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Interpreting Narratives Within a Cross-National Interdisciplinary Study: A Case Study of a Collaborative Process

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 A B S T R A C T

Purpose: This article presents a case study of a collaborative process for the analysis of a young girl's narrative on becoming an adolescent in Shanghai. The purpose was to illuminate how interpretation of narratives can be strengthened with a diverse team of researchers.

Methods: Three different researchers, each representing a different discipline and lens for analyzing qualitative data, collaboratively analyzed and interpreted a 12-year-old girl's narrative from Shanghai as part of the Global Early Adolescent Study. Each researcher first analyzed the narrative separately with a written summary that was then analyzed for differences and similarities across the research team, along with further cross-checks of the translations of the recording.

Results: Throughout the analysis, we argued that the narrative was a story about gender and power: the gendered nature of socializing a girl, the interpersonal process of a mother, at the behest of a father, to press a daughter to behave in a proper, modest fashion, and the daughter learning the appropriate and proper way for adult woman to comport herself. At the same time, by bridging our interpretations together, we also came to agree that it was a story of a Chinese girl's loss of freedom and capitulation, evident in her resignation to comply with the gender norm that required that she refrain from displaying her body in a certain way at the dinner table.

Conclusions: Recording our collaborative analysis process enabled us to illuminate how researchers who work on cross-national studies can combine forces—of perspectives and of methods—for a compelling approach that provides a more comprehensive analysis of the underlying meanings behind an interview narrative.

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 IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTION

Qualitative methods are especially useful for understanding the human experience. In this case example, three researchers from different disciplines in a cross-national study illustrate how a collaborative approach to understanding a Chinese girl's narrative of socialization into a gender norm produced a complex interpretation of the process and her experience.

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Telling stories has been described as a fundamental part of the human experience; it is how we know and make meaning of our experiences [1]. The qualitative method of gathering narratives from individuals, groups, and communities through interviews to garner information and generate knowledge about experience has been widely adopted, in health research and beyond [2–6]. The vast majority of research on adolescent health employs descriptive and inferential statistical analyses to produce knowledge about constructs and variables reflected in demographics (race), scale scores (i.e., CES Depression Scale [7]),

and survey items (i.e., Add Health Survey [8]). Such analyses provide evidence of associations or predict a proportion of variability in behavioral health outcomes. Qualitative methods in general (i.e., grounded theory [9]; participant observation [5]; and interpretive phenomenological analysis [10]), and the analysis of narratives in particular, enable adolescent health researchers to understand how youth experience processes and attribute meaning of such variables, as well as theoretically and empirically driven dimensions of those experiences, including the experiential dimensions of those very dependent and independent variables used in statistical analyses and the findings of those analyses. In particular, efforts to understand a phenomenon or process, such as gender socialization, are especially well-served by narrative methods, in which the levels of analysis provide insight and evidence both of content and, literally, participants' narrations that reflect how they navigate larger "stories" or discourses that organize and shape social experiences [11]. That is, narrative methods can offer insights into mechanisms by which sexual health outcomes associated with this process happen; predictors of outcomes operate; and potential "entry points" for intervention [12]. This feature of narrative analysis is particularly relevant to girls' navigation of gender norms; girls may not say directly that they are complying with them but, as we illuminate below, narrative analysis reveals how they are experiencing and managing gender socialization processes through analysis [13].

As part of the first phase of the Global Early Adolescent Study (GEAS), we gathered narratives through semistructured interviews from adolescents, aged 11–13 years, across 15 diverse cultural sites to understand what gender norms the early adolescents are being socialized into, how they are being manifested, and how adolescents are learning them (see the study by Mmari, in this supplement, for study design). While the strengths of working across cultures and disciplines are undeniable and yield much more robust findings [14,15], one key concern is how to develop strong interpretations given cultural differences [11]. This concern is acute when gender is understood as a social construct or a set of relations [16], and as a developmental process infused with distinct meanings [17], as in the GEAS.

We describe a way to address it in a case study of our collaborative process of developing an interpretation of a girl's narrative about when she first realized she was no longer a child when her parents treated her differently. That is, this article is a twofold case study of how we worked as researchers and also a "snippet" of what an actual case study of this girl's experience of gender socialization would look like, to serve as an exemplar of how a finding is developed, established, and reported using our method. It is therefore a partial case study by definition. The individual interview took place in a youth activity center in a small community within Shanghai in which the study was being done; it was conducted privately by a female interviewer. The participants were recommended by a key informant working in the study community, which had relatively low economic development and a high migrant proportion. Before the narrative interview, interviewers carried out a timeline group activity with several participants (3–6 on average). The timeline activity served as a warming-up exercise that made the young adolescents much easier to get into the topics the interviewers were going to talk individually. Moreover, this activity helped to build the rapport between the interviewers and the interviewees. We chose this particular interview and narrative because this girl [we will call her MeiMei] told an articulate, well-developed story

that included a moment of transgression, providing a fissure through which to hear about a feminine gender norm, how her parents socialized her into it, and her experience of that process.

The team of researchers (C.Y., D.L.T., and K.M.) for this analysis included the primary qualitative researcher from the Shanghai site, trained in adolescent health and working with youth there for over 6 years, representing an "insider" cultural lens (C.Y.); a developmental psychologist with expertise in female adolescence, gender, sexuality, and qualitative methods (D.L.T.); and a medical anthropologist specializing in adolescent public health (K.M.). We report this example to illuminate how different qualitative analyses and disciplinary perspectives utilized in tandem can shape analysis and interpretation in a single project, as well as strengthen the analysis with interpretations that might fall by the wayside. Furthermore, this case study provides insights into the unique attributes of each perspective, especially in terms of (1) identifying and incorporating what was common across our initial interpretations and (2) identifying and "talking through" what was different to articulate a fuller understanding by incorporating our unique insights. While each of us had a specific lens for interpreting the girl's narrative, it is the working through and weaving together of all three perspectives. We developed these summaries initially for a presentation on disciplinary differences in narrative analysis and the importance of cultural context in interpreting findings for the entire GEAS research team. Subsequently, these summaries became further developed from an integrated analysis via ongoing discussion through email and developing the written analysis iteratively that provided us with a comprehensive understanding about how the girl experienced being socialized into a local gender norm prevalent in Shanghai, which holds a mix of traditional and more progressive beliefs about gender and power in the family [18,19]. This confluence constituted one form of triangulation (There are many forms of triangulation, that is, comparing across other data in the corpus or other studies; here we are using the technique of multiple researchers discussing and building an agreed-upon interpretation [3].), while our distinct emphases, reflecting theoretical and disciplinary stances, offered more nuance and depth, as well as cultural accuracy.

For this article, we first provide the actual narrative told by a 12-year-old girl in response to the question: "Do you remember a situation when you realized you were no longer a child and that your mum/dad was treating you differently than before?" We then describe the analysis and how the team (C.Y., D.L.T., and K.M.) collaborated. We conclude with reflections on this approach to analyzing qualitative data in a cross-national study.

The Narrative

"When I was little, I was very active. I liked to put my feet on the table, and the table was very short, as high as a chair. At that time, my parents did not correct me. But when I grew up, my dad mentioned that. He said: "You should not put your feet on the table." And he patted my feet...he wanted to move my feet onto the floor. But I have got used to putting my feet on the table. And then she told me: "You have grown up. You cannot be like this anymore." Yes, don't have manner, and she said that it would be bad if other people saw I was sitting like this. My mom also said that there was a Chinese old saying that sitting should be like a bell, standing like a pine tree...She said like that everyday, which changed me... I felt annoy[ed], haha... I just went back to my room. At that time, she was a little angry, if I talked back, she

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