

What is narrative interviewing?



Molly Andrews

Centre for Narrative Research

NOVELLA

m.andrews@uel.ac.uk

Is there something intrinsically special about the the way a narrative scholar approaches interviewing?

- many narrative researchers do not use interviews
- many scholars who would not describe themselves as being particularly interested in narratives might agree with what I am going to say to you today.

Key assumptions of narrative interviews

- Stories are an important means through which we communicate with one another and with ourselves; one way of eliciting stories is through interviews
- The dynamic and messy nature of data; meaning is contextual and constructed
- Importance of temporal framing

Assumption 1: Orienting towards stories

You know everything is not an anecdote. You have to discriminate. You choose things that are funny or mildly amusing or interesting. You're a miracle! Your stories have **NONE** of that. ...And by the way, you know, when you're telling these little stories? Here's a good idea - have a **POINT**. It makes it **SO** much more interesting for the listener!



Neal (Steven Martin) and Del (John Candy) in Planes, Trains and Automobiles'

- Starting point is that there is something intrinsically useful/interesting about stories
- Stories are told in interviews spontaneously and when they are elicited; sometimes when they are elicited they are not told
- Stories DO something; they have a purpose
- Stories are almost always subjectively true
- Stories are always in relation to other stories
 - Micro/macro narratives
 - Counter-narratives

Assumption 2: Dynamic and messy nature of data



- Invariable, meaning changes over time. Data cannot be captured in pure form, even on transcripts, as the same words mean something different across time and place
- Subjective truth is important
- Meaning is contextual and constructed/negotiated in interviews
 - Questions, responses, follow-up questions

Assumption 3: The importance of temporal framing



- Where does the story begin and end?
- What does this temporal framing bring into focus? Obscure? Who is included? Who is absent?
- When is the story being told in relation to when it happened? Is the comparison of the temporal perspective explicit? Implied? (e.g. the self I once was, the self I could have been, the self I dream of becoming?)

Elizabeth and I are sitting in her living room. The age difference between us is roughly fifty years. This excerpt comes from our first interview together. We have been speaking for more than an hour, when Elizabeth describes an event which took place more than three decades ago. Just before this point in the interview, Elizabeth has told me that, as a mother of four, she spent two weeks in a maximum security prison, as a result of her political protest.

MA: How about your decision to actually break the law, was that a difficult decision for you, or did you feel very convinced that what you were doing was right? How did you think about that decision at the time?

EW: Yes, I took a lot of thinking about it. Because I had been on [a similar protest] the year before, but I hadn't [broken the law] because of family affairs and so on. The next year I was going again, and there was nobody else from [her town], and I thought well, I wouldn't go. I mean, nobody's going this year. I went and sat in the garden and then I felt such a heel. The fact that nobody was going, it was all the more important for me to go, wasn't it? And if there's only a few of you going, it's all the more important that if you do go, you make a stand. But I mean it was such a silly idea to think that just because nobody else was going, well I wouldn't go. I did talk it over with my husband first, needless to say. Then I wondered if I ought to go. You know how it is – and you're aware, and it's, you know, 'am I being just an exhibitionist, and showing off?' ...



And I think I dreamed – whatever was the dream? Very often when I'd got a problem like that, and I'm turning it over in my mind, a dream makes it clear. Oh, I know, I dreamed there was a tray and my hands were underneath holding the tray and I was doing a lot, what with the family and the famine relief and one thing and another. I was doing a lot, and more and more things were piled on this tray, and I said 'Oh Lord, don't put on any more. I can't hold it.' And then when I looked under the tray, it wasn't my hands that were holding it, it was sort of symbolic hands, large, thick hands that you get on Henry Moore sculptures. And I knew that it wasn't really me – that if what I was doing was right, one was upheld in another dimension somehow. In here it was right, and it was go ahead. And somehow that made it clear to me, anyway. Somebody else might have interpreted it another way, but from my interpretation, it was that I should go ahead, which I did. And it was trying and difficult, but a very rewarding experience, really.

Making sense of Elizabeth's story

- How should we interpret what she is saying?
- Is this story 'true'? Does it matter?
- Story within a story
- Temporal aspect
 - The interview took place 25 years ago
 - She is describing an event that happened 30 years earlier
- Can we here and now understand what she is saying?