Qualitative Research: Narrative approach in sciences

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Abstract

In recent years there has been increasing interest in qualitative research in international literature. In Greece, qualitative methods have attracted the attention of the academic community such as in the field of psychology and education as well as in the broader field of social sciences. Qualitative research focuses in understanding a research query as a humanistic or idealistic approach. Though quantitative approach is a more reliable method as it is based upon numeric and methods that can be made objectively and propagated by other researchers. Especially the use of biographical- narrative approach as a method derived from and developed through different disciplines. It has proven to be an excellent way of making theoretical sense of social phenomena. Biographical-narrative approach is important in many disciplines. This methodology comes from the humanities and social sciences and can follow a qualitative or quantitative approach. It is focused on the detailed stories or life experiences of a single event or a series of events for a small number of individuals. Narrative approach is a genre of analytic frames whereby researchers interpret stories that are told within the context of research and/or are shared in everyday life. The narrative analysis in the social sciences refers to a series of approaches, which have a common form.

Key Words: *research methodology, qualitative research, narrative approach, biography, life story, experience, social science*

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Understanding Qualitative Research

Qualitative method is used to understand people's beliefs, experiences, attitudes, behavior, and interactions. It generates non-numerical data. The integration of qualitative research into intervention studies is a research strategy that is gaining increased attention across disciplines. Although once viewed as philosophically incongruent with experimental research, qualitative research is now recognized for its ability to add a new dimension to interventional studies that cannot be obtained through measurement of variables alone. [1] Qualitative research is characterized by its aims, which relate to understanding some aspect of social life and its methods which (in general) generate words, rather than numbers, as data for analysis. [2] These methods aim to answer questions about the 'what', 'how' or 'why' of a phenomenon rather than 'how many' or 'how much', which are answered by quantitative methods. If the aim is to understand how a community or individuals within it perceive a particular issue, then qualitative methods are often appropriate. [3] The personality of the researcher (and his/her integrity) may play a much greater role than in quantitative research. Therefore, the quality of raw data is essential. [4]

Qualitative research was first used by anthropologists and sociologists as a method of inquiry in the early decades of the 20th century. For example, in the 1920s and 1930s, social anthropologists Mainowski [1920] and Mead [1935], and sociologists Park and Burgess [1925] had remarkable contribution on qualitative research. The period from 1900 to 1945 is called the traditional age of qualitative research. During this period, qualitative data analysis aimed at a more or less objective description of social phenomena in society or in other cultures. [5] The positivist paradigm reflects the principles of scientific enquiry of qualitative research. For example, the Chicago School in sociology and the research of Malinowski in ethnography are formed in the traditional age. [6] Much of the literature of qualitative research and its textbooks begins in the 1960s and 1970s. [7] During 1970 to 1986, blurred genres, a variety of new interpretive, qualitative perspectives, such as, hermeneutics, structuralism, semiotics, phenomenology, cultural studies, and feminism

have developed. In this period, the first software programs and packages for computer-supported data analysis were developed. [8] The postmodern period of qualitative research started in 1990 to 1995. It is a period of experimental and new ethnographies. During this period narratives have replaced theories, or theories are read as narratives. [9]

Quantitative research is typically considered to be the more "scientific" approach to doing social science. The focus is on using specific definitions and carefully operationalizing what particular concepts and variables mean. Qualitative research methods provide more emphasis on interpretation and providing consumers with complete views, looking at contexts, environmental immersions and a depth of understanding of concepts. [10]

The essential purposes of qualitative research are to document in detail the conduct of everyday events and to identify the meanings that those events have for those who participate in them and for those who witness them. The emphasis is on discovering kinds of things that make a difference in social life; hence, an emphasis is placed on qualitas rather than on quantitas. This priority of emphasis does not mean that information about frequency is irrelevant to qualitative inquiry, for good qualitative research reports the range and frequency of actions and meaning perspectives that are observed, as well as their occurrence, narratively. [11]

Qualitative research is inductive in nature, and the researcher generally explores meanings and insights in a given situation. [12] It refers to a range of data collection and analysis techniques that use purposive sampling and semi-structured, open-ended interviews. [13] Qualitative, or naturalistic, researchers recognise their own experiences and subjectivity influence their interpretations and this is made known to the reader through a process of reflexivity. Collecting data that provides variation in perspective (triangulation) may also help to reduce researcher bias. [14] A qualitative study accepts that variations between people and contexts as well as the passage of time will not enable a study to be replicated elsewhere. Furthermore, data analysis is a dynamic and creative activity carried out by the researcher where insights develop and change throughout

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the process. An audit trail of these procedures and processes carried out by the researcher enable a judgement to be made by another. The audit captures the inevitable change and variation in the researcher's perspective to provide 'trackable variance'. [15] A qualitative study does not attempt to control the multitude of factors involved in the phenomenon under investigation, it seeks to explore the whole in all its complexity. Interpreting such complexity is challenging for the researcher and a number of strategies are used to facilitate the process: [16] prolonged engagement and persistent observation enable researchers to gain a deep understanding of the phenomenon being studied. [17]

A framework for qualitative research practice is an essential part of a researcher's toolkit. [18] Choices about paradigms and research frameworks are influenced by the phenomenon under investigation and to fulfil the research objectives and research question. [19] Paradigms determine both the ontological and epistemological basis of a chosen method. Clarifying and making explicit the assumptions underpinning a methodology and method and the methodological choices made throughout the research process are core features of credible robust research. [20]

Theoretical Framework of biographical-narrative approach

Many of the qualitative research methods developed in the social sciences are suited to explore research questions pertinent for the systemic field and make a good fit with systemic thinking. [21] The biographical approach originated in the tradition of the interpretative paradigm developed by the Chicago School of Sociology. Thomas and Znaniecki, two sociologists belonging to the Chicago School, were the pioneers of biographical research in the discipline of sociology. In their well-known study, The Polish Peasant in Europe and America, the research for which was conducted during World War One and which was published in the USA in 1918, biographical research was developed as an innovative method in the social sciences in order to explain complex

migration-specific social phenomena as qualitatively new in terms of the originating and the receiving society. [22] Their methodology, distinguished by the fact that biographical material was used as sociological data to gain insight into the principles constructing the lives of migrants, inspired the empirical research tradition of the Chicago School from the 1920s onwards. It was here that the use of biographical material for sociological investigations, particularly in deviance research, was continued and systematised as a biographical method during the 1930s.

Narrative research may be biographical following the life of individuals, while an oral history explores the personal reflection of events from one or more individuals. A theoretical lens such as feminism may also be used within this type of research. [23] A variety of data may be collected including observation, participant diaries and letters, documentation, interviews, artifacts and photographs; these help to provide a detailed contextualized story. Data analysis involves reorganizing the stories into chronological order, identifying key aspects and may include interpretation and thematic analysis. The researcher negotiates the meaning of the stories with participants. [24] The task of narration is to render the processual nature of life course events, and the researcher can analyse the issues of interest to him/her not as static phenomena but describe the way a given phenomenon emerged, developed and possibly disappeared. It is a method that includes the analysis of the characteristics of the narrative text, and recently of the meaning of inter-human relations in social, historical, and cultural contexts. [25] It focuses on people's narratives either about themselves or a set of events. Instead of looking for themes that emerge from an account, it concentrates on the sequential unfolding of someone's story so there is an emphasis on characters. It is time consuming, and usually includes a very small number of cases. [26] The advantage of the narrative interview is not the fact that it helps to collect information about the events which cannot be gathered by any other research methods but the fact that only in a narrative does an individual give a processual account of life course events. [27] Labov defined narrative as "one method of recapitulating

past experience by matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events which (it is inferred) actually occurred". [28] Although narrative analysis has its origins in literary theory and is closely associated with media and cultural studies, social scientists have become interested in using it as a means to gain greater understanding of the social world and the production of data. [29] Perhaps reflecting its multidisciplinary use, the term narrative analysis can refer to a variety of different approaches to data collection and analysis, including biography, autobiography, life history, oral history, autoethnography, life narrative and the sociology of story telling.

Biographical methods ascertain how experiences are interpreted by individuals. This perspective is reinforced by Buckner (2005) who contends that the value of biographical interviewing lies in its exploration of the participants' subjective experience in relation to their immediate and wider social relationships and contexts. [30] Ritchie (2003) contends that biographical methods are one of the most naturalistic methods of generating data. [31] Narrative stories interpret the world according to the individual's experience. [32] Narratives stories are used for the research associated with a person's ' experience and his involvement in a situation. The person reproduces it's story through the narrative. This reproduction can be achieved either by the narrative of a situation and the experience, or by an interview in which the subject (social analysis) will be recounted. [33] On this basis, the careful pumping of all the necessary elements from the world of the individual is not enough, but equally important is the "experience", that is, the whole of the senses, images, memories, hopes or fears associated with the particular situation.

The concept of experience is directly related to the narrative approach. It is fact that ''experience'' is already used many years ago and is found in the work of Husserl (1970), Merleau-Ponty (1962), and many more modern expressts, highlighting the idea of primary (primary) or of human existence. [34] Hans-George Gadamer (1975) In his work truth and method, says that there are two dimensions of meaning in the experienced experience: the immediacy of experi-

ence and the content of what is experienced. Both meanings have epistemological-methodological significance for qualitative research conducted in psychology and education, but in other similar fields of social and humanities Sciences. They refer to the immediacy with which something is conceived which precedes any interpretation, processing and communication. [35] This thought is also expressed in the known position of Merleau-Ponty (1962*), "the world is not what I think, but what I live on the inside. If one wants to study the world on the side of the experience, it should begin with a "direct description of our experience as it is".* [36] In the context of modern social and humanities sciences, experience remains a central epistemological-methodological concept, which aims to provide specific ideas and intuitions on the qualitative meanings of experiences in people's lives.

Narrative approach in sciences

The roots of qualitative research lie in social and cultural anthropology, philosophy, psychology, history, and sociology. The goal of the qualitative tradition is a 'deep understanding of the particular'. [37] The purpose of qualitative research is to describe and interpret issues or phenomena systematically from the point of view of the individual or population being studied, and to generate new concepts and theories. The choice of methodology is directed by the questions being raised. [38] In recent years narrative approach has gained more area among the qualitative methods and has used by many different disciplines. In the interdisciplinary field of migration studies, the biographical approach is well suited to empirical investigations of migration processes because it offers us a way of empirically capturing the diversity, complexity, and transformational character of migration phenomena and of reconstructing them through biographical analysis. Narrative is a centerpiece of literary studies. For decades narrative also has had a prominent place in educational studies, both as a focus of research methodology and of instructional content. Attracted by the educational benefits narratives are presumed to promote, many scholars have argued for greater use of narratives in science education. [39]

In the field of psychology narrative approach is also used. The relationship between science and narrative is often discussed in one of two conflicting contexts. The first context sets up a dichotomy between science and narrative based on differences in cognitive processes that underlie comprehension. Much of the literature underlying this context comes from discourse and cognitive psychology, which explores how the mind comprehends narrative information as compared with other types of information. The second context treats narrative as a communicative technique able to enhance the persuasive impact of scientific information.

Narrative method is also relevant so to the communication science. Narrative describes a format of communication involving a temporal sequence of events influenced by the actions of specific characters. [40] Examples of narrative range from short exemplars or testimonials that may be contained within larger messages to detailed and lengthy entertainment stories common in the movie and book industries. Research suggests that narrative communication is encoded using a unique cognitive pathway and results in effects that are quite different from argumentative or evidence-based communication. Specifically, narrative communication often improves comprehension, [41] generates more interest and engagement with a topic, [42] increases selfefficacy through modeling, [43] influences real-world beliefs, [44] and can be more successful for persuading an otherwise resistant audience. [45] As such, narratives hold promise for improving the effectiveness of science communication to nonscientist audiences and have been examined with regard to science-related topics such as health, [46] risk [47] and the environment.

Narrative had important entry into social research. Elliot Mishler's (1986) influential book on research interviewing brought narrative to the centre of collecting and evaluating data. [48] But in Mishler's case, the source is not the narrative of narratology but the work of Labov, Waletsky (1967) and the whole socio-linguistic family. [49] Conversation analysis and biographical studies have a prominent place in his work. He is well aware of the work done within cognitive psychology on "schemes" and "story grammars". Mishler as well as Bruner (1986) and Freeman (1993) quote early discussions on narrative and psychoanalysis. Suddenly narrative seems to sprout from numerous, discrete locations. [50] To add to the complexity of the scene, the theme on personal narration in connection with scholarly discourse appeared both from anthropology; [51] and feminist [52] and sociological studies of auto/biography. [53] Considering the rather scientific rhetoric of classical narratology, this propensity for personal narration can hardly be understood as its direct effect. In a very characteristic way, Bruner's (1986) erudite journey through narratological theory did not attract many followers. His results and theses were enough, and in particular, his essay Life as Narrative (Bruner 1987) became enormously influential. [54] The acute epistemological crises in human and social sciences were an obvious reason for interest in these new metaphors: narratives and stories seemed to provide scholars with more complex and less objectivistic forms of knowing than the previous laws, experiments, and abstract theories. [55]

The use of narratives in social research may be characterized by three separate, but by no means straight forwardly successive moments. At the first stage, narratives were used as factual resources. The second moment was characterized by the study of narratives as texts with a particular form. The third moment includes a movement beyond a separate narrative text, into the study of narratives and storytelling as polymorphous phenomena in context. [56]

Discussion

Qualitative methods give the researcher the opportunity to aim at what means for the subjects the experience they are talking about, in other words, to deepen. What is happening is a "fine" description [57] of side of researchers. But beyond the detailed analysis, the qualitative ones methods record the subject's "voice" and expressions. [58] Obviously this method is more complex, but allows the researcher to explore and better understand the complexity of a phenomenon.

The emergence of narrative as a method of inquiry in so-

cial science research may be linked in part to the growth of interest in qualitative methods in the latter part of the 20th century. In most cases, the narrative-turn literature focuses more on the content of the stories, even to the point of illustrating naiveté as regards the narrative form. The different agendas between the narrative families may indeed be celebrated rather than downplayed. Yet the almost total ignorance about theoretical and methodological developments on the other side of the theoretical divide can hardly be the most fertile point of departure. Yet the understanding of the interplay between "narrative modes" [59] of perceiving, living, knowing, communicating and telling requires more extensive theoretical interchange than is now occurring.

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