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Narrative Approaches as A Supplementary Source of Knowledge On Marginalized Groups

Abstract

This article reflects upon two different research projects that involve narratives from youth in care and youth growing up in families with gay and lesbian parents. We argue that these narrative approaches may offer a supplementary source of knowledge on marginalized groups that often seem hard to reach. The first method involves the participant and researcher collaborating to convert an oral narrative into a written one. In the second, the participants write an autobiographical narrative by themselves, covering themes specified by a researcher. The article is structured so that we first look at the processes of co-creating narratives and collecting autobiographical testimonies. We then introduce the two different methodological approaches by referring to empirical examples. Finally we reflect on the methodological and ethical challenges that occurred during this research.

Keywords

Narrative approaches; Autobiographies; Youth in care; Youth in gay and lesbian families

According to Hine (2009), most understanding of the lives of young people is based on adults' perspectives and interpretations. Until relatively recently this has been taken for granted and seldom questioned (Hine 2009: 35). According to the UN Convention on the Right of the Child, children and youth have a legal right both to be heard and to express their opinions freely. The implementation of this convention has contributed to a change in the way children and youth are viewed in research, a change that demands a different understanding and an alternative perspective that actually involves children and young people (ibidem). A considerable body of literature now exists on children's and youth participation arguing for greater involvement of children and young people in decisions that affect them (Hill et al. 2004; Powell and Smith 2009). In spite of this, Powell and Smith (2009) claim that we still have a long way to go. It is not easy, they state, for children and youth to

participate in research when research agendas are set by an adult researcher (Kellett et al. 2004; Powell and Smith 2009). This issue represents an ongoing challenge within the field of research as well as for individual researchers. Our approach to the topic considers whether a narrative approach could offer children and youth greater possibilities to contribute in research in a way that they are comfortable with. Might a narrative approach also open a door to marginalized people often considered as "hard to reach"? Will the participants in our two research projects, which in many ways can be defined as investigations into marginality and stigmatisation, be better able to contribute their knowledge through a narrative approach?

Narratives and autobiographies

Along with the increasing body of literature concerning child and youth participation, the number of publications relating to narratives has increased massively over the last two decades. There is growing interest in the application of narratives in subjects such as anthropology and ethnography, sociology, psychology and medicine (Hydén 1997; Hydén 2008). As researchers, we are presented with new possibilities and challenges when gathering these many narratives. Narratives present and explain individual experiences by organising actions and events, creating a sense of fulfilment and a connection between the narrator and those listening or reading. Polkinghorne (1988) explains it this way:

....a form of 'meaning making'. /.../ Its particular subject matter is human actions and events that effect human beings, which it configures into wholes according to the roles these actions and events play in bringing about a conclusion. (p.36)

The narrative pulls the events together to create an understanding of cause and effect. But one action cannot simply be explained as the result of another according to some logical principle, and meanings cannot necessarily be explained through logic and rational language either. Bruner (1986) seeks to make this clear by drawing a distinction between the narrative, on the one hand, and the well-formulated logical argument on the other. There are two different types of knowledge, he claims - narrative knowledge and scientific paradigmatic knowledge. These are judged by different measures, and have their own unique demands in terms of formulation and accuracy. Both can be used to convince the listener or reader. But what they can actually convince someone of is different:

...arguments convince one of their truth, stories of their lifelikeness. The one verifies by eventual appeal to procedures for establishing formal and empirical proof. The other establishes not truth, but verisimilitude. (p.11)

Narratives show meaning and their strength lies in their truthfulness and their verisimilitude. When we are listening to or read a good story, the narrator creates a "narrative truth." This is what we have in mind when we say that a story is good - that an explanation seems convincing.

When a narrative is interpreted in the context of research the immediate impression is no longer sufficient. Narratives are connected by language and subjectivity, and are contextualised by and consist of many threads and layers. They cannot be viewed simply as standalone events or as unconnected fragments, but relate to time, place, gender and class. Narratives can describe connections and

divides, surprising occurrences and everyday life. A narrative approach allows us to see a broader and more complex picture than one provided by asking limited questions or sticking firmly to specific themes. If the participant is allowed to express and explain what he or she thinks is meaningful, then one gets closer to what Bruner (1986) and Polkinghorne (1988) call *narrative comprehension*. Through narrative comprehension, a researcher seeks to understand and analyse the ways in which participants identify themselves and how they view their relationship with others.

One common factor between narratives is that the author looks back and reflects upon earlier experiences. He or she looks back at his or her history in the light of the present, and in this light, also at his or her expectations for the future. Narratives are, in that sense, an attempt to create order and continuity from looking back over life lived. Or, in the words of Laslett (1999), "... *they look back on and recount lives that are located in particular times and places*" (p.392). Narratives are not necessarily "windows of reality," but stories about the present and an anticipated future. Denzin (2000) expresses the constitutive function of narratives like this:

Narratives do not establish the truth of...such events, nor does narrative reflect the truth of experience. Narratives create the very events they reflect upon. In this sense, narratives are reflections **on** – not **of** - the world as it is known. (p.xii/xiii)

Riessman (2008) maintains that narrative analysis consists of a series of methodological approaches. One of these is the *autobiography*; that is written accounts where researchers ask the participants to write down their life experiences and/or reflect on more specific themes.¹ Autobiographies are highly personalized texts in which the authors tell stories about their own lived experiences, relating the personal to the cultural (Richardson 2003). Through the writing process, the writer both creates and discovers who he or she is – or will become. But as we know, identity is fluid, and is always being shaped by the combined processes of being and becoming, belonging and wanting to belong. The written form allows, according to Hydén (2008: 50), "*a more elaborate and formal style and use of imagery, and a refined chronology of events.*" It distinguishes itself from the verbal form in that the researcher does not actively engage with the narrator. *The oral narratives* are constructed and produced through the process of interaction between narrator and researcher:

The focus on story telling in various social contexts has led researchers to focus on both the performance of the story and its performative aspects. That is, both the way the story is told and performed in interaction jointly with the listeners, and what is done or accomplished through the telling of the story. (p. 51)

While Hydén (2008) highlights the importance of interaction between narrator and researcher, where what is being told is viewed in light of this, Richardson (2003) asserts that language is the most central factor for narratives. She shows how

¹ Plummer (2005:86-87) splits or divides the term autobiography into three components, and describes the components as: "autos (what do we mean by the self?), bios (what do we mean by the life?) and graphe (what do we presume in the act of writing?)." Plummer further defines the purpose of writing autobiographies thus: "autobiographical writing aims to capture this self-reflexive process, to know it through consciousness, to ultimately understand the flow of this particular life. Part of the philosophy of autobiography, then, concerns this self-reflective debate and the streams of consciousness it provokes."

language does not reflect any social reality, but produces meaning and constructs social realities. Regarding language's importance for expressing one's self – our subjectivity – she writes the following:

Language is not the result of one's individuality; rather, language constructs the individual's subjectivity in ways that are historically and locally specific. What something means to individuals is dependent on the discourses available to them. (p.508)

Narratives give us an insight into how the linguistic expressions used by the author affect the way in which the person concerned sees themselves and their subjectivity. The ways we construct our identities are therefore reflected in narratives. The author or narrator often finds that the patterns he or she now sees did not exist at the time when the events happened, but have arisen through the speaking or writing process. Reflecting in the present about events and experiences in the past, shows how lived life is situated in relation to factors such as time, place, relationships, culture and structure. With this in mind, we can interpret narratives as re-presentations - as the narrator or author's attempt to structure different events and motives in an effort to position the story within "*a discourse of truth and identity /.../ as an attempt to authorize the autobiography*" (Gilmore1994: 69).

Empirical examples

The data which forms the basis of this paper is drawn from two different studies. One of them was conducted with 10 youths aged between 18-27 years with experience of being in care (Follesø 2006). The other is based on 25 participants aged between 15-45 years who have grown up with gay and lesbian parents (Hanssen 2007). We will now present a brief description of the methodology involved and highlight some relevant examples.

Youth in the care system

The first research was conducted between 2004-05 and encompassed six girls and five boys. They had different backgrounds and came from different parts of Norway, but shared a common factor of having lived in a foster home or institution for long periods. Most of them had complex histories and had experienced regular moves between their family home, foster home and institutions. The youth were approached via Youth in Care, a non-governmental organisation established and run by youths that are or have been placed in the care of social services.

The narratives were arrived at in close collaboration with the individual concerned, and the time between the initial meeting and submission of a final, written narrative was around six months. The participants were introduced to the project via an initial conversation where they were given the chance to decide whether they wanted to proceed or decline. No-one chose to withdraw either at the outset or later in the process. Each youth was interviewed individually, starting with an open question about his or her's first memories about being in care. We followed up with questions related to what they chose to value within their narrative. In this way, themes gradually emerged that could be expanded upon. The interview was transcribed, then the researcher composed a draft narrative. This was achieved by charting events on a timeline, collating statements about each event and disregarding statements that did not belong to the dominant narrative. We took this

draft narrative back to the narrator to review and edit, discussed the text together, and adjusted it until the narrator approved the text as theirs.

The kind of themes that arose regularly involved stories of difficult family backgrounds and positive influences. The following examples come from Amalie (20) and Henning (21). Amalie explains:

I started at school at the first place where we lived, just outside Oslo. Then we moved north, here I continued in first grade. I remember two different schools, and four different flats... I never knew when we were going to have dinner. Or who was home. Or if anyone was home at all. Or where we were going to sleep. Sometimes we were woken up in the middle of the night to be driven somewhere. Social services had found us again ... We hid – or she hid us. I can remember once I wasn't allowed to school. We had to pack everything and move to a camp site. (Follesø 2006: 72)

Positive influences could be a teacher, social worker or, as in Henning's' case, a sister:

In many ways she was like my mother. She was responsible for me and helped me when I was a child. In many ways, I think we helped each other through the tough days. We could talk to each other about everything, even when words couldn't describe it. A look, a signal, just a movement was often enough. We had our own language, my sister and I. We weren't the kind of family that could talk around the kitchen table. We lived a kind of sign language type life, us two. Being a big sister is not always easy. Taking responsibility can sometimes mean doing things that sometimes not everyone appreciates. Like contacting social services when everything fell apart. She was the one who was blamed for everything that went wrong. Our parents blamed her for us having to move about, they didn't want to take the responsibility themselves. This is how it is to this day. (Follesø 2006: 46)

Youths growing up with gay and lesbian parents

The other study was conducted in 2004-06 and is based upon the participation of 25 people aged from 15 to 45 (most of whom were aged between 21-26), who have grown up in families with gay and lesbian parents. The participants come from Denmark and Norway. When the empirical work started out it was quite a challenge to attract participants. After sending a lot of emails and information about the study to different organisations, we began to receive replies from applicants who wanted to participate.

The participants were asked whether they preferred to be interviewed or write their life story themselves. Four of the participants preferred to write their own story, while the rest wanted to be interviewed. The participants who decided to write were asked to focus especially on three themes. One was "my family", where they were asked to explain who they considered family and what family meant to them. The second theme concerned the stigmatisation and difficulties they had experienced. The participants were asked to write whether they had experienced any kind of stigmatisation and whether they saw their families as included or excluded by society. The last theme concerned identity – "Who am I?" Here, they were asked to write about their everyday life, what kind of interests they had and about friends and

school or work. In addition, they were invited to introduce any theme, events or situations they deemed meaningful to their story.

Although no interviewer or collaborative partner participated during the writing process, some limitations were applied to their writing – mainly because they were asked to concentrate on specific themes. But once the participants had begun they were on their own - the researcher no longer had any influence on the process. What the participants wrote, the topics they chose to highlight and the way in which they wrote was left up to them.

Christine (31), chose a particular perspective when she wrote about her identity. She followed the themes that she had been asked to write about precisely, which meant that she started by writing about her family, then about stigmatisation and finally about identity. The section on identity was the longest part of Christine's autobiography and is where she reflected most. When writing about her identity, she chose to write about the experiences, thoughts and struggles related to her own sexual orientation. She begins her narrative like this:

I have been married to a man for eight years and have two children by him. I see myself as bisexual but have only been with a woman twice.

Until I was 18 years old, it didn't occur to me that I could be anything but heterosexual. Lesbianism belonged to a completely different generation – it was something my mother and women of her age were. It was not something that I associated with myself or other young women. But then I was (with my mother and stepmother) at a reunion party at Dannerhuset (which my mother had occupied in the past). And I saw some young women kissing each other. It was completely new to me, and I remember, it suddenly struck me: "I could definitely see myself there, kissing another woman!" Then I began to wonder whether I could be a lesbian too (Hanssen, work in progress)

It was entirely Christine's choice to place such an emphasis on her awakening to her sexual orientation. The topic itself opened up the possibility of writing about interests, friends, work and so on, but Christine only concentrated on the process that formed her sexual identity. This suggests that this process must have been very important to her and has occupied a sizeable proportion of her life and thoughts.

Oral and written stories: disparities, similarities and possibilities

Here are different ways in which a researcher can gather data – something these studies also illustrate. We have opted to collect data either by producing personal stories collaboratively between researcher and narrator or by asking participants to compose their narratives in relation to specific themes. Initially, these approaches might seem dissimilar, but, as we see it, there is more that unites than divides them. We will now discuss how these approaches can be an interesting supplement to other types of data collection.

The methods are similar partly because both involve the written form, even though the processes by which the written narrative is composed are quite dissimilar. When working with the texts produced by youth with experience of being in care, this process was complex because of the need to convert oral narratives into a written, coherent text. An interview transcription can make words appear odd and out of context even though they did not seem to be at the time of the interview itself. The

differing demands of written and oral forms account for some of this. The spoken form can be far from grammatically correct. We can repeat ourselves, interrupt ourselves and others, use half sentences or make unsupported assumptions. The speaker may have known what they are saying at the time and the listener may have understood, but, when the speech is transcribed, it can appear completely different. It can seem imprecise or hesitant or the person can, contrary to how they seemed within the conversation, appear to have a poor grasp of language (Fog 1994). This means that the narratives' oral nature, with their meandering, broken formulations and associations, has to be overcome through a rigorous consultation process between the narrator and researcher.

Narratives invite the narrators to highlight what they themselves consider important. For instance, when a participant is asked to write an autobiographical narrative and is given specific topics, it is up to the narrator whether he or she wishes to emphasise some topics over others. This allows them to write about issues that concern them, more so than if they were directed to answer specific questions. The fact that the narrator is not "disturbed" by the researcher during the writing process means that he or she can dip in and out of the written narrative and reflect upon whatever they choose. Autobiographical narratives can therefore give the researcher access to the practices and thoughts in the way in which the narrator chooses to present them. Where a participant is interviewed and works out a text afterwards in collaboration with the researcher, the focus will be on whatever information the participant wants to impart. In other words, it is the participant's own perspectives and choices that are dominant – the researcher does not control or start to steer the contextual direction. The researcher must be responsive and probing, and follow up the topics that the participant wishes to focus on.

When conducting this kind of research, one has to be prepared for surprises. Individual experience is systematised through the personal story in such a way as to create coherence and completeness both for the person that tells their story and the person who reads it. Inviting someone to discuss something that they themselves deem important can, if prepared for, create an opportunity to discuss issues that are not normally enquired about. Whereas set questions can close doors or guide answers in a particular direction, the narrative approach can open up and lead in completely unexpected directions. In the projects that we refer to here, the narrative did indeed provide an opportunity to highlight topics that we had not initially considered as central – and the narratives went in different directions to the ones we had expected. One example is Henning, who had once been able to speak with his sister about everything. Henning had lived in a foster home for many years and it had been assumed that the main issue he would focus on would be his feelings about life in a foster home. However, this turned out to be of secondary importance. What turned out to be the most important narrative to Henning was the painful separation that he had experienced when he was younger. After having relied on his sister as the only fixed focus in his life, he had gone through the trauma of their having been placed in separate homes. Brother and sister gradually lost touch with each other, something that is still painful for Henning. In his case, the narrative opened up into a further discussion of how sibling relationships can be maintained when children are placed outside the parental home. Another example is Christine, who strongly emphasised in her autobiography her experiences and reflections relating to sexuality and sexual identity. Instead of emphasising other narratives, this was – surprisingly enough – the only focus she had when she was writing about the make-up of her personal identity.

Hydén (2008) asserts, as mentioned earlier, that there is a division between oral and written texts. This divide he describes - with reference to Linell and Bauman - as the following:

The norms for written stories are in many ways different from those of spoken language (Linell 2005). /.../ These norms and forms are rarely used in the telling of oral and conversational narratives, where those aspects having to do with the necessity and importance of engaging the audience through the whole story telling event and delivering a point are much more important (Bauman 1987). (Hydén, 2008: 50-51)

Hydén pinpoints the central difference between oral and written narratives. Autobiographies allow for the possibility of meandering backwards and forwards without being directly influenced by the researcher, whereas oral narratives are produced and shaped collaboratively with the researcher. On the other hand, we are critical of the assertion that "*engaging the audience*" and "*delivering a point*" should be more central to oral delivery than when it comes to written narratives. Our experience is that the narrators, whether they are recounting verbally or in written form, are equally concerned about both engaging the recipient of the narratives and portraying what are, to them, the most significant points.

Despite the differences between the oral and written narratives within our research project, it is the similarities that are most striking. There are two specific conditions that we wish to highlight in this regard. Firstly, both approaches give the narrator *time*. This means that the narrator is given a chance to work on their narrative over a longer timeframe than is common with qualitative interviews. Through a recurring process – either through the researcher and narrator continually returning to their narrative, or through the narrator writing, editing and working on their autobiography – greater possibilities arise for new and further reflections than would do with a narrative that is produced only once. Secondly, we believe that our mode of approach is appropriate for engaging with marginal groups that are otherwise difficult to reach. While the prospect of a traditional formal interview might appear threatening, the discussion of one's narrative – or writing it oneself – is a situation in which more people are comfortable. Here, researchers can ensure that it is the narrator's own experiences that are important – and not the researcher's own preconceived categories.

The researcher's influence

A narrator always has an audience, and within a research project the audience is generally the researcher. Through narratives, the researcher tries to understand events and meaning the way that a narrator portrays it. By speaking or writing down a cohesive narrative, the narrator is encouraged to share their own understanding and interpretation, and the space for cohesive thoughts is bigger than with other approaches within research. This doesn't necessarily mean that the researcher's influence disappears. What influence, then, does the researcher have when portraying a narrative?

In the two approaches that are presented here – ie oral narratives and autobiographies – the researcher's influence might at first seem different. The oral narratives were based on an introductory interview, as explained earlier. Despite the open form of questioning, the researcher is able to guide both the turnings and choices, and the researcher's interests will consciously or unconsciously be able to

steer the narrator in the desired direction. The next stage of the process, however, allows the participant to have a greater degree of involvement during which they can correct the researcher's influence. Through their amendments and additions, the participants become involved in the formation of the narrative so that everyone has responsibility for their own narrative. So, the narrator and researcher carry out a work of a performative and creational character. When it comes to the autobiographies, the process is somewhat different. Here, the researcher's participation – and therefore their influence – is marginal during to the author's writing process. The researcher's influence is there at the initial phase - that is, in the formulation of the invitation and the definition of the narrative's topic and scope. After that, the author is left on their own to decide for themselves what they want to put down on paper and pass on to others. The researcher's influence will again be strong when the narrative is interpreted and analysed.

Regardless of which approach is chosen, a researcher will have to reflect on their own role and understanding, as neither a researcher nor a narrator exists in a context-free, neutral environment. Everyone uses their prior understanding as a basis for seeing meaning and patterns in their surroundings. This understanding will be partly conscious, partly unconscious. The researcher's task is to try as much as possible to highlight this context and in doing so show which parameters the analysis falls within. This process of awareness Haraway (1991) describes as *situated knowledge*. Science and knowledge, she claims, must always be understood contextualised, localised or situated.

As researchers we have preconceptions of the people we meet. Marginalisation and vulnerability are terms that contain normative narratives, and which change in relation to historical, cultural and social conditions (Lundberg 2005). In our meetings with vulnerable or marginalised groups it is therefore highly important that we reflect on how we are localised and situated in time, place and culture. But it isn't just about how we as researchers from our own perspective perceive what we see and hear; it is just as important how participants or informants perceive us as researchers. They also view their lives from their own contexts and will often have preconceived views on who we are as researchers, where we come from and what we want from them. This also raises possible imbalances of power and position, differences which – if they are not addressed – can subconsciously steer what is being said and how it is being said.

The researchers therefore have a clear influence within narrative research. They initiate the narratives, choose the boundaries of the topics, and are also central in the way in which the narratives are shaped and constructed. Furthermore, the analysis of the narrative depends on what the researcher recognises as a pattern, their preferred theoretical perspectives and not least what they choose to omit. The researcher's situatedness is therefore of undoubted importance.

Conclusion

Our experience is that participants in research projects get a clearer voice through telling their narratives orally or in written form than when compared to other quantitative and qualitative research. The two methods that we have discussed in this article therefore represent key approaches that provide us with an opportunity to listen to voices that often go unheard. We can therefore see that both oral narratives and autobiographies can offer important supplementary knowledge when engaging with people who are not always easy to reach.

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