborative forms, such as duo or trio ethnographies (Sawyer and Norris, 2012), emphasize the cultural contexts in which narratives unfold. Some narrative inquiries feature the storied lives of the inquirer, which they may choose to include alongside their participants' stories to illuminate important insights. For instance, Carolyn Ellis (also Ellis and Patti, 2014) crafted narrative accounts that convey the

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healing power of narrative work for both herself and participants.

Narratives and society. Some narrative inquiries focus on the social dimensions of storytelling within institutional contexts. Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly (2000), for example, describe narrative inquiry as the study of lived experience "in the field," within formal settings (e.g., schools, organizations, clubs). They, like other auto or duo/trio ethnographers, use ethnographic data generation and collection methods (i.e., observing, jotting field notes, conducting interviews, examining artifacts, journaling) to capture and compose stories as/of experience.

Similarly, organizational and communication researchers study narrative as social practice. Organizational researcher David Boje (2001), for example, studied "storytelling organizations" to uncover how organizations communicate their shared norms, values, and practices through informal stories and anecdotes. He noted that organizations are constantly in the process of reinvention, so their narratives often lack a clear beginning, middle, and end. He advanced an ante-narrative approach to understand the fluid and unstable meanings of stories generated within organizations.

Narratives for/of social justice. Some narrative inquiries combine narratives of the self with narratives of society to tell the stories of social groups (e.g., African Americans, women, people with disabilities) that often face multiple oppressions (e.g., gendered racism) to expose and remedy injustice. The purpose of this narrative work is to bring forward the unheard/unwritten stories that run counter to dominant or master narratives. These counterstories or counternarratives often draw on publicly available documents, interviews, and focus groups to elicit and interpret stories through critical race theory and variations such as critical race feminism, Latino critical theory (LatCrit), tribal critical race theory (TribalCrit), and Asian critical race theory (AsianCrit), as well as variations spanning racial/ethnic groups such as DisCrit and QueerCrit. Narratives associated with critical race theories have been constructed as parables, composites, and testimonios. For example, law professor Derrick Bell (1985), an influential thinker behind critical race theory, told counterstories in the form of chronicles, featuring two fictional, courageous black civil rights lawyers to challenge dominant assumptions of black experience and civil engagement.

Future Directions

Narrative inquiry is not a stagnant methodology. Susan Chase (2011) describes narrative inquiry as (still) a field in the making, and Jeong-Hee Kim (2016) urges new narrative researchers to push the boundaries of narrative inquiry. The future of narrative inquiry is open, multiple, and likely to be influenced by shifts in thinking about the self, society, and social justice. New materialist and posthumanist theorizing may prompt narrative inquiry into nonhuman agents. Political activism may mobilize narrative inquiry into political and social movements. Finally, the ubiquity of technology and social media may motivate narrative inquiry into sites that mass produce narratives of self, society, and social justice.

SEE ALSO: Autoethnography; Biography; Discourse; Narrative; Paradigms; Postmodernism; Qualitative Methods

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