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The Narrative Study of Lives: Editorial Notes

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Each article in this Special Edition of *Qualitative Sociology Review* opens a window on everyday reality in central South Africa. The articles all originated from research in the program *The Narrative Study of Lives*, situated in the Department of Sociology at the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein, South Africa. These windows on reality display the narrative as a methodological tool in qualitative research and reveal its potential to open up better understandings of everyday experience. We also reflect on the epistemological journey towards the

unwrapping and breaking open of meaning. Narratives are not the only tools available to sociologists in our quest to understand and interpret meaning. But, when it comes to deep understanding, narratives are particularly effective in opening up more intricate levels associated with emotions, feelings, and subjective experiences.

All the contributions in this Special Edition reflect on the methodological and epistemological practice of using narratives to understand, sociologically. They also all reveal dimensions of the same concrete reality—the contemporary society of central South Africa. We invite readers to engage with each individual article, which provides a vignette—a brief episode—of a larger reality. We also invite you to engage with the entire collection, through which a more detailed and clearer picture of the larger reality will emerge.

Understanding through Qualitative Research

In their introduction to *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2011:3-4), Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln point out that the aim of qualitative research is to increase our understanding of social reality through the use of materials—such as accounts of personal experience, introspection, the life-story,

interviews, artefacts, and various texts—to describe/understand routine and exceptional moments and meanings in people's lives. It is particularly towards the understanding, description, and use of "exceptional moments and meanings" that this Special Edition of the journal turns. John Creswell (2013:44) shares the desire to unwrap exceptional moments and meanings when he talks about being "sensitive to the people and places under study," to generating "complex descriptions and interpretations of the problem," and to uncovering the "meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem." Most readers will agree that qualitative data should lead to rich descriptions, fruitful explanations, and new integrations. We trust that this Special Edition will achieve these aspirations.

Understanding through Narratives

Few methods of data collection capture context, meaning, experience, subjectivity, the lifeworld, reflexivity, and action as effectively as narratives. When people tell coherent and meaningful stories, embedded in a particular context, they reveal to us as researchers insights into our own, as well as other people's experiences. They provide accounts of how particular phenomena came to be what they are, of how those phenomena take on different meanings in different contexts, and of how individuals do/perform/constitute social life.

A narrative captures the importance of context, the meaningfulness of human experience, thought, and speech within time and place; it provides opportunity to understand implicit as well as explicit rationales for action within a holistic framework...the

narrative approach is seeking comprehensiveness of understanding within the individual case. [Bazeley 2013:342]

In *The Narrative Study of Lives* program, we mostly analyze several narratives that focus on a particular issue in order to access the multiple meanings that people attach to it. Several research participants would share their life stories in keeping with the notion that "narrative understanding is a dynamic process, and narrative meaning accrues by degrees" (Popova 2015:n.p.). The linear unfolding of events is almost always constructed by narrators over multiple interviewing sessions. Multiple narrative sessions create a mosaic in which individual elements are pieced together to reconstruct singular events or to constitute a whole picture. Seldom is it possible to assemble a picture of the "full reality" in one session. Sometimes our hermeneutic journey towards understanding—our reconstructions of other people's constructions—involves fewer narrators. The first two articles in this Special Edition are examples of this: the first is an exploration of two life stories collected a decade apart and which focus on experiences of hardship; the second article explores the lifeworld of a single narrator. Both of these articles are situated in the sociology of everyday life. The rest of the articles involve several narrators reflecting on the specific issues in their lifeworlds.

The very essence of life-story research (especially in as far as narrative inquiry, life history, and oral history are concerned) provides an epistemological key to a wide scope of knowledge of everyday reality, indigenous knowledge, cultural transmission, and community engagement. Life-story data can,

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however, never simply be accepted as “unmediated representations of social realities,” as Atkinson and Delamont (2009:316) caution. For this reason, all the articles in this Special Edition attempt to execute a double reading: the reading of research participants’ narratives against a reading from the background of the empirical reality within which participants are embedded. Researchers within the program of *The Narrative Study of Lives* always need to engage in a reflexive process to demonstrate how narrative realities that were unwrapped through life story research coincide with historical truths, and how they are logically consistent with other forms of understanding of social reality. Ken Plummer (2001) agrees with this view when he contextualizes the use of narratives as:

getting close to living human beings, accurately yet imaginatively picking up the way they express their understandings of the world around them, perhaps providing an analysis of such expressions, presenting them in interesting ways, and being self-critically aware of the immense difficulties such tasks bring. [p. 2]

Although written a few decades ago, John Spradley’s (1979) statement on why narrative research offers great potential resonates with our aim for the collection of articles in this Special Edition:

I want to understand the world from your point of view. I want to know what you know in the way you know it. I want to understand the meaning of your experience, to walk in your shoes, to feel things as you feel them, to explain things as you explain them. [p. 34]

Understanding the South African Context through the Narrative Study of Lives

It is now more than two decades since South Africa transformed itself from being an apartheid prison and arch-pariah to a widely acclaimed example of the potential for a new humanity. Few countries were more despised by the international community than the apartheid state formed by the National Party of South Africa when it came into power in 1948. Institutionalized and legally enshrined racism was to provide the basis for people living in separation and isolation. A person’s race determined where she/he could live, and also what education, medical care, occupation, social services, legal protection, and property rights she/he would be entitled to. In the wider context of the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989 and the approach of the end of the Cold War, South Africa negotiated a new dispensation under the leadership of Nelson Mandela and F. W. de Klerk. In April 1994, the first democratic elections took place and South Africa was finally free.

But, the legacy of the past continues into the present. Although South Africa is now a country with a constitution lauded as one of the most enlightened in the world, it is more than ever a country that harbors inequality and inequity. In her introduction to the comprehensive coverage on life-story research in the SAGE “Benchmarks in Social Research Methods,” Barbara Harrison (2009:XXIII-XXIX) argues that a number of factors herald a growth in research that is based on narratives. Most of these factors are particularly relevant to the context of South Africa’s

post-democracy phase, which started in 1994. The factors include an awareness of the role that oral history and narrative accounts can play in contributing towards a democratization of knowledge: How do we remember and experience the past? How are injustices of the past still part of our lives in the present? How do we deal with transition and trauma? How do we experience, and celebrate, cultural diversity and everyday aspects of our identities?

Traditional documents of life very often did not incorporate the voices of the majority of South Africa’s people. Apartheid suppressed their voices by relegating entire racial groups to the economic and cultural margins of society. Through political

exclusion their experiences were hidden from most historical accounts and their views seldom played a role in representations and reconstructions of reality. In step with new horizons and freedoms, everyday discourses on issues that reflect everyday life as explored by researchers and postgraduate students in the program *The Narrative Study of Lives* contribute to greater inclusivity, and provide more opportunities for political and cultural participation and self-expression. The contributions in this Special Edition of QSR hope to provide broad brushstrokes of aspects of life in Central South Africa. The voices contained in the articles open up deeper levels of experience of “ordinary people.” May it also lead to a better understanding of these experiences.

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