Addressing issues of power and equality using narrative and reflexive research

Professor Kim Etherington
University of Bristol
What do I mean by Narrative Research?

‘Narrative research is an umbrella term that covers a large and diverse range of approaches, the result of a rapid expansion of this area of inquiry over the past dozen years’, (Mishler 1999: xv)

From Latin root ‘narrare’: to tell or know. ‘A narrative’ is an account or telling.

Narrative also refers to the overall structure of a discourse.

Narrative research is a means by which we gather, analyse, and represent people’s stories as told by them.

There are different forms of narrative research – some focus on ‘content’ of stories; others on ‘meaning’. Depends on philosophical position.
What do mean by stories?

Tentative definition of ‘a story’ (McLeod, 2001):
– accounts of specific, concrete events
– with beginning, middle, end, protagonist and dramatic climax
– Structures and conventions are culturally constructed

Narrative research views:
– Stories as a primary source of data
– Stories as a ‘root metaphor’ for human meaning-making
Bruner (1986): two ways of knowing

‘Paradigmatic mode of thought’
Draws on reasoned analysis, logical proof, and empirical observation – used to explain ‘cause and effect’, to predict and control reality, and to create unambiguous objective ‘truth’ that can be proven or disproved.

‘Narrative knowing’
Narrative knowledge - created and constructed through stories of lived experiences, and the meanings they create. Help make sense of the ambiguity and complexity of human lives.

Narrative knowledge is situated within contexts: embedded within historical cultural stories, beliefs and practices
Why stories?

Stories allow us to hear feelings, thoughts and attitudes: the richness of the narrative helps us understand how people create meaning, their strategies for coping and how they make theoretical sense of their lives.

Subjective meanings and sense of self and identity are negotiated as the stories unfold,

bearing in mind that stories are reconstructions of the person’s experiences,

remembered and told at a particular point in their lives, to a particular researcher/audience and for a particular purpose.

This influences how the stories are told, which stories are told and how they are presented/interpreted. They do not represent ‘life as lived’ but our re-presentations of those lives.
Narrative Inquiry...

Values, local, intimate knowledge;

invites tentative, marginalized voices to be heard alongside the dominant western discourses thereby challenging given nature of ‘modern’ certainties - questions how we know things and who tells us what we know.

captures unique lived experience expressed via rich multi-layered data;

seeks ‘insider’ information about what it’s like to be that person, in their particular life and culture;

orders experience through telling and re-telling

examines and deconstructs taken-for-granted assumptions and myths
Methods focus on power and inequality

Narrative methods involve a mutual, sincere, collaborative, and reciprocal process over time whereby each party educates the other…

Researchers share ownership of data with participants, thereby undermining the bias of dominant paradigm and opening up its assumptions to investigation e.g. professionals are the experts; subjectivity is a contaminant of the research etc.

The storyteller has full voice, but both voices are heard.
Underpinnings

Assumption of interdependence and uncertainty

Democratisation of knowledge – many ways of knowing

Acknowledgement of complexities of realities

Shift of focus from only outcomes to include processes

Use of reflexivity – focus on contexts and relationships between researcher and researched as shaping the creation of knowledge.
Reflexivity

Reflexivity is a dynamic process of interaction within and between our selves and our participants, and the data that informs decisions, actions and interpretations at all stages.

We are therefore operating on several different levels at the same time.

To be reflexive is to have an ongoing conversation about experience while simultaneously living in the moment....(Hertz 1995)
Reflexive research:

Produces reflexive knowledge: information on what is known as well as how it is known.

A reflexive researcher does not simply report facts or ‘truths’ but actively constructs interpretations of his or her experiences in the field, and then questions how those interpretations came about. (Hertz 1995)
How assumptions that underpin reflexivity address power and equality in research practices

Relationships seen as consultancy and collaboration

Equality dispenses with ‘expert’ position

Using both voices, creates sense of power and autonomy – not just for researcher but also researched

Reflexive transparency shows how we discover what we discover - these are moral and ethical issues
to remain sensitive to cultural and gender difference (Cloke et al 2000).

to be sensitive to the rights, beliefs and cultural contexts of the participants, as well as their position within patriarchal or hierarchical power relations, in society as well as in our research relationships.

To be transparent and engage in dialogue with participants about research decisions.
Focus on power in ethical practice requires is to...

- share interpretations with participant’s
- collaborate about how their data/stories will be represented
- show our own part in the co-construction of knowledge
By showing our interactions readers can observe

the ethical behaviours involved in respecting the autonomy, dignity and privacy of participants,

the risks of failing to do so,

the ‘ethically important moments’ that occur,

and the means by which they are ethically negotiated.
Exercise: In 2 groups sit facing each other:

one group are clients the other group are their counsellors.

- Researchers and prospective participants engage in dialogue about doing research together.


