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Learning to Value Stories: A Review of Narrative Inquiry

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Abstract

In the book *Narrative Inquiry*, Kathleen Wells (2011) provides a concise and helpful pocket - guide regarding the narrative method for the student and researcher interested in garnering the basics of this qualitative approach. As a post - graduate professor of models and methodological issues in qualitative research, and a researcher who is proficient in investigating phenomena related to social work with the narrative method, she draws on her expertise to provide the reader with a volume of memorable illustrations from scholarly writings which serve to be helpful for those not only in the field of social work, but the fields of psychological and counseling research as well.

Keywords

Social Work, Narrative Inquiry, Narrative Analysis, Qualitative Research, Stories, Review, Counseling Research, Field Research, Interviews

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Learning to Value Stories: A Review of *Narrative Inquiry*

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In the book Narrative Inquiry, Kathleen Wells (2011) provides a concise and helpful pocket-guide regarding the narrative method for the student and researcher interested in garnering the basics of this qualitative approach. As a post-graduate professor of models and methodological issues in qualitative research, and a researcher who is proficient in investigating phenomena related to social work with the narrative method, she draws on her expertise to provide the reader with a volume of memorable illustrations from scholarly writings which serve to be helpful for those not only in the field of social work, but the fields of psychological and counseling research as well. Keywords: Social Work, Narrative Inquiry, Narrative Analysis, Qualitative Research, Stories, Review, Counseling Research, Field Research, Interviews

In reading Kathleen Wells' (2011) book *Narrative Inquiry*, my initial aim was to extend my burgeoning knowledge of how this qualitative approach can be incorporated in my future doctoral dissertation work. Although my field is marriage and family therapy, and Wells writes from a social work perspective, I chose this book because it claims to be an introductory guide that is "reader-friendly" (back cover) and has significance for both psychological and sociological field research. What I found is the author is true to her claim of reader-friendliness and I was able to garner a great deal of knowledge from this work.

As an introductory guide, Wells does a commendable job defining the scope of the book, which she limits to "first-person oral narratives [...] obtained for the purpose of research" (p. 7). She promptly provides the reader with her goals for writing the book, and a brief overview of what the reader can expect from subsequent chapters.

Structurally, the guide is slim in size, but well organized with chapters including subheadings which make this guide a keeper. One can easily refer back to any of the subsections with the shuffle of limited pages, often without the need to reference the index or chapter guide. Each subsection is bracketed with questions that challenge the reader to think more critically and comprehensively about the concepts. Additionally, Wells provides the most thorough descriptions of her chosen methods of data analysis that I have encountered. Her addition of Poland's (2002) instructions for transcribing data using a conversation-analytic notational system from audio/video recording, which heretofore this reader has not encountered in other texts, is applaudable (as cited in Wells, 2011, pp. 39-41). She consistently uses this method throughout the book when narratives are presented for illustration and promptly defines in brief, the various notations where applicable. With this said, I move on to discuss what I regard to be one of the most beneficial inclusions of this guide.

One of the greatest assets of this book is the author's utilization of multiple illustrations from scholarly research narrative transcripts. I found these to be both moving and extraordinary. These illustrations proved to be exceedingly helpful for several reasons. First, they are engaging and compel the reader to pursue the original article from which they were derived, as Wells suggests (p. 100); second, they help the reader to better grasp a workable understanding of the concepts of narrative analysis; and third, they keep the reader focused on the text and prevent it from being a "dry" reading experience. Likewise, how compelling would a book on narratives be without the presence of narrative illustrations? It is inherent

that those of us interested in this method of qualitative research place great value on the stories of individuals, how these can provide rich understanding, shape policies, and change both the narrator and the audience.

Some common and notable themes emerged during my reading. The most dominant is that narratives are culture-bound. The *language* of the narrator is inexplicably linked to his/her culture and this is a key element in understanding this approach. The reader should note that this is perhaps one of the most important themes of narrative inquiry. To miss this would render this approach to qualitative research, and any use of it, untenable. Second, the author points out several ways Narrative Inquiry is beneficial in the social work arena. Yet, these areas are just as pertinent to those of us working in the fields of psychology and counseling as well. A few ways that Wells tells us how narrative inquiry can be helpful is in:

- Understanding “professional-client encounters” (p. 11);
- Appreciating relational experiences (p. 12);
- The “study of [previously overlooked] aspects of development” (p. 12);
- Realizing the importance of the subjective experience (p. 18); and
- Learning about the structural methods of analysis and how this is important in the use of studying social [...] phenomena (p. 62).

Wells states in the introduction that this book is “addressed to doctoral students and researchers within and outside of the school of social work for whom narrative inquiry is new” (p. 4). However, I venture to voice it is so simply written that a broader audience would find it beneficial. Perhaps anyone, even beginning college students who esteem a future in research, could find it as helpful as did I.

Numerous times throughout the book Wells encourages the reader to investigate the plethora of references from which she draws. She admits that due to the brevity of the writing, an all-encompassing explanation of narrative inquiry and analysis would be impossible. Understandably, she includes portions of analysis that are germane to her interest, social work, and those that she has utilized successfully in her previous research. Yet, despite the conciseness of her writing and the areas she does cover, I am puzzled by one glaring oversight.

Wells has entitled the book *Narrative Inquiry* and the back cover introduces it as “an introduction to narrative inquiry.” However, a very limited portion of the book actually covers the *inquiry* process of this approach. The majority of the book—four of eight chapters—focuses on narrative *analysis*. The author uses only two pages to discuss the components of a narrative. The remainder of the chapters is devoted to analytic methods, her chosen technique of framing Narrative Inquiry using the case study method, data collection, and validation. Considering that Wells’ intended audience is unfamiliar with this approach, I presume to say she would have served her readership more effectively with a detailed explanation of inquiry prior to divulging so heavily into analysis. After all, it is difficult for one to properly utilize any of the recognized methods of analysis if one is unfamiliar with the process of inquiry.

With this said, I can find no other fault with this excellently written guidebook. I do not hesitate to recommend it to anyone interested in gaining a basic knowledge of this approach, but mention that the future reader be aware of what I consider the above-mentioned bungle. In this respect perhaps he/she can supplement this work with a more detailed explanation of narrative Inquiry before delving into the weighty and rich discussion that Wells has provided of narrative analysis.

References

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Author Note

Salena Potter is currently working to complete her PhD in Marriage and Family Therapy at Amridge University in Montgomery, AL where she received her M. A. in Marriage and Family Therapy. She is in part-time clinical practice in Huntsville, AL. Her areas of research include the ethical and legal aspects of using Skype as a venue for Teletherapy, and ways to assist low-income single mothers in obtaining a college education. She can be contacted via email at bandurasbox@gmail.com.

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