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Conducting Narrative Inquiry in Sociological Research: Reflections from Research on Narratives of Everyday Encounters

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Published Articles

Çalışkan, G. (2014). Accommodating “foreigners”: Narrative accounts of Berlin’s German-born Turkish Ausländer. *International Review of Sociology*, 24(30), 450–470.

Çalışkan, G. (2015). Politics of narrating everyday encounters: Negotiating identity and belonging among Berlin’s German-born Turkish Ausländer. *Narrative Works*, 5(2), 25–49.

Abstract

This case study highlights tips and practical tools that researchers can use in a narrative inquiry, particularly in sociological research. Narratives are one way people make sense of their experiences. They are constituent of social interactions within the complex processes of meaning-making in social experiences. The case answers three questions: Why are stories important in sociological research? How can we

conduct successful narrative interviews? How should we analyse the stories collected? Examples are chosen from a narrative analysis of social encounters; specifically, from my research with German-born Berliners of Turkish descent.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case study, students should be able to do the following:

1. Develop an understanding of what narrative methodologies are, and what their strengths and limitations are.
2. Develop an awareness of the difficulties in maintaining ethical requirements such as anonymity and confidentiality while conducting narrative inquiry.
3. Recognize the distinctive features of conducting narrative interviews, including the importance of conducting initial meetings and collecting impromptu narratives through particular ways of asking questions.
4. Understand what a narrative unit is, identify such units in actual interviews, and develop an understanding of how to analyze collected narratives.

Case Study

Conducting Narrative Inquiry in Sociological Research: Reflections from Research on Narratives of Everyday Encounters

Narrating and Sociological Research

Understanding stories. Narrative sociology has emerged as a critique of an “anti-humanist methodology in the social sciences” which tends, for example, to reduce social experience to sets of statistics (Plummer, 1995, 2001). However, getting and assessing life stories or narratives involves a range of difficulties, and there is no

simple formula for conducting the narrative research process—from interviewing, to analyzing, to writing up the findings. We cannot simply demand, “Describe your life as the chapters in a book!” (Plummer, 2001, p. 146).

A narrative is “an account of a sequence of events,” which is told to make a point (Polletta et al., 2011). As a social activity, narrating is a transformative practice for making sense of a world in flux (Berger & Quinney, 2005). A close analysis of the narratives produced by even a small sample of individuals may yield evidence for understanding the intersubjective meanings shared by a whole community.

From a sociological perspective, the narrative is one constituent of social interaction. That is, the stories we tell about our lived experiences emerge from complex processes of social life, and from the claims we make about our social experiences: “This is what happened (to me), and here is what I think about it. This is why I believe that it happened that way.” When we understand narrative in this way, we see narrating as both a sociological and a political tool. When people tell their stories, they do so purposefully. Their stories are not only reflections of what experiences have happened to them; they are also requests, asking that we, as the listeners, bear witness to their experience. Story tellers wish to be acknowledged as the witnesses of their own experiences. Like the stories people tell to one another every day, the narratives we collect in sociological research shed light on the broader practice of negotiating social experiences. Narratives are full of seemingly subjective contradictions because they involve a range of intersubjective meanings. Narrative inquiry allows sociology to view these subjective contradictions as resourceful combinations of differing realities.

Becoming a narrative researcher. Taking up a sociological narrative inquiry involves a journey, and the narrative researcher has to be ready to embrace this challenge. One must read and understand the technique, and examine how others have done such research. And the literature is abundant (Plummer, 1983, 1995, 2001; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, to name just a few). But reading the literature can only take you so far. Becoming a narrative researcher takes time. You learn how to conduct narrative research by trial and error. You learn “on the job.” You make errors, mistakes, then go back to make corrections—or start over. You come to understand what you need to do as you continue to do it. You have to trust the process.

I have become a narrative sociologist, and it all started during my ten-month graduate research fieldwork in Berlin. I will share some tips I learned on the journey of doing this kind of investigation (Çalışkan, 2014, 2015). As I outline these tips, it might sound as if I understood them from the get-go. But take my word for it: I have wasted more than one interview learning the hard way. Even though this essay flows in a linear path, nothing about narrative research is linear.

When I started, I didn’t know much about narrative inquiry, or why stories mattered from a sociological perspective. My plan (beyond getting immersed in the field) was to conduct semi-structured interviews with people who were raised in Germany, but were born to immigrant families from Turkey. The length of my fieldwork period gave me the luxury to make mistakes, to evaluate interview techniques, and to read, reflect, and revise how I would conduct the research. I was three months into the visit before I understood that I needed to focus on narratives. Only then did I develop a sound method of collecting narrative interviews. During the last seven months of the research, my approach became consistent. The narrative

inquiry I developed was about understanding the dynamics of discursive messaging within the complexity of everyday encounters, as narrated by research participants. This analysis was based on a commitment to seeing narratives as significant resources for understanding the politics of social experiences in everyday life.

This case is organized as follows. First, I discuss how to conduct narrative interviews. I focus mainly on specific techniques and practical tools for shifting the power balance between the interviewee and the interviewer. Second, I discuss how to analyse the narratives that are collected. I emphasize how narratives can be approached as testimonies, truth claims, and political acts. Throughout the discussion, I refer to my research in Berlin.

Conducting Narrative Interviews

If a narrative is a story, and an interview is asking questions (and waiting for answers), then a “narrative” and an “interview” do not go together smoothly or naturally. This is the main challenge in conducting narrative interviews. Narrative interview research has similarities to other qualitative interview research. Narrative inquiry, too, requires an active dialogue between the data (the stories we collect) and the conceptual framework we are using. However, narrative inquiry has a very particular purpose. It requires a firm commitment to uncovering the narrative, and therefore an adequate way of conducting the interview and then analysing it. Getting unprompted narratives is central, but can be difficult. We need ways of encouraging respondents to provide detailed accounts without affecting their responses. This brings us to a discussion about the nature of rapport between interviewer and interviewee; how to build, and then maintain it. The following points are crucial:

- issues of power and ethics

- a clear understanding and plan to shift power balance
- an initial face-to-face meeting prior to interviews
- the initial meeting flows into the first interview
- the style of questioning
- the length of the interviews
- the final question
- the interviewer's tasks

Issues of power and ethics. Ethics in research involve “the application of moral principles to prevent harming or wronging others, to promote good, to be respected and to be fair” (Sieber, 1993, p. 14). Researchers have to pay specific attention to ethical issues, including issues related to confidentiality, honesty, deception, exploitation, consent, and harm. A researcher's primary responsibility is to do no harm to the participants, even if that means changing the initial research design, revising the process, or revisiting the interpretations of research questions.

Narrative inquiry is heavily relational, and therefore issues of ethics and power are much harder to address than in some other kinds of qualitative research (Clandinin & Caine, 2013; Lugones, 1987). Narrative researchers need to address their role and involvement with the research and the participants (Chataika, 2005; Lyle, 2013; Plummer, 2001). Bloom (1998) refers to this process as “a journey of becoming” (p. 65). This refers to both the researcher's and the participant's process.

The aspects of such relational ethics include the following (Chataika, 2005, pp. 8–12; Plummer, 2001, p. 228):

- cultivating respect and mindful recognition for persons who are systematically disadvantaged in society

- ensuring respect for human dignity; avoiding embarrassing, arrogant, and demonizing questions
- representing and promoting an ethic of care and responsibility
- aiming to enable social change for justice and opportunity
- placing the highest priority on minimizing harm

In my research, I have developed some guidelines for addressing the following questions with respect to potential harm:

- Could talking to me put someone in political danger? Could it cause that person lose their job? How can I avoid that kind of danger to any participant before, during, and after the interviewing process?
- How can I ensure the anonymity of my respondents, especially when above-minimal risk is concerned? (See Çalışkan [in press] for tips on conducting above-minimal risk research.)
- How am I going to secure confidentiality? How am I going to monitor who has access to the data, and how personal information will be controlled and disseminated?

Narrative inquiry requires a close engagement between researcher and participant. That engagement means that there are greater possibilities of researcher role conflict and blurring boundaries than there are in other types of qualitative research. Narrative research is reciprocal. A trusting relationship is built, which makes the participants that much more vulnerable. For example, in my research I observed that as my subjects' participation evolved, the informed consent procedure became a distant memory for most of them. During my 10 months in Berlin, many of the participants befriended me. It was very easy for me to lose sight of the fact that as

our discussions progressed, they often stopped viewing their participation as research. I constantly had to reflect on how to separate my research from my personal involvement. Therefore, I propose asking the following questions:

- Are the participants doing or saying things that they would not want included in the research?
- How am I going to handle it if a participant contacts me about other personal issues that are not relevant to the project?

A clear plan to shift power balance. We have to let people tell their stories. But we also want the stories to be relevant to our research questions. So how are we going to conduct the narrative interview in a way that will yield a purposeful set of stories that are relevant to our research question? This requires a shift in the power balance between interviewer and interviewee. First, the narrative researcher needs a clear understanding and a plan concerning how to shift the balance. It is essential to let the interviewees be the narrators of their own experiences, and to have them feel that they are in control of their narrative. At the same time, the researcher has to lead the discussion, keep the research question in mind, and communicate relevant inquiries to the participant. Empowering the participant to provide spontaneous narratives requires that certain steps be taken before and during the interview. The shift has to happen at a very early stage in the discussion, and it does not happen by itself. It requires a careful way of building rapport with the interviewee.

Initial face-to-face meeting. The first step to forming a strong rapport with the participants is to actually meet them in person, before doing any recorded interview. What happens during this meeting? What are the benefits of this session for the research?

During the initial meeting, the potential participant and the researcher have a chance to talk about the research project casually, without any agenda of inquiries. Also, researchers have an opportunity to set boundaries, state the rules regarding the research, and clarify what the participant can expect. This meeting is a good time to make it clear that we are interested in their experiences, and that the interview is not a question-and-answer type of exchange.

During this meeting, we should explain the research project in everyday language, plain and simple. The potential participant should be left with a short, one-page written explanation. The explanation is not a consent form—it simply gives an idea of what the researcher hopes to understand. In my research, I wanted to learn about experiences related to being born and raised in Germany, but having parents or grandparents from Turkey. The statement made it clear that I wanted to understand how being raised in Germany by a Turkish family affected the participants' experience of life in Berlin.

If the potential participant agrees to meet for an interview, then the researcher makes an appointment, with the understanding that the person may decline to continue at any time. It is at this point that power begins to shift. The potential participant leaves this first meeting without having made a commitment. But now they have an idea of what is being asked of them, what to expect. They are given time to decide if they wish to continue.

What this first session does is to start the potential interviewees thinking about participating and about the experiences they may want to share. The narratives begin to form. This reflection can then proceed after the first meeting ends. In my experience, the first meeting has an important impact on the interviewer-interviewee

relationship, setting the tone for what follows. It affects the quality of the later interviews, making them narratively richer.

The first interview. The initial meeting flows into the first interview. If conducted in a helpful way, the initial meeting can provide explicit references for how the interview can best begin. During the initial meetings, the participants may provide clues to the potential narrative. They may raise questions, make comments, or tell stories that suggest where the interviews need to start.

When I met my participants for the first interview, I reiterated that I did not have a set of questions. Instead, I wanted to hear their stories about what it was like growing up in Germany.

In my experience, the first interview often opens with a reference to the initial meeting. Participants tend to report their thoughts since the initial meeting concerning what the research might mean for them. In the “Thinking with Stories” section (see below), Yıldız’s narrative is an example of how making sense of one’s experience might begin with the participant’s reflections on the initial meeting. If, on the other hand, the researcher initiates the opening, it might be an observation about a statement the participant made during the initial meeting. For example, here is how I started my interview with Özge:

Gül: Do you remember the first day that I met with you and your friends?

Once I explained my research, you said, “I am not a good candidate for your research.” What do you mean by that? Would you like to start with that and why you thought so?

Özge then explained what it means for her to be a practising Muslim queer person. She told me stories showing how the clear distinctions of religion, ethnicity, and

sexuality don't tell her lived experience. She shared her experiences of what it means to be Muslim, Turkish, and lesbian in Berlin. So, the hints that a participant gives during the initial meeting can allow the researcher to start from where the participant stands, rather than asking them to start elsewhere. In any event, the interview should begin with something the participant feels comfortable with. The hints and reactions given in the initial meeting always say something about the participant's story in relation to the research question.

Style of questioning. It is a paradox of the narrative interview that even though it is unstructured, it requires a prepared list of themes. When necessary, the researcher broaches the themes by asking open-ended questions. To encourage participants to provide spontaneous narratives about their experiences, I suggest framing the questions as responses to the comments they have just made. Always use their own stories as anchors for your questions. Chase (1995) points out that the key is asking simple questions related to their life experiences. It is usually more productive to ask them about specific, concrete occasions than about experiences in general. Start from something particular that the participant talked about already, using everyday words—not sociological terms, please!

Many aspects of the narrative investigation became apparent through the flow of stories. For dealing with broad, challenging issues that would be difficult to ask out of context, you need to trust the momentum and the length of the interviews, and let the participants move at their own pace. Often you will find that you don't even need to *ask* questions: The narratives addressing your broad research questions will emerge as the interviews progress. You will find that participants often spontaneously discuss many of the themes on your list.

This method of questioning is a core difference between a narrative interview and other types of qualitative interviews. In a narrative interview, we deliberately and openly shift the power dynamic, acknowledging that we are directed by participants' initial observations. We locate what the participants think about the research, and we centre the inquiry on that. This focus allows the researcher to start from the experiences that the participants want to explore first, and this kind of interaction is essential for a narrative interview. Mishler (1986) emphasized that interviewees often provide spontaneous narratives about their experiences, so long as the style of questioning does not suppress their stories: "When the interview situation is opened up in this way, when the balance of power is shifted, respondents are likely to tell 'stories.' ... Interviewing practices that empower respondents also produce narrative accounts" (pp. 118–119).

Depending on the nature of the research, I recommend having several interviews with each participant. Having more than one interview gives the participants time to reflect. It also helps the researcher gain the respondent's confidence. The researcher's willingness to come back for a second discussion helps the participants feel that talking about their experiences is important. Moreover, it gives the researcher an opportunity to follow up on aspects that emerged during the first interview.

Length of interview. If the researcher allows respondents to set the agenda and then listens to rather than directs their stories, an issue arises concerning the appropriate length for the interview. Time limits need to be made clear during the initial meeting and reiterated at the beginning of the first interview. This understanding gives the participants a sense of control over how much detail to provide and when to stop. I told the participants that the interview could last about

ninety minutes, but it might go for two hours, and we could meet more than once if needed. I conducted at least two interviews with each person, and in almost all cases this was sufficient.

The final question. One technique I find indispensable concerns the final question of the interview. At some point during the conversation—generally towards the end of each interview—I ask participants what they think is most important to consider in my research. When people are asked what is most important, they naturally focus on what is important from their own perspective. They express their vision concerning what is right, wrong, desirable, or offensive in the light of their experience. When you feel there is not much more to add, or that the interview is coming to an end, participants tend to summarize what they have already narrated, but now they assign meaning to the events. My participants often treated this final question by challenging the politics of othering. For example, Güler thought that the most important aspect of German-born Berliners of Turkish descent was the “incredible heterogeneity” in their thoughts, personalities, and societies.

Tasks for the interviewer. It is imperative to pay full attention to participants when they are giving their stories. I suggest that you avoid writing extensive notes while listening. You can make a keyword note if you want to get back to something they say, either later in the session or at the next meeting. Once the interview is done, I recommend writing extensive field notes as soon as possible. Write out all your observations, impressions, and opinions. Make notes on the highlights of the interview. I find that my impressions complement the tape-recorded data: I catch things that a tape recorder cannot, and vice versa. Notes and recording yield interdependent yet distinct sets of insights. So, after each meeting, jot down your field notes, listen to the recordings, and then make analytical notes. That process will

allow you make an initial analysis and identify issues to be further explored in the next meeting.

How to Analyse the Narrative

In our second meeting, Yıldız explained her perception as follows:

Since we met, and you told me about this research, I asked a powerful question to myself: ... where will I be buried? Berlin or Turkey? I said, “Neither here nor there; I should be buried elsewhere, ... in another country, that I have no relation or connection with whatsoever.” I was born here, and I go to Turkey only for holidays. ... If you ask me where I would like to live, I would prefer here. ... Yet even though I do not know there well, I have an incredible yearning for Turkey. ... You accept both places. ... Going back and forth between two countries, I combine with the being buried issue. ... You are neither from here nor from there, you had better go somewhere else, where you do not have any connections, and be from there.

This opening narrative encapsulated what it meant for Yıldız to be a German-born Turkish-background Berliner. This observation determined the focus of discussions to come. It led to an exchange that wouldn't have been possible if I hadn't started the interview with a lead from the initial meeting. Yıldız had spoken about her need for something to hold on to, and this resulted in a discussion that was crucial for the research. The unfolding exchange with Yıldız expressed the relationships between her lived experiences, her sense of herself as an individual, and her communal experience as a Turkish woman born and raised in Germany. In my discussion on how to analyse a narrative, I will come back to this example.

When analysing narratives, we have to recognize the following important social realities:

- Humans think with stories. The stories we tell allow us to make sense of our experiences.
- The stories we tell about our lives are full of contradictions and intersubjective meanings.
- The act of narrating is an act of making a claim to truth.
- A narrative is a proof of what the narrator has experienced. Therefore, a narrative is a form of testimony.
- When people tell their stories they do so purposefully, which makes narratives political tools.
- Narrative analysis needs a narrative unit with distinct characteristics.

Thinking with stories and making sense. As Riessman (1993) explained, one of the primary ways that individuals make sense of experience is to cast it in narrative form. Even so, stories do not provide straightforward, transparent descriptions of life (Elliott, 2005). Rather, they give meaning to events. To provide the details of their life experience in a story form, individuals are forced to reflect on their experiences, to select the most important aspects, and then to order them into a coherent whole. The making-sense process qualifies storying as a meaning-making activity.

In an interview setting, shifting the power to the interviewee allows the meaning-making process to evolve. It also allows concise narratives like those of Yıldız to be made, while letting the researcher explore what the stories reveal about participants' social surroundings. As in life, in a narrative interview, relating personal experiences is a process of thinking with stories on all these levels. Such

descriptions are located in a bigger picture in which the narrators' perceptions of the research question involve particular ideas about their social worlds and experiences.

For example, Yıldız began with a reference to our initial meeting; the story she spun was deeply relevant to her sense of identity and belonging, and also to my research.

Unpacking contradictions and intersubjective meanings. Many narratives seem to present contradictions, both within themselves and with each other. For example, Yıldız wanted to be treated as a German. She felt it was inappropriate for people to ask her where she was "from," because she was born in Germany. At the same time, she made a point of claiming that her heritage was Turkish. This seeming contradiction reflected her lived experience of being born in Germany yet having immigrant roots. Unpacking such contradictions provides significant insight for the narrative inquiry. We have to tune into the participant's awareness, and grasp the possibility of creative restructuring by drawing selectively from contradictions and clashing categories. Narratives remind us that seeming contradictions involve a range of intersubjective meanings that are particular to the experience of the participant.

I believe that participants construct the meanings of their narratives from the intersubjective encounters they experience in everyday life. Their sense of meaning emerges not from abstract concepts, but from actual interactions with others. In turn, their narratives are constructions of intersubjective meanings, fashioned from the raw material of their encounters within a social matrix.

Narratives as truth claims. Individual stories often contain factual errors. For example, some participants may give the correct dates for particular incidents, and others might report different dates. But these errors are a significant part of the politics of narrative and of narrative analysis. For the researcher, variation in dates is not interpreted as evidence that the accounts are invalid or unreliable. The errors

themselves can provide insights into the importance attached to events. The “truth” of a narrative, however, is not a matter of reporting facts. Narratives speak truth even when they include factual errors. The truth conveyed concerns how the participant has perceived or interacted with a situation. Understanding stories as making claims to truth is crucial. The truth of a story is not about putting the claim to the test. Rather it is about seeing the claim as a challenge to what is commonly argued; it is about questioning hegemonic narratives. Doing so opens up room at the margins. In my research, I did not test the stories I collected against those of Germans. Nor did I try to confirm the claims that were made. Instead, the truth emerged from the broader fabric that the narratives wove before my ears and eyes.

Narratives as testimonies. After or toward the end of their interviews, the participants might express their feelings about having provided an extensive account of their life experiences. Here is Ela’s and Selin’s feedback:

I haven’t thought about this for a while. That page was closed for me. I mean, living and staying in Germany, and being part of German society. It has re-opened now. – Ela

So many things bother me. As we talk I can realize that. It becomes clear to me as I remember. – Selin

Participants might refer to how they felt during the interview, or reflect on how they have explained their experiences. We have to bear in mind that it is an unusual experience for anyone to narrate their life encounters at this length and in this format. In doing so, the participants experience giving testimony about their lives.

The act of narrating reflects being present to the experiences that are described. In that act, the narrators are observers of their encounters, seeing events

through their own eyes. Bhabha (1994) reminds us that “remembering is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful re-membering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present” (p. 63). Remembering ruptures the dominant narrative.

While remembering the events, participants may also describe the inner struggles they went through. This dual witnessing and experiencing makes the narrators both the tellers and the spectators of their encounters. They are narrating, but simultaneously hearing the narrative. Their stories tell us about the contexts that have shaped their testimonies and the world views that have informed them.

We are reminded that narrative researchers need to acknowledge that as we hear such testimonies, our own views also influence the meanings we derive. Our vantage points shape our interpretations; to account for those interpretations is part of the research process. This is the point at which we must reflect on our position as the researcher.

Narratives as a political tool. Because our lives are enmeshed in narrative, narrating lived experience is both purposeful and political. As Chase (1995) noted, a person’s culture “marks, shapes and/or constrains” their narratives (p. 20). As people narrate their experiences, they purposefully create a space where existing systems of meaning-making are disrupted. The narratives create new systems of understanding. Respondents talk about the social issues that are relevant to their experiences and consider where these issues fit in their story.

The act of narrating can be an occasion for interviewees to make choices about what is important about their experiences and in relation to the research. Their choices can make narrating itself a significant political tool. The particular encounters, views, and experiences that participants decide to recount signal their subjectivity. The ways they see each incident prepare them to react or to take the

initiative. The stories reflect their strategies for challenging existing structures and for being political actors in their own lives. Narrative analysis helps recover participants' understandings of their experiences concerning the research question. The strategies engaged in these verbal reconstructions reveal that the assumptions embedded in the narratives are particular views rather than universal realities. Consequently, narratives are often effective sources of counter-hegemonic insight.

Finding the focus of your analysis: the narrative unit. Even though it might not be clear at the beginning of your research—it might emerge as you work through the interviewing process—it is important to get to the point that you are clear about the “anchor” of your analysis: what your unit of analysis will be.

A unit of analysis is a focus point that allows you to go through all the narratives and know exactly what to pull out. In my research, the unit was the description of an everyday encounter. The kind of research question you ask affects the characteristics of narrative unit you might choose. You might home in on, for example, narratives of moving, childhood, resilience, or resistance. Suppose your research question is participants' self-evaluation of the success and failures in their lives. In that case, your narrative unit might be the personal transformations that made them the person they are today. Being clear about the narrative unit makes the analysis process possible.

Narrative units involve interpretations concerning participants' social experiences pertaining to the research question. Participants might give accounts of these experiences, their responses, and their social engagements. Narrative units often involve participants' demands, adversaries, and challenges, as well as their expectations and resources. A unit of analysis provides a particular picture of how participants build and retain their sense of subjectivity, self-worth, and autonomy.

The narrative unit should illustrate how the experiences that your research focuses on and the social structure they take place in are mutable, negotiable, and interactive. As a result, we can perceive, among other things, the power dynamics at play in any given narrative event.

The analysis should be comprehensive enough that we can capture how sharing memories sheds light on the complexities of the participants' lives. The analysis unit we choose allows us to examine such complexities. The unit should also enable us to explore how these stories challenge social categories and meta-narratives about them.

Focusing on everyday encounters allowed me to discover how my participants' stories evoked the ambiguity of being German-born Berliners of Turkish descent. Their stories revealed how geographic dislocation had altered their lives, experiences, and languages. In confronting discontent over losing their homeland, the narrators experimented with modes of articulating their conditions for being and belonging. They engaged in this experimentation by assessing their acts and collective memories, and by claiming their diasporic experiences. From a methodological perspective, studying encounters between subjects who have dominant status and those who have subordinate status involves more than simply understanding the relationships between unequal interlocutors. This kind of inquiry is also a point of entry for examining the formation of political practices in everyday life. Persistent social inequalities must be taken into account if we are to accurately understand people's messages in which references to disparity abound.

How, then, can we work with a unit of analysis? What are the steps for moving from identifying units of analysis to determining the findings?

The first practical step is to analyse each unit individually. First, focus on how the participant viewed the narrative unit at hand. Which broader topic was this narrative related to? What was the participant's intent, or point, in telling this story? Consider each narrative unit within the broader context of the whole interview, and within the overall story of the participant. Then ask what would be an appropriate title for this unit. This description is your initial analysis of the unit.

For the second round of analysis, group together similar titles or stories with similar messages. Start to find clusters of narrative units, according to their similarities or differences.

The third round involves identifying the stories that link the clusters of similar stories. Discerning linked stories allows you to analyse the relationships between similar narrative units and discern the meta-narrative that encompasses the whole group of narratives. These greater narratives indicate relations between the participants' ideas and their lived experiences. While reorganizing these narrative units, I group units that illustrate certain aspects of the bigger story. Then I analyze these groups, looking for key elements that pertain to my research question. Finally, I write the bigger story that the similar narrative units indicate.

This approach is a form of thematic analysis in which narrative units are kept intact while identifying the major themes expressed across various units of analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017). The identified themes depend on the conceptual framework or theory you are engaged with. In relating the themes of the narrative and the theory concerned, you are seeking to provide thick descriptions of your themes as they emerge from the narrative units (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

One aspect of my own analysis involved the discourses of accommodation. A central theme that emerged from the narrative units was the discourse of ranking immigrants, which involved associating the participants with fraud, with headscarves, and with skin tones. These emerged from the narrative units. In narrative inquiry, thematic analysis helps us to cover the broad aspects of the full data set. Then we can use those findings to conduct a more in-depth analysis.

Narrative analysis requires a hands-on approach that is highly interactive and therefore flexible. It requires a holistic understanding of each narrative unit within the context of the bigger story, while at the same time bridging accounts to a wider human meaning and shared experience. We need to pay close attention to the relationships between the narrative units, the interpretations, and the analysis—that is, the story as retold by the researcher. Narrative units need to be kept whole rather than fragmented. Accordingly, computer-assisted qualitative data analysis packages are relatively unhelpful.

Conclusion: The Power of Narrative Analysis

Narratives are a fruitful focus of sociological research. They provide insight into individuals' experiences and the meanings they draw from them. The forms their stories take tell us about the cultural and social frameworks people use to make sense of their lives. A close analysis of the narratives produced by even a small sample of individuals may yield evidence for understanding the intersubjective meanings shared by a whole community.

The task of the researcher is to figure out how to fit the pieces together so that an overall complex structure of meaning is revealed. While doing this, however, we have to acknowledge our subjective perspectives. Narratives are not delivered in tidy, ready-made categories. They do, however, recount evocative incidents that suggest

how categories play out in daily life. Narrative analysis investigates how people deal with the underlying meanings of their experiences. These experiences usually span the boundaries between categories, definitions, and identities. Narrative analysis, like the experience it unpacks, is itself a process of constant hybridization, full of variations and seeming contradictions.

Exercises and Discussion Questions

1. Write a 100- to 250-word narrative of an experience during elementary education that had a sustaining impact on you. Then, the instructor will collect and redistribute these stories among the students in the class. Each student takes a story and reflects on it. You are asked to focus on what makes the narrative sociological, and what conceptual and theoretical tools you can use to analyse it. Then, consider some of the challenges that the story you work on raises concerning social categories or social structures. At the end, hold an open-class discussion of your observations.
2. Discuss what kinds of research projects may use narrative analysis as a methodology.
3. As narrative analysis is a qualitative research method, discuss what underlying limits you see in using this approach. Discuss how you might address these limitations for a project you identified in Question 2.
4. Narrative analysis is a highly interactive method of conducting research, which often involves close communications with participants. Consider how a researcher can maintain ethical requirements such as anonymity, confidentiality, and safeguarding of information when conducting this kind of analysis.

5. Propose a research project that involves narrative analysis. Discuss how you would deal with the problems described in Questions 3 and 4 for this project.
6. Thinking about the stages of narrative inquiry outlined in the case, how would you plan for the research process in your proposed project?

Further Readings

Polletta, F. (2006). *It was like a fever: Storytelling in protest and politics*. Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press.

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Web Resources

Following are among the research centres with the focus on narrative research:

Centre for Narrative Research (CNR) [<https://www.uel.ac.uk/schools/social-sciences/our-research-and-engagement/research/centre-for-narrative-research>]

Centre for Interdisciplinary Research on Narrative (CIRN)

[<http://w3.stu.ca/stu/sites/cirn/index.aspx>]

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