

Jan K. Coetzee 

University of the Free State, South Africa

## Narrating Emotions: Towards Deeper Understanding

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18778/1733-8077.16.1.02>

**Abstract** Qualitative research aims at unwrapping the ordinary and the exceptional in order to bring us closer to a complete description and interpretation of life. People's narratives are particularly effective in revealing deeper dimensions of experience and of meaning. Narratives always need to be read against the background of the empirical reality in which they are embedded. Most of the narratives referred to in this article are situated against the empirical reality of South Africa as a society in transition, still marred by inequality and inequity. One narrative, from a project conducted in the Czech Republic, shares some contextual characteristics with the South African examples—the Czech Republic is also a society in transition, previously employing institutional violence to suppress political dissent.

An important aspect when dealing with intense political and social transformation is the presence of highly charged feelings and emotions. As part of the contextualization for this article I briefly argue that the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (1996-1998) in many ways did the groundwork for a new appreciation of the sharing of emotional accounts and revelations pertaining to atrocities, injustices, and suffering. This Commission's work prepared the way for recognition of the potential of such sharing to create a better understanding of the experience of life in a deeply divided context.

In the article, I argue for the establishment of a *social encounter*—a concept frequently used in the micro-sociological writings of Randall Collins—between researcher and research participant in an attempt to come to deeper levels of understanding. During episodes of emotional sharing of experiences and feelings a research participant often reveals deeper levels of social interaction—these revelations have the potential to open the way for a hermeneutical process towards understanding. Dramatic recall can lead to reconstructing a story that contains all the elements of what was originally heard, seen, and felt.

The article uses five examples of narratives containing moments of high levels of emotion—each example opening the way for better understanding of the experiences of the research participants.

**Keywords** Narrative; Understanding; Empirical Reality; Social Encounter; Hermeneutics; Engagement; Empathy; Emotion

**Jan K. Coetzee** is a Senior Professor Emeritus and Director of the program *The Narrative Study of Lives* in the Department of Sociology at the University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa. His most recent publication is the book *Narrating the Everyday: Windows on Life in Central South Africa* (SUN MeDIA, 2019) (together with Asta Rau and Magdalena Wojciechowska). He is a practicing visual artist and his latest art focuses on books as documents of

life, using old texts juxtaposed with found and sculpted objects to draw attention to the book as a symbolic knowledge object and potential source of criticality. His monographs, *Books & Bones & Other Things* (SUN PRESS, 2018) and *The Book & The Skull* (SUN MeDIA, 2020), contain examples of this work.

**email address:** [coetzeejk@ufs.ac.za](mailto:coetzeejk@ufs.ac.za)

## Qualitative Research and Understanding

The qualitative researcher aims at bringing the practice of sociology closer to understanding. In their introduction to *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2011:3-4), Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln refer to the objective of qualitative research as the use of materials such as personal experience, introspection, lifestory, interview, artifacts, and texts to describe, in order to understand, routine and exceptional moments and meanings in people's lives. It is in particular to understanding, and to exceptional moments, unique experiences, and sensitive meanings that this article turns. In a similar vein, John Creswell (2013:44) alludes to the qualitative researcher's continuous desire to unwrap the exceptional to bring about "complex descriptions and interpretations of the problem" that will lead to breaking open the "meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem." Ultimately, the qualitative sociologist wants to use the research subject's rich descriptions—including descriptions of the exceptional and the sensitive—in order to reach fruitful explanations and new integrations of meaning, interpretation, and understanding.

## Understanding through Narratives

It is commonly accepted that few methods capture 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 insights into their own, as well as others' experiences. Narratives provide accounts of how particular phenomena came to be what they are, how those phenomena take on different meanings in different settings, and 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]

Any research program based on the narrative study of lives frequently goes beyond employing the narrative of an individual research participant. A single

narrative can provide comprehensive understanding, but most of the time several research participants share their lifestories. “Narrative understanding is a dynamic process, and narrative meaning accrues by degrees” (Popova 2015:n.p.). The unfolding of perspectives and events is usually constructed by several narrators, and meaning is almost always constructed over multiple interviewing sessions. Multiple narrative sessions have the potential to create a mosaic or tapestry in which individual elements can be woven together to reconstruct singular scenarios or where a combination of elements can constitute the comprehensive picture. Seldom is it possible to assemble a picture of the full reality in one data collection session. Our reconstructions of other people’s constructions mostly happen incrementally. The deeper the levels of sensitivity, the more refined our research approaches—and the more delicate our lenses need to be in order to dissect the complex layers in the unwrapping of meaning. In order to reach deeper levels of sensitivity and to dissect the complex layers of meaning, the narrative researcher needs to establish a sympathetic encounter with the participant. To establish sensitive rapport requires specific efforts and an astutely developed awareness on the part of the researcher.

To put forward arguments for the potential of narrative research to unlock our understanding of our research participants’ lifeworlds is nothing new. Ken Plummer (2001:2), for example, emphasizes these requirements 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.

To understand their experiences, to share in their feelings, and to attach meaning in the same way as they do, the researcher needs to take every opportunity to enter the participants’ lifeworlds. An important epistemological element in qualitative research design—described above by Plummer as the ability of “accurately yet imaginatively picking up the way they express”—entails sensitivity from the side of the researcher to detect all the dimensions in the narrative of the participant. Without exploiting emotional dimensions, the researcher should provide opportunities and a safe environment to the research participant to share her/his feelings. Whilst guarding against overstepping the protective boundaries set by sound ethical practice, the researcher can reach a deeper understanding of the research participant’s lived experiences when utilizing intersubjective rapport during moments of emotional sharing.

## **Narrating Life in the Context of Empirical Reality**

In the previous section, I stress that narrative and biographical studies have the potential to provide natural vehicles for unlocking our understanding of deeper levels of meaning and experience, but that this process of unlocking will not happen automatically. The very essence of lifestory research—especially in as far as narrative inquiry, life history, and, to a lesser extent, oral history are concerned—is that

it can provide an epistemological basis for a wide scope of deeply personal knowledge and experience of everyday reality, of local and indigenous practices, of cultural transmission, and of community engagement. Lifestory data can, however, never be accepted as “unmediated representations of social realities,” as Atkinson and Delamont (2009:316) caution. The researcher employing a narrative study of lives by necessity has to engage in a reflexive process of questioning how the experience of social reality in people’s narratives relates to historical truths, and how it is logically consistent with other forms of our understanding of social reality.

The fact that data from narrative research cannot be accepted merely on face value brings me to the main point in this section. Any form of narrative research requires us to undertake a double reading in which we read and interpret research participants’ narratives against the background of the empirical reality in which their narratives are embedded. This view stems directly from the work of Pierre Bourdieu and the emphasis that he places on “methodological relationalism” (cf. Bourdieu 1989; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). In terms of this, Bourdieu acknowledges both the intersubjective and the objective dimensions of the nature of reality. These two dimensions constitute a double life and necessitate a double reading. There should always be a complementary application of two divergent modes of analyzing: the quantitative analysis of the social structure (referred to by Bourdieu as the social physics) and the qualitative exploration of meaning-frameworks (that Bourdieu calls the social phenomenology) underlying the experiences of the individuals constituting these social structures (cf. Bourdieu 1990). By

following the principles set out by Bourdieu’s methodological relationalism, the narrative researcher acknowledges the importance of analyzing the intersubjective—and often deeply emotional—dimensions of the research participant’s accounts within the context of objectivated phenomena. Bourdieu employs the concepts “habitus” and “field” to elaborate on the double reading. The concept “habitus” is analogous to the confluence of self-experience, biographical situation, stock of knowledge, narrative repertoire, and meaningful action. The concept “field” refers to the given situation in which the subject finds her- or himself and includes concrete physical and objective aspects of reality, as well as socially constructed meaning-frameworks (Wacquant 1989).

All the examples in this article—except for the case material in the first example—come from research undertaken in South Africa, a society in transition. The first example is taken from comparative research done in South Africa and the Czech Republic, and deals with a narrative describing subjective experience within the context of a society undergoing radical transformation. As was the case in apartheid South Africa, the state in the former Czechoslovakia dealt harshly with political opponents. Dissent often lead to imprisonment and the narratives describing the trauma of long-term incarceration in these two countries strike similar notes. For the purposes of this article, I will not delve deeper into the objective “field” or “social physics”—as distinguished by Bourdieu—of the pre-democratic Czechoslovakia. In many ways the concrete, physical, and objective reality of political prisoners in these two countries were similar. I selected the narrative contained in

the first example because it provides the clearest indication that I have come across in my academic career of the way in which a highly emotional moment during an interview can trigger a personal out-pouring that pictures graphically and accurately how a research participant experienced a particular situation.

In as far as the other 4 examples are concerned: they all come from different research projects undertaken in South Africa. In addition to this similarity, the 4 examples have in common that all those research participants belong to what can be described as previously disadvantaged communities. All these participants are classified as Black African South Africans—previously subjected to institutional racism and to the cumulative effects of apartheid legislation.

Few countries have ever been as reviled by the international community as the apartheid state established by the National Party of South Africa since it came to power in 1948. Institutionalized and legally enshrined racism enforced a culture of separation, inequality, and isolation. A person's race determined every aspect of her/his life: where she/he could live, whom she/he could marry, her/his quality of formal education, access to medical care, social services, legal protection, and property rights to which she/he would be entitled. In the wider context of the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989 and of the end of the Cold War, South Africa negotiated a new dispensation under the leadership of Nelson Mandela. In April 1994, this country's first democratic elections took place and South Africa became democratically free.

The remnants and shadows of South Africa's past did not disappear with the dawn of this new dispensation. Now a country with a constitution lauded as among the most enlightened in the world, South Africa remains marred by inequality and inequity. The case studies referred to in this article illustrate some of the inequalities and inequities that persist in this country's post-democratic era. There is no doubt that oral history and narrative accounts can play a significant role in contributing towards democratization. How we remember and experience the past is important in terms of how we will deal with our present situation. It is important to determine to what extent the injustices of the past are still part of our lives in the present. By narrating our experiences, feelings, and insecurities we come to deal with transitions and traumas. Narrative accounts can help us to understand how we experience, and celebrate, cultural diversity and everyday aspects of our identities.

One of the most important aspects when dealing with intense political and social transition, democratization, previous injustices, and suffering is the unwrapping of sensitive feelings and emotions. Shortly after the end of apartheid in 1994 the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was set up in South Africa (South African History Online 2017). This Commission, a body similar to a court of law where testimony is heard, provided an opportunity to anybody who felt to have been a victim of the violence and injustice perpetrated during the apartheid years to come forward and tell her/his story. Similarly, perpetrators of apartheid's violence and crimes could give testimony, disclose their actions, and apply for amnesty from prosecution. From the



beginnings of the formal hearings in April 1996, until the presentation of the TRC's report in October 1998, hardly a day went by without the South African society being exposed to highly emotional accounts and revelations pertaining to atrocities, injustices, and suffering.

For the first time in South Africa's history, the emotion-filled accounts of representatives of the majority of its people could be heard. The contribution of the hearings of the TRC towards a new appreciation of the potential to bring into the public domain emotional accounts of deeply-experienced events cannot be over-emphasized. Traditional sociological instruments such as the analysis of documents, survey questionnaires, observations, and discussions within small groups cannot provide adequate insights towards fully understanding the deeper levels of experience, remembering, and accounting for the role and effects of the past on our present-day reality. Research reports and other documents from South Africa's pre-democratic dispensation rarely incorporate the voices of the previously disadvantaged and disenfranchised. Because of their political exclusion they were hidden from historical accounts and their views seldom played a role in the reconstruction and representation of reality. The TRC undoubtedly contributed to an expansion of highly emotional everyday discourses about everyday life. In many ways, this Commission provided important principles for employing sensitive narratives containing emotion and affect. It is against this background that I argue for researchers to employ constant awareness of the epistemological value of utilizing personal and—sometimes—highly charged disclosures when collecting data.

## The Hermeneutic Process

From the preceding arguments it is clear: One of the primary aims of qualitative research in general, and of the use of narratives containing emotion and affect in particular, is to explore deeper levels of experience of ordinary people. Liz Stanley (2013:6) summarizes this aim as follows:

The narrative, biographical and documents of life approach has its eye on the complexities of social life, differences between people and their points of view, and the importance of the contextual and situational.

Research by means of narratives focuses in general on the biographical descriptions that people give of their everyday life experiences. In order to unlock as much as possible of the "complexities of social life" (as Stanley describes the aim of biographical research) the qualitative researcher needs to follow a hermeneutical path that will lead to the unwrapping of these complexities. The biographical descriptions that we most commonly use can be contained in a research participant's autobiography, auto-ethnography, lifestory, or in documents of life such as diaries or memoranda. Most of the time biographic descriptions come from in-depth interviews. And it is during in-depth interviews that the opportunity arises for unlocking aspects of the "complexities of social life" (Stanley 2013:6). These interviews are usually conversational, dialogical, informal or semi-structured, open-ended, reflexive, collaborative, or guided. But, in order for these interviews to break open meaning and to bring about deeper understanding, they must become social encounters between researcher and participant. With the

researcher initiating and guiding, the participant collaborates by producing accounts or versions of her/his past, present, or future actions, experiences, aspirations, thoughts, and feelings. During this dialectical process of *researcher initiating* → *participant collaborating* → *researcher guiding* → *participant revealing* a social encounter is created.

Randall Collins (2004:43) elaborates on the idea of a social encounter when he relates it to the micro-sociological basis of interaction ritual theory. The qualitative interview, as a form of social encounter based on and leading to deeper levels of social interaction, establishes a hermeneutical path to understanding. The social encounter and interaction between researcher and research participant provides a possibility—as well as a vehicle—for unwrapping intense moments of experience. Collins (2004:43) refers to these social encounters as rituals of interaction:

These are the events that we remember, that give meaning to our personal biographies, and sometimes to obsessive attempts to repeat them: whether participating in some great collective event such as a big political demonstration; or as a spectator at some storied moment of popular entertainment or sports; or a personal encounter ranging from a sexual experience, to a strongly bonding friendly exchange, to a humiliating insult; the social atmosphere of an alcohol binge, a drug high, or a gambling victory; a bitter argument or an occasion of violence. Where these moments have a high degree of focused awareness and a peak of shared emotion, these personal experiences, too, can be crystalized in personal symbols, and kept alive in symbolic replays for greater or lesser expanses of one's

life. These are the significant formative experiences that shape individuals; if the patterns endure, we are apt to call them personalities; if we disapprove of them, we call them addictions. But, this usage too easily reifies what is an ongoing flow of situations. The movement of individuals from one situation to another in what I call interaction ritual chains is an up-and-down of variation in the intensity of interaction rituals; shifts in behavior, in feeling and thought occur just as the situations shift. To be a constant personality is to be on an even keel where the kinds of interaction rituals flow constantly from one situation to the next.

Narrative studies largely operate within an idealist theory of knowledge where descriptions of people's intentions, interpretive understanding, intersubjectivity, engagement, and empathy are important elements towards the unwrapping of meaning. The aim to reach subjective understanding or interpretation goes hand-in-hand with a hermeneutical process of using emotion and affect as conduits into deeper levels of experience. The encounters, exchanges, and interactions between researcher and research subject are most of the time recorded and transcribed. This leads to the construction of a text that not only contains a record of what was said, it also encapsulates the intentions, hopes, suffering, fears, and joys of the research participants. Hermeneutics becomes the process through which deeper understanding is restored and meaning unwrapped (Outhwaite 1987:62). This unwrapping of meaning takes place through a "dialogical relationship between interpreter and text; the dialectic between question and answer" (Bleicher 1982:73).

When interpreting/analyzing narratives, we need to understand that the social reality they reveal is

intrinsically dynamic and complex. It represents an intricate fusion of human agency, structures, and contexts within which social action takes place and within which meaning is constructed. None of these components is exact, given, or fixed; each presupposes the other. [Cf. in this regard my remarks on Bourdieu's proposed "double reading" and his emphasis on "methodological relationalism" in the previous section.] As narrative analysts, our understanding is based on interpretation, and we need to draw on all available dimensions, including the deeper levels of subjectivity as contained in emotions and affect.

In his book on ethnography, *Tales of the Field*, John Van Maanen (1988:101-124) refers to a specific kind of narrative. In the same way as an impressionist artist strives towards capturing the totality of a scene at a specific instant or moment in time—often within the context of a specific mood—the researcher should strive towards capturing "impressionist tales." Research participants, when relating subjective and sometimes intimate detail, reveal deep meaning and lived-through experiences. The researcher and the research participant should aim to "reconstruct in dramatic form those periods" (Van Maanen 1988:102) that were subjectively experienced. An impressionist tale therefore is based on dramatic recall, on reconstructing a story that contains all the elements of what was originally heard, seen, and felt. As impressionists themselves, the research participants are not simply reflecting what happened. When telling impressionist tales, they are reflexively involved in opening up facts, speculations, details, background information, interpretive processes, ambiguities, and emotions.

## Narrating Emotions: Examples of Interpretative Repertoires

I will now briefly apply the principles of looking for and capturing deeper levels of meaning, experience, subjectivity, and emotions as expressed by research participants in different projects within my program *The Narrative Study of Lives*. I focus on the different ways that research subjects are emotional during their everyday being-in-the-world. When introducing his discussion of the phenomenological paradigms in his book on social theory, David Inglis (2012:86) states that phenomenology and other interpretive approaches seek "to understand how people conceive of the world around them" and that they are "concerned with how particular persons or groups of people see, perceive, understand, experience, make sense of, respond to, emotionally feel about and engage with particular objects or circumstances." This description highlights a progressive movement towards deeper levels of understanding as the qualitative researcher moves from seeing, to perceiving, to understanding, to experiencing, to making sense of, to responding to, and eventually to emotionally feeling about and engaging with the experiences of the research subject. Following the pathway of an impressionist researcher—as pointed out by Inglis above—we are interested in the reflexive, creative doings or actions of people and the pictures they paint of their experiences, and which they hold up for the researcher to see and to share.

The cover design of Margaret Wetherell's book *Affect and Emotion* (2012) presents a conceptual map of some of the emotions that a qualitative researcher might find when researching subjectivity and in-



tersubjectivity. On the cover of the book are 12 concepts arranged in a circle like the 12 numerical indicators on the dial of a watch. The 12 concepts cover some of the important dimensions or denominators of emotion and affect: fear, panic, ecstasy, remorse, nostalgia, awe, indifference, duty, guilt, epiphany, anxiety, and fatigue. This conceptual map is, of course, far from all-encompassing and/or complete. On the positive side of the range of emotions we miss love, desire, longing and on the negative side there is no reference to hate, frustration, and repulsion—and other emotions are also missing. This cover design is certainly not meant to be complete, but it does present in graphic form a chart for the qualitative researcher to use as a guide—in a similar manner as the face of a watch indicates time as a moment in a day.

As alluded to above, the article contains 5 examples. These examples are not analyzed in order to extract specific findings contained in the brief exemplars. Suffice to mention that all these examples contain personal accounts of individual experiences. In all 5 cases, the epistemological value of personal and emotional disclosures leading to each research participant revealing further information are emphasized. After sharing the emotionally charged accounts of their respective situations, all the research participants continued to elaborate on the details of their experiences.

### **Long-Term Political Imprisonment**

This exemplar of trauma narratives comes from an earlier longitudinal and cross-national project (1998-2002) on narratives of former political prison-

ers from South Africa and the former Czechoslovakia (Coetzee, Gilfillan, and Hulec 2002). During one of the interviews a Czech participant reflects on the immense loneliness of being a long-term prisoner and describes the emotional suffering that flows from detention in isolation:

**Jiří Mesicki**<sup>1</sup>: On the night of 5 December (1951), St. Nicholas Day, we could hear beyond the prison walls the sounds of children laughing and crying out as they celebrated the day. In my mind's eye, I could see them mischievously running from place to place, dressed up as angels and devils. They were the guards' children and suddenly they reminded me of my own childhood. But, I had a grim feeling that I was going to go to another hell. So eventually, very early on 6 December, we were put into three buses and, accompanied by a panzer with a machine gun, we moved on. It was obvious that we were not going to a camp but to another prison. [Coetzee, Gilfillan, and Hulec 2002:119-120]

When talking about the evening of 5 December 1951, Mesicki could hardly contain himself. Whilst fighting back his tears he related the torture of being imprisoned with the worst of common-law criminals—murderers, rapists, and armed robbers. He continued with his account of the extreme abuse that the political prisoners endured, devoid of any semblance of human rights or their oversight. Moved by the emotional recall of his suffering, Mesicki immediately started to reflect on the effect of his harrowing experience. It is likely that without the emotional recollection of the physical circum-

---

<sup>1</sup> Birth name.

stances of his ordeal—contained in the excerpt of his narrative above—he might not have come to describe the deeply personal and subjective effects that the harrowing physical circumstances had:

After about three years, the civilian in us all—the human being—began to evaporate somehow. It disappeared because of the terrible monotony of our lives. We were just part of a mass, called *mukls*.<sup>2</sup> We were *mukls*—men destined for liquidation. Our brains had leaked from our heads. We were brain-dead. We didn't care for health, we didn't care for life. We were merely creatures destined for liquidation. We were not allowed to enquire about our fates, to speak about our lives, our futures. The only chance we had was when we went to the doctor. We would ask: "What's new? Any chance of change?" And the answer would be: "It's forever." The question was always: "What's new?" And the answer, always: "It's forever." After five or six years, we had no hope at all. We saw, with the little information we got from outside, that the West's attitude towards the Soviet Union was changing. There was no hope that World War III would start. At that stage we believed that only a new war could lead to our freedom. So we were not sure that we would ever leave prison; that we would survive. [Coetzee, Gilfillan, and Hulec 2002:128]

We might not have been privy to this touching description of the effects of intense trauma on human existence and experience, was it not for Mesicki's nostalgic reflections on the St. Nicholas Day events of 1951. His recalling of the sadness and complete sense of loss that he felt at that moment triggered

<sup>2</sup> *Mukl* is the acronym for the Czech *muz urceny k likvidaci*: a man destined for disposal.

within him one of the most touching accounts of the effects of intense trauma.

### Everyday Precarity of Extreme Poverty

In a project on life in resource poor squatter areas—informal settlements—around Bloemfontein, in central South Africa, a group of women narrate how they are faced with a scourge of social ills resulting from poverty and unemployment (Masenya 2015). Both examples given below refer to sections during the interviews when these women were unable to contain their emotions. The suffering caused by extreme poverty is clearly depicted when they talk about their feelings. In both cases, the researcher experienced a tighter bond with the participants after their emotional outpourings. This bond—referred to earlier as a "social encounter"—opened the door for more sharing and disclosure by the participants.

**Pinky**<sup>3</sup>: It makes me feel bad seriously. That thing [not being able to find a permanent job] pains me so much—like at the end of every month, people buy things. They buy things for their children and I can't afford to. I also want to buy things for my children, but I can't because I do not have money. My children always tell me: "Mom, did you see that this person's parents bought him this and we don't have shoes and other stuff?" Do you understand how painful that is because I know that my children do not have those things and they want them, but I can't provide them. It hurts my feelings very much and I would take a walk to calm myself down. When I got back, only then would I be able to sit my children down and ask

<sup>3</sup> Pseudonyms are used for all narrators from this point on.

them to accept the fact that I do not work so I do not have money.

**Zoleka:** I have brothers, but they are just useless. I buried my mom alone. I buried her all alone and they came holding their empty hands. The firstborn brother gave me R150.00 and what was I going to do with that money? And the other one contributed R900.00. They contributed such little money for their own mother's funeral! So, I gave them back their money. I buried my mother alone. I took her body from Bloemfontein and laid it to rest at my home [Lady Frere, Eastern Cape]. I did all that by myself. My brothers both live in Cape Town and are not working at all. I am alone. I might just as well be my mother's only child because I am not getting their help at all.

### **Overcoming the Divide: Young Black South Africans' Lived Experiences of Upward Mobility**

The institutionalized racism that once subjugated the Black majority during South Africa's apartheid years gave way after 1994 to legislature that aims to bring the country into a new era of egalitarianism. A striking result of this has been the steady increase of young Black people achieving upward mobility and making the transition into the middle- and upper-classes. The research in this example explores the lived experiences of upward mobility of young Black newly qualified professionals such as lawyers, accountants, and medical doctors (cf. Kok, Coetzee, and Elliker 2017:56-73). As can be expected, the research often touches on this group's efforts to negotiate between separate and often contrasting identities: on the one side, being previously disadvantaged, growing up in poverty, and coming from the margin of the established society and—on the

other side—operating now among highly skilled colleagues, most of whom grew up within the privileged and protected realms of higher class and/or status groups.

Almost all of the upwardly mobile young professionals that form part of this project experience elements of continued prejudice and discrimination in their professional life. Being often reminded within present-day South Africa of previously existing inequalities, it remains difficult for them to express in an open and honest way the resentment that they experience. The deep-seated hurt caused by innuendos of inequality and their implied inferiority often resurfaces. Their new socio-economic status often requires them to show that they can conform to the old establishment's rules and expectations: that they are capable of performing well within their respective professional domains. As a result, most of the research participants had difficulty with narrating their upward trajectory. Only when the research participant could draw inspiration from the existential struggle in the process of her/his upward mobility, and the emotions involved in this struggle, was it possible to unleash an honest reflection on the personal journey. Piwe's story is an example in this regard. As a young medical doctor coming from a humble background his narrative only starts to flow well after he re-lived—in a somewhat humorous way—how he initially found his way to the institution of higher learning, the university, where he would complete the academic training required to qualify as a medical doctor. This account by Piwe not only contains references to the road that he had to follow in order to have come to the achievement of the required academic status. His account of this

journey also opened the way for his enthusiastic participation in the research.

**Piwe:** I came here with the train. I remember this: the first time I came to Bloemfontein, because I never travelled anywhere while I was still at home. So, I remember when I told my mother: "Listen, I'm gonna go to school, but I don't know." Because, you know, I didn't apply for "Medicine" [studying medical sciences at a Medical School] to start with. And remember the closing date is in May the previous year. So, I told my mom: "Listen, I'm going. I got good distinctions! So, let me go." She gave me R80. The train by then was 30 bucks. So, I took the train from Kroonstad and I got in here at the train station. Then I got off there [Bloemfontein Central Railway Station] and then I started asking around: "Where is the Varsity?" And they showed me the tower, the Cell C Tower there at the Waterfront. So, they just said: "Take this road." They showed me the Nelson Mandela Road. So, I walked to Varsity, looking at that tower. And they said: "When you get there, you will see on your right-hand side the Mall, Mimosa Mall, and then you know you are almost there. And then: just keep on looking on your left. You will see first Grey College and then the Varsity." And then, when I got to the Varsity, I wanted the Medical School. And the security guards, they took me to Kovsie Health [the on-campus Health Clinic at the University of the Free State]. And I sat there for hours and then the doctor came and said: "We're opening a file for you." And I'm like: "No! I want to register to become a student." And I had to go home to squat at another friend's place and come back the following day to just look for the Medical School. And once I found it, then everything became clear, you know.

And you can imagine when you get to Medical School and you know that you didn't apply, but you go with such confidence, you know? That: "Let me try." And if I didn't try, I wouldn't have been here today. Because they told me at first it's impossible. The Dean told me this is crazy, this is madness. Because I actually asked for the Head or the Principal. I didn't even know there were Deans there. So they took me to the Head of the School of Medicine, Professor Van Zyl. And I got there and I said: "Professor, I've come from so far. I brought my grade 12 certificate and what do you say, Professor? I want to study medicine." And he's like: "*Jisslike, Boet!*" [Loosely translated as: Oh my goodness, son!]. He took me to Mrs. Roussow, the administration woman, and she's trying to comfort me saying: "You passed well, but there's still some next time." And I started pouring out like: "If you know where I come from." And to see how God works: 2 days later they called me. The very same people who said it was impossible, they called me and said: "Listen, there are two students who cancelled, and we didn't consider the list. We actually considered you first." And they considered me. They called me in. I studied medicine. And here I am today.

### **The Sangoma or the Health-Care Center?**

#### **Health-Seeking Practices of Women**

The subtitle of this section refers to the dilemma in developing and poor societies between adhering to traditional beliefs and practices on the one hand, and the utilization of modern medicine provided by the state and/or the private sector, on the other hand. The *sangoma* represents traditional health-care, performed by a healer without formally recognized training. Although usually more afford-

able to poor people and also more accessible in informal settlements, their “services” are not for free. Traditional healers operate outside of the confines of regulated and controlled tariffs and practices, and depend largely on the use of herbal medication and the application of forms of witchcraft. The desperation of poverty and the lack of means—financial, transport, informal area without medical facilities, et cetera—often leave the poor with no other option than to seek help from the traditional healer.

The dilemma expressed in the subtitle underlines the fact that health-care in South Africa is, even 25 years after the country’s democratization, still very unequal. Although health and well-being are seen as fundamental human rights, the reality is that people in resource-poor communities do not have access to good quality health-care. This project traces narratives related to health-care from a group of women living in abject poverty. It aims to document the health-seeking practices and medical decision-making that these women employ when faced with illness in their households (Mbelekani, Young-Hauser, and Coetzee 2017:210-227). All the women in this research talk about their dealing with illness in their homes against the background of their struggle for economic survival. The women come from a traditionally stoic cultural world, where emotions arising from illness and hardship are largely suppressed in daily interactions. The interviews clearly afforded them an opportunity to share without this customary constraint. When realizing that their emotional accounts on their day-to-day struggles were being listened to with empathy, they started to tell us in greater detail about

their trust in and use of traditional healers when confronting illness.

The following excerpt depicts a moment during data collection when one of the participant’s deeply emotional account of her despondency provides a turning point in her narrative. After sharing the suffering that she endured in her struggle with poverty, she seemingly finds it easier to talk about how she normally seeks medical care when she or a family member has to deal with illness:

**Terry:** ...when you are living, God gives you energy. Sometimes when I am trying to sleep, I would think: “What are we going to eat tomorrow? Oh, this maize meal is small!” But, you will see someone come in and give you money without you asking, and not knowing that you don’t have food. It is God. Sometimes you would see that you have maize meal, and you don’t even know how it got there. Sometimes a person brings you...you know. Sometimes you have nothing and you would see a person walk in carrying everything that you need and give it to you just like that. You will be shocked. How did the person know? What is that? It is God who sent the person. As people we live by God...Sometimes you even sleep without eating because it’s tough. You have no money, you have nothing.

Oh, it was painful! Oh, it was painful! Even when they took photos of us, these children surrounding me, we were crying. Jo! It was painful, my child! [Wiping tears from her face]...The most painful thing was thinking where I am going to get what from where and from whom. I don’t know because I live on the money I get from the social grant [crying]



and these children are still at school [wiping tears from her face]...

Yes! It's taking me back. The pain is coming back again. My heart is painful, you know. To ask for a place to sleep. And another thing that also pains me is that my ancestors are there. And God is there...

### **Marginality and Oppression: Narratives of Belonging from a Transforming South Africa**

Situated in the sociology of everyday life, this last example of the role of sharing deeply emotional experiences during in-depth interviews comes from 2 farm workers. The project focuses on the lifestories of two elderly research participants—one set of interviews conducted 10 years, and the other set 20 years after South Africa's democracy of 1994 (Coetzee and Rau 2017). These 2 participants were born on two separate farms. Having spent their entire lives on these farms where they were born, Abraham and Henry reflect on their past and on their position in the "new" South Africa. Both opened up in terms of what they regard as their "identity," as well as on their views of the place and space where they have been living. They shared their religious beliefs and told us how religion constitutes a way in which they negotiate everyday life and ameliorate suffering. Our lengthy meetings with Abraham took place during 2004/2005—one decade after South Africa's democracy—and those with Henry during 2014—two decades after the political transition. We are convinced that the two research participants would not have opened their hearts to the same extent if it was not for the opportunities during the interview sessions to talk freely—often emotionally—about their personal experiences of be-

reavement, addiction, anger, and frustration. Having been given the opportunity to speak about traumatic events during the course of their personal lives provided openness for these elderly participants to talk about strong traces of continued suppression and suffering. They relate their feelings about subordination in the workplace and on being members of a largely disenfranchised group—even though South Africa's democracy came a decade or 2 earlier.

**Abraham:** Yes, Mister, actually. But, as I look at my case, I see: we continue like this. If the Lord made us in such a way that we were all the same height, nobody would have wanted to work under someone else. And no one would have helped anyone else. Now the Lord has to change this matter in this way. So, if I can, I must now help. Now I have to help my master so that he can get ahead—like working with the sheep and those things. Now if we were all the same height, something like this wouldn't work. Now the Lord knew well, he had good knowledge.

There has to be [a system of] let me do the work. And I also say so: I agree one hundred percent. There has to be. Let me do the work. Then it can...then it works. Each one feels...I feel: it is good that the Lord made it available.

**Henry:** I still call [the boss] Master and *Seur* [the boss's father and original boss] and *Miesies* [the boss's wife]. Yes, we did say Master [*Baas*] and Great Master [*Grootbaas*] and Small Master [*Kleinbaas*]. That we heard from our parents. I think [we speak to them in this manner] because of the suffering. You had to call the White owner *Seur* because he was the highest. Then you had a foreman, Master [*Baas*], a White fore-

man. I also had to say to him *Baas, Baas Sarel*. But, for the owner of the farm it was *Seur*.

Yes, we felt that we were going backwards and the man was going forward. But, you worked just for free. It did bother people. But, people were afraid... Where would you find a new Master? If I went to another farm, that farmer would phone my previous Master and would ask him: "What kind of a boy was he?" Then the previous master would say: "No, he was such a boy or he was such a boy." Then the farmer would come back and say: "No, man, I did look for a man, but I found one." Then you had to go and try to get another Master...And you would go along until one day when you would maybe find a Master.

## Conclusion

From the examples given above it is clear that deeper qualitative understanding can potentially be reached when narratives reveal exceptional moments and deeply personal meanings. When narratives unwrap elements of the exceptional we stand the chance of gaining greater insight and understanding—elements that might enable us to guide the interview towards deeper explorations of the research participants' experiences. In all the examples in this article, the research participants reach emotional moments following which they open up and reveal personal experiences. These experiences range from hopelessness, panic, and anxiety—as is the case of the long-term political prisoner whose life lost its meaning—to desperation, fatigue, and fear that accompany life in extreme poverty and desolation.

It is unlikely that research on traumatic and sensitive issues such as the profound experiences of long-term political incarceration, a life in abject poverty, the challenges of negotiating the pitfalls of newly acquired socio-economic status, and the confines of structural inequality can bring us to deeper levels of understanding without tapping into the revealing potential of negotiating a personal social encounter between researcher and research participant. In all of the above cases the emotional narratives reflect personal experiences. At the same time they open a door to our understanding of structural impediments in moving towards a better society.

*The narrative study of lives*—when conducted in a sympathetic manner and when allowing space for emotional meaning-making—has the potential to contribute to increased democratization in a country where the numerical majority of the population was previously excluded from political participation and where their voices were silent. The effect of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) on the South African society in as far as its contribution to a democratization of knowledge on and about the powerless confirms this potential. A further effect of the TRC is that it also sensitized people to strive towards a better understanding of their own social reality so that they can work towards a better society. For the qualitative researcher, *the narrative study of lives* can contribute to a more focused search for understanding the social realities of a wide spectrum of society. This search can and will contribute to the development of an ear more finely-tuned to the personal—and often emotional—experiences of research participants.

## References

- Atkinson, Paul and Sara Delamont. 2009. "Rescuing Narratives from Qualitative Research." Pp. 309-318 in *Life Story Research, vol. 1*, edited by Barbara Harrison. London: Sage.
- Bazeley, Pat. 2013. *Qualitative Data Analysis: Practical Strategies*. London: Sage.
- Bleicher, Josef. 1982. *The Hermeneutic Imagination*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1989. "Social Space and Symbolic Power." *Sociological Theory* 7(1):14-25.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1990. *The Logic of Practice*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre and Loïc Wacquant. 1992. *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Coetzee, Jan K. and Asta Rau. 2017. "Between Enslavement and Liberation: Narratives of Belonging from Two Farm Workers in Rural South Africa." *Qualitative Sociology Review* 13(1):10-31.
- Coetzee, Jan K., Lynda Gilfillan, and Otakar Hulec. 2002. *Fallen Walls: Voices from the Cells that Held Mandela and Havel*. Prague: Lidové Noviny.
- Collins, Randall. 2004. *Interaction Ritual Chains*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Creswell, John W. 2013. *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*. London: Sage.
- Denzin, Norman K. and Yvonna S. Lincoln. 2011. *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*. London: Sage.
- Inglis, David. 2012. *An Invitation to Social Theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Kok, Michael, Jan K. Coetzee, and Florian Elliker. 2017. "Overcoming the Divide: An Interpretive Exploration of Young Black South Africans' Lived Experiences of Upward Mobility in Central South Africa." *Qualitative Sociology Review* 13(1):56-73.
- Masenya, Dimakatso Veronica. 2015. *Women's Narratives of Everyday Precarity in the Mangaung Township (Bloemfontein, South Africa)*. Master's Dissertation in *The Narrative Study of Lives*. Bloemfontein: University of the Free State.
- Mbelekani, Yvonne N., Amanda Young-Hauser, and Jan K. Coetzee. 2017. "The Sangoma or the Health-Care Centre? Health-Seeking Practices of Women Living in the Mangaung Township (Bloemfontein, South Africa)." *Qualitative Sociology Review* 13(1):210-227.
- Outhwaite, William. 1987. *New Philosophies of Social Science*. London: Macmillan.
- Plummer, Ken. 2001. *Documents of Life 2. An Invitation to Critical Humanism*. London: Sage.
- Popova, Yanna B. 2015. *Stories, Meaning, and Experience: Narrativity and Enaction*. New York: Routledge.
- South African History Online. 2017. *Truth and Reconciliation Commission*. Retrieved October 03, 2018 (<https://www.sa-history.org.za/topic/truth-and-reconciliation-commission-trc>).
- Stanley, Liz. 2013. *Documents of Life Revisited: Narrative and Biographical Methodology for a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Critical Humanism*. Surrey: Ashgate.
- Van Maanen, John. 1988. *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Wacquant, Loïc. 1989. "Toward a Reflexive Sociology: A Workshop with Pierre Bourdieu." *Sociological Theory* 7(1):26-63.
- Wetherell, Margaret. 2012. *Affect and Emotion: A New Social Science Understanding*. London: Sage.

.....  
 Coetzee, Jan K. 2020. "Narrating Emotions: Towards Deeper Understanding." *Qualitative Sociology Review* 16(1):12-27. Retrieved  
 Month, Year ([http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/archive\\_eng.php](http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/archive_eng.php)). DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18778/1733-8077.16.1.02>  
 .....