

Review:

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Catherine Kohler Riessman (2008). Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences. CA, USA: SAGE Publications, 244 pages, ISBN: 978-0-7619-2998-7, US\$ 37.95

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Abstract: Narrative inquiry is increasingly being used across disciplines in the human sciences to investigate a multitude of questions. In this review, RIESSMAN's book on narrative methods is discussed. The review focuses on how she situates narrative tradition within the broader landscape of qualitative research and her presentation of a typology of analytic methods in narrative inquiry. It will discuss her perspectives on data construction and the issue of validity in narrative research.

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1. Introduction: Overview of the Book

Narrative inquiry has increasingly gained popularity among researchers and academicians in the last several decades. It is utilized across academic disciplines and professions. This textbook by RIESSMAN provides students and scholars an overview of and concrete guidance on narrative methods. Within the seven chapters of the book, RIESSMAN presents a well-organized and integrated approach to narrative analysis. She begins by deftly presenting a brief history of the development of narrative inquiry in qualitative research, detailing the complex and cross-disciplinary nature of this field of inquiry. This is followed by a practical chapter on the production of texts for inquiry. [1]

Chapters 3-6 discuss four specific methods of narrative analysis: thematic analysis; structural analysis; dialogic/performance analysis; and visual analysis. For each of the analytic methods presented, exemplars that reflect the complex

and cross-disciplinary nature of narrative inquiry are provided. These exemplars, taken from the fields of psychology, nursing, and anthropology among others, can serve as benchmarks for different schools of thought in narrative inquiry. [2]

The chapter on visual analysis presents a very interesting discussion on the "visual turn" in social research and how images are integrated with words to construct a story. It provides five excellent and diverse examples of how images can be utilized to tell stories about collective racial identities, illness experiences, the reconstruction of personal identities, teen pregnancies, and the lived experience of persons with disabilities. In the final chapter, RIESSMAN provides a pragmatic guide on how readers can adapt any of the methods she presented and deal with issues related to validity of narrative inquiry in general. [3]

This review article will focus on four key aspects of RIESSMAN's book: history and definitions of narrative; production of texts for analysis; methods of narrative analysis; and the issue of validity in narrative inquiry. It will critically appraise RIESSMAN's discussion and treatment of the concept of narrative, methodological issues in narrative inquiry, and perspectives on the validity of narrative inquiry. [4]

2. Contextualizing Narrative Method

Given the increasing popularity of narrative inquiry and the ubiquity of narrative per se, it is not surprising that there exists a multitude of definitions of the concept. As with other qualitative approaches (e.g. grounded theory; CHARMAZ, 2000), there are several inflections to narrative inquiry (ALVERMANN, 2000; CONNELLY & CLANDININ, 2000). In the introductory chapter, RIESSMAN highlights this lack of consensus as to what constitutes narrative with her brief description of the different applications of the concept of narrative in different fields—from narrative as simply an extended answer to a research question in a story form to it being an entire life story. She does not attempt to forward a single definition of narrative; instead, she abstracts the "ties that bind" the different definitions—attention to sequences of action, choice of language and narrative style, and varying degrees of analytic interest in audience/reader response—and use these to compare and contrast narrative with other case-based and variable-centered methods. This approach proves to be a very helpful in throwing into sharp relief how the different definitions of narrative (with their respective theoretical and epistemological underpinnings) influence how data are dealt with and ultimately interpreted, as seen in later chapters on narrative analysis. [5]

Further, RIESSMAN outlines the many functions of narratives, from telling stories in order to construct individual and group identities to arguing a point and mobilizing people into action. She likewise sketches a brief history of narrative. A careful reading of her discussion of the functions and history of narrative exposes how these two aspects are intricately intertwined; that is, the field of narrative has evolved over the years because scholars have been able to use it to respond to the different challenges of the times. For example, narrative has been used by scholars to study the culture and lives of individuals and communities during

times of cultural change (e.g., MISKOVIC, 2007) and to mobilize marginalized groups and initiate political action. [6]

3. Production of Texts for Analysis

While there are different kinds of data that can be used in narrative inquiry, RIESSMAN focuses on interviewing and the process of transcribing interviews. She positions her discussion of interviewing and transcription on the premise that "interviews are narrative occasions" (p.23), and that transcription inevitably involves interpretation. She argues for interviewing methods that afford participants the opportunity to tell their story in their own ways, therefore sharing power within the conversation. The issue of power relations is of paramount importance in narrative inquiry (CONNELLY & CLANDININ, 2000; FLICKER, 2004) and narrative researchers need to create an atmosphere that fosters "reciprocal and empowering interaction" (COHN & LYONS, 2003, p.41) if they are to produce rich and meaningful data. [7]

She provides an excellent example of how theoretical and methodological perspectives influence how a transcript is constructed and ultimately interpreted. She presents two different transcripts from the same interview. One was co-constructed (i.e., it included the interaction between the participant and the researcher), while the other excluded statements of the researcher (i.e., it implied that the "self" presented by the participant was independent of interaction). These two different approaches lay the groundwork for RIESSMAN's more detailed discussion of narrative analysis in later chapters. More importantly, they highlight how transcription is an interpretive process that is influenced by theoretical beliefs and practical considerations (LAPADAT & LINDSAY, 1999). [8]

RIESSMAN tackles the complex and difficult task of transcribing translated interviews. The issue of translation of interviews and their subsequent transcription has attracted increasing attention from scholars as more and more researches are done in non-English speaking countries but published in English-language journals. Narrative production is influenced by language and culture (HYMES, 1974 as cited in KANG, 2006). Translation, therefore, involves not only theoretical and methodological issues (HALAI, 2007) but personal and cultural ones as well (RIESSMAN, 2008). However, what was lacking was a more detailed discussion of how challenges in translation in narrative inquiry can be addressed. A brief discussion and provision of concrete examples of translation work and methodology (e.g., HALAI, 2007; LAMBERT, 1997) would have been helpful. [9]

4. Narrative Analysis

RIESSMAN presented a typology of narrative analysis—thematic, structural, dialogic/performance, and visual. With each analytic method, she presented researches from diverse fields that offer concrete strategies for working with narrative data. More importantly, within each analytic method, she underscored how diversely each of the researchers treated narrative. This approach is very

instructive in terms of highlighting for readers the influence of theoretical perspectives, epistemological issues, type(s) of data and definition of narrative on the way data is analyzed and interpreted. She eloquently connected the exemplars with the issues in narrative inquiry that she has identified earlier in her book—definition of narrative, influence of theoretical and epistemological perspectives on analysis, and similarities and differences of narrative with other case-based approaches. [10]

4.1 Thematic analysis

Her chapter on thematic analysis focused on how the content of oral and written narrative data is analyzed. Instead of providing step-by-step instructions on how to construct and interpret data, she provided guidelines on and examples of how different researchers align their methodologies with their specific research objectives and a priori assumptions. She highlighted how thematic analysis can be used with a variety of data and help researchers working with a number of cases identify common themes. She used the examples of researches that explored different research questions using different data—interviews, archival documents and field notes. She illustrated how prior theory shaped the interpretation of spoken and written narratives, and how these narratives in turn have shaped individual and group identities (e.g., in members of Alcoholic Anonymous) and served as impetus for social action (e.g., resistance against authority). With each exemplar, she briefly summarized the findings then proceeded to critically analyze the pragmatic steps each researcher took to interpret their data. In particular, she deconstructed each study vis-a-vis how narrative is defined, how data are constructed into text, the unit of analysis and the degree of attention given to context. [11]

In this chapter on thematic analysis, RIESSMAN carefully points out that while both narrative and grounded theory come up with themes, what differentiates them is that the former does not "fracture" data and is case-centered rather than focusing on theorizing across cases. Moreover, it must be added that perspectives on interviewing and data construction differ significantly between narrative inquiry and grounded theory (see CHARMAZ, 2000; GLASER, 2002). [12]

4.2 Structural analysis

Using LABOV's and GEE's approaches to frame her exemplars, RIESSMAN discusses structural analysis. She begins by contextualizing the historical development of structural analysis and uses this historical background to explain how the study of narrative structure has been (and continues to be) used to address social injustices. She draws on the works of LABOV and GEE in order to explain the analysis of the sequence of speech acts can be used to explain behavior. She highlights how a single event can be ascribed varied meanings and underscores differences between LABOV's and GEE's approaches, showing how each is useful depending on the specific research question and kind of data one is working with. In her research examples on street culture, violence, divorce and critical care nursing, she showed how different researchers used structural

approaches to answer specific questions. She presented transcripts from research that used LABOV's approach and examined how each facilitated the analysis of data in terms of the structural elements present (e.g., abstract, complicating action, resolution, etc.) and the sequence of speech acts. [13]

In her discussion of structural analysis (particularly GEE's approach) she pointed out how this approach can help in data reduction and facilitate identification of several substantive issues that can otherwise be missed if thematic analysis alone was used. She presented examples of texts that did not fit LABOV's prototypic story form but "felt like narrative" (p.96), and proceeded to discussing how these texts were parsed into stanzas using intonation and discourse markers as guides. These stanzas were then analyzed to uncover recurrent themes and embedded meanings. [14]

An important point that RIESSMAN makes is that GEE's approach is focused on North American English, and, therefore, caution must be used in using this approach in studies that use languages other than North American English. [15]

A most helpful point RIESSMAN makes is how one can miss salient points in a set of data if only thematic analysis was used and context was given minimal attention. These are crucial sensitizing concepts that would serve students and scholars well. She highlights how attention to structure can both generate knowledge and complicate analysis and the importance of having knowledge of linguistics when using this analytic approach. [16]

4.3 Dialogic/performance analysis

Building on her previous discussions on thematic and structural analysis, RIESSMAN proceeds to a discussion on dialogic/performance analysis. She emphasizes how this approach differs from the two previous ones because of its focus on the context and view of narratives as being multi-voiced and co-constructed. She explains how symbolic interaction and literary theories have informed this analytic approach then relates how these theories have come into play in the exemplars provided. [17]

In her exemplars focusing on biographical disruption and discourses in the classroom, she argues that thematic and structural analyses can be integrated with dialogic/performance analysis in order to interpret narratives. She presented transcripts that contain not only the utterances of the participants but also highlight the different roles taken on by the participants and the linguistic devices employed (e.g., expressive sounds). She examined these transcripts and underscored how each researcher focused on unearthing what function the narrative served for the group of participants. [18]

She highlights the importance of attending to factors such as linguistic markers and story sequence when using such an approach. She proposes that dialogic/performance analysis is a suitable method for analyzing works that involve "focus groups, community meetings and classrooms" (p.124). She

emphasized how language and historical and cultural contexts influence the construction and performance of narrative. [19]

4.4 Visual analysis

The chapter on visual analysis draws on thematic and dialogic/performance analysis and attends to not just how and why images are produced, but also how images are made with participants, thereby making the research endeavor collaborative. She draws on the work Gillian ROSE in order to frame her discussion of the five exemplars which used different visual media—photographs, collages, paintings and video diaries. She uses researches on the history of Japanese Americans, illness experiences of patients, and an autobiographical case study of an artist to showcase how different genres of media are appropriate for different research questions. With each exemplar, she discusses the production of the image, the image itself and the different interpretations given to each of the works. She describes the circumstances surrounding the production of the images (be it photographs or paintings) in each research and interrogates how each researcher draws attention to details in the image they perceive as salient. She contrasts researches that work with "found" images (e.g., photographs and paintings) and those "made" during the research process (e.g., self-portraits and video diaries), and scrutinized how each told a story using different foci of analysis. A very important argument she makes is that images do not just "speak for themselves" but ultimately need to be contextualized and explained. With her exemplars, she demonstrates how narratives can be interpreted differently by different people and how the narrative can be co-constructed by both the participant and the researcher. [20]

Because narrative analysis is increasingly being used in the human sciences, several methodological and even ethical issues (YARDLEY, 2008) need to be addressed in regard to its use in narrative inquiry. Such issues include how different media (e.g., photos and videos) can be used together as data (KNOBLAUCH, BAER, LAURIER, PETSCHKE & SCHNETTLER, 2008); the ethical considerations in the use of these media and issues of story ownership (YARDLEY, 2008); and how results are presented or published (SCHNETTLER & RAAB, 2008). [21]

To summarize RIESSMAN's chapters on analytic methods, it must be borne in mind that narrative researches are framed within specific theoretical and methodological perspectives. With all the exemplars, she calls the reader's attention to the fact that many researchers do not explicate their definition of narrative and their unit(s) of analysis. Readers of narrative studies should also attend to the degree of importance that is attached to context as this ultimately influences how data are constructed and meaning is made. Additionally, researchers (not just in narrative but in the qualitative paradigm in general) need to detail how they have come to their interpretations and what has informed their interpretive stance. As DICKIE (2003) has posited, researchers must go beyond labels and let "the reader into the process" (p.51) of analysis and interpretation.

These are important because, as RIESSMAN wisely noted, not all readings of a narrative are plausible. [22]

In her exemplary and methodological presentation of exemplars from diverse fields, she demonstrates how different disciplines utilize narratives in order to investigate issues fundamental to the human condition. She rightly posits that different types of narrative data and analytic methods can be used in order to portray a person's or group's experience in all its depth and fullness. [23]

5. Revisiting the Issue of Validity and Reliability

Several scholars have previously debated (and continue to debate) the issue of validity and reliability in qualitative research. RIESSMAN paid particular attention to the issues of historical truth, correspondence, coherence, and pragmatic, political and ethical use of narratives. She proposed that narrative students and scholars explicitly describe their modes of inquiry and meticulously document their sources. She further asserts that in order "to support theoretical claims, students must demonstrate how they developed and/or used methods appropriate to their research questions, epistemologies, and situated perspectives" (p.188). [24]

She asserts that the validity of narrative researches lie in their ability to inform future studies and contribute to social change by empowering participants. She concludes that in narrative inquiry, many issues remain to be settled. However, these issues should serve as impetus for scholarly debates and "added diversity" (p.200) in the field. [25]

6. Conclusion

RIESSMAN's book offers a very pragmatic approach to narrative inquiry. She explicitly and skillfully inter-relates the different theoretical and epistemological issues with how the different exemplars in her book have been informed, methodically building on the topics (e.g., constructing data, data analysis, theoretical and historical perspectives) and integrating them to present a very enlightening text. This book can be very useful for students of narrative inquiry courses and scholars working on narrative researches. However, students and academicians who are new to this field would benefit from further reading of literature in general sociology, linguistics, anthropology, and ethnography as certain concepts presented in the book may be a bit complex for those who are new to narrative inquiry. Overall, this textbook promises to be a landmark text in narrative inquiry, informing scholars and students in the field and enticing those who are new to it to immerse themselves in the complex but exciting world of narrative research. It masterfully showcases the many challenges and promises that narrative inquiry holds for those who intend to use it to investigate a multitude of research questions. [26]

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