

Reading the subtext: Before, beside, and beyond the narrative

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Abstract

This paper draws upon a study of women's education to consider how a 'recall methodology' was developed and modified before, beside and after the data collection, which relied upon informal conversational interviews. Using the same framework, the researcher reflects upon the philosophical issues that arose during the research process as she struggled to balance criticality and realism, acceptance and intervention within the narrative process. The linguistic devices used to highlight meanings in the text are presented with examples and the paper ends by examining how embedded stories offer an additional lens for analysis, moving beyond the narrative itself.

Introduction

The theme 'Before, beside, and after (beyond) the narrative' prompted a reconsideration of the methodological approaches to research that I developed when I set out to explore the lives of students whom I had previously taught over a ten-year period. This was a cohort of adult women choosing to qualify to work with young children. Many of them were returning to education after a break to start a family. Some were making good a lack of formal education in the compulsory sector, others seeking a career change. Despite the varying starting points and levels of motivation, one of the significant findings of the research was the way that the women drifted into childcare work and training because it was accessible. They knew about and were interested in children as mothers, the work was convenient in terms of hours and location, the opportunity to study was state funded and, in focusing their home-life, education and occupation on children they avoided the stress associated with cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957). In theoretical terms, they were able to integrate their lives (Wright 2011) as the options they chose lay within a single capability set (Sen 1999) being emotionally congruent and physically compatible albeit requiring careful planning and organisation to achieve a delicate balancing act.

To set the scene, the original doctoral research was a study of 33 women selected to be broadly representative of the 150 possible participants for whom I had previously collected detailed background information by questionnaire. The original intention (in the 'before') was to focus on the women as participants in adult education and this aspect remained an important element within the research and is dealt with elsewhere (Wright 2013). However, as I commenced the research (passing into the 'beside') it became rapidly apparent that such an approach would seriously constrain the women's freedom to tell their life stories in the ways that made sense to them. Recognising this, I adopted an open conversational style, and this narrative form led to an immediate broadening of possible outcomes and insights, taking the stories far beyond the shared experiences of the classroom experienced in our roles as student and tutor. However, I am breaching my own intended narrative structure, my beginning, middle and end, by looking ahead, as this paper plans to discuss the research process within the framework of decisions made 'before' the research began, issues and challenges that necessitated change during or 'beside' the research, and ideas and views that arose 'after' the research was completed. Some of these were part of the formal analysis, others have continued to develop 'beyond the narrative' as I revisit and reflect on the original data when the opportunity arises.

The 'before'

Employing the structure of this conference, we should first consider the 'Before' of the Biographic Narrative, and I start by answering the self-imposed question 'Why did I adopt this approach and why was it appropriate?'. The general arguments about depth and breadth are relevant here but more specifically there was a critical need to make the familiar 'strange'

(Garfinkel 1967). Although I knew that I was interested in students' views of education and the role it played in their lives and had decided that the participants were to be drawn from ten cohorts of students whom I had personally taught on a diploma course, I needed to broaden the interest beyond the course itself. I was not carrying out action research so wanted to focus on students and their lives rather than tutor and her teaching. To adopt a biographical approach signalled an interest in their personal histories that would illuminate and explain their decisions and viewpoints. It 'excavated' new material that I would not have learned about without the formality of an interview even though the interviews themselves were very informal. It provided a rich stream of complex narrative that enabled thematic, within- and across-interview, and holistic analysis.

The 'Before' of the process also involved considerable thinking around the interview sample. I had to decide whether, like Goodson and Sikes (2001) I would choose the candidates who were capable of telling interesting stories. Alternatively, I could just accept those 'willing to assist in the research process' (Erben 1998: 5). After reflection, I felt that as all the students were already known to me I needed to establish a criterial basis for selection to avoid accusations of bias. Sample size was also an issue – how many students could I – did I need to – interview to get sufficient results? Since I faced this dilemma Baker and Edwards (2012) have drawn up a 'really useful' overview of sample sufficiency in qualitative research but even with this available the researcher still needs to make an individual decision and I suspect that many of us stop when we run out of time, funds and/or energy whether or not we can later claim data saturation.

The sample decision is core to biographical methods as we need at all times to be aware of the scope and depth of analysis needed to achieve credible outcomes – the 'After' is always with us in the 'Before' even when we call our work 'exploratory' and our methodology 'emergent', a label I adopted during the research process (Wright 2009). In my case I designed a sampling matrix, setting cohorts against current working patterns and cross-cutting this with the key characteristics evident in the group to make sure that I interviewed the few childless workers, the younger and older, the English and incoming workers, and a representative selection of workers stratified by educational achievement. Issues of overall research design, of ethical approval, and of contact-searching all came in to the 'Before' of the study, although some of these issues also inevitably bled into the 'Beside'. Real life is never tidy but there is still a need 'to say something sensible' about a 'generally "messy" situation' (Robson 2002: 4).

Before I started the research I saw myself (rather naively) as a radical postmodern thinker. As an educator who at the time was training early years workers within Further Education (a post-compulsory sector traditionally providing a mix of basic skills to under-qualified adults and vocational education at sub-degree level) I had become increasingly disillusioned with continual funding cuts, political restraints disguised as bids to raise standards and the managerial rationality which recasts value questions as technical ones thereby limiting choice (Gergen 1992). I first engaged with postmodern perspectives through Dahlberg, Moss and Pence's (1999) work *Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care*. This draws on 'the potential infinity of vocabularies in which the world can be described' (Rorty 1980: 367) and aims to 'encourage critical enquiry and dialogue' (Dahlberg et al 1999: 3) seeing quality as a problem to be questioned rather than a challenge to be achieved. Excited by the possibilities of 'resistance' to closure (Usher and Edwards 1994: 18) I expounded the virtues of multiple realities, ditched the passive 'view from nowhere' (Assiter's 1996: 95 appropriation of Nagel's 1986 term) in favour of 'the auto/biographical I' (Stanley 1992) and joyfully discarded the limitations of Cartesian dualism, succumbing to the 'polysemous possibilities' and the 'mysterious slash' of postmodernism for a while (Stronach and Maclure 1997: 30, 31). Importantly, in the further education context I had found an intellectual position from which to refuse to be bounded by behaviourist objectives (Armitage et al 1997).

The 'beside'

This new freedom became problematic in my childcare study when I started to consider the interview process and the extent to which I would structure the discourse. I was aware that I was transgressing by sending out questionnaires that contained a significant number of closed

questions to enable a statistical analysis of the overall population under study. Was I truly a qualitative researcher concerned only with the individual viewpoint or someone with a foot in both the interpretative and positivist camps? And did this really matter? If the postmodern extreme heralds a 'descent into relativism' (Parker 1997: 4) why should the individual not take what s/he needs from each tradition, practising a form of bricolage (Denzin and Lincoln 1994). I was intellectually uncomfortable with the idea that 'anything goes' (Parker, 1997: 4) given that I was interviewing real people who were sharing their life stories with me. That I knew them personally exacerbated this ethical dilemma and I found myself to be moving toward a more realist stance where the students and I were together trying to determine a shared vision of what was 'true'. Like West (1996) I wanted to move 'beyond fragments' and understand people.

Decisions around interview strategies started in the 'Before' when I asked myself 'How was I going to carry out the research?' and answered this by constructing sets of interview questions. However, Kvale's work *InterViews* flagged up the possibility of a 'rather moderate postmodernism' (1996: 158) and I began to see that I could establish my own philosophical stance, seeking accurate shared interpretation without losing the criticality and reflexivity I associated with postmodernism (Usher and Edwards 1994). My carefully constructed semi-structured interview schedules were relegated to the status of 'prompt sheets', to be used when and if the participants needing urging to talk, or encouragement to move the conversation on. A 'probing' process grew out of the experience of the early interviews, and I found a rationale for this in Hollway and Jefferson's (2000) exposition of psychosocial interviewing where the authors describe the importance of challenging and questioning hesitations, contradictions and juxtapositions in the narratives even as they appear. For me, using a single-interviewing process, there was little merit in noticing such incidents after the event, as this left the interpretation speculative.

Hesitations are important. They may signify that the participant has not thought clearly, or perhaps recently, about a subject and may offer an unrehearsed explanation that more closely approximates the truth than a later reworked version. They may also indicate a reluctance to engage with a topic for many different reasons that need to be explored. Contradictions are revealing, leading one to question why there is confusion, which versions are the more plausible, why there is a need to rethink and re-present an idea even as it is first uttered. Is there a process of 'denial' at work? Juxtapositions may signal hidden connections, a sharing of content or emotional response that introduces new material for co-examination. They may also be an attempt to deflect the interviewer. Again part of the 'Beside' of the process is to ask these questions, sometimes even using leading questions to evoke a response.

In ethnography Hammersley and Atkinson (1995/1983) talk of 'progressive focusing'. This can be applied to interviews as refining the questions to ensure that emergent areas of interests are probed more fully until answers emerge, an activity definitely grounded in the 'Beside'. For me this did not feel appropriate. I wanted to leave the participants to tell their own stories as much as possible so focused my energies on excavating shared understandings during the interviews rather than analysing what was happening immediately afterwards or pulling out strands and patterns that connected different participants together – or indeed set them apart. To borrow an analogy from Coleridge, it was a process akin to 'suspending disbelief', a living in the 'moment' that kept my thoughts firmly in the 'Beside' of the interviewing process and the real life story that I was hearing and recording. Similarly, during the transcription process, that closely followed each interview (so is also in the 'Beside') I focused mechanically on listening to ensure accurate typing rather than listening for meaning, leaving the deep listening processes to take place in the 'After' as I replayed the recordings alongside the typescript.

The 'after' ... or 'beyond'?

After the interviews were completed and transcribed, the exhausted researcher needed to find methods of analysis that ensured a similar 'exhaustion' of the data. (At proposal submission stage I had managed to inspire confidence by talking vaguely about 'grounded theory' and induction). Now I needed to do something concrete – either use grounded theory or find other

methods. I needed to find a workable solution to the vital questions ‘So what?’ and ‘Who cares?’ (Clandinin and Connelly 1994) and my own more immediate concerns, ‘What shall I do’ and ‘How?’. Reading the specialist texts in more detail I felt grounded theory was rather too mechanical for me after the open and interactive interviewing process, even Kathy Charmaz’s (2000) more constructivist approach. So I settled for finding themes by hand, for picking out key words or phrases that summed up beliefs, for analysing the written scripts to see that what I read fitted my mental framing of the interviewing process. Immersing and re-immersing myself in the data I heard its hidden messages, drawing up a list of typologies of behaviour and achievements visible only through an holistic lens. (Here I question whether I am talking about “After” the narrative or actually the more alliterative ‘Beyond’ as this type of analysis is based in the meanings of words but not in the actual text – the stories take on a life of their own beyond what is directly said.) Listening even more closely I eventually accepted that I could not write about education alone as the students’ lives were deeply enmeshed in family, work and study and single strands could not be teased out individually. These elements are discussed in detail in my book, *Women Studying Childcare* (2011) and not the focus of the current paper.

Fragmenting texts

In this paper, I want to look in more detail at how I made the psychosocial processes more visible, the viewing of interviews as conversations that led me neatly to a view of language structures as ‘speech as action’ (Sacks 1992) and to the use of conversational analysis (CA) (Ten Have 1999) as a means of capturing the nuances within the shared discussions. At its most basic conversation analysis studies the structure within language, analysing the turn-taking processes that occur in normal speech and more formally within interviews. Thus, it follows, if the interview more closely resembles a conversation this becomes more significant, for the areas where alternative turn-taking is violated and the gaps where responses are delayed draw attention to disfluency. To mark up entire interview transcripts would have changed the nature of the research and vastly extended the analysis stage for little purpose. However, to use the process as a tool rather than as an end in itself, it is acceptable to use CA selectively. Generally, for CA, the speech is set out as consecutive turns, with an initial (in my case H.) used to identify the interviewer contribution, I. to label that of the interviewee. As it is the analysis of the relationship between adjacency pairs, missed turns and preference or dispreference that is important to discover hidden meanings, this normative structure is vital to analysis. Fortunately, I had followed the common practice at transcription of setting out alternative speech episodes beneath each other, each starting on a new line. So it was relatively easy to go back into the interview recordings and add the extra symbols that CA uses to indicate other activity beyond the words (is this also part of a section on ‘Beyond’ the Narrative, too, I wonder?). CA coding was very useful to identify and explain the areas of text where hesitations, contradictions and juxtapositions occurred, whether on the part of the interviewee or the researcher. Additionally, there were other areas where the visible portrayal of inflection, change of pace, uncertainty or denial, was very illuminating.

The devices that commonly indicate tone and timing are relatively simple. Thus I used underlining to indicate a stressed word, CAPITALS to indicate raised voices and colons to record e:::longated syllables. (.hhh) and (hhh) indicate inward and outward sighs, and round brackets observations (other than speech), empty brackets () indicate talk too inaudible to capture, and ° precedes and follows speech uttered softly.

To give an example, Felicity dragged the syllables when she talked about her responsibilities and this indicated the level of anxiety that she felt.

I. I lie awake worrying about those things and I wouldn’t be doing that if I worked at a checkout in Tesco’s - I would:: not:: be:: lying:: awake:: worrying:: about whether I had undercharged someone 10p!

I used the sign = to depict an immediate response or cut in as when I questioned Felicity about the Ofsted rating:

H. Underlines in what sense? What did you get? Did you get=

I. =We got good overall but we got more than 50% outstanding so its okay.

Here, the cut in suggests that she did not want to have to reject a possible suggestion that they could have achieved 'outstanding'.

The convention of square brackets indicates overlapping speech, when speakers talk simultaneously, neither listening to the other:

H. [Yes it is]

I. [What do you mean?]

Pauses are normally counted in tenths of seconds but this seemed unnecessarily quantitative for my purposes and rather than indicating missed turns conventionally with a floating bracketed time eg: (0.2) I chose to draw attention to the missing turn by labelling the gap with an H. or I. and merely used brackets and full points to indicate pauses, letting the number of stops roughly indicate the length of the pause.

Thus (.) represented a brief hesitation, (.....) a lengthy one and (...) something in between.

H. Is that important to you?

I. (.....)

H. Do you think it matters that ...

indicated a significant failure to respond followed by a legitimate prompt, something which transcribed without conversation analysis conventions might appear to be simple repetition.

When considering interjections and affirmations or denials however, I chose to set aside the conventions of turn-taking and overlap. Earlier research into children's intersubjectivity had made me aware that in conversation participants negotiate shared meaning by accommodating affirmations within a speech turn. The interjector instinctively recognises a potential interstice and fills it, the speaker accepts and allows this but without losing the gist of their continuing turn. So on paper such exchanges were captured so:

H. Did you find that was important (I. Yes, yes) to your final decision?

This empathetic interspersion of prompts and affirmations/rejections, in my opinion, demonstrates the co-construction of knowledge and captures power equality. When neither party feels the need for deferral to the other (which I think might happen in a formal interview procedure), interspersion only interrupts rather than violates the conversation structure. Ease and equality become visible when such interspersions occur within the turns of both interviewer and interviewee.

Moving 'beyond fragments'

As well as this fine-grain analysis I also immersed myself in the data, holistically developing two sets of student typologies (Wright 2012) and developing a Model of Integrated Lives, but here it is more relevant to focus on some individual life-stories.

When I interviewed an Asian student, Hansa, she struggled at times to convey the nuances of meaning, becoming frustrated that she could not always find the words she wanted to express her ideas clearly. We achieved this shared meaning through a process whereby I sustained the interaction over the hesitations by offering possible answers when the pauses to compose a response became uncomfortable. Typed up conventionally, it looked as if I was holding an interview with myself, or overly shaping the discourse. With the pauses and inflections clearly indicated, the questioning tone of my suggestions captured on paper, it was apparent that the process was supportive. Hansa's excitement and animation clearly indicated when we achieved a common understanding.

Another conversation exemplifies how contradictions raise awareness that the story is more complex than it first seems. Heidi achieved her diploma on her third attempt suggesting that this was important to her. Indeed, she articulated this clearly:

I: I just wanted to pass, that's all I ever wanted, so that was my job, and I could stay there.

Despite this long-term commitment and evident motivation, Heidi was no longer working in the setting when I interviewed her. She offered a number of contradictory reasons for this alerting me to an answer that was not being articulated. At one moment she was leaving because she was getting too involved with the children, at another because she had said she would go and could not go back on her word, later she admitted that she could not go on fighting with

colleagues all the time, or go to work unhappy. At one minute she expressed concern for the group's welfare, at another joked about how she would like to 'really annoy them totally'. The juxtaposition that the nursery garden needed improvement and 'that Ofsted could really pick so much fault in it is unbelievable' alerted me to the possibility that the reason for leaving was tied up with a poor inspection, perhaps due to her encouraging the children to play unsupervised, hiding among the conifers. She juxtaposed the view that:

I: If you've got the piece of paper that says you are qualified you have got to make sure that you live up to that standard.

This led me to surmise that she stormed out after a poor inspection, unable to accept the criticism and its ramifications within the group, and unwilling to go 'back' on her decision. However, she was already thoroughly miserable so I decided not to press for clarification in this instance but focused instead on what she planned to do next.

Daisy, mother of four, retold a complex life story, and declared a passionate interest in working with young children but was only doing agency work at the time of the interview, despite qualifying. When asked she admitted to being a bit frustrated with the pre-school committee but then changed the subject slightly to complain about the national system whereby volunteers manage trained staff. This felt like a juxtaposition, in this case to deflect me from the personalised query. So I empathised and asked for a specific example and this drew out a 'floating' concern about criticism, possibly another juxtaposition.

H. You say it was frustrating – can you give specific examples?

I. I think criticisms, as well, being criticised.

The pace of the interview slowed down perceptibly and Daisy's answers became shorter and more closed. I queried whether the criticism was personal, then whether it was informal or at appraisal, receiving affirmations but no further detail. Even when I empathised by re-articulating her frustration, this only elicited a 'yeah'. However, when I tried a different approach, Daisy suddenly opened up. Half in jest I made a (possibly) false claim on her behalf:

H: So you left there amicably and went to an agency?

Being a very honest person, Daisy immediately corrected this view, admitting that she resigned after critical appraisals and 'was glad to be out of it at the end'. Mirroring the banter in my comment she joked 'shall we cut that bit' restoring the tone of the conversation to its former humour. Such prompts are not part of the orthodoxy of formal interviewing but proved very successful in eliciting views informally in an otherwise 'safe' interaction. It was important to keep the conversation going and to elicit accurate interpretations so sometimes, as Kvale (1996) suggests I resorted to using leading questions. Doing this checked my interpretation of Daisy's motivations.

H. Do you think you like the agency work because it involves moving on?

I. (Nods) I tend to steer away from grown ups.

Going beyond the 'beyond'

Narrative research amasses considerable quantities of data and, viewed through a different lens, has the potential to yield additional insights. Such an instance arose when I considered the narratives in terms of style rather than content. In the 'Before' I had been aware of Bruner's (1985) arguments for reasoned knowing taking two different forms, the logical scientific mode of paradigmatic cognition and the storied knowing of narrative cognitions, which he sees as significant beyond its role in expressing emotions. I also studied Polkinghorne's (1995) distinction between the paradigmatic approach that encourages storied accounts to be analysed thematically and the narrative approach that seeks to produce storied accounts from material gained more systematically. However, in my postmodern frame of mind I judged these distinctions to be too binary and left the interviews to develop 'naturally'. However, when I became interested in the nature of emplotment as I prepared work for the 2013 ESREA Life History and Biographic Research Network conference I realised that 'storying' indicated when events were of central importance to students suggesting that there are certain matters that they dwell on repeatedly and make sense of – perhaps even come to accept – through continual rehearsal. Greta, for instance, gave an elegant account of difficult driving conditions that,

initially; had seemed irrelevant to the rest of her account. It was only when I started to view the structures of the text in terms of emplotment that I understood the possible reason for its inclusion. She had quite recently lost a close relative in a car accident and her own story could be viewed as the nearest parallel experience she could call on to make sense of the relative's death. Her relief that she had not hurt anyone else took on a new significance as I realised that she was attributing similar relief to her relative and indirectly gaining some measure of personal relief. She stated in several ways:

I. All my priority was to not hit anybody, not hurt anybody.

The changing narrative structure drew attention to a connection that I had not been aware of when looking for factors relevant to education. This makes me wonder how many additional interpretations still sit within the narrative accounts, waiting to be discovered when the lens changes.

'Concluding' the paper

Perhaps these snippets give a flavour of how unorthodox interviewing techniques can assist the researcher to probe or not probe for deeper understanding; how working with hesitations, contradictions and juxtapositions throws light over the factors that shape people's lives; how close listening enables a more holistic understanding than that elicited from standardised questions. As already stated, these are examples that illuminate the interrogative process in action so function 'beside' the biographic narrative. In contrast, the coding and conversational analysis is carried out in the 'after', but together, both help us to develop our understanding 'beyond' the actual narratives. The final story, Greta's accident, serves as a reminder that lives are multi-layered and accounts interwoven. A 'recall methodology' such as I developed appears to have the potential to reveal additional meanings when the researcher adopts a different lens.

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