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NARRATIVE  
METHODS IN  
FAMILY BUSINESS  
RESEARCH

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# AGENDA

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Narrative research

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Types of narrative research

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Research methods

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Narrative analysis

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Considerations for narrative research



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# NARRATIVE RESEARCH

- The goal of many qualitative research inquiries is to develop a general or universal understanding of social structures and social phenomena.
- Narrative research, involves a qualitative analysis of one person's perspective and worldview.
- The narrative method focuses on a deeper understanding of the world from an individual person to give us a sense of how the world interacts with and is interpreted by that person.
- Analysis of a coherent narrative ultimately contributes to theories in the social sciences
- When we get a sense of the way that people interact with and perceive the world around them, we can employ other qualitative methods to confirm and develop our intuitions into theories at scale.



## EVERYWHERE WE LOOK: WE FIND STORIES OF WHAT MIGHT HAVE HAPPENED OR OF WHAT WILL HAPPEN

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- Barthes (1977, p. 79) remarked, narrative is “simply there like life itself.”
- Weick (1995, p. 127) argued that “most organizational realities are based on narrative.”
- **Stories we find are usually filled with particulars:**
  - **details about specific actors, acts, scenes, tools and intentions.**
- Social life is constituted by narrative, but traditional variance methods (Mohr, 1981) are, to some extent, fundamentally flawed.
  - By tabulating and correlating the variable properties of people and things, we risk mis-recognizing and misrepresenting the phenomena we to study.

WHAT DO WE  
MEAN BY  
'NARRATIVE'?

- *Labov (1972, 1982) identifies the functional parts of a well-formed narrative: an abstract (or summary), orientation (to the scene, characters, etc.), complicating action (sequence of events), evaluation (meaning or significance of the action), resolution (what finally happened), and a coda (brings the story back to the perspective of the present).*
- *Here, we are interested in the properties of narrative that any set of data (in whatever form) might have in varying degrees.*
- *The more clearly these properties are present, the more the text will seem like a narrative.*
- *Following Bruner (1990, p.77), we can identify four features of a text (or discourse) that marks it as “narrative”.*

# (1) SEQUENCE IN TIME



- *Narrative should include a clear **beginning, middle and end**, although even fragmentary*
- *stories can still represent time and sequence.*
- *Narratives do not need to present **events in sequence**; they are frequently re-arranged for dramatic effect (as in murder mysteries, where the corpse is usually found before killer is revealed).*
- *But **chronology** is a central organizing device.*
- *The events or actions referred to in a narrative are understood to happen in a sequence.*

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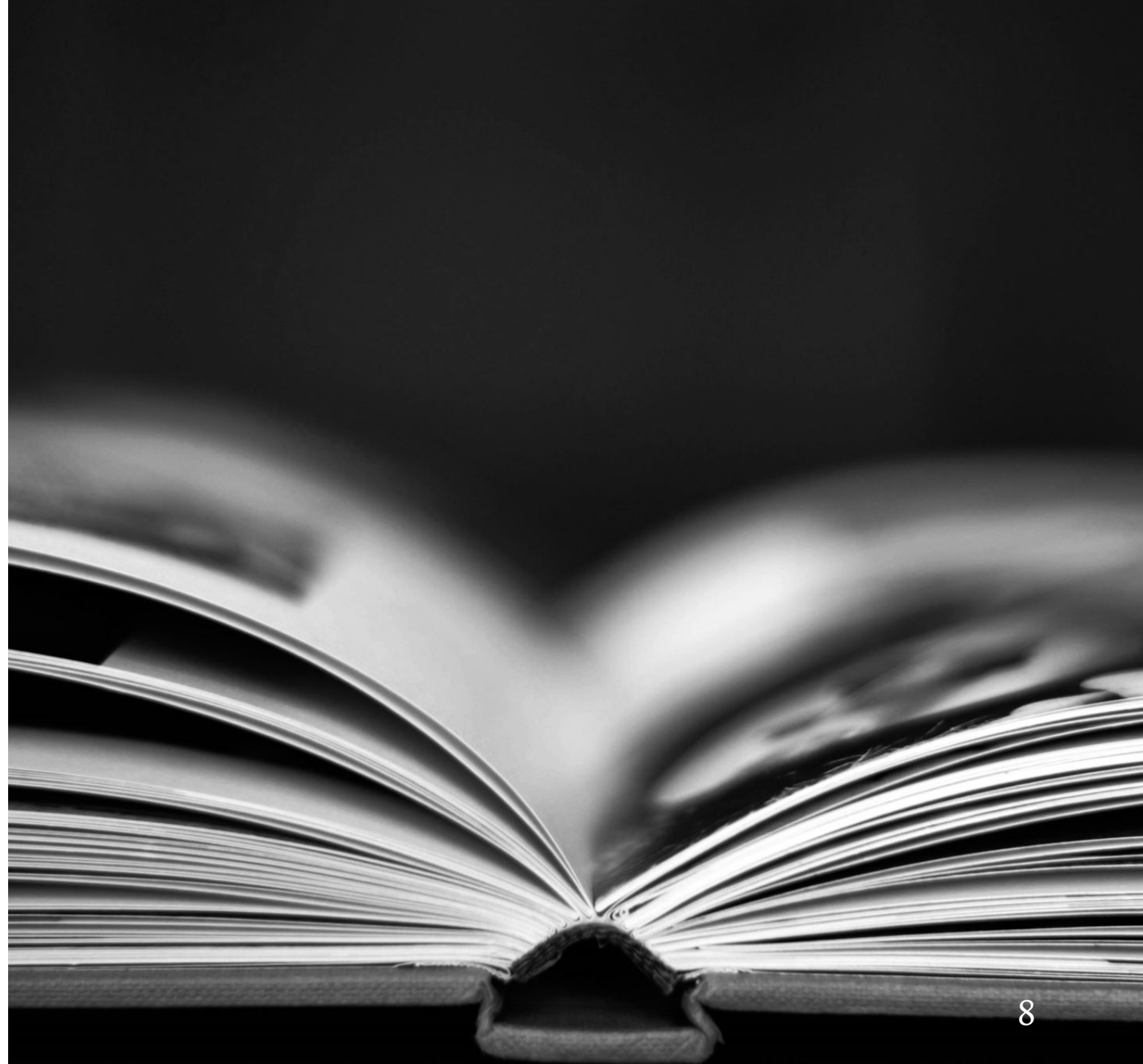
## (2) FOCAL ACTOR OR ACTORS

- *Narratives are always about someone or something.*
  - *There is a **protagonist** and frequently an **antagonist**, as well.*
  - *The characters may not be developed or even identified by name, but along with sequence, they provide a **thread that ties the events in a narrative together.***
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## (3) IDENTIFIABLE NARRATIVE VOICE

- *A narrative is something that **someone tells** (Bal, 1985), so there should always be an identifiable voice doing the narrating.*
- *This may or not be one of the actors in the story.*





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#### (4) “CANONICAL” OR EVALUATIVE FRAME OF REFERENCE

- **Narratives carry meaning and cultural value** *because they encode, implicitly or explicitly, standards against which actions of the characters can be judged.*
- *In fairy tales (and their close cousins, textbooks),* **the moral is often explicit.**
- *It may even have a privileged section that isolates it from the actual events in the narrative. But even without any explicit moral, **narratives embody a sense of what is right and wrong, appropriate or inappropriate, and so on.***

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## WHITE (1981, P.5) - ANNALS, CHRONICLES AND NARRATIVE

### **Annals:**

- *contain an explicit representation of sequence and time, but there is no suggestion of a connection between events or any attempt at explanation.*
- *As White (1981, p.7) notes, annals lacks anything we normally associate with a story...*
- *“no central subject, no well-marked beginning, middle, and end, no peripeteia, and no identifiable narrative voice.”*
- *Annals are a familiar source of data for researchers, because they are a product of any electronic system that records transactions or keeps a “log file”.*
  - *Electronic mail systems, for example, create annals. Imagine extracting a sample of messages from an email database.*
  - *The messages would be time stamped and could be displayed sequentially, but unless someone had carefully arranged and annotated them, there would be no obvious or inherent sense of connection.*

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# CHRONICLES

## Chronicle:

- *builds on this simple temporal organization by adding a focal character or theme of some kind: “things that happened to us”, for example.*
- *In White’s words, “A chronicle often seems to wish to tell a story, aspires to narrativity, but typically fails to achieve it. More specifically, the chronicle usually is marked by a failure to achieve narrative closure.” (1981, p.5, emphasis in original)*
- *White argues that what distinguishes narrative from a mere chronicle is this sense of closure, and that this closure is provided by the moral context that gives meaning to the events in the story.*
  - *“The demand for closure in the historical story is a demand, I suggest, for moral meaning, a demand that the sequences of real events be assessed as to their significance as elements of a moral drama.” (White. p. 20, emphasis in original).*
  - *What White (1981) calls “moral”, Bruner (1990) calls “canonical”, but regardless of the label, narratives embody evaluative criteria against which the conduct of the characters is implicitly or explicitly judged - not against your morals.*

# MORAL CONTEXT OF NARRATIVES

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- *Goguen (1997) notes that moral (or in his terms, evaluative) criteria permeate narratives; they are not confined to the “moral of the story.” This is not merely an academic point about literary criticism, because stories are pervasive features of social life.*
- *Indeed, Goguen (1997, p.48, emphasis in original) argues that “everything in social life has an inherent ethical component, and it attains its meaning through the relations of accountability in which it participates.”*
- *For the time being, it is sufficient to say that what distinguishes narrative from the chronicle is this sense of moral or evaluative context.*
  - *It is important to note, when talking about moral context, that one need not evoke “morals” in the Victorian sense.*
  - *Rather, the stories told in any given cultural group will tend to reveal their values and their sense of what is appropriate.*
  - *Goguen (1997) and many others have argued, these stories give meaning to the events, actions, and objects for that group.*

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# THE VALUE OF NARRATIVE RESEARCH

- To understand the value of personal narratives in research, consider other qualitative methods that examine groups of research participants.
    - *When applied to family business contexts, we can see that surveys can give us a demographic makeup of family firms and their attitudes towards succession, while observations can show us how family members and non-family members interact with each other in a dynamic family business.*
    - *While these are useful research methods, they may not adequately capture the perspectives of next generation or women in family firms, particularly if they do not make up a significant portion of family business.*
      - *If you research inclusion in decision making in family firms, qualitative studies employing research methods at scale may not adequately capture the data you're looking for - specific experiences.*
  - Among other things, the narrative turn acknowledges the need to fill in the blanks left by other research methods.
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# NARRATIVE RESEARCH FOR DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

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- The narratives that people tell are also a useful object of inquiry in qualitative research.
  - Analyzing narrative construction is an important aspect in communication research and cultural studies – showing how past experiences are told and retold to convey new and different knowledge.
  - Think about how children apologize to their parents when they break something.
    - Do they apologize right away or do they tell a story about what they were doing at the time to explain their actions? The different ways that children can construct a narrative gives us insights regarding their value systems and the larger culture around them instilling those values.
  - Researchers often examine the ways in which their participants tell stories in semi-structured interviews or observed experiences (e.g., talking with friends, giving a speech).
  - The narrative method that any given storyteller employs can offer context about how that person constructs knowledge and conveys meaning to others.
  - A comprehensive understanding of that context can be a powerful tool for understanding cultural practices of communication among people.
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# TYPES OF NARRATIVE RESEARCH

- **Biography:** the purpose of biographies as a function of narrative inquiry is to shed light on the lived experience of a particular person that a more casual examination of someone's life might overlook.
  - Newspaper articles and online posts might give someone an overview of information about any individual, while a more involved survey can provide sufficiently comprehensive knowledge about a person useful for narrative analysis and theoretical development.

# TYPES OF NARRATIVE RESEARCH

**Life history:** this is probably the most involved form of narrative research as it requires capturing as much of the total human experience of an individual person as possible.

- While it involves elements of biographical research, constructing a **life history** means collecting **first-person knowledge** from the subject through **narrative interviews** and **observations** while also drawing on other forms of data such as **field notes** and **in-depth interviews with other individuals**.
- Even a newspaper article or blog post about the subject can contribute to the contextual meaning informing the life history.
- The objective of conducting a life history is to *construct a complete picture of the subject from past to present* in a manner that gives your research audience the means to immerse themselves in the human experience of your subject.





# TYPES OF NARRATIVE RESEARCH

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**Oral history** : while all forms of narrative research rely on narrative interviews with research participants, oral histories *begin with and branch out from the individual's point of view* as the driving force of data collection.

- Major events like wars and natural disasters are often observed and described at scale, but a bird's eye view of such events may not provide a complete story.
- An oral history can assist researchers in providing a unique and perhaps unexplored perspective from in-depth interviews with a narrator's own words of what happened, how they experienced it, and what reasons they give for their actions.
- Researchers who collect this sort of information can then help to fill in the gaps that common knowledge may not have grasped.
- The objective of an oral history is to provide a perspective built on personal experience and illuminating potential inquiries that can be addressed in future studies
- The unique viewpoint that personal narratives can provide has the potential to raise analytical insights that research methods at scale 

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may overlook.




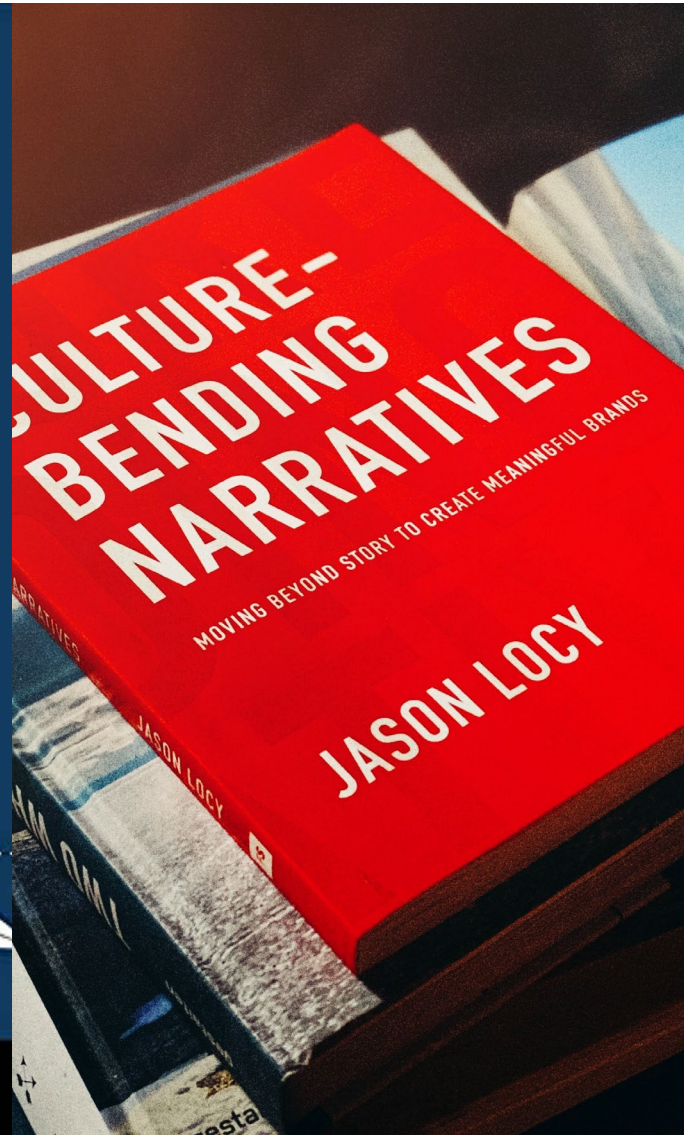
# RESEARCH METHODS FOR A NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

Hans Hansen

## NARRATIVE CHANGE

How Changing the Story  
Can Transform Society,  
Business, and Ourselves

 Columbia Business School  
Publishing



- To conduct narrative analysis, researchers need a narrative and research questions.
- A narrative alone might make for an interesting story that instills information, but
  - *analyzing a narrative for generating knowledge requires ordering that information to identify patterns, intentions, and effects.*

The narrative approaches rely on the written or spoken words or visual representation of individuals.

*Narrative inquiry* observes what and how something is said.

*Narrative research* can be both a research method and an object of research.

*Narrative methods* can be considered "real world measures" to investigate real life problems.

**In simple terms, the narrative approach encompasses the life story of a person and the meaning of that person's experience and an aggregate of narratives is created that influence each other.**



# DESIGNING A RESEARCH INQUIRY

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- Narrative research is less about the storyteller or the story they are telling than
  - it is about generating knowledge that contributes to a greater understanding of social behavior and cultural practices.
  - *While it might be interesting or useful to hear a comedian tell a story that makes their audience laugh, a narrative analysis of that story can identify how the comedian constructs their narrative or what causes the audience to laugh.*
- A narrative inquiry starts with a research question that is tied to existing relevant theory regarding the object of analysis (i.e., the person or event for which the narrative is constructed).
  - If your research question involves studying inequalities in power across multiple generation of family business, for example, then the narrative analysis you are seeking might revolve around the lived experiences of family business founders, and other members.
  - If you are analyzing narratives from Founders' stories, then your research question might relate to identifying aspects of founders' stories that grab the attention of next gen for example.
- The point is that researchers conducting a narrative inquiry do not do so merely to collect more information about their object of inquiry. Ultimately, narrative research is tied to developing a more generalized or contextualized understanding of the social world.

# DATA COLLECTION

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- Having crafted the appropriate research questions and chosen the appropriate form of narrative research for your study, you can start to collect your data for the eventual narrative analysis.
  - The key point in narrative research is the narrative.
  - The story is either the unit of analysis or the focal point from which researchers pursue other methods of research.
  - Interviews and observations are great ways to collect narratives.
  - Particularly with biographies and life histories, the best way to study your object of inquiry is to interview them.
  - If you are conducting narrative research for discourse analysis, then observing or recording narratives (e.g., storytelling, audiobooks, podcasts) are ideal for later narrative analysis.





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# NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

- **Narrative structure:** linguistic or thematic organisation (literary and cultural studies, narratology)
- **Narrative content:** themes or meanings BUT not the same as thematic or content analysis in general. Narrative thematic analysis focuses on how themes develop within the story, not just on themes which can be extracted from the story.
- **Narrative context:** how a particular narrative works in relation to the audience listening and the wider narratives of that context eg. What work is the narrative trying to accomplish in relation to the audience / how does a particular experience of eg being a woman relate to broader narratives of feminism.



# NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

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## **Thematic analysis**

- Qualitative research often employs thematic analysis, which is merely a search for commonly occurring themes that appear in the data.
- The important point of thematic analysis in narrative research is that the themes arise from the data produced by the research participants.
- In other words, the themes in a narrative study are strongly based on how the research participants see them, rather than focusing on how researchers or existing theory see them.

## **Structural analysis**

- The search for structure in a narrative is less about what is conveyed in the narrative and more about how the narrative is told.
  - The differences in narrative forms ultimately tell us something useful about the meaning-making epistemologies and values of the people telling them and the cultures they inhabit.
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# NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

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## Functional analysis

- Whereas a straightforward structural analysis identifies the particular parts of a narrative, *a functional analysis looks at what the narrator is trying to accomplish through the content and structure of their narrative.*
- For example, if a research participant telling their narrative asks the interviewer rhetorical questions, they might be doing so to make the interviewer think or adopt the participant's perspective.

## Dialogic analysis

- There is a nuanced difference between what a narrator tries to accomplish when telling a narrative and how the listener is affected by the narrative.
  - There may be overlap between the two, but the extent to which a narrative might resonate with people can give us useful insights about a culture or society.
  - The topic of humor is one such area that can benefit from dialogic analysis, considering that there are vast differences in how cultures perceive humor in terms of how a joke is constructed or what cultural references are required to understand a joke.
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# WHAT ARE WE LOOKING FOR IN NARRATIVES?

- Narrative vs stories
- Coherence vs incoherence
- Big stories / small stories
- Co-construction and performance of narratives
- Reflexivity
- Counter-narratives
- From generalisability to relate-ability
- Narrator credibility
- Are experiences believable?
- Aesthetic quality
- Authenticity
- Accessibility
- Closure
- Compelling
- Explanatory power



# CONSIDERATIONS FOR NARRATIVE RESEARCH

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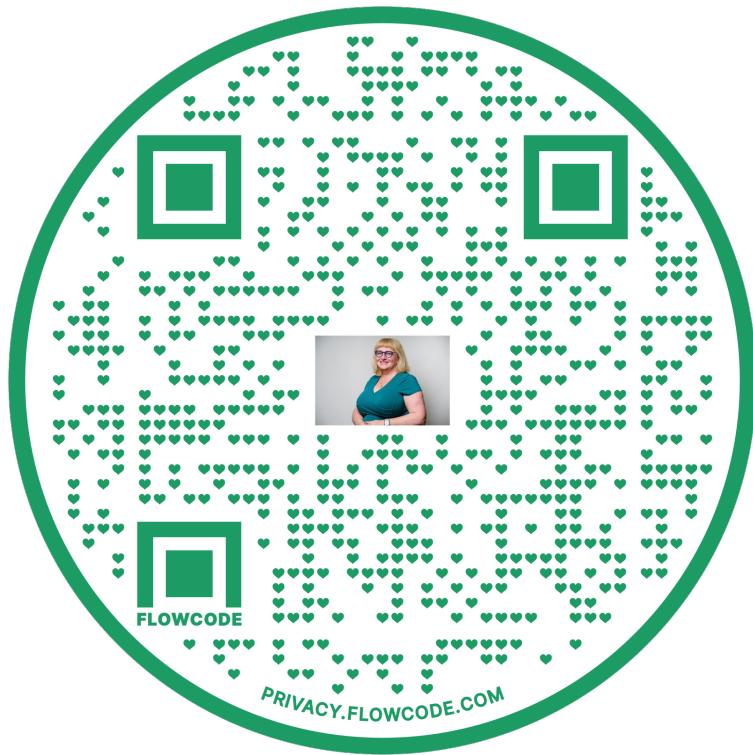
As every story is embedded in its cultural context, the question might arise about how objective these experiences are.

The results of research are influenced by the personal narratives ( researcher's positionality), but by carefully considering your narrative methodology and critically reflecting on your research, you can conduct transparent and rigorous research and avoid potential misunderstandings.

**Rather than trying to look at the story "objectively", you want to put it into its sociocultural context.**

In this way, your analysis can also take several varieties of narrative into consideration and a phenomenon, or a story can be viewed from different perspectives.

# THANK YOU



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