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Bolton, Everton, Vorajee (nee Essat), Zaheera and Jones, Kip

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## 2 *The Verismo of the Quotidian:* A Biographic Narrative Interpretive Approach to Two Diverse Research Topics

EVERTON BOLTON, ZAHEERA VORAJEE (née ESSAT) AND  
KIP JONES

### **Background**

The turn to narrative enquiry shifts the very presence of the researcher from knowledge-privileged investigator to a reflective position of passive participant/audience member in the storytelling process. The interviewer as writer/storyteller then emerges later in the process through her/his retelling of the story as a weaver of tales, a collage-maker or a narrator of the narrations. Recent times have seen the development of myriad methods of narrative inquiry; one such method and the practicalities of its interview protocol will be discussed in this chapter.

The Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method (“the Method”) (Chamberlayne, Bornat and Wengraf, 2000; Wengraf, 2001; Rosenthal, 2004; Jones, 2004) is built upon biographic work developed in Germany in the early 90s by Rosenthal and others and evolving from Shuetze’s (1976) method of story and text analysis and Oevermann’s (1980) objective hermeneutical case reconstruction (Rosenthal and Bar-On, 1992: 109). The Method uses an interview technique in the form of a single, initial narrative-inducing question (minimalist-passive), for example, “Tell me the story of your life”, to elicit an extensive, uninterrupted narration. This shift encompasses willingness on the part of the researcher to cede “control” of the interview scene to the interviewee and assume the posture of active listener/audience participant. A follow-up sub-session can then be used to ask additional questions, but based only on what the interviewee has said in the first interview and using her/his words and phrases in the same order.

This dynamic and interpretive method, with its emphasis on action and latent meaning, distinguishes it within the broad and rich range of life history, oral history and narrative approaches. The Gestalt of the participant’s story using a minimal passive interview technique is maintained by this method of non-interruption. Gestalt has been defined by Hollway and Jefferson (2000: 34) as ‘a whole which is more than the sum of its parts, an order or hidden

agenda informing each person's life'. Gestalt represents the constructed shape of a story, through theme, motif and/or various agendas – hidden or otherwise.

### **Asking for Story: The Narratives of Two Studies**

Two PhD candidates from De Montfort University present outlines of their research projects explaining how they arrived at the use of the Method to discover meaning in their two very different research topics. The process of choosing a narrative method for a PhD project is highlighted in their recounting. Both are at different stages in training and use of the method.

First, Everton Bolton describes his proposed exploration of the narratives of people with severe and enduring mental illness. He suggests that much of the insight of these individuals is relatively private and that by excluding their stories we, in effect, omit a large and essential body of information. He argues a need for qualitative research, placing emphasis on phenomenological inquiry and the storied life, and explores how this approach can help researchers to gain special insight into the unique experiences of the individual. He describes his journey to a biographic interpretive method – first considering, then discarding, other methods along the way and his present anxieties as he is about to embark on biographic narrative interviews with mental health services clients in the UK.

Secondly, Zaheera Essat describes her use of the Method to elicit stories from ethnic minority women who have given birth. How birth stories rely on women's memories of their past and their connections to everyday life is explained as well as how the shape of the story is maintained through narration. Her experience of working with the biographic narrative method is shared and how the method is beginning to reveal birth stories and their connections to the quotidian at the midpoint in her interview process.

Finally, Kip Jones sums up working with the biographic narrative interview process and outlines the Methods' use of interpretation for analysis through self-reflection and reflective teams.

### **Everton Bolton**

There is no doubt that quantitative research methods have been traditionally the methods of choice in health care research. However qualitative methods are increasingly becoming important methods in both health and social care research. My on-going PhD research: "*A study of the experience of having multiple readmissions to psychiatric hospital*", is based on qualitative methodology, using open-ended biographic narrative interviews according to the protocol of the Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method. I was introduced

to the Method at a workshop conducted by Dr Kip Jones at the University of, Wales – Swansea. It was there that I realised the potential of this data collection tool for this particular research.

Of interest to my study is how individuals with mental illness construct personal identities in relation to their lived experiences of the ‘revolving door’ phenomenon, a phrase often used by mental health professionals to describe a pattern where a patient is frequently readmitted to psychiatric hospital. By making an integrated analysis of the experiences of these patients and of the objective social structure that form the necessary conditions for the experiences, I hope to contribute to a greater understanding of how these experiences are incorporated (or not) in their life stories/senses-of-identity and how they attach meaning to these experiences. So far, in their attempts to understand this phenomenon, researchers in this area have tended to rely on quantitative and positivist research, rather than qualitative and idiographic research methods. Despite these attempts, the problem of the ‘revolving door’ phenomenon remains. Because much of my work as a mental health social worker involves listening to service users problems and their stories concerning their everyday experience of living with mental illness, I chose the Method to further explore these experiences in a more systematic and meaningful way.

For the study, the Method was chosen to elicit the lived experience of ‘revolving door’ patients and is theoretically grounded in hermeneutic phenomenology and social constructionism. Narratives will be obtained through dialogues that are reflexive and reflective, considering the social position of the participant, the participant and researcher (micro), and the participant and society (macro). The challenge is to articulate these different levels of analysis, giving voice to the rich, meaningful, and unique experiences of narrators.

The rationale for adopting the Method hinges on the fact that it uses a single, initial narrative-inducing open question to generate an extensive uninterrupted narration (Wengraf, 2002: 119). Alternatively, but still remaining within the Method, responses may be more targeted by a single narrative question that is directed at a thematic or temporal area of the participant life story (Wengraf, 2002: 122), for example, ‘Tell me the story of your life, beginning when you were admitted to a psychiatric hospital for the first time’. Both these approaches can be useful as the storyteller determines what is told, what is important and what is unspoken. At the same time, this is different from semi-structured or structured interviews that try to elicit facts particular to a researcher’s own interests. Furthermore, this method has relevance in this study because this research population has a tradition of not having their experience of living with mental illness explored in any meaningful way. Moreover, the choice of qualitative methodology is inextricably linked to phenomenology, social constructionism, symbolic interactionism and

ethnographic theoretical perspectives, thus providing the framework for thinking about the phenomenon of ‘revolving door’ patients in the widest possible ways.

My journey to the Method began by first considering other narrative research approaches, the number of which has seen rapid growth in recent years. A range of areas in health and social psychology has greatly influenced my thinking. Only three narrative methods will be briefly mentioned here: the work of Crossley (2000) in narrative analysis; Smith’s (1996) Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and its application using narratives as a way of exploring the lives; and McAdams’ (1993) work and its concept of ‘generativity’ based upon the earlier work of Erikson. It was the methodology of McAdams (1993) and his interest in narrative psychology and identity that led the way to the consideration of the Method as the data collection tool for this particular study. McAdams (1993) proposes an interview protocol for collecting narratives and argues that semi-structured interviews can be used to explore personal narratives (1993: 254). The use of semi-structured interviews and the limitations to data collection that these approaches offer were, however, deciding factors in not choosing them as the method of data collection in my study. These approaches were, nonetheless, helpful in conceptualising my use of narrative for eliciting patient’s stories.

Whereas structured or semi-structured interview formats aim to capture precise data of a codable nature in order to explain behaviour with pre-established categories, the Method makes an attempt to understand the complex lives of members of society without imposing any assumptions that may limit the field of inquiry (Wengraf, 2002). The Method’s interview protocol has the advantage of keeping the researcher’s preconceptions in the background and giving priority to the participants’ own conceptions of their experiences.

Not having used this method yet – in any real sense – one can imagine my fears and anxieties about using it for the first time! Will I be able to suspend my compulsion to ask questions and not let my social work professionalism disrupt the participant’s gestalt? Will inviting patients with a mental illness (considered by mental health professionals as a vulnerable group) to tell their story be asking too much of them? At the same time, I am already encouraged by the keenness of patients eager to take part in the study. From the initial interest shown by patients, I anticipate that their narrations will underline the importance of “story” in human research. This will yield valuable data and insight into the private world of patients living with mental illness who experience frequent and repeated admissions to psychiatric hospital.

**Zaheera Essat**

I am currently using the Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method in my PhD investigation of the life stories of ethnic minority women who have given birth

in order to gain insight into the meaning of childbearing for these women. At present, I am in the midst of doing interviews using the method and hope to share with you my personal experience of using the method for the first time.

Initially, I was apprehensive about whether the Method would provide insights into people's lives because of minimal intervention from the researcher during the interview. It was only when I carried out an interview for myself that I fully understood how the Method works and my doubts about it were abated. During the interview, a single narrative-inducing question about childbirth was asked, giving the woman space to tell her story with no interruptions. I strongly believe that the woman gave a rich story as a direct result of minimal intervention and because room was provided for her to explore as she wished. Allowing people to tell their story without interruption was initially difficult for me, but, in actual fact, proved vital to the interview process. The woman often paused whilst she was talking and, initially, my interpretation was that she was stuck for words; it was very tempting to nudge her along, but she did not need direction and was probably taking time to reflect, commonplace during narrative interviews.

Prior to the interview, I did have assumptions about the structure of the story that would be told, but, in reality, the story that was told refuted my predictions. I expected a basic chronological order of events, but she discussed a variety of events in no particular lifespan order – moving from marriage to birth, to puberty then to her childhood. At a glance, it may seem extraordinary that a story would be told in this way, but, looking closely, many of the experiences held similarities; for her, grouping them together was important because the emotions felt through these experiences were comparable. Words such as 'fear', 'scared', 'loneliness', etc. were used a number of times when describing past events in her life. What may seem like a confused story is actually a personal account of past experiences and how she saw her life. Stories are dependant upon memories of the past, but the fact that they are remembered and shared describes a personal and particular gestalt.

Although childbirth was an important aspect of her story, it was not told in isolation from other events in her everyday life. Birth is a physiological event experienced by the woman alone; nonetheless, it led the woman to constantly talk about her family and friends who were around her at the time. The strong influence of other women who could relate to her experience of childbirth and the significance of this support in shaping the woman's own birth experience were made apparent in her story. For me the initial open interview question takes this into account and, therefore, should not be too focused on a particular life event. There is an inclination for participants to concentrate on a specific event alone if the question itself is too narrow in focus.

Keeping a reflective diary is also vital as it can allow pre and post interview thoughts and ideas to be recorded, which can be a learning source and play an important role during analysis. For me, the most important aspect

of using the Method is to learn from each interview and consequently to improve on my interviewing technique. Whilst preparing for other interviews, I am constantly reflecting back to my first interview using the Method and reminding myself to go into the interview with an open mind and appreciate each woman as an individual with her own story, even though many birth stories may be similar. The participant may reveal distressing issues that have never been addressed before and, consequently, may need referral to support networks which should be in place before the interview. Childbirth can be a deeply traumatic occasion for women and an interview addressing personal birth experiences may be the first time the woman has reflected openly on her birthing experience. During my first interview, I noticed that the woman was at ease talking to me, which most likely contributed to the richness in her life story. Just as the interviewer is nervous prior to an interview, the participant will also be experiencing similar emotions and so it is vital to commence by building mutual trust. The style of questioning with this method may be difficult for the participant to assimilate and so building rapport with the participant at an early stage is essential.

Although childbirth is a universal event, the way various societies manage childbirth and attach meaning to it are not (Priya, 1992). This allows me to appreciate the concept of diversity in the structure of the birth stories told by women. Childbirth may seem like an independent event but it is not and to appreciate this is to allow women the freedom to explore what is important to them. Giving people the space to tell their life story rarely occurs in everyday life, let alone in most research studies. The Method, therefore, opens up a space for people to give rich accounts of their lives. It is imperative not to have assumptions or agendas prior to the interview as this can cause the interviewer to listen only for the story that s/he wants to hear and ignore what is being shared that could be vitally important. "What interviewees have to say about their lives and self-concepts are much more illuminating than any specific research assumptions or questions could be" (Jones, 2003: 61). As with all methods, there may be times when interviews do not progress smoothly or as expected and situations arise that were not anticipated. Nonetheless, these experiences have provided me with important learning points, strengthening my interviewing technique.

### **Kip Jones**

What does it mean when we seek to know a person? (Jones, 2000) In "truth" seeking, are we merely comparing and contrasting our own everyday world with the worlds of others? Within the individual's world and her/his tendency of 'revealing/concealing', 'knowing/not knowing' (Heidegger in Krell, 1993), by exploring the terrain, are we simply only portraying the process itself, its

dialectical underpinnings – its thesis and antithesis? Or, in fact, do we, in our attempts at some sort of a dramatic “truth” (Verismo) stumble on to a synthesis after all, a moment of revelation that truly is wrenched by the individual in her/his self-knowing and revealed to us?

Asking a person to tell us about her/his life is just a beginning. By doing this, in a less than perfect way, we are at least starting by participating in the storytelling of the person in her/his world, her/his expectations, successes, failures and dreams. Next comes interpretation and, indeed, the Biographic Narrative *Interpretive* Method has much to say about this second process (see Wengraf, 2001; Jones 2004).

In brief, microanalysis of the narrative of the reconstructed life follows the interview stage, using a reflective team approach to data analysis. The ‘*Lived Life*’, or chronological chain of events as narrated, is constructed then analysed sequentially and separately. The ‘*Told Story*’, or thematic ordering of the narration, is then analysed using thematic field analysis, involving reconstructing the participants’ system of knowledge, their interpretations of their lives and their classification of experiences into thematic fields (Rosenthal, 1993: 61). Rosenthal defines the thematic field as: ‘the sum of events or situations presented in connection with the themes that form the background or horizon against which the theme stands out as the central focus’ (1993: 64).

Still, it is important to emphasise that interpretation on the part of the researcher begins early, even within the interview process.<sup>1</sup> During the interview, the researcher is often making and dealing with subconscious observations whilst maintaining a position of active listener. These subconscious thoughts are brought into the interpretive process through thorough note taking and self-debriefing following the interview sessions. Through the use of this note taking in the first sub-session of the interview, the interviewer is participating in a process of interpretation, making choices about which areas of the story should be explored further in the second sub-session. Post-interview debriefing (ideally with supervisor[s] or other researchers) is inherently interpretive. Later, when the interviewer (preferably) types the transcript of the interview, further reflection and note taking takes place. Further hearings of the tape recorded interview produce additional insights and are diaried by the researcher as well. When constructing the Lived Life and selecting passages of the Told Story for team analysis, again, the interpretative skills of the researcher come into play. It is at the level of the reflective team analyses of data that the researcher, finally, is able to put her/his interpretive skills aside and present the data to a group unfamiliar with the interview material, acting as only a facilitator for group level interpretive analyses.

Through hypothesising how the Lived Life informs the Told Story, the case history is then finally constructed from the two separate threads of the Lived Life and the Told Story. A case structure is then formulated that

validates more than one event based upon the actions of the interviewee. Freeman (1997: 395) sums up thusly: 'The project at hand is therefore ultimately a reconstructive one; it is a project of exploring lives in their various modes of integration and dis-integration, formation and de-formation, and, on the basis of what is observed, piecing together images of the whole'. This whole becomes the imaginative subjective drama of an everyday life: the *Verismo* of the quotidian. Without an initial, unstructured and open-ended request for story, however, this would not be possible.

### Endnotes

1. For an example of an interview where interpretation by the interviewer is consciously restricted to these early reflective stages of the Method and then becomes apparent through presentation, see K. Jones (2004) "Thoroughly Post-Modern Mary" [A Biographic Narrative Interview with Mary Gergen]. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* [On-line Journal], 5(3), September 2004. Available at: <http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/a5b6c7/04-3-18-e.htm>

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