

# The value of stories in qualitative interviews: using narrative inquiry as a methodology

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## ABSTRACT

The research interview is a common method of choice for collecting data, particularly within the qualitative research tradition. This is because it lends well to the emergent nature and exploratory aims of qualitative research. Detailed accounts of what and how things happened, and who was involved, that is elaborate stories, can be located in interview responses. This is irrespective of whether or not the stories were deliberately elicited or regardless of the methodological stance adopted by the researcher. The ubiquity of stories therein signals the need for researchers using qualitative interviews to be cognizant of the narratives surrounding these stories and the analytical value they hold in their research. This paper presents the philosophical underpinnings and strategy of narrative inquiry, and illustrates how methods of collection and analysis can be shaped in concert with the methodology.

**Key words:** stories, qualitative interview, narrative inquiry, methodology.

## INTRODUCTION

Qualitative interviewing is the oldest (Oxford University Press, 2017) and central of methods in social science research (Brinkmann, 2013) as well as the most common method in qualitative research (King, 2004). This is because it lends well to the emergent nature (Bryman & Bell, 2015) and exploratory aims (Creswell, 1998) of qualitative research. However, the qualitative interview as a research method will undoubtedly be conducted differently, depending on the assumptions that undergird the methodology of choice. For instance, the phenomenological researcher may use the interview as the sole method to uncover the essence of the phenomenon of inquiry. The ethnographic researcher, on the other hand, may rely on interviews sporadically and in a less formal manner to further his or her understanding of the lived-experience of a particular community. Despite so and more often than realised, research participants engage in extended storytelling during interviews. This can happen with or without any prompting. Below are some examples of what participants said during research interviews that signalled the beginning of or end of a story.

*“...I have to side track to another story now.” Emily*

*“...because, wow, it’s very long story.” Lina*

*“...my story is repeated by other people.” Kenneth*

*“...I can just give you this one example.” Li Yi*

*“...because, mmm, example my mother-in-law, she ...” Jenny*

These short excerpts are but the more obvious examples of the ubiquity of stories in interviews. It is also not uncommon to hear other researchers comment that the interviews took longer than expected because participants had many ‘things’ to say about the topic. Consequently, the stories that emerge during interviews – as well as the narratives embedded therein – represent an important and readily accessible form of data. As such, researchers using qualitative interviews ought to be equipped with substantial knowledge about narrative inquiry (NI) as a methodology of inquiry or as a parallel methodology to their methodology of choice.

Narrative research has been undertaken in the study of many fields, including medicine (McCance, McKenna & Boore, 2000; Clark & Mishler, 1992) economics, biology, environmental science (Webster & Mertova, 2007), psychology, sociology, law, medicine, education (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998) and history (Cronon, 1992). In business and management research, Bryman & Bell (2015) cited Czarniawska (1998) and Boje (2001) as examples of research using NI. In practice, strong connections between leadership and storytelling have been argued for (Bennis, 1996; Boje, 2011b; Hansen & Kahnweiler, 1993; Schawbel, 2012).

The utility of NI in research and in practice seems obvious to narrative researchers because they believe that the human world is inundated with stories. For instance, Fludernik (2009) argues that we are always either narrating or being narrated to; through books, television, radio, another person(s) and through other modes of communication. Blogs and some social media platforms greatly facilitate storytelling among today's technologically-inclined populace. Additionally, narrative researchers conceive stories to be so central to people's lives that people are naturally assumed to be storytellers (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Lieblich et al., 1998). Fludernik (2009) even assigns the term "professional narrators" (p. 1) to people who frequently engage in storytelling, such as teachers, press officers or comedians. This paper focuses on first-person accounts of narratives or stories.

But what is a story and what is a narrative? Other than their broad reference to some kind of discourse, these terms have been used to refer to a variety of things. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) refer to story as the phenomenon and narrative as the method of inquiry, while others (see Webster & Mertova, 2007; Riessman, 2008) do not see the need to distinguish between narrative and story; rather, both represent human experience. Frank (2000) however suggests that people tell stories, not narratives. Narrative, on the other hand, refers to "a structure underpinning the story" (Frank, 2000, p. 354), which is the outcome of the way stories are interpreted. Hence, when Riessman (2004a, 2004b) argues that narratives indicate sequence and consequence, a teller's selection, organisation and linking of events coupled with his or her evaluations, the author is perhaps referring to how readers make sense of what the stories may mean.

In the main, stories contain some form of chronology, of events, characters and actions (Riessman, 1993; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). In that chronology is a plot that could either be strung together temporally, causally or thematically (Riessman, 1993). Temporally-ordered stories may signify a start, middle and end (Fludernik, 2009) or a past, present and future (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Within first-person accounts in the context of research interviews, stories are elicited and could refer to a whole life story or narrow, topic-centred stories (Riessman, 2008).

This paper discusses the methodology of NI, beginning with the philosophical stances that underpin it and is followed by the way NI informs the use of qualitative interviews to collect and analyse data. Thereafter, sample data will be used to illustrate the way in which the proposed stances, techniques and choices can be applied. In so doing, this paper demonstrates the value of stories and narratives in facilitating the goal of research using qualitative interviews to gain considerable depths, and a contextual appreciation, of the social phenomena under investigation.

### **NI – Its Philosophical Stances**

There are four commonly held philosophical stances of NI, collectively forming its theoretical perspective. These philosophical stances, extensions from their earlier roots in literary (White, 1980) and historical studies (Bruner, 1991), represent contemporary arguments that followed late twentieth-century scholarly discovery and interests in the value of narratives in understanding reality (Mitchell, 1980). These philosophical stances hold possibilities and present limitations.

Firstly, proponents of NI argue that people make sense of their experiences by telling stories about them (Riessman, 1993; Webster & Mertova, 2007; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Mishler, 1986; Seidman, 2006; Fludernik, 2009). Storytelling is thereby viewed as a way in which people create order in their lives (Riessman, 1993), an inevitable and natural form to convey how things happen (White, 1980) and in a manner that is relevant to the narrator (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). In essence, stories offer people a channel to make meaning from life experiences. White (1980) even suggests that the lack of a story points to an absence of meaning. However, not all proponents insist that stories represent the only means by which people generate meaning. They do, however, emphasize the predominance of a storied life in meaning-making.

Secondly, proponents view the act of telling stories as a meaning-making process (Seidman, 2006). People are perpetually casting their experiences under different and developing circumstances, and hence in new light (Riessman, 1993). Since life events are constantly unfolding, Riessman (1993) adds, experiences and the meaning people give them are never final. This emphasis on process accentuates how stories-in-the-making is life-in-the-making. Stories are thus viewed as active and on-going (re)constructions of life and its meanings. Relatedly, stories are also seen as meaning-making structures (Polkinghorne, 1995). As such, NI enables researchers to understand, at the particular instance, lived experience by the telling of the same.

Thirdly, proponents view stories as creating or constituting reality rather than merely referring to it. Stories are therefore not only about external events although descriptions of incidences help us understand what the narrator wants to say. Stories themselves, Bruner (2004) and Riessman (2008) suggest, are how life experiences are made out to be. Rather than supplying an objective truth or reality, stories represent people's experiential truth (Riessman, 1993), "a rendition of how life is perceived" (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 3). Consistent with the constructionist epistemology, stories and realities are also viewed as co-constructions (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). As stories potentially construct reality, reality in turn potentially constructs the stories that are told.

Fourthly, proponents view stories as a window into people's lives. Embedded in the stories people tell are their identities, personalities (Lieblich et al., 1998), beliefs, desires, theories and values (Bruner, 1991). As such, stories form the "basis for *interpreting* why a character acted as he or she did" (Bruner, 1991, p. 7) [emphasis in original text]. It is thus not surprising that stories occasionally contain moral elements, what Riessman (2008) describes as "a breach between ideal and real, self and society" (p. 3).

These four philosophical stances form the foundation for NI as a research methodology and shapes the ways in which qualitative (narrative) interviews and analysis are conducted.

### **NI – As Methodology**

The central concern of NI as a methodology revolves around the issue of representation, that is, how stories are collected, interpreted and analysed, and how stories are presented by teller and listener (Riessman, 1993; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Bruner, 1991; Lieblich et al., 1998). Representation in NI can pose significant challenges for the researcher. Firstly, stories are subjectively constructive; every person conceives an event differently, constructing meaning from his or her personal and communal stock of stories. Secondly, stories reflect process; people are continually making sense of their experiences even at the time of telling, giving the meaning people attach to their stories an ambiguous, fluid and contextual quality. Thirdly, stories are produced in interaction; the stories people tell are shaped by both tellers and listeners, and the reciprocity that takes place during the telling.

In order to re-present stories, narrative researchers design their methods to do three things. First, the methods of data collection and analysis should cater to the variety, ambiguity, fluidity and context-driven nature of meaning derived in the participants' stories (Riessman, 1993). This strategy safeguards "the restorying quality" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 9) of the elicited stories and addresses how stories are subjectively constructive and reflect process.

Second, researchers focus on how stories are jointly constructed by the participant and the researcher (Riessman, 2008; Mishler, 1986). In so doing, this strategy addresses the challenge of how stories are produced in interaction. While people tell stories for a purpose and to convey a particular meaning, the purpose and meaning stories take are also shaped by listeners. For instance, the listeners' verbal cues shape the way tellers tell their stories, whether tellers illustrate their point or move on to another point (Riessman, 2008). Stories are as such not only shaped by the tellers' experiences, they are produced in conjunction with listeners.

Third, the integrity of the story is preserved (Riessman, 2008). If stories are subjectively constructive, are produced in interaction and reflect process, they should be preserved in order to reflect the way participants construct meaning. For instance, presenting stories whole in the analysis, that is including the researcher's voice, represents a way to preserve the integrity of stories generated during the research. This strategy is consistent with 'contextualizing strategies' in qualitative data analysis (see Maxwell, 2012) and reflects attempts to understand the data in contexts (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Crucially, this also means that the specific case and coherence 'within the case' is given precedence over the possible similarities 'across cases' (Riessman 1993; Maxwell, 2012).

### **NI – In Qualitative Interviewing**

In order to encourage narration from participants, the narrative interview method needs to be differentiated from the 'question and answer' type of qualitative interviewing (Riessman, 2004b; Mishler 1986). Instead, the narrative interview method responds to the participants' stories and the direction they take rather to the researcher's interview schedule (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Additionally, the interviewer ought to be sensitive to how interviewers and interviewees "develop meaning together" (Riessman, 2002, p. 248); that the interviewer is not merely a facilitator but is involved in the construction of the stories.

While it is not possible for the interviewer to divorce him/herself from the storytelling, the general stance during interviews should be to privilege the participants' voices. This means that the interviewer keeps his/her interventions minimal in order for participants to develop *their* stories (Squire, 2008). Consequently, narrative interviews are minimally structured. Interview questions are open-ended while the interview protocol functions as a guide rather than a checklist. Repeat interviews are ideal since participants' stories may need time to develop (Riessman, 2008). In this way, the interview method addresses the three challenges regarding the way participants' stories are re-presented.

Apart from the technicalities of conducting a narrative interview, it is the interviewer's genuine interest in what the participants have to say that facilitates extended storytelling. "The specific wording of a question is less important than the interviewer's emotional attentiveness and engagement and the degree of reciprocity in the conversation" (Riessman, 2008, p. 24). As such, the primary concern of researchers using narrative interview method should be to really listen to and follow the participants' stories rather than be overly concerned about which questions to ask or to redirect the participants' storytelling to answering the research questions.

But participants digress, interviewers may argue. Though seemingly valid a point, the strength of the narrative interview method is that it gives voice to participants. Until and unless participants are provided the space to tell their stories in full, it might be premature for interviewers to interrupt the storytelling. In the end, however, interviewers will have to use their discretion. What is important to note is that the interviewer's voice is included in the analysis.

### **NI – In Data Analysis**

In order for the analysis to privilege the participants' voice, the full(er) account of what participants' say during the interviews should be kept intact. The larger narratives within the participants' stories ought to be foregrounded throughout as opposed to merely analysing stories separately or in isolation. This also means that narrative researchers "theoriz[e] from the case rather than from component themes (categories) across cases" (Riessman, 2008, p. 53), facilitating the analysis of stories across cases without losing the individual context from which these stories emerge. Privileging the participants' voice also presupposes that researchers consider the participants responses without imposing theoretical ideas or applying research questions early on in the analysis. This thereby avoids the tendency of analysing participants' stories to merely substantiate existing theorisations (Riessman, 1993). Because stories are produced in interaction, the interviewer's voice, i.e. questions, prompts and utterances, ought to be examined alongside the participants' responses.

However, researchers will find the iterative and interpretive process of narrative analysis complicated at times. For instance, the participants' stories may be segmented in several ways, each with different emphases. Where a story begins and where it ends can be ambiguous, depending on the researcher's aims (Riessman, 2008). Also, the task of combining story segments for analysis is not straightforward. This is because stories rarely have clear beginning and/or endings. Sometimes participants may make several points with one story. At other times, they seem to make one point repeatedly with several stories. Regardless, researchers will have to apply their own interpretive lenses so that their analyses reflect the participants' overall storytelling and address their research aims concurrently.

Apart from the preceding general analytical stances, there are four specific analytic steps researchers can consider using during narrative analysis. This is not an exhaustive list nor particularly comprehensive. It will however introduce the researcher to specific steps that can be readily used to analyse data generated during qualitative interviews.

(1) Focus on the content of the participants' stories, i.e. 'what is said', a method Riessman (2008) terms as thematic narrative analysis. This analytic step aids the discovery of themes and is usually guided by prior theory while new theorisations can be simultaneously sought from the data.

(2) Focus on the structure of the participants' stories, i.e. 'how it is said' (Riessman, 2008), a method that analyses the way participants construct their stories. Questions that can be posed onto the data include 'why participants developed their stories this way', 'which stories came first', and 'how latter stories compared and contrasted with earlier stories'. These questions help prompt the researcher to attend to the sequence and progress of themes within the participants' stories (Squire, 2008).

(3) Focus on the minute features of the participants' stories, such as their choice of words, terms, repetitions, pauses and abrupt changes in the direction of conversations. According to Burck (2005), these minute features can reveal insights into what participants may be implicitly trying to convey. Although common to discourse analysts, the scrutiny of minute features of the participants' stories complements the broader analytic focus inherent in narrative analysis.

(4) Focus on contrary cases actively (Squire, 2008), such as in what participants *do not say* in addition to what participants *do say*, and why participants' stories are developed in ways that are divergent from others. Researchers need to analyse whether and what it means when developing themes *do not* resonate with the participants' overall narratives or why some themes are absent in their stories.

In the end, general and specific analytic steps will need to be moderated against including too much data in the analysis. Narrative researchers usually end up with vast amounts of data, thus risking data overload (Lieblich et al., 1998; Riessman, 2008).

### NI – An Illustration

The following is drawn from a research I conducted using narrative inquiry as its methodology. The research examined the connection between spiritual well-being and work performance by seeking to understand the ways in which the employee's spiritual inclinations interface with the need to meet work targets. This research addressed the gap in the field where extant empirical studies were predominantly focused on demonstrating statistical links between spiritual well-being and work performance, to the exclusion of qualitative studies that would be more suited to uncover the experience of spiritual well-being and how the experience may be related to work performance.

As its research site, the healthcare sales industry provided two features pertinent to the investigation of the experience of work among healthcare sales representatives. The first is the social values commonly associated with 'healthcare' and the avenues for meaningfulness and spiritual well-being therein. The second is the 'sales' emphasis, representing the typical organisation's concern for meeting the bottom line. 11 successful sales representatives working in multi-national healthcare sales corporations in Malaysia were recruited in the research. All interviews were audio-recorded and each participant interviewed twice. Interview data were transcribed for analysis.

For the purpose of illustration, this paper focuses on the interview with one participant, Emily (pseudonym). The selection of Emily's stories depicts a narrative where the interface between spiritual inclinations and the need to meet work targets is compatible. The narrative also points to a direct connection between spiritual well-being and work performance. This finding lends credibility to existing theorisations in the spirituality in the workplace literature that suggests that the sense of alignment between the employees' spiritual inclinations and the work they do (i.e. spiritual well-being) is directly connected to enhanced work performance (*cf.* Fry, Hannah, Noel, & Walumbwa, 2011; Jurkiewicz & Giacalone, 2004; Lewin & Regine, 2001; Rego & e Cunha, 2008).

### Emily

Emily is a 29 year-old Malaysian Chinese with eight years of working experience. She has worked in two multinational healthcare sales companies where she has met her sales targets for six out of seven years. At the time of the interview, she was in her fifth year in the second healthcare sales company promoting medical devices. The following analysis is centred on her then current job and her experience marketing devices for minimally-invasive surgical procedures to surgeons in hospitals.

Early in the first interview, Emily noted that she valued the opportunity to help patients in her job since her devices benefitted them. She also revealed that she had always wanted a job that brought her as close as possible to healthcare because she wanted to make a difference. I was attempting to get Emily to expand on these thoughts by asking her whether she thought about the job differently during the year her sales achievements were below expectations. Emily responded by saying that she still felt her job was meaningful and doubted whether she would find another job that was as fulfilling as the current one. But instead of stopping there, she went on to relate her experience of a recent routine sales call she made to one of her surgeons (see excerpt 1) (transcription symbols are provided in the Appendix).

## Excerpt 1

*“There was one time I was in (name of location), but this happen just recently, but it’s something related. I was in a surgery trying to promote (Device S) to the surgeon. The surgeon wasn’t using my product. He has open, opened up the patient, he thought that he’s just going to do a gastrectomy, remove a stomach, but, mmm, it turns out that the situation has turned bad. The patient will not be able to survive. Even though he does the surgery, it’s also pointless. So the surgeon just did a bit of bypass just for palliative purpose and closed back the incision. And the surgeon was under so much stress because he said, he didn’t know the stage of the disease has progressed so fast, so now he has to face the patient and tell the patient that, [Right] you know. So, we change, after surgery was completed, we changed and went out. So when I saw the surgeon, he was very distant. Mmm, when I came out from the OT, I saw him wearing just, still OT clothes but talking to the patient’s [Family] family. Patient’s family was crying and all that. And that makes me feel like, oh my god, my job is important, you know, it is affecting not just the patients, but also the patients’ family [Mmm] because everyone have people that are surrounding them, their loved ones. So, by my being in healthcare, I help people with, mmm, just help people and, and their loved ones, those that affect them. I was thinking, if I don’t have (Device S) for him, probably he would not be able to do the bypass and all that, I felt like I’m also part of the, the, surgery, you know, like I, because of the products I carry and all that.”*

During the second interview, I asked Emily to describe when she experienced moments that her work helped patients. She responded by telling me a succession of stories, three of which are reproduced here. Specifically, excerpts 2 and 3 are Emily’s accounts of events that had taken place while excerpt 4 is a segment where she concluded for me what those events meant to her.

## Excerpt 2

*“Recently, I’ve been to, mmm, gynaecology, mmm, cases. Just to introduce (Product H) to them. They have never used it before [Mmm] for cancer patients. I think the benefit is definitely there. [Mmm]. The surgeons were reluctant to use it, very reluctant to use it. Forced. Actually I have to force them to use it because I truly believe there’s a benefit. A few were forced and eventually they used it, [Mmm] and they liked it, it saved time, and, mmm, I always followed up after that, after the cases. I will just text them and ask them how it went. And when they tell me their patients are doing very well [Mmm] and experiencing less pain and all that kind of thing, [Mmm] it gave me that greater drive and motivation to sell that same thing to another surgeon. [Mmm]. Because the first thing is: it helps patients. The second thing is: what’s the better sell-selling point than other surgeons who see the benefit say that it helps patients to another surgeon. So, I think that is the [Mmm] thing.”*

Emily then talks about her relationship with another group of surgeons who are new to minimally invasive surgical procedures and how they value her opinion in surgeries. This is because she is relatively more experienced than them, having observed other experienced surgeons perform similar procedures. She ends this section by saying “...I have to side track to another story now” and immediately followed up with another story (see excerpt 3).

## Excerpt 3

*“When I attended one of the surgeon’s cases, he didn’t know how to use my product and he caused some bleeding. (... clarification of which surgeon she was referring to...). So, it was bleeding. He started using (conventional device to stop the bleeding). [Mmm]. After that, I followed up with this surgeon. He said, he sort of blamed us because the product failed, he had to use this other thing that caused (excessive tissue damage) to the patient. He, he, he didn’t really blame but I can read between the lines, but he was also sort of blaming himself because, why did he use the other instrument and caused (excessive tissue damage). I was in the case, you know. I, I felt so bad for the patient like (^tsk^), I felt like maybe I have not managed this surgeon well enough on teaching him how to use my product. Otherwise this thing wouldn’t have happened. [Mmm]. I felt so bad. And it caused (excessive tissue damage). And I, I tell myself over and over and over again I must remind, I must replicate this story to other people, except I take out the surgeon’s name, I mustn’t tell them what it is but I must tell them what I’ve experienced, what I’ve seen before. Using other conventional technique, not my product, causes (excessive tissue damage). And I even saw the patient in O.T. getting the (surgical repair for the excessive tissue damage). [Mmm]. It was not easy, it was (^tsk^) unnecessary, you know.”*

After the story in excerpt 3, Emily described another event where she was assisting yet another surgeon in surgery who was using her product for the first time. This surgeon encountered 'bleeding' that was similarly experienced by the surgeon in excerpt 3. This time, however, she was more prepared to help the surgeon manage the bleeding with her device. As a result, the surgeon did not revert to the conventional device and post-operative complications were avoided. After surgery, Emily took the opportunity to relate the lesson that the surgeon in excerpt 3 learnt to the current surgeon she was referring to, which was to avoid reverting to the conventional device. Excerpt 4 shows how she concluded this segment of the storytelling.

Excerpt 4

*"So for that part, I feel like I'm also saving a lot of patients [mmm] from going through, [mmm, mmm] you know, the traumatic experience that the first patient did. [Mmm]. So that being able to be in a case, teach the surgeons to use our instruments, correctly guiding them through what other surgeons have done, and mmm, following up with them on how the patients are doing is also actually bringing me closer to the patients. [Mmm]. Like in a way, at the moment of time, you just feel like, I feel like when I'm doing my work, I just, I just think, I have to think like the surgeon. It's all about the patients now, mmm, it's all about getting the surgery done well. However, when you reflect back, how you link it back eventually, you know you're helping the patients."*

### The Analysis

The narrative interview method seems particularly suited for Emily. Obvious in the above excerpts, she launched into elaborate storytelling with very little prompting. I did not direct the conversation in any significant way except to encourage storytelling by interrupting as little as possible as well as to signal that I was following the conversation closely (see my "Mmm"s in the excerpts). Emily recounted these events and experiences without much hesitation.

Emily conveyed her experience using a mix of generalised accounts of events of work (excerpt 2) and specific events at work (excerpt 3). It is possible that excerpt 2 was meant to be a synopsis of the ways her work helped patients while excerpt 3 served to substantiate her claims. The detailed succession of stories Emily told in response to my question (four related stories in total, two of which, that is excerpts 2 and 3, are shown here) before she concluded her storytelling (excerpt 4) point to the veracity and significance of these moments as part of her working experience.

In excerpt 1, Emily depicted how a seemingly routine sales call led to an important observation. Via the products she promoted, Emily felt that she had the potential to impact patients' lives as well as those of the patients' families. What may seem like a daily routine, she recounted, was not so routine after all. Her sales calls enabled her to be 'part of the surgery' and consequentially, made her partly responsible for the surgical outcome of patients. Therein lay her influence and the possibility to make a difference to her patients' lives.

The way the story in excerpt 1 came about helps explain Emily's story further. She told the story in response to my question of whether the meaningfulness she felt of her job, i.e. being able to make a difference to patients' lives, was diluted when she did not achieve her sales targets. In essence, the story was not made to be about sales although Emily was in surgery to promote her devices. There is perhaps very little that a healthcare sales representative does that is not related to sales. Instead, Emily made it to be about the fundamental activity she engaged in at work – her sales calls. Thus, the point Emily conveyed in excerpt 1 is her realisation that the fundamental things she did at work 'helped patients', putting aside temporarily the demands for sales.

This is not to say that achieving her sales targets was unimportant. In excerpts 2 and 3, Emily storied how helping patients and achieving sales were identical pursuits. The seemingly obvious and straightforward storytelling in excerpt 2 indicated her equally obvious and straightforward message: getting her surgeons to use her products literally meant helping patients (because of the product's proven benefits for the group of gynaecology-related cancer patients). This, in turn, helped her persuade more surgeons to use her devices and register sales, a situation that resembles a virtuous cycle. And if excerpt 2 is indeed a synopsis of Emily's experiences, then she was perhaps trying to convey how the story in excerpt 2 reflected her general experience of work.

The story in excerpt 3 seems to convey a similar point albeit from a different perspective. Emily's incompetence, defined as her inability to prepare her surgeons adequately to use her device during surgery – which is another way of saying she is an inefficient sales representative – can be detrimental to patients' wellbeing. Although the outcome of the incident in excerpt 3 also meant a loss of future sales from a potential client, Emily did not highlight it. Instead, the emphasis of the story was one of regret. The story in excerpt 3, and the way Emily assumed responsibility for patient outcomes, is also consistent with what Emily said at the start of the interview that she wanted to make a difference.

In order to prevent a repeat of such negative outcomes, Emily sought to motivate herself to guide surgeons better on the use of her device in future. She used the lesson she learnt from the case to convince other surgeons of the dangers of post-operative complications caused by conventional devices and instead to stick to her (more technologically advanced) device. In essence and based on excerpt 3, helping patients meant promoting her products well. The more competent she was in guiding surgeons to use her device, which in turn meant promoting her device effectively, the more she improved her patients' chances of a better surgical outcome.

Excerpt 4 is the culmination of this extended stretch of storytelling where Emily made explicit what the preceding succession of stories meant. To her, doing her job well, i.e. attending her surgeons' cases, teaching surgeons how to use her products correctly and convincing surgeons to use more advanced devices (hers in particular) "also" (brought her) closer to the patients" (see excerpt 4). It is therefore not coincidental that the location of all Emily's stories is the operation theatre – the place where she can have significant effect on both her sales and her patients. The word "also" (see quote above from excerpt 4) underscores an important point Emily made earlier in her storytelling (see excerpt 2), that is, selling her products well also meant helping patients. Thus, it is very likely that the meaning Emily derived from her work significantly motivated her to promote her products and to promote them well.

All in all, the stories contained in these excerpts seem to show that Emily experiences her job to be meaningful because she can make a difference and that these are generally congruent with her daily tasks and her responsibility to deliver sales. In a way, the job allows her actions to be compatible with her personal values and beliefs.

### **Deconstructing the analysis**

If we revisit the preceding analyses, the reader will find that it focused on 'what the participant said'. As one example, the analyses referenced Emily's story of how she forced some of her surgeons to use her devices. The analyses also focused on 'how the participant said it'; the stories were displayed for the reader in chronological order and the movement of Emily's stories from the generalised (excerpt 2) to the specific accounts (excerpt 3) of what transpired, ending with her stating her point of this stretch of storytelling (excerpt 4) - and what that meant – was discussed.

The minute features of the participants' stories were also investigated. The discussion about the term "also" in excerpt 4 is a case in point. Furthermore, the analyses considered what was not said when it observed how Emily did not make the storytelling in excerpt 1 about sales. Lastly, the analysis demonstrated trustworthiness (validity in NI) when it developed coherence between the larger points Emily made and the individual stories she told. As Connelly and Clandinin (2000) say, "(n)arrative explanation derives from the whole (p. 7).

Some stories were not presented in full. Between excerpts 3 and 4, I opted instead to present a summary of what Emily said. This is inevitable since many things were said from the start of excerpt 2 to the end of excerpt 4, a 13-minute interview segment. This choice reflected my concern for the display of too many lengthy excerpts for the reader and for space limitations in this journal article.

But the above is not the entirety of Emily's experience on the subject. It is a version of her experience, developed in the context of a research interview and in response to the interviewer and his questions, prompts and utterances. What is eventually displayed and analysed reflects the researcher's choices (e.g. which interview segments to be included in the analysis) and interpretation. In the attempt to be even-handed, excerpts are presented in full so that the participants' voices are 'audible' and the analysis 'visible' to be reader.

### **NI – Limitations**

Stories are "limited portraits" (Riessman, 1993, p. 15), a snapshot of people's experiences and the meaning they give them. Also, research participants tell a story, not the whole story (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Furthermore,



researchers will inevitably re-present and re-interpret the participants' stories according to their research questions and aims (Riessman, 1993). The issue of representation in NI is necessary, its associated problems unavoidable. These re-constructed stories are all narrative researchers have to work with (Riessman, 1993).

Some experiences may be difficult to narrate. While Riessman (1993) refers to traumatic events such as an abortion and divorce, it is plausible that participants may view some matters as private, reserved only for personal reflection. Relatedly, not all stories are perhaps worth telling. Webster and Mertova (2007) argue that people might only recall and narrate moments that had an impact on their lives such as events that questioned one's view of the world leading to a dramatic change in prior experience, understanding and future actions.

All representations are however "incomplete, partial, and selective" (Riessman, 1993, p. 11). Rather than operating with the assumption that phenomena can be understood in a complete, impartial and non-biased manner, narrative researchers understands that stories people tell represent how life is made out to be and that storytelling is a means for human meaning-making. NI thus remains an important methodology to gain access to human experience and meaning.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

NI is particularly valuable a perspective for investigating people's experiences that cannot otherwise be observed or understood except to hear people talk about them. In such cases, the research interview remains the primary method for collecting data. But there is no universal way to collect and analyse narrative data. The preceding illustrates one way, tailored for the specific circumstances of the study mentioned. Some researchers emphasise the social activity of storytelling within organisational settings (Boje, 2011) while others focus on a person's life story (Atkinson, 2007). The resulting methods of data collection and analysis will undoubtedly need to attend to these different focuses. Likewise, researchers will need to shape their methods to reflect their emphases and research aims. Nonetheless, NI represents a methodology viable for different fields of study (see for e.g. Overcash, 2004; Riley & Hawe, 2005; Czarniawska, 2007; Savin-Baden & Van Niekerk, 2007), on top of being accessible to qualitative researchers adopting different methodological stances.

According to Maxwell (2012), there are five purposes for which qualitative research is well suited for – to understand meaning, to understand context, to identify unanticipated phenomena and influences, to understand process, and to develop causal explanation. This paper argues that NI represents a methodology within the qualitative research tradition that ably supports all five purposes. If qualitative interviews are called upon and regardless of the choice of methodology, researchers that are cognizant about the ubiquity and value of stories, as well as familiar with NI as a methodology, are better positioned to uncover the depth of the phenomena or experience under investigation. This paper advocates facilitating for and capitalising on the stories participants tell during qualitative interviews, and demonstrates how this can be done.

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#### Appendix – Transcription symbols for excerpts

Symbols	Meaning
( words )	Anonymised portion
( <i>words</i> )	Translation from local dialects to the English language
( ... words ... )	Condensed segment of talk
[ words ]	Interviewer's voice
–	abrupt cessation of talk
(.)	clear discernible pause
(^word^)	other spontaneous parts of speech, e.g. laughs