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Analyzing Biographies and Narratives

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5

Analysing biographies and narratives

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This chapter examines what the analysis of narratives, stories and biographies has added to qualitative research and looks at the sources and functions of narratives. It examines the particular content and themes of life histories or biographies. These general features are put into context for analysis by a set of practical approaches to analysis and by examination of an example narrative. The chapter ends with a discussion of the structure of narratives.

NARRATIVES

Narration or story telling is one of the fundamental ways that people organise their understanding of the world. In stories they make sense to themselves of their past experience and they share that experience with others. So the careful analysis of topics, content, style, context and the telling of narratives will reveal peoples' understanding of the meanings of key events in their lives or their communities and the cultural contexts in which they live.

Most stories, especially if they are part of a longer interview or dialogue, could have been expressed as a simple example. Rather than the story:

'I admit I'm not a good timekeeper, but sometimes being late works out well in the end. I remember the time I was slightly late for a train and thought I would miss it. But, in fact, the train before was so delayed that I caught that As it made up time, much to the surprise of the people I was meeting, I ended up arriving early',

the respondent could have said,

'Sometimes, even if you are late departing you can end up arriving early because you catch an earlier train that has been delayed',

or,

'Being late is not good, but sometimes you get away with it'.

What is added by telling this as a story?

- It provides evidence for the general point (that can be inferred from the particular story)

- It personalises the generalisation. It says, ‘I experienced that’, which both reinforces the evidence and tells you something about the person, what they feel and how they evaluate and experience the world. By analyzing narratives, stories and biographies we can examine the rhetorical devices that people use and the way they represent and contextualize their experience and personal knowledge.
- The experience is put into a time frame. It is chronological. This is much closer to our experience of the world which has a temporal coherence to it.
- It acts as evidence for aspects of the self-portrayal or biography being given by the respondent. It gives respondents a voice. It encourages us to take seriously the way people construct and support their identity because through narration people tell us what kind of person they think they are or would like us to think they are. Consequently we may focus on people who are not usually represented or taken seriously.
- It has dramatic and rhetorical force (See Box 5.1). It is easier for the hearer to take on board and it is more convincing and persuasive than the generalization.

Box 5.1 Rhetoric

Rhetoric is the art of making speeches or using language effectively to please or persuade. It arose in Classical Greece, where learning rhetoric was prized as a means to success in public life. Rhetoric examines the methods and means of communication and has been criticized for considering simply style or appearances (“mere rhetoric”). Aristotle’s book on the subject presented a systemisation, much developed in later centuries, of the forms of rhetorical argument. This included, for example, the well known rhetorical question – asked not because an answer is wanted but for rhetorical effect such as to emphasise that even being able to ask it is reprehensible (“how many times do I have to tell you?”) Despite the criticisms that it focuses on form not content, rhetoric is actually just as much concerned with what one could say as how one might say it. Indeed, a basic premise for rhetoric is the indivisibility of means from meaning; *how* one says something conveys meaning as much as *what* one says.

This list illustrates what has been added to qualitative research by the investigation of narrative and biography. It has both focussed attention on how people make the points they do, and it gives access to how they wish to portray themselves, how they give account for their actions and their lives. Shared expressions and shared vocabulary and metaphors can tell us a lot about how social groups see themselves and how they account for their experiences. See Box 5.2.

Box 5.2 Metaphors and accounts

Metaphor

Metaphor is the use of imagery as a kind of rhetorical device. Usually a word or phrase that signifies one thing is used to designate another, thus making an implicit comparison, as in “a sea of troubles” (troubles everywhere, like the vastness of the sea or like storms at sea), “Life in the fast lane” (a fast and hectic life like being in the fast lane of a motorway) or “drowning in money” (having too much). Metaphor is a major and indispensable part of our ordinary, conventional way of conceptualizing the world, and our everyday behaviour reflects our metaphorical understanding of experience. Ordinary concrete descriptions are rarely metaphorical, but once people start talking about abstractions or emotions, metaphorical understanding is the norm.

Most of us, most of the time, use standard metaphors that reflect the milieu and culture we live in. As researchers, we can investigate how the metaphors are structured, how they are used and how others understand them. Sometimes metaphor is used because people find it difficult to express themselves without their use or because there is an emotional content to what they are saying that is easier to convey metaphorically. In other cases it is just an example of a shared common term. On the other hand, in some cases the use of specific metaphors reflects shared ideas and concepts among the narrower group to which the respondents belong and are characteristic of the specific cultural domain.

Accounts

The examination of accounts can be traced back at least to the work of Mills (1940) who described them as containing vocabularies of motive and they are also examples of what Austin referred to as ‘doing things with words’ (Austin 1962). Account giving is the specific use of narrative where people try to account for, justify, excuse, legitimate and so on their actions or their situation. There are two principal types of account; excuses, where people try to mitigate or relieve questionable action or conduct perhaps by appeal to accident, forces outside their control or lack of information, and justifications, where people try to neutralize or attach positive value to questionable actions or conduct.

SOURCES OF NARRATIVES

Texts from a variety of sources can be given a narrative analysis. A principal source is interviews. Rather than go through a predetermined set of questions or even a prepared list of themes, interviewees can simply be encouraged to tell their story. Such elicitations work particularly well if the person is asked to recount their experiences of some turning point in their lives. Typical examples that have been researched include getting divorced, a religious conversion, a change of career, giving birth and getting a life threatening illness.

Interviews are not the only source of material for narrative analysis. Naturally occurring conversations can be used (provided you have overcome the practical and ethical obstacles of recording them) as well as focus groups and all kinds of documentary or written sources

including explicit autobiographies. In some cases you may well refer to documentary sources to support and enrich your narrative interpretations of interviews.

FUNCTIONS OF NARRATIVE

Narratives are very common and a very natural way of conveying experience. Paying attention to why people use a narrative or are telling stories at strategic moments in an interview can give an insight into what are important themes for them and suggest ideas for further investigation.

Common functions of narrative include the following.

1. **To convey news and information** as in stories of personal experience. This is perhaps the most common use of stories and all our conversations are full of such tales.
2. **To meet psychological needs**, such as giving people a way to deal with disruptions to everyday routines. These include personal or family problems, financial crises, poor health, changes in employment or even particularly sensitive or traumatic times or events like divorce or violence. We share a need to restore a sense of order following disruption and we try to make sense of inconsistencies. This process of bringing order is termed 'emplotment' by Ricoeur (1984) to refer to the organizing of a sequence of events into a plot. The sequence can be long or short but it is important for people to attempt to give them narrative shape. Analysis of the language used in such stories can reveal much about what a narrator feels.
3. **To help groups define an issue or their collective stance towards it.** When several people experience an event their narratives can become a common story that expresses their shared experience. An example is coming out stories told by gays and lesbians.
4. **To persuade** (e.g. in a court witness, or a salesman). Such examples use the rhetorical power of narratives and play on the way that they seem to give greater credibility to the report.
5. **To present a positive image or to give credibility.** Typical examples here are where a person has triumphed despite early distrust of their views or where their particular knowledge or skills have been important in achieving a goal. Others may try to establish credibility by telling stories showing how their position is the common or normal one.
6. **To undertake the social transmission of experience** through e.g. parables, proverbs, moral and mystic tales. Respondents use them to indicate good and bad practice, both to the researcher and to their peers. They have an ethical or moral dimension. A typical example of this is the cautionary tale that recounts accidents or disasters in their organization. Such stories act as a collective reminder of what not to do and how not to be. Moral tales are usually about others but if the tale is about the narrator this is often because it is an example of overcoming adversity or a key turning point in their life. In many cases moral tales are a way of passing on cultural heritage or organizational culture though these functions are also achieved by stories other than moral tales. Examples are atrocity stories, morality fables in organizations, fables of incompetence (such as in medical settings, giving warnings of what not to do), the oral culture of schoolchildren, urban legends, and stories about 'clients' such as customers in retail organisations, medical patients and students in schools and colleges.
7. **To structure our ideas of self and to establish and maintain our identity.** This can be achieved at the social level by the kind of moral tales and cultural stories I have just mentioned. Such shared stories can define a subgroup or subculture, especially to those in the group. Being inducted into such groups often includes getting told the key stories for the group. But stories can be used to establish identity at an individual level too. Stories present a

narrator's inner reality to the outside world and often it also makes things clear to narrators themselves. We know or discover ourselves and reveal ourselves to others by the stories we tell. As McAdams puts it,

"If you want to know me, then you must know my story, for my story defines who I am. And if I want to know myself, to gain insight into the meaning of my own life, then I too must come to know my own story." (McAdams 1993: 11)

Not every story will perform every function in this list, but stories will perform at least one, and most will have several of these functions. Paying attention to determining the function of the narrative will reveal how narrators portray themselves, what their experience is like and what concerns them.

NARRATIVE AND LIFE HISTORY

A key example of narrative is the autobiography or life history. Whereas people spontaneously use narratives when telling us about themselves and they regularly include short stories in their discourse, biographies and life histories are usually the result of a specific request. Data can come from interviews, written biography, autobiography, life history interview, personal letters or diaries.

When giving an account of their whole life respondents usually order their careers and memories into a series of narrative chronicles, marked by key happenings – the emplotment of the narrative. These can show how the person frames and makes sense of a particular set of experiences. Typical examples of this are how people measure success, how they overcome adversity, what they think of as good and bad practice and explanations of success and failure.

Biographical content

The general approach people take when telling their life history is 'how it happened' or 'how I came to be where I am today.' There are several key features.

- Almost always biographies are chronological. This does not mean that every part of the story is in strict order of occurrence. Sometimes people start 'in the middle' with a key event or experience, however, generally events are recalled in the order that they happened.
- People usually identify key events and key social actors – the characters of their story. These are events and people that have made a difference to them, without which they wouldn't be the people they are now.
- A particular example of a key event is the turning point or what Denzin refers to as the epiphany, the event that leaves a mark on the person (Denzin 1989). This is something people say has made them, in their eyes, a different person and they often describe it using terms like "before these events I used to do these things (be this kind of person), but now I do different things (or am that kind of person)". Key events and persons are good indicators of how a person conceives of their life, what it means to them.
- Other common features of life histories include planning, luck and other influences. Often events or people are discussed in these terms – as people who they were lucky to meet, who influenced them (e.g. partners, spouses, mentors), or as events they had always planned (e.g. getting married, having a family). Such encounters become part of what McAdams refers to as a 'personal myth' (1993).

Life histories usually have themes and these, along with the features just discussed, can be coded in the usual fashion (discussed in the preceding chapter). Themes vary enormously depending on the person's experience and they may only apply at one stage of the person's biography. Sometimes themes are significant by their absence. The kinds of things to look out for are listed in Box 5.3.

Box 5.3 Common life history themes

- The relational story – constantly referring to others, what they did with people, to people or people did to them, or in contrast a story where most of the activity is undertaken by the respondent alone. Look for the use of the names of other people and of the pronouns 'he', 'she' and 'they' along with descriptions of actions or look for the use of 'I' along with activities.
- Belonging and separateness – two contrasting themes that may be important for people for whom identity is an issue. Identity, who I am, can be an issue for many people as they progress from being single to forming a relationship and having a family, and then later to adjusting to their children living independently. Issues of identity also arise where the person experiences a fundamental change in what they do, like joining the military, becoming a nun, or retiring from paid employment.
- Closeness, remoteness and experience of moving – a theme often expressed in the context of a highly mobile life (either socially or geographically mobile). Typical examples of experiences where you might expect such narratives are the stories of immigrants and those who have moved (e.g. by marriage) from one social class to another. But it might also be a theme for someone trying to break away from what they see as the constraints of family, community or background.
- The idea of career – May be occupational or other social roles e.g. parent, children, patients. Often a central life concept. Examples include people for whom work is a calling, such as soldiers, priests, nurses, teachers and journalists, those who define themselves in terms of what they do, “I’m a full-time mum”, and those who have experienced something that has taken over their lives, such as paraplegia following an accident, a life threatening illness or long-term imprisonment.
- Intimate relations with the opposite sex (or the same sex for lesbians and gay men) – the absence of discussion may be as significant as its inclusion.
- A focus on early life as determinant of later actions – what made me the way I am. This is narrative as a form of account. People are often trying to account for the way things are now – what work they do, what kind of person they are, their relationships – in terms of what happened earlier in their life.

This is an indicative list, not a complete one. You may find in the narratives you are examining that different social, personal or chronological themes are prevalent.

PRACTICAL ANALYTIC ACTIVITIES

1. Read and re-read the transcript to familiarize yourself with the structure and content of the narrative or narratives.

Look for:

- Events - what happened
- Experiences - images, feelings, reactions, meanings
- Accounts, explanations, excuses

- Narrative - the linguistic and rhetorical form of telling the events, including how the narrator and audience (the researcher) interact, temporal sequencing, characters, emplotment and imagery.

Look for examples of common content and themes – as listed above.

2. Prepare a short, written summary to identify key features such as the beginning, the middle and the end of the story.
3. Use the right hand margin of the transcript to note thematic ideas and structural points. Look for transitions between themes. You can examine text on different kinds of transitions such as the move from, for example, professional training to early occupational career. Find text expressive of a particular theme used at specific stages of the biography. For example, is intimate relationship something respondents only mention at certain stages of their life history?
4. Take notes/memos about the ideas you have and use them to highlight where people give accounts for their actions and to show the overall structure of the story. See if there are episodes that seem to contradict the themes in terms of content, mood or evaluation by the narrator. One special attitude narrators can take to an issue is to fail to mention it.
5. Mark (with pen or pencil) any embedded mini-stories or sub-plots. Use arrows to indicate linkages between elements.
6. Highlight or circle emotive language, imagery, use of metaphors and passages about the narrator's feelings.
7. Code thematic ideas and develop a coding frame. It might be sufficient to use fairly obvious and broad codes like 'childhood', 'professional training', 'early occupational career', 'marriage', 'parenthood', 'national service', 'management', 'career change' and 'retirement'.
8. Later in your analysis, begin to connect the ideas you have developed about the narrative with the broader theoretical literature
9. Undertake case-by-case comparisons. (e.g. thematically), It is likely that you will only have a few life histories to deal with in a study. Even so, some case-by-case comparison may be revealing. You might compare different participants' views on some event they were all involved with or you could compare how people experience similar transitions in their lives.

An example: Mary's separation story

This comes from an interview done as part of a study of the experiences of women who had separated from their husbands. In this case Mary does not give a whole life biography, but starts at the time her husband left her. She tells the story, mainly chronologically, of what happened then and in the succeeding nine years. The interview transcript consists of a series of stories or scenes interspersed with some explanation of events and some description of Mary's feelings and emotional states. The interview is quite long (over 6,000 words) and there is no space here to give a lot of detail. However, I will summarise the text and indicate how Mary's interview exemplifies some of the ideas discussed in this chapter.

Beginning

Mary married in 1963 and separated from her husband in 1994 when she was 51. She has four children, three daughters (one married at the time of the separation) and one son. Mary starts her account with a story of the day her husband suddenly left. She is concerned to explain how this was without warning and that there was nothing in the previous relationship with her husband that indicated he wanted to leave. She supports this theme with several sub-stories such as her

son's story of how her husband took all his things with him and her own story of finding, several days later, the house key he had left. An initial issue for her is that of blame. The letter her husband left gave her the impression that she was to blame for the break-up. As Mary put it,

"It [the letter] was like you, you, you and I couldn't cope with that really because I thought I must be a really horrible person for that to have happened, you know".

Mary stresses not just how she felt to blame for the break-up and how shocked she was - "I couldn't stay in the house, I couldn't eat, I couldn't do anything, I couldn't function really", but also how sudden, unexpected and strange was her husband's manner of leaving. She uses the term 'bizarre' several times in the interview to describe the event. There are also several passages where she uses different metaphors to try and describe her feelings at the time. In one she says,

"...it was such a shock. I just remember it was like really strong buzzing in my ears and going very, very cold right the way through and I really observed it because it was so bizarre and then the heat followed the cold and came right up my body and seemed to be coming out of my ears and through the top of my head."

Later in the narrative, she admits to having a very visual imagination, and says,

"I had this awful feeling of being in the corner of a room with my back up against the corner and my hands holding on and the corner opening. And I'd start to fall through and it was like... oh God, it was phenomenal because there was only my hands holding on to the wall to stop me. I never fell through but there was something inside me that said if you fall through you'll never get back. You know, I felt as though I was teetering on the edge of, like, a mental breakdown and that was what it was to me this hole opening up in the corner behind me. If I'd gone down there I might have been really, really ill. So it was hanging on to the walls that kept me up really..."

Not everyone will be quite so imaginative and use such expressive imagery about their feelings and experiences, but passages like this give us very good insight about what it was like to be this person and experience these events.

Middle

In Mary's case the latter passage is also part of her transition in the story to a more independent identity. First she recounts how she found out that her husband was with another woman. This began to remove some of the blame and shock she felt. Then she describes an epiphany that happened when, in her distress, she was staying with her daughter and, for lack of spare beds, sleeping with her young grand-daughter in her bed. The grand-daughter had wet her nappies and these had leaked over Mary.

"I think it was then I started to sort of pull myself together... I had to do something and what I couldn't do was carry on the way I was and be the same person I'd always been..."

End

She then tells how she went on to get some qualifications and then a new career. She also joined a social club for single people and this led to several new and lasting friendships. Then she sorted out her financial circumstances and eventually, at the financially propitious time, she divorced her husband.

What is missing from Mary's account? Of course a major voice that is not present is her ex-husband's, nor are her children's. We only get Mary's memory of what happened. The narrative is therefore from her point of view and what she can remember now. A lot of the story is concerned with showing the listener that her feelings were strong, justified and understandable. Bear in mind that it is quite likely that all the mini-stories she recounts have probably been remembered and told many times before to other audiences. Over such re-tellings, they will have been refined, re-remembered and recast so that their form changes and is moulded to suit the particular audience. We can see this co-construction of the account in action when, after telling several related stories to reaffirm that her husband gave no warning of his intention to leave, the young, female interviewer was moved to say,

“Looking back do you think there were any things that would have given you any signs as to what was going to happen, or was it completely...”

and was interrupted by Mary saying,

“Completely, completely and utterly out of the blue.”

Which she then followed with two stories, one that repeats how calm her husband was just before he left, giving no sign of what he was about to do and the other about finding out about the woman her husband was now living with.

Mary uses stories to tell the events from her perspective. She uses them to persuade us of what happened, she uses them to illustrate her emotions and feelings. And she uses the narrative overall to show how she overcame the emotional and financial trauma of the separation and, after an epiphany, pulled herself together to such an extent that she now sees herself as a financially secure, emotionally stable and independent person. This is the sense she now makes of what happened.

NARRATIVE GENRE OR STRUCTURE

As well as examining the thematic content of biographies we can look at the narrative structure of people's stories. As has been recognized since at least classical antiquity, a story has a beginning, a middle and an end (I used this division in Mary's story) and a logic. Events are not just temporal they have a causal sequence; one event leads on ineluctably to the next. We can treat the stories people tell as having a plot and categorize them like plays. Table 5.1 gives a four-fold classification of stories based on dramatic themes. I have underlined terms that you might consider setting up codes for.

Table 5.1. Dramaturgical classification of stories.

Romance	The hero faces a series of <u>challenges</u> en route to his/her <u>goal</u> and eventual
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	<u>victory.</u>
Comedy	The <u>goal</u> is the <u>restoration of social order</u> and the hero must have the requisite <u>social skills</u> to overcome the <u>hazards</u> that <u>threaten</u> that order.
Tragedy	The hero is <u>defeated</u> by the <u>forces of evil</u> and is <u>ostracised</u> from society.
Satire	A <u>cynical perspective</u> on <u>social hegemony</u> .

Mary's narrative falls centrally into the Romance form. Although it starts with a lot of anxiety, financial insecurity and shock at her husband's departure, she soon started to describe how she made a new life for herself. She got training and a new career, joined a social club, developed strategies to overcome the continuing anxiety and came to terms with being in the house on her own. She sues for divorce to get the best financial benefit from her husband's pension. She recognises these changes:

“The sad thing is that I'm glad now that he went, actually, and that sounds really bizarre because it took a lot of years to get over it, but the changes in me and my lifestyle are so vast now. To go back to that, you know, I couldn't do that.”

Life stories progress, they advance or regress, depending whether the story moves on to better things or to worse things, or they stay stable when the 'plot' is steady. If things steadily advance then the story is said to ascend. Mary's story is clearly ascending. If things progressively worsen then the story is descending. Others stories may ascend then descend or descend and then ascend as things turn from good to bad or the reverse.

Another well known classification of stories is one given by Arthur Frank in his book *The Wounded Storyteller* (Frank 1995). Frank examines the stories told by people who are ill. As he says,

“Stories have to repair the damage that illness has done to the person's sense of where she is in life, and where she may be going. Stories are a way of redrawing maps and finding new destinations.” (Frank 1995. p. 53)

Frank identifies three common story types,

1. **The restitution narrative.** This is the story most favoured by physicians and other medical professionals. The emphasis is on restoring health, the 'me' when I'm better. Such narratives often have three movements. They start with physical misery and social default ('I can't work', 'I can't look after my family'). The second movement focuses on the remedy, what needed to be done. Finally, the remedy is taken and the narrator describes how physical comfort and social duties are restored. These are often stories told about patients rather than by them, not least because they give the narrator little agency. The patient simply has to 'take the medicine' and get well.
2. **The chaos narrative.** This is really a non-story. There is little narrative drive or sequence, just a list of bad things that will never get better which the narrator is almost overwhelmed by. A typical (non-medical) example is the Holocaust story told by those who survived concentration camps in the Second World War. The story signals a loss or lack of control. Medicine just can't do anything. These are not stories that other people want to hear and they often interrupt to offer good endings such as 'the resilience of the human spirit'. As Frank

puts it, modernity (of which scientific medicine is a good example) cannot countenance chaos. It has to have desirable outcomes.

3. **The quest narrative.** This is the teller's story, where the teller is in control of things. Narrators tell how they met the illness 'head on' and sought to use it, to gain something from the experience. This is a very common story told by those in self-help groups. The story is a kind of journey, with a departure (the symptoms are recognised), an initiation (the suffering, mental, physical and social, that the person has experienced often with reference to the parts of their life that have been interrupted by the illness) and a return (where the narrator is no longer ill but is still marked by the experience). Such stories may contain what Frank refers to as a manifesto. The teller has gained a new voice, a new insight into the experience and wants others to take it on board.

These classifications overlap with the dramatic forms I gave earlier. For instance the quest narrative may take on a romance or comedy form. Moreover, as I've suggested by the mention of Holocaust stories, such a classification applies to other traumas than just illness, for instance, legal stories, refugee stories, job loss and separation stories. Indeed you might see many elements in Mary's story as suggesting it is a quest narrative.

Such typologies of narrative structures can be used in a couple of ways.

1. They can be used to draw attention to the way that people portray the events they are talking about. For example, in Mary's case she now sees herself as a strong, independent woman who has found ways to deal with both financial and emotional worries. This always raises the question, why have people chosen to portray themselves that way? Sometimes this question can be answered by examining the content of the biography; sometimes it remains unanswerable. In addition, choosing one type of narrative might require certain issues to be omitted or played down. For example, Mary, in her story, makes little mention of the new partner she is now living with perhaps because she wants to stress the challenges that she has overcome rather than the fact that she has managed to re-establish the kind of relationship she lost when her husband left her (Comedy form).
2. If you are examining several biographies, the structures you have found can be used to make comparisons across cases. It may be that everyone telling their story about the issue you are examining (e.g. becoming separated) tells the story with the same structure. This may reveal something about how becoming separated is experienced by people. On the other hand if there are stories with different structures, then these differences may be associated with other, personal, social or organisational issues that may prove significant in your final analyses.

Narrative elements

Several researchers have focussed on the kinds of stories that people introduce into their ordinary discourses, including interviews. Going beyond the simple beginning, middle and end categorization, Labov (1972; 1982; 1967) suggests that a fully formed story has six elements. See Table 5.2.

Table 5.2. Labov's narrative elements.

Structure	Question
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Abstract	Summary. What was this about? Summarizes the point or gives a general proposition which the narrative will exemplify. In interviews, the interviewer's question may perform this function. May be omitted.
Orientation	The time, place, situation, participants of the story. It tells us who, what, when or how, giving the cast, setting, time period etc. Typical phrases used are, "It was when..." or "That happened to me when I did..."
Complicating action	The sequence of events, answering the question, then what happened? This is the major account of the events that are central to the story. Labov suggests these are commonly recalled in the simple past tense. The action can involve turning points, crises or problems, and show how they were dealt with by the narrator.
Evaluation	Answers the question, so what? Gives the significance and meaning of the action, or the attitude of the narrator. Highlights the point of the narrative.
Resolution	What finally happened? The outcome of events or the resolution of the problem. Typical phrases used are, "So that meant..." or "That's why..."
Coda	This is an optional section. It marks the end of the story and a return of speech to the present tense or the transition to other narrative.

By analysing narratives and stories in this way to see how they are constructed, we can begin to understand the functions the story performs. The structure helps us understand how people give shape to events, how they make a point, their reaction to events and how they portray them. All of these can be used as a starting point for further exploration and analysis.

Interviews often contain self-contained stories or sub-plots. They stand out from the rest of the responses, partly because they use the past tense and they are often about issues of central concern to respondents, to which they may return at other points in the interview. As we saw in the example of Mary's interview, she tells her biography as a series of short sub-plots or mini-stories. Many of these can be fitted into Labov's structure and doing this helps focus on the sections. One example is the story of how Mary got a new career. See Table 5.3.

Table 5.3 Mary's story

Structure	Text
Abstract	Well I had to get some money. I worked. But it just kept me ticking over. Kate [co-habiting daughter] offered to pay more for her keep, but I said "no it's not your responsibility, I'll sort this one out, I have to."
Orientation	What I thought was, I'd worked as a social worker for twenty years. I'd retired from that and the one thing that I'd liked about the profession was there was a lot of counselling. I'd had a lot of in-house training for counselling and that was the part that I'd liked the most so I thought I'll do a counselling course.
Complicating	So I did the RSA1, but it was expensive. I got some help towards the

action	cost of that from the college. Then I did the three-year diploma and used all the money that I'd behind me. The mortgage was going out, everything was being paid. The pension covered that and that was no problem. But I used to have to pay for my learning at Ledbridge and it left me with nothing. But that's what I did.
Evaluation	I came out as a different person totally. You wouldn't have known me if you'd bumped into me in the street, I'd lost three stone in weight and I decided to colour my hair and I turned from a grandma with grand children to ... into this person that was determined to get on really and make sure she was alright.
Resolution	And that's what I did. It meant I could stand on my own and do a job I really enjoy.
Coda	I'm glad now that he went and gave me that chance to find myself really 'cause I was lost in that family.

This is a simple example, but it illustrates quite well how people tell stories and how they seem, implicitly to recognise the conventions of how to tell the tale. Not all stories will fit quite as well into the categories, but most do to a large degree. Looking at those points in their interviews where respondents break into a story, it is quite clear that these are important issues for them. One could almost say that they are defining instances of how they see themselves. Mary told several such stories as part of her overall narrative or biography. One important point this analysis highlights is the evaluation element. This tells you what the respondent feels about the events and in the case of Mary, it adds more evidence to her overall story of how she fundamentally changed the kind of person she was following her husband's departure. Such stories may also add moral elements to the narrative. Again, in the case of Mary's story, the story illustrates how she has broken away from both emotional and financial reliance on her family.

KEY POINTS

The analysis of narratives and biography adds a new dimension to qualitative research. It focuses not just on what people said and the things and events they describe but on how they said it, why they said it and what they felt and experienced. Narratives thus allow us to share the meaning of their experience for respondents and to give them a voice so that we may come to understand how they experience life.

People naturally produce narratives and stories in interviews, discussion, focus groups and ordinary conversation. They do so for a variety of reasons. This is partly for the rhetorical and persuasive functions of stories and partly so that experience may be made meaningful by emplotment – ordering it into a sequence of chronicles. Narratives also have social functions as a way to share wisdom and providing guidelines about how to behave.

In their biographies people identify key actors and key events that are often turning points or epiphanies. They include a variety of themes, some of which, like belonging, remoteness, career and relations with others, are very common.

The practical analysis of narrative involves the close reading of the stories. You can use thematic approaches and code them, as in the last chapter. However, writing memos and summaries of the

stories is also an important part of analysis. Different peoples' narratives can be compared case-by-case.

Narratives also have a structure that partly reflects the advance or descent of the plot. Key examples of plot are the romance, the comedy, the tragedy and the satire. Shorter sub-plots or mini-stories may also have a structure that highlights the evaluative and affective aspects of narrative.

FURTHER READING

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