

Narrative Inquiry

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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412963909.n275> Print pages: 542-545

Clandinin, D., & Caine, V. (2008). Narrative Inquiry. In Lisa M. Given (Ed.), *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*. (pp. 542-545). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412963909.n275>

Narrative inquiry is first and foremost a way of understanding experience. It is also a research methodology. It is, then, both a view of the phenomena of people's experiences and a methodology for narratively inquiring into experience and thus allows for the intimate study of individuals' experiences over time and in context. Beginning with a narrative view of experience, researchers attend to place, temporality, and sociality, from within a methodological three-dimensional narrative inquiry space that allows for inquiry into both researchers' and participants' storied life experiences. Within this space, each story told and lived is situated and understood within larger cultural, social, and institutional narratives. Narrative inquiry is marked by its emphasis on relational engagement between researcher and research participants. Narrative inquiry, across various disciplines and multiple professional fields, aims at understanding and making meaning of experience through conversations, dialogue, and participation in the ongoing lives of research participants. Each discipline and field of study brings slightly different ways of understanding and different contexts to the narrative study of experience that deepen the methodology of narrative inquiry.

The introduction of narrative inquiry as a research methodology has reshaped the field of qualitative research, especially with its close attention to experience as a narrative phenomenon and its emphasis on relational engagement that places relational ethics at the heart of inquiry. This entry reviews the process of narrative inquiry and its philosophical foundations, describes the creation of field and research texts, and explores ethical issues that are raised with this methodology.

Narrative in Qualitative Research

Over the past 2 decades, researchers have taken a narrative turn to understanding experience. Although there is a history of narrative work within the traditions of narratology, in the 1990s researchers began to specifically develop a research methodology called narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry and narrative research, terms used almost interchangeably in the current research literature, signify a research methodology. However, within the broad field of qualitative research, there are many analytic methods or forms of narrative analysis. Some forms of narrative analysis are used as methods within other qualitative research methodologies.

In studying and understanding experience narratively, researchers recognize the centrality of relationships, the relationships among participants and researchers, and the relationships of experiences studied through and over time and in unique places and multilayered contexts. Amidst these relationships, participants relate and live through stories that speak of and to their experiences of living. The process of narrative inquiry is composed of engaging with participants in the field, creating field texts, and writing both

interim and final research texts. Throughout this process, ethical considerations require that researchers remain attentive to ethical tensions, obligations, and responsibilities in their relationships with participants.

Philosophical Underpinnings

John Dewey's theory of experience is most often cited as the philosophical underpinning of narrative inquiry. Dewey's two criteria of experience, interaction and continuity enacted in situations, provide the grounding for attending to experience through the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space with dimensions of temporality, place, and sociality. Jerome Bruner's ideas about paradigmatic and narrative knowing in psychology, David Carr's ideas about the narrative structure and coherence of lives in philosophy, Mary Catherine Bateson's ideas about continuity and improvisation as a response to the uncertainties in life contexts in anthropology, and Robert Coles's ideas about narrative in life and teaching practice in medicine also provide a philosophical base for narrative inquiry. As narrative inquirers seek to inquire into experience, they must begin their inquiries with narrative self-studies into their own experiences. Narrative inquiries, thus, have both autobiographical narrative groundings as well as more theoretical groundings. The autobiographical narrative inquiries are the starting points for initially shaping and deepening the research puzzle.

Process of Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiries begin with inquiring into researchers' own stories of experience. Because narrative inquiry is an ongoing reflexive and reflective methodology, narrative inquirers need to inquire continually into their experiences before, during, and after each inquiry.

Within the methodology of narrative inquiry, there are particular methods that are employed. There are two starting points for narrative inquiry: listening to individuals tell their stories and living alongside participants as they live their stories. The most frequently used starting point is with telling of stories, and the methods most commonly used are interviews and conversations or interviews as conversations. Some narrative inquirers also use artifacts to trigger the telling of stories. In the second starting point, narrative inquirers begin with living alongside participants using visual media and/or participant observation. For narrative inquirers who begin with living stories, telling stories using methods such as conversations, oral histories, and interviews also plays a part. Whether the beginning point is living or telling stories, inquirers need to attend to the ways individual narratives of experience are embedded in social, cultural, and institutional narratives. Each inquiry reflects the ambiguities, complexities, difficulties, and uncertainties encountered by the inquirer as she or he lives in the field and writes field texts and interim and final research texts.

In the Field

Prior to engaging with research participants, narrative inquirers need to undertake a reflective inquiry process into their narrative understandings in relation to the particular research phenomenon with its attendant research puzzle. These narrative reflections are central to the research process and become part of the research texts. Entering the field begins with negotiation of relationships and the research puzzles to be explored. Negotiations of purpose, transitions, intentions, and texts are an ongoing process

throughout the inquiry. Narrative inquirers also negotiate ways they can be helpful to the participant(s) both during and after the research.

As the negotiations begin, narrative inquirers are attentive to the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space and attend to experience temporally, socially, and spatially. Once in the field, researchers recognize that narrative inquiry is a way of living in the field and as such, the research becomes part of life. Given the complexity and depth of the research, researchers' lives become entwined with participants' lives.

Field Texts

Depending on the starting point of the inquiry (living or telling), different methods are used to compose field texts. Field texts, commonly called data, are composed from conversations, interviews, and participant observations, as well as from artifacts. Artifacts that may become part of the field texts include artwork, photographs, memory box items, documents, plans, policies, annals, and chronologies. Field texts are co-compositions, reflective of researchers and participants, and need to be understood as telling and showing those aspects of experience that the relationship allows. Field texts are composed with attention to the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space. Temporality comes into play in two ways: the first is that field texts are composed over multiple interactions with participants; the second, through participants' reflections on and of earlier life experiences. Sociality directs attention inward toward the participants' thoughts, emotions, and moral responses and outward to events and actions. Place directs attention to places where lives were lived as well as to the places where inquiry events occur.

Field texts are embedded within research relationships and reflect multiple nested stories. Field texts are shaped into interim research texts, which are shared and negotiated with participants prior to being composed into final research texts. Research texts are composed from field texts and interim research texts.

Narrative inquirers are well served by participating within a response community. Within a response community, works in progress (interim research texts) can be shared and discussed. Response communities are critical elements within the inquiry, as they help inquirers recognize how they shape both the experiences of their participants and their research puzzles. These communities consist of people the researcher values and trusts to provide responsive and responsible dialogue about the unfolding inquiry. Response communities, marked by diversity, can enrich the research, particularly if they are composed of interdisciplinary, intergenerational, cross-cultural, and academic and nonacademic members. Given the iterative nature of narrative inquiries, there is continuous interplay among field texts, interim research texts, and final research texts.

Research Texts

During the composition of research texts, narrative inquirers are attentive to both participants and possible public audiences. Research texts are shared with participants, who remain the most influential voice in the move to final research texts. Research texts need to reflect the narrative quality of the experiences of both participants and researcher and the ways these stories of experiences are embedded within social, cultural, and institutional narratives.

Research texts are negotiated between researcher and participants. Researchers, however, also owe responsibility to the scholarly community and must compose research texts that answer the questions of “so what?” or “who cares?” These questions speak to the social significance of each narrative inquiry. Research texts can take multiple forms, including textual, visual, and audible forms.

In narrative inquiry it is imperative to address the question of how larger social, institutional, and cultural narratives inform our understanding and shape the researchers' and participants' stories by which they live. Paying attention to these contextual narratives enables researchers to further deepen the complexity of the living and telling of stories.

Ultimately, research texts develop out of the repeated asking of questions concerning the significance of the research. Research texts also attend to the personal and practical significance of the research, paying attention to the growth for researchers and participants that can occur in the (re)living and (re)telling of the experience.

Ethics

Because narrative inquiry is a relational research methodology, ethical issues are central throughout the inquiry. Ethical requirements move beyond institutional requirements of privacy, confidentiality, and informed consent. Attending to the way participation in a narrative inquiry shapes each participant's life, the negotiations of entry, exit, and representations of experience are central ethical concerns. Issues of informed consent bring forth questions of who has the right to give consent, how one maintains informed consent throughout the inquiry, and how participants consent to final research texts that reveal personal experiences and place those experiences within a larger context. Researchers require thoughtful sensitivity and wide-awakeness as they compose research texts, particularly when they work with marginalized and/or vulnerable populations, such as with children and in cross-cultural settings.

Narrative inquirers have to balance issues of voice, signature, and audience. Within each inquiry, researchers attempt to represent the multiplicity of voices and signatures, which are reflected in the importance of diverse textual structures and accounts. Narrative inquiries are always filled with rich temporally unfolding narrative accounts, as they represent the lived and told experiences of participants and researchers. Yet, as narrative inquirers come to know in relational ways, the inquiries also become an intervention, which requires the researcher to remain attentive to ethical issues long after leaving the field and composing final research texts.

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See also

- [Collaborative Research](#)
- [Narrative Analysis](#)
- [Relational Ethics](#)
- [Visual Narrative Inquiry](#)
- [Voice](#)

Further Readings

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