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Review

The power of story: Narrative inquiry as a methodology in nursing research



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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to explore the essential elements and value of narrative inquiry in nursing research. We propose that understanding a previous experience allows the nurse researcher an “insider view” and hence a deeper understanding of the issues that arise in the relationship between participant and researcher. We suggest that narrative inquiry in nursing research offers a particular way of caring about how knowledge is produced. Nursing science would benefit from the understanding that health and nursing practices are dynamic processes characterized by the continuous interaction of human thought and behaviour that continuously ‘pumps’ into personal, social and material environments. Narrative inquiry as a methodology in nursing research is exceptionally useful to uncover nuance and detail of previous experiences.

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In contrast to the social sciences, the interest in and use of narrative research within nursing is relatively new. Narrative inquiry was first used by Connelly and Clandinin [1] as a methodology to describe the personal stories of teachers. Narrative researchers look for ways to understand and then present real-life experiences through the stories of the research participants [2,3]. The narrative approach allows for a rich description of these experiences and an exploration of the meanings that the participants derive from their experiences. Narrative inquiry amplifies voices that may have otherwise remained silent [4]. It utilizes story-telling as a way of communicating the participants' realities to a larger audience [5]. By using the narratives format to present findings, researchers can access rich layers of information that provide

a more in-depth understanding of the particulars of the participants' points of view. The knowledge gained can offer the reader a deeper understanding of the subject material and extra insight to apply the stories to their own context. Narrative inquiry has an underlying philosophy and access that enables the illumination of real people in real settings through the ‘painting’ of their stories. It is a methodology in which the researcher attempts to illuminate the meanings of personal stories and events.

Nursing is increasingly embracing more art-based approaches as research methodologies [6]. However, the majority of studies conducted in Chinese settings are quantitative; few qualitative studies have been performed. One major reason for this disparity is that Chinese nursing

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researchers have been trained to approach issues quantitatively [7]. However, to fully understand issues in nursing, quantitative approaches may not be adequate. Qualitative research methods such as narrative inquiry might be needed to clearly understand patients' experiences or viewpoints. Therefore, this review will explore the essential elements in the application of narrative inquiry and its value in nursing research.

1. Why do we need narrative inquiry in nursing research?

Rather than attempting to categorize research data, viewing the data from an objective stance, or generalizing the data in order to develop 'laws', the narrative approach acknowledges human experiences as dynamic entities that are in a constant state of flux [8,9]. In addition, stories can serve as a primary means for understanding the pattern of an individual life. "Story makes the implicit explicit, the hidden seen, the unformed formed, and the confusing clear" [10]. The stories of the narrative approach allow participants to speak of their experiences without externally imposed constraints. As van Manen argued "... modern thinking and scholarship is so caught up in theoretical and technological thought whereas a phenomenological human science approach may strike an individual as a breakthrough and liberation" [11].

Narratives help nursing researchers understand patients, nurse–patient relationships or other nursing issues such as personal identity, life-course development and the cultural and historical worlds of the narrators. Narratives also help to illuminate the intricacy of specific phenomena and the paradigms that shape peoples' experiences based on how they identify themselves [12]. Health and health care issues can be articulated through the narrative process. Experiences are not expressed as standalone entities, but are constructed as we negotiate through and around constantly shifting meanings. Narrative inquirers are not interested primarily in the facts or truth of these accounts, but rather in the meanings portrayed in story form. The storytellers construct their stories to convey a specific perspective of an event: it is meaning, not necessarily truth that is conveyed in the form of stories. The purpose of narrative enquiry is to reveal the meanings of the individuals' experiences as opposed to objective, decontextualized truths [13].

In narrative inquiry, the researcher asks questions that will help them interpret and experience the world of the participant rather than try to explain or predict that world. In narrative inquiry, nurse researchers assume that the participant who had the experiences will provide powerful insights and ideas that may address health concerns and offer new perspectives as to how life experiences sustain and influence social and health dynamics. Understanding the experience this way allows nurse researchers an "insider view" and hence a deeper understanding arising from the participant's perspective. This insider view does not reveal objective "truths" but instead reveals subjective truths for the participants within their social context.

2. The three-dimensional space narrative structure

Clandinin and Connelly's development of narrative inquiry as a research methodology was deeply shaped by philosopher John Dewey [14–16]. As a philosopher of experience and an educational theorist, Dewey, based his principles on interaction and continuity, theorizing that the terms *personal*, *social*, *temporal*, and *situation* were important in describing the characteristics of an experience. For Dewey, to study life and education is to study experience; that is, education, life, and experience are one and the same.

Dewey [14–16] used the three-dimensional space narrative structure approach (Interaction, Continuity and Situation) to find meaning and this approach is central to his philosophy of experience in a personal and social context. This approach suggests that to understand people, we need to examine not only their personal experiences, but also their interactions with other people. Dewey's three-dimensional approach has had a profound influence in the study and practice of narrative inquiry in many disciplines including education. The fluidity in storytelling, moving from the past to the present or into the future, is at the heart of Dewey's theory of experience in the field of education.

Based on Dewey's theory, Clandinin and Connelly [2] advanced three aspects of this narrative approach: *personal and social* (Interaction); *past, present, future* (Continuity); and *place* (Situation) as shown below (Table 1):

In the three-dimensional space narrative structure approach, Interaction involves both the personal and the social aspects of the experience. Using this framework, the researcher analyses the story for both the personal experiences of the storyteller and his/her interactions with other people. These other people may have different intentions, purposes, and points of view which may inform the analysis.

Continuity or Temporality is central to narrative research. When analysing a story, the researcher considers the past and present actions of the storyteller as those actions are likely to occur in the future [2].

Situation or Place also needs to be considered when analysing a story. The researcher looks for specific locations in the storyteller's landscape that give meaning to the narrative, such as the storyteller's physical location and how the activities occurring in that place affected his/her experiences.

3. The researcher–participant relationship

Narrative inquiry is a complex and dynamic methodology. The researcher and the participant constantly negotiate the meaning of the stories by providing validation checks throughout the collection and analysis [18]. The researcher develops a deep understanding of the diverse contexts that are embedded within the participant's life as the researcher collects stories, negotiates relationships and transactions, and explores new ways of collaborating with the participant to actively involve him/her in the research process [2]. Active

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