

Narrative Analysis Handout

Narrative analysis is a key competency of the PAR researcher, and a starting tool for collaboration and building empathy. Narrative neither assumes nor demands objectivity – instead, it privileges subjectivity and agency. Working with narrative has externalities that you don't get from other methods – for example, the research process can be regenerative or redemptive. If a research project has involved a range of mixed methods, narrative analysis can also help you make sense of your various results as a whole.

- Narratives can include macro events (e.g. revolutions, market crashes, peace treaties and elections) and micro events (e.g., village skirmishes, personal crime, public lynching, sexual violence).
- Events reported within narrative include analytical features e.g., onset, duration, magnitude (# and scale of actors involved), types of things that actors do and that happen to them).
- Narratives provide a fundamental form of empirical information that have different levels of analysis:
 - **linear level** – basic structure of the narrative or basic facts as understood by storyteller
 - **relational level** – story reveals relationships between storyteller and other actors
 - **emotional level** – feelings and subjective understandings of the event as it was experienced (who was really responsible and why, what really happened, what was “right” and “wrong”)
 - **analytical level** – an added layer of meaning drawing connections cross different narratives of the same or similar events

Researchers can collect data for narrative analysis using any means that involves capturing an account. Common means are through video, interview, and participant observation.

Reissman (2008) – Elements of Narrative Analysis

Thematic Analysis – useful for theorizing across a large number of cases.

- Emphasis on content - the told rather than the telling; underpinned by a philosophy of language as a direct and unambiguous route to meaning.
- Cons: attempt to mimic objective inquiry by suggestion that themes identified are unmediated by analyst's perspective; decontextualization

Structural Analysis – useful for detailed case studies and comparison across several accounts

- Emphasis on the telling - Focus on narrative devices (language, form, etc.) to analyze how the narrator makes a story persuasive – the “communicative work”
- Cons: compromising clear communication; decontextualization

Interactional Analysis – useful for studies of relationships between speakers in diverse field settings

- Dialogic process between teller and listener; co-construction of meaning within particular contexts/settings
- Cons: recording; difficulty accounting for the unspoken post-facto/at a distance

Performative Analysis – useful for studies of communication practices and identity construction

- Treats storytelling as a performance, a “doing” that involves, moves and persuades an audience;
- Cons: see above

Visual analysis: – Useful for non-text-based expression

- *Gestures, positioning, expressions*

Questions relevant to PAR practitioners:

- *For what are narratives best used? (Landman, p. 32)*
 - *To obtain a close reading of events with detailed and unique accounts*
 - *To gain rich insight into a range of substantive topics and subjective understandings based on the unique interaction of events and interpretation provided by storytelling.*
 - *To capture of subjective and intersubjective understandings that might not otherwise be available via other (particularly quantitative) methods*
 - *To document social, political and human elements of interactions between humans and between humans and their larger environments*
 - *To capture perception and feelings about power, power relations and institutional constraints as confronted through political or social engagements*
 - *To document interaction between personal experience and social structure (Reisman (2008))*
- When should narrative analysis be used?
 - to surface experiences/viewpoints that tend to be marginalized (including indigenous, minority, women’s knowledge)

- when traumatic events have occurred with little documentation other than the memory of participants
 - to capture developmental shifts in people, organizations, cultures (e.g., increases in democratic capacity)
 - to document human impacts of decisions, policies, events
 - to make social knowledge accessible to community members
 - to make culture visible/accessible to outsiders
 - Other uses??
- What exactly does it entail?
 - depends on research goals, theories to be tested, context, etc. See Landman pp. 39-41
 - Truth and reconciliation process — massive numbers of individual interviews backed up by contemporaneous media coverage, historical record, artifacts
 - Exploring ideas of a local leader — examination of personal papers plus selected interviews of close associates
 - Documenting environmental disaster — ???
 - Establishing systematic educational malpractice in a school system — ???
- **Methodological issues: (Landman p. 33)**
 - *Authenticity and veracity of story teller and of the account: work of recollection may involve a creative process in which storyteller embellishes, hides, enhances and otherwise alters the account to make it less connected to the facts of the event itself (Landman p. 31)*
 - Physical artifacts (newspaper clippings, journal entries, objects associated with event) can help pin down information and trigger memory
 - Can be supplemented with quantitative analysis e.g., coding and counting words, clauses, themes within a narrative or set of narratives.
 - *Can look to themes across multiple narratives of same or related event (Bill Cosby)*
 - *Interpretation carried out by the analyst*
 - *Faithfulness of the analysis — how close does it follow original narrative?*
 - *Representativeness -- are the narratives collected typical of the population of interest?*
 - *Generalizability—levels of analysis, number of observations, etc*
- How do we tell a good narrative analysis from a bad one?
 - <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/15500533>
 - Emerging criteria for demonstrating robustness in qualitative inquiry, such as authenticity, trustworthiness and goodness, need to be considered. Goodness, when not seen as a separate construct but as an integral and embedded

component of the research process, should be useful in assuring quality of the entire study. Triangulation is a tried and tested means of offering completeness, particularly in mixed-method research. When multiple types of triangulation are used appropriately as the 'triangulation state of mind', they approach the concept of crystallization, which allows for infinite variety of angles of approach.

- <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/10591279>
 - Issues of quality and credibility intersect with audience and intended research purposes.
 - Three distinct but related inquiry concerns:
 - rigorous techniques and methods for gathering and analyzing qualitative data, including attention to validity, reliability, and triangulation;
 - **credibility, competence, and perceived trustworthiness of the qualitative researcher; (how does this apply in PAR context??)** and
 - the philosophical beliefs of [research] users about such paradigm-based preferences as objectivity versus subjectivity, truth versus perspective, and generalizations versus extrapolations. . . . It is important to acknowledge that particular philosophical underpinnings, specific paradigms, and special purposes for qualitative inquiry will typically include additional or substitute criteria for assuring and judging quality, validity, and credibility.
 - the important challenge is to match appropriately the methods to empirical questions and issues, and not to universally advocate any single methodological approach for all problems.

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