Narrative Inquiry

Joanna Anglin
Seung-Yun Lee
Kevin Schneider
Sujin Son
What is narrative inquiry?

- an ongoing questioning, responding, and reflecting among collaborators using narratives to generate new shared personal and group understanding (composite definition)

- Narrative inquiry varies from case to case, a testament to its usefulness and adaptability. Clandinin and Connelly (1990) described the process well here: “Narrative inquiries are shared in ways that help readers question their own stories, raise their own questions about practice and see in the narrative accounts stories of their own stories. The intent is to foster reflection, storying, and restorying for readers” (p. 20.)

- Documenting is KEY.
Polkinghorne (2007) asserts, narrative inquiry “issues claims about the meaning life events hold for people” and “makes claims about how people understand situations, others, and themselves” (p. 476).

Polkinghorne (1998) referred to narrative as “the primary form through which humans construct the dimensions of their life’s meaningfulness and understand it as significant” (p. 155). Children display “narrative competence” by age 3, we’re wired to communicate in stories (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 160).

Narratives help us organize. “Narrative ordering makes individual events comprehensible by identifying the whole to which they contribute” (1988, p. 18).

Open for criticism? ◊ Not if you correctly frame it. Riessman (2008) stated “Narrative truths are always partial – committed and incomplete” (p. 186).

Framing it as an individual or group story and not a universal truth.
Ensuring validity and rigor

- Researchers, “should not argue for a level of certainty for their claims beyond that which is possible to conclude from the type of evidence they gather and from the attributes of the realm about which they are inquiring” (Polkinghorne, 2007, p. 477). Assembled narratives can make meaning of life events, not determine if they happened.

- Don’t write the narrative before doing the research. He argued “an open listening stance and carefully attending to the unexpected and unusual participant responses...can assist in ensuring the participant’s own voice is heard and the text is not primarily an interviewer’s own creation” (p. 482).
Use data effectively ◊narrative or poetic transcription:

Richardson (2000) captured why poetry and other writing fits well with the flexibility of narrative inquiry. “By writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it. Form and content are inseparable” (p. 923). Those who write narrative poems have done transcription (using the participant’s own words) or re-representation (using a blend of the participant’s and researcher’s words).
How do we write about other’s lives?

“the dread, guilt, and shame that go with writing about others”

(Josselson, 1993, p. 69).
Writing about others

- Who owns the story?
- What happens when there is disagreement on interpretations?
- What are the ethical boundaries in telling the story?

(Johnson–bailey, 2002, p. 325)
Three Methods to Increase Trustworthiness

- Triangulation
- Member check
- A statement of the researcher positionality
Narrative Inquiry and Society: Foundational Ideas

Using narrative research on societies

- Connecting personal stories to historical events.
- Using personal stories to explain particular historical events, such as holocaust.
- Using personal histories, such as teachers’ stories, to research the function of particular organizations, such as schools in reformation.
Exploring counternarratives of people from marginalized groups to reveal and criticize masternarratives. (e.g. Critical race theory)

Exploring the influence of popular stories accepted in a broader society on the development of personal identities, which are embedded in the personal stories.

Exploring community histories by collecting oral histories.

Exploring written stories, such as legal judgment, to explore the influence of particular policies on the lives of individuals.

Action research
Applicability and Critique

- “One” story versus “the” story
- When are you finished collecting stories?
- Researcher subjectivity/bias
- Autoethnography as narrative inquiry?
Narrative Inquiry References


