INTERACTING STORIES
Narrative Approaches to Research

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Ewan McGregor in *Big Fish*, the film

“Stories are our dreams, really. That’s why we tell stories. They’re what make us interesting and what connects us with one another.”
Aims

• What is our interest in narrative?
• Systemic therapy as narrative analysis?
• What is narrative analysis?
• Why choose narrative analysis?
• What can we do with it? Individual narratives and family narratives: co-construction
• Representational systems and narrative
“That reminds me of a story.....”

.....From: *Mind and Nature: A necessary unity*

Gregory Bateson, 1988
Our stories

• How do our own stories influence the research questions we ask?

• Why is narrative analysis so attractive to me? Cultural genre of narratives of education as quest and liberation

• As a research supervisor, my understanding of reflexive positioning – how we ‘come home’ in our research
‘I worked out that crying doesn’t work. No matter how hard I cried it never worked. Nothing ever changed and I became very good at just crying on the spot but it didn’t do anything so it (anorexia) is just another way of crying…..

I used to cry so much. There used never to be a day I didn’t cry and then I think now I guess I use food. ……..You can’t control emotions but I can control food and if all my thoughts are full of food and weight and stuff it doesn’t leave much space for emotions……………………….

The only thing I ever hear them talking about is me and if I didn’t have this [anorexia] its kind of like, would everything fall apart, at least its keeping them talking. And they won’t argue while I’ve got this because it might make me worse. So um...that’s kind of bought, sort of like, I’m not in control as such but I’ve got more control over the situation that way.’

Claire
THE STORIES WE LIVE BY

Stories not only describe events that have occurred but can depict imagined, potential, and mysterious futures.

They link the **PAST – PRESENT – FUTURE**

In the telling of a story we are also simultaneously in the present as we *tell* but also the story might have a history and existence of its own that tells of the past but will also be reproduced in the future.

In each telling though, it may alter in how we choose to tell it and also what emerges; new fragments may be inserted as our listeners ask questions or add their own memories......
Narrative Theory

• Narrative: a continued account of any series of occurrences

• “There is no other way for us to describe lived time other than through narrative” Ricoeur

• “Autobiography is justification” Bruner
Narrative Theory

• “We never cease to reinterpret the narrative identity that constitutes us, in the light of the narratives proposed by our culture”

Ricoeur
All families experience difficulties and their beliefs about these lead to attempts to solve the difficulties. However, the attempts can make the problems worse. It is then likely that their beliefs increasingly move towards a view that the difficulty is serious, unsolvable and they come to see more and more actions as indicative of problems.

Our son is very ill, and we are failing totally as a family.
NARRATIVE as PERFORMANCE

• Relationship between teller and listener

• Power – who asks the questions and for what purpose?

• Intentions of the story teller – to convince, justify, explain, persuade, amuse etc.

• Co-construction – prompting, editing, encouraging, validating, disagreeing etc.

• Connecting with shared stories – cultural, literary, religious etc.
What is Narrative Analysis?

These approaches are concerned to explore the stories that people hold about their lives, and how our sense of self and identity is shaped by the stories that we hold. The emphasis is on events over time, that stories connect up the past, present and the future. The emphasis is on the personal accounts that people hold. Stories and narratives are explored in terms of their power to evoke feelings and how they offer a coherence or sense of purpose to the person’s life.
Why Choose Narrative Analysis?

• Differences between phenomenological methods and social constructionist/discursive approaches

• Narrative analysis sits astride both qualitative traditions: bottom-up and top-down analyses
Why Choose Narrative Analysis?

• Researcher interested in how family members’ give meanings to their lives in terms of stories or accounts
• Stories assumed to connect events in people’s lives and explain changes over time
• Narratives assumed to have both content and form
• Feelings and experiences: stories are evocative – research is interested in the feelings they arouse for family members, and us, as they talk about their life
Narrative Analysis Assumptions

• Self-narrations are both constructions and claims of identity
• Past experiences are believed to be described in the light of current positions/experiences and our imagined future
• Self-narrations are hypotheses that offer meanings over time and are as much determinative of the ‘facts’ as vice versa
NARRATIVE COHERENCE

• **ORIENTATION**: scene-setting, provides a context for the story, introduces main characters, locates the story in a specific temporal, social and personal context.

• **STRUCTURE**: a causally related set of events logically connected over time, usually in the form of:
  - an initial event
  - internal response (thought, feeling, plan, goal)
  - external response (carry out a plan, reach a goal, resolve emotional imbalance, remedy a crisis)

• **AFFECT**: an evaluation of the events, including emotions and feelings, either explicitly or implicitly through voice tone, gesture, etc. Use of tension, drama, anger, humour, pathos to communicate or emphasise evaluative points.

• **INTEGRATION**: a synthesis - integration of the events and meanings and feelings expressed. The events make sense within the context of the larger life story. Discrepancies, ambiguities, complexities and contradictions may be noted, commented on, used to indicate suspense, conflict and growth but the narrative tries to reconcile these so there is a ‘point’ to the story, it adds up to something.

• **CULTURAL**: awareness of shared cultural norms, conventions of ‘significant’ life events, key transitions, timings of transitions and common meanings allocated to change. Not necessarily bland acceptance of cultural conventions but an awareness of cultural landscapes and abilities to locate one’s story within these.
TYPES OF NARRATIVES

Narratives can be seen to vary on a number of important dimensions:

- **ELABORATIVE vs. CONSTRUCTIVE/pre-emptive**
  e.g. you are *always* selfish and *everything* you do is...

- **COHERENT vs. FRAGMENTED**
  e.g. well, I suppose my father was..... sort of kind...... But, he did let me down a lot and..... at the end of the day, he was OK, but...... I don’t really care anyway, I’ve kind of forgotten about it...

- **REFLEXIVE vs. CONCRETE**
  e.g. I have no idea why she used to hit me, she’s just a cruel personality I suppose

- **DIFFERENTIATED vs. CONSTELLATORY**
  e.g. he stole some money and he just couldn’t be trusted with anything,
    I think he would let his friends down, even his family, he had no respect for anything.....
Narrative Research

• REALIST

• COLLABORATIVE

• EMANCIPATORY

• PSYCHO-DYNAMIC – the defended narrator
Types of Narrative Analysis

- Life story method
- Sequence of core narratives
- Poetic and metaphor approach
- Emplotment and genres
- Systemic narrative analysis: combined and hybrid approaches
Progressive, Optimistic, Future-oriented Narrative

“I would love to be what I class as an ‘apple pie Mum’, you know, like the farmer’s wife with big rosy cheeks and a big pinny (apron).... Um......you see, the ultimate dream would be for us to win mega bucks on the lottery and we would like to buy a farm, but not a farm to grow so much in crops, but to grow children.”

Abi, a foster mother
What can be done with life stories?

• Life story seen as a ‘social construct’ ie the social function of biographies and the social processes that constitute biographies
• Social reality and experiential work interacting over time
• Can we proceed from text to life?
• Therapeutic implications – are systemic therapists narrative analysts?
Life Story Method

• Accounts are constructed/translated by the analyst from the text
• Plot lines are contrasted across the interviews
• Particular attention paid to points where story-lines are disrupted
• We need understanding of the structure/form of the life story before we can hypothesise about the importance of separate episodes and their meaning for the narrator
The Story

“Where shall I begin, please your majesty?” he asked.

“Begin at the beginning,” the King said gravely, “and go on until you come to the end: then stop”.

(Lewis Carroll, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, 1865)
The Story

- How does the participant select stories, and with what form and structure?
- Identify the plot line: Agent, uses Instrument, to take Action, to achieve Goals
- Identify a narrative through its structure – Act (what), Scene (where/when), Agent (who), Agency (how), and Purpose (why)
Sequence of Core Narratives

• Examination of the account/text in relation to structure
• Thematic connections between narrative episodes within interviews
• Why is narrator using this specific text to present this experience or theme?
• Which topics are addressed, and in which details are the themes presented, and why?
• Thematic connections across the interviews
Emplotment and Genres

• Influenced by Ricoeur’s narrative theory: each culture ‘offers’ narrative forms or stories of selves which act as templates for organising lived experience
• What cultural genres are drawn on by the narrator to present their biography eg a moral quest, enlightenment, transformation, restitution, reparation, and so on
• Chaotic or ‘frozen’ stories: repetitive description with no sense of agency
“From abattoirs, through the fur trade, to testing cosmetics on defenceless animals, the horrors unfolded. It presented such an appalling and unflinching picture of cruelty that I couldn’t sleep; indeed, I was so upset, so deeply moved, I wept and wept all that night…….But once you accept the inevitable truth of what you’re doing, you can’t pretend any more; you can’t pretend it doesn’t matter, or that is has no effect on the planet or your consciousness. There’s no denying your actions.”

Hayley Mills, BBC Vegetarian Good Food, 1995
Narrative Analysis: a systemic approach

• Summarise the narrative in terms of structure and function – the main plot
• Summarise the narrative themes within the interview, and compare and contrast the themes across the interviews
• Process analysis: how is the story being told? What is the narrator trying to achieve? What are the discourse markers?
• A connection is assumed between the way we speak about our close relationships and the nature of those relationships themselves
ATTACHMENT REPRESENTATIONS:  
The layers of attachment

PROCEDURAL MEMORY: memory for how we do things (R)

SENSORY MEMORY: visual images, smell, touch, auditory (R)

SEMANTIC MEMORY: cognition, beliefs, attitudes (L)

EPISODIC MEMORY: narratives, stories, inter-connected experiences (L and R)

INTEGRATIVE MEMORY: reflection, meta-cognition, on-going monitoring of our speech and thought (L and R)

Right Brain – Implicit  

Left Brain – Explicit
**ACTIVITY: Transcript process analysis**

**Structure** – how well ordered is the interview, relationship with interviewer?

**Imagery** – what visual, sensory material is there?

**Semantic** – what are the concepts, generalisations about relationships made?

**Episodes** – what are the stories told, how coherent are these?

**Integration** – how is material from the above brought together, what evidence is there of insight, reflection on self and others

**Engagement and therapy:** How would you position yourself, approach, think about, feel about, fantasise about starting to work with this person?
Narrative Theme of Abandonment

“They (Child mental health service staff) weren’t putting any effort in to help me. They were just sitting back and watching me go through the process of being depressed. They wouldn’t put any effort into seeing me, or anything.”

*Ryan, a young person admitted to an in-patient psychiatric unit*
Reflexivity

“In the social sciences there is only interpretation. Nothing speaks for itself.”

“Methods of making sense of experience are always personal.”

“One learns about method by thinking about how one makes sense of one’s own life.”

Interpretative decisions made by the narrative analyst

- Co-construction
- Cultural context
- What problems it solves for the narrator
- Psychological processes/processes of change
- Narrative as performance
- Purpose – why is it being told in this way?
- Turning points?
Couple and Family Narratives

• Shared narrating and shared construing
• Focus on particular aspects of shared experience and explore how events are connected over time
• Systemic case studies: the ‘Rashomon’ effect
• Understanding the similarities and differences in experience and in the accounting of experience
JOINT STORIES: FAMILY CONSTRUCTION OF NARRATIVES

• Narratives are relationally constructed

• Family narrating is isomorphic with their relational patterns

• PROCESS and CONTENT
  – Meanings developed in the story
  – Roles each family member plays in the construction of a joint story
NARRATING ROLES

- NARRATOR
- EDITOR
- AFFIRMING
- ELABORATOR
- CRITIC

Roles embody a focus on:
CONTENT and EMOTION/RELATIONSHIPS
Narrative validity

Narrative validity is dependent:

• on believability
• on liveability
• and on empirical adequacy
ALVIN: We’ve often thought, if we’d have had Claire when we were younger things might have been different. But obviously when Claire was young and wanted the attention we were in middle age and totally engrossed in our work and did that have a factor? Because the other three lads they just grew up with us and we hardly noticed a problem did we?

MARGARET: You think, you’re doing the right thing by working and getting a decent……

CLAIRE: Yeah, they’re not saying you’re wrong…If you hadn’t have worked and we’d had no money something else could have happened.

MARGARET: No, I know, its just……

CLAIRE: It’s just why was it food, why wasn’t it something else I used as my coping mechanism?

ALVIN: Why wasn’t it drugs?

CLAIRE: I got a lot of attention when I was younger through food didn’t I? A lot. Maybe that had something to do with it?……I think, not consciously but psychologically I knew that – I did not think this consciously and think oh I know I’ll be thin so I’ll get attention and stuff – I subconsciously knew that um, kind of, people took notice of me for food and like, I just got all the attention from food, didn’t I really?
Continuing

MARGARET: I didn’t realise that.

CLaire: No, I didn’t realise that. That’s just thinking back. And subconsciously I might have used that to my advantage, knowing people, because people used to worry that I didn’t eat much. And knowing that people worried about me might have seemed nice.

MARGARET: And that was before you were even sixteen, wasn’t it, because when I met that lady in Hatchers, our first words when I was staying with your Nana was ‘How's Claire eating now?’, because..

CLaire: But it was made such a big issue though wasn’t it, when I was going to someone’s house you’d have to tell them beforehand that I wouldn’t eat anything and stuff and it was made such a big thing all the time.

MARGARET: But then, you think you’re helping when you’re doing it.

CLaire: I know.
Narrative validity

• How interviewees interpret the research topic, whether they ‘keep to it’, whether they orient toward what they think the researcher wants to know, or what they (interviewees) are interested in, these are empirical questions that can be addressed in individual case analysis.
References


