

## ARTICLE

**Narrative in Social Work**

## A Critical Review

**Catherine Kohler Riessman***Boston College, USA***Lee Quinney***Glanrhyd Hospital, Wales, UK***ABSTRACT**

We examine how the concept of narrative has entered social work over the past 15 years, with special emphasis on research applications. Approaching our task from distinctive standpoints and locations, the article reviews definitions of narrative, criteria for 'good' enough narrative research, and patterns in social work journals. Our evaluation uncovered few studies, in contrast to the volume of narrative research in education, nursing and other practicing professions. Three exemplars of narrative inquiry – model research completed by social workers – show the knowledge for practice that can be produced with careful application of narrative methods, in all their diversity. Drawing on our respective locations and experiences, we cautiously suggest some reasons for the paucity of quality research in the USA, and greater representation in Europe.

**KEY WORDS:**

narrative

social work  
research

storytelling

Beginning in the late 1960s and continuing at a hectic pace, the idea of narrative has penetrated almost every discipline and profession. No longer the sole province of literary scholarship, narrative study now is cross-disciplinary, not fitting within the boundaries of any single scholarly field. The 'narrative turn' has entered history, anthropology and folklore, psychology, sociolinguistics and communication studies, and sociology. The professions, too, have embraced the concept, along with investigators who study particular professions: law, medicine, nursing, education and occupational therapy.<sup>1</sup> The narrative turn is part of a larger 'turn to language' in the social sciences – the springboard for this special issue. Although narrative may have some roots in phenomenology (Ricoeur, 1991), applications now extend beyond lived experience and worlds 'behind' the author. A central area of narrative study is human interaction in relationships – the daily stuff of social work.

Our purpose is to examine the status of narrative in social work, with particular attention to research applications in journals, and to critically interrogate the results of the review. There is narrative scholarship by social workers in books and book chapters (cf. Hall, 1997; Laird, 1993; Riessman, 1994; Shaw and Gould, 2001), but academic journals remain the primary outlet for publication. How has narrative shaped social work scholarship there? More specifically, has there been systematic application of narrative methods (however diverse) in research? Social work is based on talk and interaction, and we expected to find many investigators taking up narrative approaches to study interactions with clients, and talk about clients with other professionals. We were surprised by the small corpus of systematic research, but pleased to uncover several exemplars.

A caveat about our mode of presentation first, before turning to complexities of definition, evaluation of the literature, and speculation about possible reasons for the paucity of narrative research in social work. The article includes several voices because we occupy distinct social locations, bring different perspectives and experiences to the evaluation, and our respective roles in the project were distinctive. Riessman is a senior narrative researcher, North American and a former faculty member of several US schools of social work, far removed from practice. She took responsibility for analysis of the literature and for crafting the article. Quinney is a British social work practitioner and postgraduate research student, beginning a career that has included grounded theory methods and will include narrative. He completed a large part of the library research, wrote impressions, and added the voice of a practitioner to our final draft. We approached the topic of narrative from particular standpoints, as all investigators do, but these generated difficulties in writing (we have never met face-to-face). Readers will notice a shift in pronouns and, at points in our text, one of our names identifies a particular set of ideas. Although awkward, the device preserves our respective voices – a hallmark of narrative – and allows

us to present a 'story' of the research endeavour. As in all stories, multiple voices and identities come into play.

## WHAT IS NARRATIVE?

The term 'narrative' carries many meanings and is used in a variety of ways by different disciplines, often synonymously with 'story'. We caution readers not to expect a simple clear definition of narrative here that can cover all applications, but we will review some definitions in use, and identify essential ingredients. Narrative inquiry in the human sciences is a 20th-century development; the field has 'realist', 'postmodern' and constructionist strands, and scholars disagree on origins and precise definitions (cf. Chase, 2005; Langellier, 2001; Riessman, 1993, forthcoming).

Riessman (1997) has written elsewhere about the tyranny of narrative and her concerns continue: the term currently has a level of popularity few would have predicted when some of us began working with stories that developed in research interviews and medical consultations 20 years ago. To put it simply, the term has come to mean anything and everything; when someone speaks or writes spontaneously, the outcome is now called narrative by news anchors and qualitative investigators alike. It is not appropriate to police language, but specificity has been lost with popularization. All talk and text are not narrative. Developing a detailed plot, character, and the complexities of a setting are not needed in many communicative exchanges. Storytelling is only one genre, which humans employ to accomplish certain effects. Other forms of discourse besides narrative include chronicles, reports, arguments and question and answer exchanges, to name a few (Riessman, 1993, forthcoming).

In everyday use, however, narrative has become little more than metaphor – everyone has her 'story' – a rising trend linked to the use of the term in popular culture: telling one's 'story' on television, or at a self-help group meeting. Missing for the narrative scholar is analytic attention to how the facts got assembled *that* way. For whom was *this* story constructed, how was it made, and for what purpose? What cultural resources does it draw on – take for granted? What does it accomplish? Are there gaps and inconsistencies that might suggest alternative counter-narratives? In popular usage, a 'story' seems to speak for itself, not requiring interpretation – an indefensible position for serious scholarship.

Although personal stories are certainly prevalent in contemporary life, narrative has a robust life beyond the 'self'. Narrative has energized an array of fields in the social sciences: studies of social movements, organizations, politics and other macro-level processes. As individuals construct stories of experience, so too do nations, governments, and organizations construct preferred narratives about themselves. Perhaps a push toward narrative comes from contemporary preoccupations with identity. No longer viewed as given and

'natural', individuals must now construct who they are and how they want to be known, just as groups, organizations, and nations do. In postmodern times, identities can be assembled and disassembled, accepted and contested (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000).

Among scholars working with personal accounts for research purposes, there is a range of definitions of narrative, often linked to discipline. In social history and anthropology, narrative can refer to an entire life story, woven from threads of interviews, observations, and documents. Barbara Myerhoff's ethnography of Aliyah Senior Citizens in Venice, California is a classic example. From taped conversations of Living History classes, combined with observations of the life of the Center and poems and stories written by members, she composed compelling narratives of the lives of elderly Jews living out their days and 'performing' their lives (Myerhoff, 1978; Myerhoff et al., 1992).

At the other end of the continuum lies the very restrictive definition of sociolinguistics. Here a story refers to a discrete unit of discourse: an answer to a single question, topically-centered and temporally-organized. The classic example is Labov (1982), who analyzed bounded tape-recorded answers to a question about a violent incident.

Resting in the middle on a continuum of definitions is work in psychology and sociology. Here, personal narrative encompasses long sections of talk – extended accounts of lives in context that develop over the course of single or multiple interviews. The discrete story that is the unit of analysis in Labov's definition gives way to an evolving series of stories that are framed in and through interaction. An example here is Elliot Mishler's (1999) study of the trajectories of identity development among a group of artists/craftpersons, constructed through extended interviews with them.

The diversity of working definitions of narrative in these brief examples of research shows the absence of a clear-cut definition. Do varying definitions have anything in common? What distinguishes narrative from other forms of discourse? The answer is *sequence* and *consequence*: events are selected, organized, connected, and evaluated as meaningful for a particular audience (Hinchman and Hinchman, 1997; Riessman, 2004). Analysis in narrative studies interrogates language – *how* and *why* events are storied, not simply the content to which language refers (Riessman, 1993, forthcoming).

Storytelling can disrupt research and practice protocols when brief answers to discrete questions are expected. Instead, narrators take long turns to create plots from disordered experience,<sup>2</sup> giving reality 'a unity that neither nature nor the past possesses so clearly' (Cronon, 1992: 1349). Typically, narrators structure their tales temporally and spatially; 'they look back on and recount lives that are located in particular times and places' (Laslett, 1999: 392). Temporal ordering of a plot is most familiar (and responds to a Western listener's preoccupation with forward marching time – 'and then what happened?'), but narratives can also be

organized thematically and episodically (Cazden, 2001; Gee, 1991; Heath, 1983; Michaels, 1981; Riessman, 1987). In conversation, storytelling typically involves a longer turn at talk than is customary. Narrative research analyzes the extended account, rather than fragmenting it into thematic categories, as practiced in the grounded theory approach.

The act of telling can serve many purposes – to remember, argue, justify, persuade, engage, entertain, and even mislead an audience (Bamberg and McCabe, 1998). The persuasive function of narrative is especially relevant for social work. Some clients narrate their experience in ways that engage and convince, while other tellings can leave the audience skeptical, inviting counter-narratives. In case conferences, one speaker can persuade others of a particular clinical formulation, while another fails to convince – a process that can be studied by close analysis of the rhetorical devices each employs to ‘story’ the case. These brief examples suggest some points of entry for social work investigation.

Approaching texts as narrative has a great deal to offer social work, showing how knowledge is constructed in everyday life through ordinary communicative action. Social workers deal with narrative all the time: when they hear clients’ stories about their situations, and try to persuade colleagues and governmental bodies in written reports. In practice, Quinney has witnessed how narrative frameworks can honor social work values and ethics, by valuing time with and diversity among people. Participatory practice that is empowering for clients depends on relationships – a hallmark of social work and narrative.

## **OUR METHOD FOR EXAMINING THE NARRATIVE TURN IN SOCIAL WORK**

How have social workers (or those in social care, to use the European humanistic term) employed the concept of narrative in professional writings? Quinney completed a literature search of social work journals published in English-speaking countries, including those that occasionally publish work by social workers. A list of journals was created as a starting point, and then expanded after consultation with experienced academics, librarians, Internet resources and databases (i.e. Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts and Sociological Abstracts). Colleagues familiar with narrative methods suggested citations. We limited the review to articles published between 1990–2002, and Riessman later updated the search by re-examining major journals through early 2005. Undoubtedly we missed some work. Few relevant pieces were published before the mid-1990s, and the rate has increased since.

Articles could be caught in our net if they used ‘narrative’ in the title, abstract, or as a key word and they appeared in journals identified with social work, or areas closely associated with it, such as health or children and families. Reading through the collection of potentially relevant work – extremely diverse

in purpose, theoretical perspective, and substantive topic – several additional questions were asked: did authors align themselves with the profession either through a direct statement or an affiliation with a school of social work/social care? Riessman attempted through a gradual winnowing process to cull from more than 200 potentially relevant works those written by social workers. Finally, she classified the articles into four broad groups based on purpose: improving practice, educating social work students, reflections on the field, or empirical research. She then looked within each group for patterns and points of contrast. The groupings were overlapping with fuzzy boundaries – an issue we discuss.

## PATTERNS IN SOCIAL WORK SCHOLARSHIP

The vast majority of articles were practice-oriented, specifically clinical; there was little work in social policy – reflecting social work's attention to relationships. Many articles appeared in US publications (cf. *Clinical Social Work Journal*) but increasingly in European ones as well. In some the purpose was theoretical: critique of dominant paradigms in clinical practice, with an argument for attention to meanings and contexts because clinical theory is historically-contingent and culturally bound (c.f. Polombo, 1992). Publications were often organized around case examples: the therapeutic use of storytelling, for example, to facilitate discovery of competencies and resilience. The self-narratives of individuals in social care were the focus of practice-oriented, case-centered articles (adoptees, trauma survivors, the chemically-dependent, individuals going through bereavement). Writers describe helping clients to restore their situations, emphasizing positive effects of deconstruction and reconstruction of life stories. At times, narrative theory was in short supply – an add-on, that allowed for reflection on a particular case. In contrast, in Australian and UK journals many authors discussed cases drawing on narrative therapy principles developed at the Dulwich Centre in Adelaide – a theoretically developed counselling model. Dominant stories constructed by families about a 'trouble-making' child, for example, were transformed into a 'new story' for child and family (cf. Betchley and Falconer, 2002). There were few recent articles describing group work based on narrative principles, only classic articles (Dean, 1995, 1998) – reflecting, perhaps, the shift away from social group work in the field generally.

The second, far smaller, group was oriented to issues of pedagogy (most appeared in the *Journal of Social Work Education* or *Journal of Teaching in Social Work* but increasingly in others). Although overlapping with practice-focused pieces that stressed theoretical critique and reflective practice, the thrust here was toward curricular change to include 'postmodern' approaches, such as narrative. The perspective taught at the Dulwich Centre in Australia was increasingly cited. A model article describes using social work students' written narratives about their work with clients to forge reflexive links among past, present, and

future actions. The field setting became a site for helping students use writing to develop critical reflexivity; the authors and field supervisors subsequently dialogued with the students' written narratives about clients, creating a multi-voiced conversation (Crawford et al., 2002).

A third and related group was composed of first person autobiographical accounts. They typically appeared in highly-specialized journals, such as *Reflections* and *Reflective Practice*, where experimental writing (creative non-fiction) is encouraged, but we also found recent examples in mainstream US journals (*Social Work*). Authors were faculty members in social work programmes, administrators in agencies, workers in direct practice and, very occasionally, policy makers. Storytelling about an experience allowed the narrator to appeal directly to the reader. Social workers, it seems, are finding academic outlets in which to use narrative forms to make meaning of difficult events, just as clients do in counselling.

The fourth group of papers used narrative concepts and methods for research purposes. They appeared in general and specialty journals read by practitioners (e.g. *Social Work*, *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, *Child and Family Social Work*, *Families in Society*, *Health and Social Work*) and in journals oriented toward research in the human services (*Qualitative Social Work*, *Qualitative Health Research*). There were a few pieces written by social workers in social science, feminist, and qualitative journals, and the specialty publication, *Narrative Inquiry*.

We were disappointed with the size of the research corpus. Riessman would get excited when reading an abstract that contained the words 'narrative analysis' and 'data', only to discover the author of a compelling case study (of the talk of a person with dementia, or ethnography of a learning disabilities classroom) was from nursing or education – not social work. In other instances, social work authors said they applied 'narrative analysis', but on closer inspection findings were constructed by inductive thematic coding ('we looked for themes'). Snippets of talk (mostly non-narrative, stripped of sequence and consequence) were presented to illustrate common thematic elements across interviews. Appropriating the terminology of narrative by social work investigators appears to be on the rise among those doing forms of grounded theory research.

Riessman asked a number of specific questions of the research papers related to standards for 'good enough' narrative inquiry. Was the work empirical, that is, based on systematic observations? Did analysis attend to sequence and consequence? Was there some attention to language, and were transcriptions made and inspected? Did analysis attend to contexts of production (research relationships, and macro institutional contexts)? Were epistemological and methodological issues treated seriously, that is, viewed critically, seen as decisions to be made, rather than 'given' – unacknowledged? During the process

of inquiry, previous divisions blurred: what about autoethnography? Intensive case studies of particular interactions with clients using critical reflexivity? Boundaries between clinical inquiry, reflective practice and research on clinical process are not always clear.

Research that claimed to be narrative was extremely diverse in topic, approach, and quality. We uncovered some exemplary work, but lots that was not. In one unfortunate set of articles, methods relied on story completion techniques, investigator ratings of narrative characteristics (e.g. coherence of stories, event structure analysis), or content analysis (frequency counts of particular words in an extended text). With few exceptions, direct quotation of interview discourse of any length was nowhere to be found. Audiotaping was rare, making any systematic examination of transcripts of interviews or group meetings impossible. Instead, researchers summarized the content of speech, mediating the engagement of reader and narrative text. It is difficult under these circumstances to independently evaluate evidence for an author's argument, or to interrogate the process of research that generated particular findings.

Frankly, we were surprised to see such limited use of the storehouse of narrative approaches available in the qualitative research literature (Andrews et al., 2000; Chase, 2005; Cortazzi, 2001; Fraser, 2004; Josselson et al., 2003; Lieblich et al., 1998; Mishler, 1986, 1995; Murray, 2003; Plummer, 2001; Poindexter, 2002; Riessman, 1993, 2004). Instead, many investigators adopted reductionistic techniques, similar in effect to what quantitative researchers do with numbers: lengthy accounts of lives were abstracted from their contexts of production, stripped of language, and transformed into brief summaries.

Data reduction is a task that confronts all qualitative investigators: journals do not allow us to present the 'whole story'; narrative accounts are typically long, some selection is absolutely necessary. The challenge for narrative research is not to mimic positivist science in modes of data reduction.

### THREE EXEMPLARS OF NARRATIVE RESEARCH

We now turn to research in social work that offers positive models – a counterweight to reductionism. Each of three exemplars, briefly presented here, meets standards for 'good' narrative research, and together they offer models of diverse ways to approach texts that take narrative form. We urge readers to consult the full articles for rich and lengthy description of methods and findings. The choice of exemplars reflects Riessman's preferences, learned from Mishler (1986, 1999): reliance on detailed transcripts; focus on language and contexts of production; some attention to the structural features of discourse; acknowledgement of the dialogic nature of narrative; and (where appropriate) a comparative approach – interpretation of similarities and differences among participants' stories. Regarding the dialogic criterion, Phil Salmon's words are instructive:

All narratives are, in a fundamental sense, co-constructed. The audience, whether physically present or not, exerts a crucial influence on what can and cannot be said, how things should be expressed, what can be taken for granted, what needs explaining, and so on. We now recognize that the personal account, in research interviews, which has traditionally been seen as the expression of a single subjectivity, is in fact always a co-construction. (Salmon, forthcoming: 2)

Despite many similarities, the three exemplars are extremely diverse. They explore very different questions, deal with different kinds of narrative texts, and employ contrasting forms of analysis. The first examines a social worker's participation in the co-construction of narrative with research participants, the second, written self-narratives of clients and, the third, narratives about clients developed by professionals in team meetings.

### **1 A Research Interview: Meaning in Context**

Cynthia Poindexter looks back on an interview with an older,<sup>3</sup> serodiscordant African-American heterosexual couple struggling with the effects of HIV infection and heroin injection. Poindexter is young, white, from the Southern USA, single, HIV-negative and, at the time of the research interview, completing her dissertation in social work. How did the participants communicate across such vast divides? The couple, ironically, never made it into the corpus for the dissertation because they did not meet sampling criteria. Fortunately Poindexter completed the interview and, post-dissertation, analyzed the conversation in two scholarly papers (2003a,b), the first of which is the focus here. It 'troubles the borders' between words and meanings, and researcher and researched.

Poindexter unpacks a co-constructed account that develops over many pages of transcript. She calls the long narrative a 'trialogue' with three voices interacting in patterned ways across four parts of the interview – 'like a play or symphony' (Poindexter, 2003a: 387). In the complex harmony of the four parts, everyday meanings of words shift and take on different meanings. The couple (she names the participants Art and Jen) use the word 'sick', for example, in six distinct ways over the course of the conversation: to refer to physical distress, medication side effects, HIV disease, HIV-related symptoms, heroin withdrawal, heroin absence, and non-HIV illnesses. Presenting detailed excerpts, Poindexter (2003a: 396) analyzes how a communication partnership develops among the participants: 'multiple and complex meanings layer over time . . . semantic context that cued each of us to the meaning of "sick" in the particular moment'. In the communicative triologue, another word surfaces repeatedly – 'cure' – that also changed meaning with context.

'Cure' can be regarded as the antithesis to 'sick'; it implies banishing a once problematic illness. But the language of 'cure' takes on several distinct meanings as Jen and Art disclose their hopes and world-views. At different times the word referred

to a dream that all persons with HIV will be saved, a hope that Art in particular will be spared, a bitter certainty that the remedy for HIV already exists and is being withheld from them [because of poverty and race], and faith that God will heal Art without and then with the help of science. (Poindexter, 2003a: 396)

Close attention to the narrators' language parallels Poindexter's close attention to her shifting position in the triad – the research relationship. Her knowledge of HIV and substance use vernacular serves as a resource for understanding. Skill and empathy enable her to follow leads supplied by the participants as the conversation unfolds, rendering subtle shifts in language meaningful. Knowledge of US racial history (slavery, lynching, Jim Crow laws, the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment) helps her contextualize the couple's suspicions that there is a cure for HIV, but it is being withheld from them: 'Art and Jen do not have the luxury of forgetting that health and wealth are linked' (Poindexter, 2003a: 403).

By locating herself as an active presence in the text, rather than cloaking herself in rationality, distance and dispassionate analysis, Poindexter embodies the 'vulnerable observer' (Behar, 1996). Consistent with criteria for good narrative research noted earlier, readers can see how the interview context shaped the developing narrative – a co-constructed account of the ravages of HIV infection on lives. Detailed transcripts of segments of interaction are presented that can be examined independently by readers. Historical and cultural contexts are brought to bear in interpretation.

The research is important for social work: working with clients from different cultures happens through a veil of language, in all its ambiguity. Translation and interpretation are ubiquitous in communication, even when speakers talk the 'same' language. In research classes, students are often taught that interpretation begins after interviews are completed, but Poindexter shows how it begins during data collection. Her observations echo points we made earlier:

[A]lthough our profession is predicated on relationship and communication, social work researchers infrequently closely examine words and connotations or present details of interactions. (Poindexter, 2003a: 405)

Her attention to shifting meanings of words undermines the reductionistic practice of counting the number of times a particular word or phrase appears in a narrative text. Disparate meanings can be derived from even 'simple' words like 'sickness' and 'cure'. A decontextualized excerpt from an interview, so common in qualitative studies, can be problematic because language, when stripped of context, can be misinterpreted.

## 2 Writing Narratives with Youth: Experimenting with a Method

Fay Martin (1998), a Canadian social worker who completed her dissertation in Britain, developed a technique in practice which she calls 'direct scribing' to

amplify muted voices of young people in child protection. She describes the narrative approach invented for practice and then adapted for her dissertation – participatory/critical research on the complex transition to independence for youngsters coming out of child protection. Martin's (1998: 2) past experience indicated many young people 'felt strongly that child welfare files misrepresented their reality'. Consequently, she invited them to dictate their self-narratives to her; she typed on the computer as they talked and watched the screen. Conversations about the stories followed – these were also transcribed. Her participants, in collaboration with adult 'guides' eventually published the life stories in a book (Fay, 1989) where they spoke out – 'saying their word to change the world, in the spirit of Freire' (Martin, 1998: 2).

The explicitly political research project involved 30 young people, randomly selected from a group who were coming out of care in a child welfare agency; all had lived in group or foster homes or institutions for some part of their lives. Because of their histories, they were 'very sophisticated interviewees' who had 'well-honed awareness of the power differential inherent in interview situations . . . enhanced understanding of the differential power of the spoken vs. the written word, and of the politics of ownership of the word' (Martin, 1998: 2). Many had spent hours facing workers who took notes, went away to write reports that became the 'facts' of their cases, providing grounds for crucial decisions. Clients, of course, have not had easy access to their files to check them against their versions of events, and cannot change 'facts' once entered in the file. The written word is privileged: 'the person who chooses the word is more powerful than the person who the word purports to be about' (Martin, 1998: 3).

Given awareness of the politics of language, Martin decided to approach the problem by asking the youths to generate written self-narratives with her and later discuss them over the course of several meetings. She engaged participants in thinking about the adolescent transition – 'when you were the responsibility of someone else [to] when you are responsible for yourself' (Martin, 1998: 5). She creatively instructed the writers in narrative concepts:

The job of the Narrator is to choose among all the things that *could* be included in the story, what things *will* be included, and *how* they will be included. The Narrator is the boss: s/he has absolute authority about how to build the story. Because you know that there are many ways to tell the same story so that each, although different, is still true . . . just differently true. So the Narrator's job – that's you – is to figure out what of all the things you *could* put into the story you *will* put in, and how you'll string them together to make what points. As much as possible, I'd like you to tell the story as if you were talking to yourself as an audience . . . I'm going to directly scribe the story, type, whatever you say. You should watch the screen and correct me if I make a mistake, or tell me if you wanted to take back or change something you said. (Martin, 1998: 5–6)

Martin made provisions for different levels of literacy, but all participants became competent partners over time. Youngsters asked her questions, and she queried them about what they included or left out, and why. Each participant left with a hard copy – of the story, and the dialogue with Martin about the story.

At the next meeting, participants interrogated what they had produced guided by the researcher:

We approached the narrative as a piece of written text and analyzed it in various ways to ensure that it represented as accurately and thoroughly as possible what they meant to say about their transitional experience, before the story was launched, independent of its author, into the world. (Martin, 1998: 6)<sup>4</sup>

More teaching about narrative form – beginnings, middles, ends – took place, including how to highlight turning points toward independence, a personal epiphany perhaps (although one participant emphatically declared ‘she was not independent and would not be for some time’ [Martin, 1998: 7]). The outcome was a set of written self-narratives – different trajectories out of adolescence and toward adulthood – accomplished collaboratively between investigator and participants.

Martin’s project offers an example of participatory/critical research that is empowering: she took past inequalities into account in her research design, and created an alternative research context where muted voices could be heard. Her narrative method required participants ‘to preside over the transformation of the oral word into written text’ (Martin, 1998: 9) – a process usually accomplished by investigator alone. Martin retained the right to query the story. Her insights from the research process are instructive for all narrative scholars:

To speak is one thing, to be heard is another, to be confirmed as being heard is yet another. I believe the narrative interview operates at the third level . . . The [written] assignment requires the participant to self-reflect on both the parts and the whole of his/her story. My experience of what the participants did with the assignment suggests that this engaged them at a fourth level, a step beyond being confirmed as heard . . . The narrativists say that one creates and recreates oneself and positions oneself socially through narrative choices. My sense was that many of these participants, reflecting on themselves in the middle of the developmental task that was the focus of investigation, found themselves in the telling, experiencing themselves as creating themselves and as recovering themselves from the stories that had been told about them. (Martin, 1998: 9–10)

The research benefited the youth – rare in research: their marginalized voices found an outlet. With eventual dissemination of the book produced from the self-writings, alliances for social change in child welfare practices could be formed.

As an exemplar of good narrative research, Martin's study meets key criteria. She created and then worked from detailed transcripts (though they are not included in the published article), rather than simply memories of what may have been said at meetings. She describes in detail the conditions of production of the 'final' life stories, and how they were subject to change at varying points in the research process. She attends to structural features of narrative in the instructions she gives participants about beginnings, middles, and ends, and turning points. Finally, the dialogic nature of the life stories is central to the project.

The third and last exemplar carries issues of power, specifically in professional language about clients, into a paediatric setting.

### **3 Professional Storytelling at Team Meetings**

Susan White (2002), a British social work academic, examines how cases are constructed through inter-professional talk at team meetings in a child health centre. How is the attribution of causality accomplished? Specifically, how do clinicians (paediatricians) tell cases in ways that persuade listeners (social workers and other professionals) of a particular formulation? Her ethnographic approach relies on detailed transcriptions of team meetings, and presentation of lengthy excerpts that illustrate the narrative practices professionals employ.

The attribution of causation can be particularly complex in child health settings. The boundary between biological and psychosocial aetiology is fuzzy, but deemed necessary in medical contexts to accomplish diagnosis and formulate a treatment plan. How do professionals do it? Storytelling, White observes, is the major way cases get made, with the clinician ordering and sequencing clinical facts and social observations into versions that are recognizable to other team members, and can be processed. Storytelling enables professionals to render their formulations recognizable and accountable to colleagues on the team.

White displays the 'ordering work' paediatricians do with fragments of material. They narratively construct an unproblematic 'medical' case, on the one hand – where aetiology is biological – and a psychosocial one on the other – a 'non-just medical' case. At least in part, the case is constituted through its telling; other possible readings of the material are closed off. White looks at the rhetorical and linguistic devices tellers adopt to narrate their formulations about patients, which signal particular readings of the material that can persuade colleagues. Her method draws on approaches originally developed in conversation analysis that she adapts to examine lengthy exchanges at team meetings. From transcriptions that sometimes approach 20 pages, she presents and analyzes excerpts, including ones that illustrate particular narrator's strategies of argumentation in potentially contestable formulations – 'non just medical' cases:

These formulations involve particularly complex story-telling, since the presence of an 'intrinsic' disorder requires that any psychosocial component be worked

up in the talk. Narratives about these cases have the flavour of detective stories with anomalous physical findings, such as failure to gain weight, set alongside characterisations of carers [typically mothers]. Cases may begin as ‘medical’ and evolve gradually to a ‘not just medical’, or psychosocial formulation through formal and informal case-talk between professionals. Once they have shifted in this way, they rarely return to a purely medical reading, since the relevances for storytelling and observation are extended to the child’s relationships and social circumstances, which once exposed are almost always found wanting. (White, 2002: 418)

The outcome in such instances is often referral to the social services department, or a child welfare agency.

White presents a series of extracts from team meetings about a child she calls Sarah, each of which she meticulously unpacks. She notes the alternative ways the case might have been told, with less deleterious consequences for the family – a child protection plan. Instead, the telling ‘silenced a potential alternative reading of Sarah’s mother as a distressed or depressed parent who was struggling to care for her child and needed help, but was not herself morally culpable for the predicament’ (White, 2002: 433). White (2002: 425) reveals how the team meeting becomes a backstage space ‘where professionals can shore up and contest their formulations of cases and often rehearse their next [frontstage] encounters with patients and their families’.

The research is vitally important for social work in a time of evidence-based practice. Professional sense-making about complex cases is best revealed by ethnographic investigation, White argues, because it can uncover the ‘backstage’ work clinicians do to collectively work up particular versions of a child and/or family. Parents get classified as ‘troublesome’ or ‘negligent’, and hence in need of social work intervention, as part of a complex reasoning process that defies analytic scrutiny using traditional methods of research. Technologies based on bureaucratic rationality, she argues, provide a particularly poor fit for the complexity and uncertainty found in many social care settings.

As an exemplar of narrative methods, the work meets many of the criteria outlined earlier for good narrative research: she presents detailed transcripts of excerpts of team meeting, analyzes language and narrative form, noting structural features of the professional narratives – precisely how they are rhetorically crafted to persuade. Because the investigator is working from transcribed tapes of professional meetings, her dialogic relationships with informants and the data are not included, but could be in future studies of meetings by others.

## CONCLUSIONS

We began with the observation that the idea of narrative has touched almost every discipline and practicing profession and, in many, generated extensive

research programmes (e.g. in nursing, medicine, occupational therapy, law, and education). We conclude from our review that social work has embraced narrative concepts for reflective practice and teaching, but only to a very limited degree in research.

The three exemplars show the kinds of relevant knowledge for social work that can be produced with diverse narrative approaches. The findings pinpoint key issues of process essential to social work practice: how communication can reach across class and racial divides (Poindexter); how adolescents' self-writings can foster discovery and client empowerment (Martin); how professionals talk about patients serves to construct particular case formulations, marginalizing other ways of thinking (White). The narrative methods each author used – and they were very different – allowed process to come to the fore, rather than narrow outcomes alone.

We uncovered other solid research that could have served as exemplars (cf. Hydén, 1995; Hydén and Överlien, 2005; Jones, 2002; Lillrank 2002, 2003; Överlien and Hydén, 2003; Urek, 2005; White and Feathersone, 2005). We undoubtedly missed a few studies in our search. But given that thirty years have passed since the 'narrative turn' began to reshape the social sciences, and given contemporary preoccupations with identity construction, why is there so little research reflecting these trends in social work? Is the profession, in its preoccupation with status and legitimacy, wary of narrative research because of a continuing infatuation with 'hard' science, the experimental model, and 'evidence-based' outcome studies?

The vast majority of the research we did find was published in British journals, joint British/US ones (such as *Qualitative Social Work*), or interdisciplinary specialty journals. Given the sheer size of the US social work market, the minimal amount of narrative research in major US journals is puzzling. To initiate a dialogue about the anomaly, we offer some thoughts about possible reasons for the geographic divide, fully aware of the danger of generalizing across contexts. We present observations from distinct standpoints.

Quinney, observing trends as a practising social worker in the National Health Service (NHS), sees many agencies in the UK struggling to recruit and retain social workers. There is the appeal to an opportunity to build relationships and understand clients in depth – an opening for postgraduate students in research programmes to undertake narrative inquiry that involves listening and interpreting. The UK has a strong socialist history, and it is part of the European Union (EU); universal and free social welfare services (including health care) remain. The demands of the market and consumerism are not as cruel as in the USA, perhaps. In social work practice, there is attention to the 'here and now' but also the 'when and where', beyond the individual. Such contexts may provide fertile ground for narrative inquiry. At the same time, there is an increasing push, in both public and private sectors, for 'evidence' not

ethnography, and a conservative agenda is increasing in influence in the UK. These trends are being felt in the funding of research, which may, in time, affect the questions social work postgraduates chose to explore and methods they select in dissertations.

Riessman's observations are informed by years of teaching narrative research methods in the USA and, in the last 10 years, in the UK, several Scandinavian countries, and Western Australia. She has been impressed by the extent of interest outside the USA in narrative methods. She offers some tentative thoughts on how research cultures in USA and EU countries may explain, in part, the geographic distribution of research articles uncovered in the literature review.

Narrative study is cross-disciplinary, drawing on diverse epistemologies, theories, and methods. Detailed analysis takes time and immersion; there are ethical issues that stretch customary practices in areas such as informed consent (Riessman, 2005; Riessman and Mattingly, 2005). These realities create exciting opportunities for creative collaborative research, but also problems for social work. Put simply, there is a great deal to read, and it typically lies outside the professional canon. All professional groups tend to think and read in their own fields of specialization: we tend to be 'blinkered' by our disciplines.<sup>5</sup> The structure of many universities further contributes to isolation, with different faculties and departmental division of knowledge. Young scholars in social work in the USA are evaluated by colleagues in social work, further isolating them.

In Europe, more than in the USA, there are counter forces to disciplinary narrowness. Some university programmes in Sweden and the UK, for example, are structured around broad areas of inquiry (children and families, policy studies, health), or broad groupings of disciplines (the social sciences). These structures promote interdisciplinarity, perhaps contributing to the greater representation of European, Australian and Canadian social workers, compared to USA ones, in our review. Interdisciplinary programmes foster competence in social theory, philosophy, biography, and other fields of knowledge relevant to narrative studies.

The structure of social work education in the USA is different in many ways from programmes in the rest of the world and, at the masters' level, is subject to strict accreditation procedures that leave little space for innovation or interdisciplinarity. Concern in masters programmes is producing competent practitioners, but the large number and size of these programmes in the USA has an effect on resources available for doctoral education, where researchers get trained. Research methods courses in USA schools of social work at all levels teach research designs appropriate for quantitative research and statistical analysis, with only cursory attention to forms of qualitative inquiry.

Professional journals in the USA reflect these biases in social work education. Practice journals provide a place for the broad spectrum of models for

clinical work, and increasingly, a place for narrative reflection. The problem is that practice journals do not necessarily foster the theoretical and/or empirical generalizations that are possible with social research. Profound insights about a particular client, a particular interaction, or a therapeutic group process do not translate easily into broader insights about a phenomenon. In addition, practitioners who might want to develop research publications can feel disabled before they begin – by the very language of research they have been taught, reflected also in the journals they read. The majority of research published in social work journals in the USA is quantitative, mirroring the pattern in social work education. Some qualitative research is now making it, but rarely narrative studies, it seems. Research based on grounded theory and other qualitative traditions using analytic induction can be defined by editors and reviewers as ‘scientific’, while some ethnographic work has had difficulty getting through the review process (and ethnographic methods are decades old). All of these factors, and no doubt others, are shaping contemporary scholarship in social work journals in the USA. Practice knowledge from narrative theory is far ahead of research applications, a trend reflected in our review.

Riessman offers a final comparison related to research funding, supported by Jean Gilgun’s (2002) trenchant analysis of a document produced by the National Institutes of Health (NIH). She suggests that the Institutes (NIH is the major supporter of social research in the USA) appear to hold a particular definition of science, embedded in language, that excludes the perspectives and assumptions of many forms of qualitative research. I could not agree more. The model and language of the natural sciences has migrated, and is now used routinely to define acceptable procedures for research about the social world. The norm of a detached, disinterested, and disengaged observer is applied inappropriately to human studies. Concepts of reliability and validity developed for quantitative work are misapplied as evaluative criteria; qualitative research has evolved different standards.<sup>6</sup> Faculties in US schools of social work are increasingly dependent on funding from NIH, which further structures the kind of research that gets produced, and how doctoral students are trained.

Funding streams and research priorities in European countries are different from US ones, and social research may be less constrained by conservative political agendas (although this is changing in the UK). The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) – the major source of funding there – has supported numerous projects using qualitative approaches that would never pass muster at NIH. Some ESRC directives I have read would astonish US colleagues by their breadth, reach, and interdisciplinarity. In sum, traditions and structures of education differ substantially between the two geographic regions, shaping the amount and kind of social work research published.

We offer our respective speculations about possible reasons for the patterning of narrative scholarship in the hope of initiating a creative and

constructive dialogue among social work students, educators, journal editors, reviewers, and funders. Dialogue is needed if narrative inquiry – in all its diversity – is to find a place in social work.

### Acknowledgements

The authors thank two anonymous reviewers for comments on an earlier draft, Ian Shaw for many forms of support, and a Leverhulme Visiting Professorship for Riessman at the University of Bristol, which supported analysis and writing.

### Notes

- 1 For citations to theoretical and empirical work in each of these disciplines, see Riessman (2001, forthcoming).
- 2 There is lively philosophical debate about whether primary experience is ‘disordered’, that is, whether narrators create order out of chaos. See Hinchman and Hinchman (1997: xix–xx).
- 3 Disclosure is necessary here: Riessman mentored Cynthia Poindexter on a Hartford Foundation fellowship. The two other exemplars were uncovered during the literature review.
- 4 A reviewer noted complexities hidden in Martin’s instruction here: the suggestion to represent ‘as accurately and thoroughly as possible’. Most analysts agree that any narrative representation involves a *version* of events and experiences, shaped by audience and other contexts – a perspective Martin obviously shares, evidenced in previously quoted material.
- 5 Riessman thanks Kim Etherington for this formulation.
- 6 On the evolving issue of criteria for qualitative research in its various forms, see Maxwell (1992), Mishler (1990), Seale (2002), Sparkes (2002).

### References

- Andrews, M., Sclater, S. D., Squire, C. and Treacher, A. (eds) (2000) *Lines of Narrative: Psychosocial Perspectives*. Routledge: New York.
- Bamberg, M. G. W. and McCabe, A. (1998) ‘Editorial’, *Narrative Inquiry* 8(1): iii–v.
- Behar, R. (1996) *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks your Heart*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Betchley, D. and Falconer, W. (2002) ‘Giving Colin a Voice: The Challenge of Narrative Therapy with a Client who has an Intellectual Disability and Communication Difficulties’, *Australian Social Work* 55(1): 3–12.
- Cazden, C. B. (2001) *Classroom Discourse: The Language of Teaching and Learning*, 2nd edn. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Chase, S. E. (2005) ‘Narrative Inquiry: Multiple Lenses, Approaches, Voices’, in N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (eds) *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 3rd edn, pp. 651–79. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Cortazzi, M. (2001) ‘Narrative Analysis in Ethnography’, in P. Atkinson, A. Coffey, S. Delamont, J. Lofland and L. Lofland (eds) *Handbook of Ethnography*, pp. 384–94. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Crawford, F., Dickinson, J. and Leitman, S. (2002) 'Mirroring Meaning Making: Narrative Ways of Reflecting on Practice for Action', *Qualitative Social Work* 1(2): 170–90.
- Cronon, W. (1992) 'A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative', *Journal of American History* 78(4): 1347–76.
- Dean, R. G. (1995) 'Stories of AIDS: The Use of Narrative as an Approach to Understanding in an AIDS Support Group', *Clinical Social Work Journal* 23(3): 287–304.
- Dean, R. G. (1998) 'A Narrative Approach to Groups', *Clinical Social Work Journal* 26(1): 23–37.
- Fay, M. (1989) *Speak Out: An Anthology of Stories by Youth in Care*. Toronto: Page Adolescent Resource Centre.
- Fraser, H. (2004) 'Doing Narrative Research: Analyzing Personal Stories Line by Line', *Qualitative Social Work* 3(2): 179–201.
- Gee, J. P. (1991) 'A Linguistic Approach to Narrative', *Journal of Narrative and Life History/Narrative Inquiry* 1(1): 15–39.
- Gilgun, J. F. (2002) 'Conjectures and Refutations: Governmental Funding and Qualitative Research', *Qualitative Social Work* 1(3): 359–75.
- Hall, C. J. (1997) *Social Work as Narrative: Storytelling and Persuasion in Professional Texts*. Oxford: Ashgate.
- Heath, S. B. (1983) *Ways with Words: Language, Life and Work in Communities and Classrooms*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Hinchman, L. P. and Hinchman, S. K. (eds) (1997) *Memory, Identity, Community: The Idea of Narrative in the Human Sciences*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Holstein, J. A. and Gubrium, J. F. (2000) *The Self We Live By: Narrative Identity in a Post-modern World*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hydén, M. (1995) 'Verbal Aggression as prehistory of Woman Battering', *Journal of Family Violence* 10(1): 55–71.
- Hydén, M. and Överlien, C. (2005) 'Applying Narrative Analysis to the Process of Confirming or Disregarding Cases of Suspected Child Abuse', *Child and Family Social Work* 10(1): 57–65.
- Jones, R. L. (2002) "'That's very rude, I shouldn't be telling you that": Older Women Talking About Sex', *Narrative Inquiry* 12(1): 121–43.
- Josselson, R., Lieblich, A. and McAdams, D. P. (eds) (2003) *Up Close and Personal: The Teaching and Learning of Narrative Research*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Labov, W. (1982) 'Speech Actions and Reactions in Personal Narrative', in D. Tannen (ed.) *Analyzing Discourse: Text and Talk*, pp. 219–47. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.
- Laird, J. (ed.) (1993) *Revisioning Social Work Education: A Social Constructionist Approach*. New York: Haworth.
- Langellier, K. M. (2001) 'Personal Narrative', in M. Jolly (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Life Writing: Autobiographical and Biographical Forms*, pp. 699–701. London: Fitzroy Dearborn.
- Laslett, B. (1999) 'Personal Narrative as Sociology', *Contemporary Sociology* 28(4): 391–401.
- Lieblich, A., Tuval-Mashiach, R. and Zilber, T. (1998) *Narrative Research: Reading, Analysis, and Interpretation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Lillrank, A. (2002) 'The Tension between Overt Talk and Covert Emotions in Illness Narratives: Transition from Clinician to Researcher', *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 26: 111–27.
- Lillrank, A. (2003) 'Back Pain and the Resolution of Diagnostic Uncertainty in Illness Narratives', *Social Science and Medicine* 57(6): 1045–54.
- Martin, F. E. (1998) 'Tales of Transition: Self-narrative and Direct Scribing in Exploring Care-leaving', *Child and Family Social Work* 3(1): 1–12.
- Maxwell, J. A. (1992) 'Understanding and Validity in Qualitative Research', *Harvard Educational Review* 62(3): 279–300.
- Michaels, S. (1981) "'Sharing Time": Children's Narrative Styles and Differential Access to Literacy', *Language and Society* 10(3): 423–42.
- Mishler, E. G. (1986) *Research Interviewing: Context and Narrative*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Mishler, E. G. (1990) 'Validation in Inquiry-guided Research: The Role of Exemplars in Narrative Studies', *Harvard Educational Review* 60(4): 415–42.
- Mishler, E. G. (1995) 'Models of Narrative Analysis: A Typology', *Journal of Narrative and Life History* 5(2): 87–123.
- Mishler, E. G. (1999) *Storylines: Craftartists' Narratives of Identity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Murray, M. (2003) 'Narrative Psychology and Narrative Analysis', in P. M. Camic, J. E. Rhodes and L. Yardley (eds) *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, pp. 95–112. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Myerhoff, B. (1978) *Number Our Days*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Myerhoff, B., with Metzger, D., Ruby, J. and Tufte, V. (eds) (1992) *Remembered Lives*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Överlien, C. and Hydén, M. (2003) 'Work Identity at Stake: The Power of Sexual Abuse Stories in the World of Youth Compulsory Care', *Narrative Inquiry* 13(1): 217–42.
- Plummer, K. (2001) *Documents of Life 2: An Invitation to Critical Humanism*. London: Sage.
- Poindexter, C. (2002) 'Meaning from Methods: Re-presenting Stories of an HIV-Affected Caregiver', *Qualitative Social Work* 1(1): 59–78.
- Poindexter, C. (2003a) 'The Ubiquity of Ambiguity in Research Interviewing: A Case Study', *Qualitative Social Work* 2(4): 383–409.
- Poindexter, C. (2003b) 'Sex, Drugs, and Love in Middle Age: A Case Study of a Serodiscordant Heterosexual Couple Coping with HIV', *Journal of Social Work Practice in the Addictions* 3(2): 57–83.
- Polombo, J. (1992) 'Narratives, Self-cohesion, and the Patient's Search for Meaning', *Clinical Social Work Journal* 20(3): 249–70.
- Ricoeur, P. (1991) 'Life in Quest of Narrative', in D. Wood (ed.) *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation*, pp. 20–33. London: Routledge.
- Riessman, C. K. (1987) 'When Gender is not Enough: Women Interviewing Women', *Gender & Society* 1(2): 172–207.
- Riessman, C. K. (1993) *Narrative Analysis*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Riessman, C. K. (ed.) (1994) *Qualitative Studies in Social Work Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Riessman, C. K. (1997) 'A Short Story About Long Stories', *Journal of Narrative and Life History* 7(1–4): 155–9.

- Riessman, C. K. (2001) 'Personal Troubles as Social Issues: A Narrative of Infertility in Context', in I. Shaw and N. Gould (eds) *Qualitative Research in Social Work: Method and Context*, pp. 73–82. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Riessman, C. K. (2004) 'Narrative Analysis', in M. S. Lewis-Beck, A. Bryman and T. Futing Liao (eds) *Encyclopedia of Social Science Research Methods*, pp. 705–9. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Riessman, C. K. (2005) 'Exporting Ethics: A Narrative about Narrative Research in South India', *health: An Interdisciplinary Journal for the Social Study of Health, Illness and Medicine* 9(4): 473–90.
- Riessman, C. K. (forthcoming) *Narrative Analysis for the Human Sciences*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Riessman, C. K. and Mattingly, C. (2005) 'Introduction: Toward a Context-based Ethics for Social Research in Health', *health: An Interdisciplinary Journal for the Study of Health, Illness and Medicine* 9(4): 427–9.
- Salmon, P. (forthcoming) 'Some Thoughts on Narrative Research', in M. Andrews, S. Squire and M. Tamboukou (eds) *Doing Narrative Research in the Social Sciences*. London: Sage.
- Seale, C. (2002) 'Quality Issues in Qualitative Inquiry', *Qualitative Social Work* 1(1): 97–110.
- Shaw, I. and Gould, N. (eds) (2001) *Qualitative Research in Social Work: Method and Context*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Sparkes, A. C. (2002) 'Autoethnography: Self-indulgence or Something More?', in A. P. Bochner and C. Ellis (eds) *Ethnographically Speaking*, pp. 209–32. Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira.
- Urek, M. (2005) 'Making a Case in Social Work: The Construction of an Unsuitable Mother', *Qualitative Social Work* 4(4): 451–67.
- White, S. (2002) 'Accomplishing the Case in Paediatrics and Child Health: Medicine and Morality in Inter-professional Talk', *Sociology of Health and Illness* 24(4): 409–35.
- White, S. and Featherstone, B. (2005) 'Communicating Misunderstandings: Multi-agency Work as Social Practice', *Child and Family Social Work* 10: 207–16.

**Catherine Kohler Riessman** is Research Professor in the Department of Sociology at Boston College and Professor Emerita at Boston University School of Social Work. She has authored 3 books, numerous book chapters and journal articles on health, illness, and narrative; *Narrative Research in the Human Sciences* will appear in 2006 (Sage Publications). Her current research examines narratives of disruptive life events, including infertility, divorce and chronic illness, which she collected and analysed in the past and reinterprets in light of developments in theory, history and her own biography. Address: Department of Sociology, Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA 02467, USA. [email: riessman@bc.edu]

**Lee Quinney** is a senior social work practitioner in a regional forensic psychiatric service in Wales. He is undertaking a doctoral study on the needs of personality disordered offenders in the community. His research and practice interests include qualitative insights into personality and mental disorder; narrative inquiry; professional development; social interventions; gender and offending; and, human needs. Previous publications include topics such as group therapy, personality disorder, and social work practice.