# Telling Stories

In the previous chapter I incliuded an analysis of ‘Martin’s Story’. ‘story’ is commonly interpretated as a synonym of ‘narrative’. Despite the title of this story, however, Martin is not the main protagonist, which is more appropriately understood as London Zoo. All Martin does is copulate; even Myra is more active, gestating and giving birth to Hari. Martin, Myra and Hari are representatives of a subspecies of tiger, a category that is under threat of extinction. The subjects of this threat are hunters and shooters and, indirectly, those in the market for tiger body parts as well as the unspecified destroyers of tiger habitat. The Zoo is energetically trying to replenish tiger numbers through a breeding programme and by education. Implicated in this story is a second narrative that privileges sub-species purity over hybridity: Martin was identified as a ‘pure bred Sumatran’, which led to the search for a suitable mate. The conservation and eugenic narratives are not themselves justified in the text, but themselves legitimate the Zoo’s actions in ‘Martin’s Story’. We might also infer a European supremacist narrative in the text that accuses Eastern mythology of causing the problems and identifies Western science as providing the solutions. In our texts and interactions we tell stories and our stories tell stories.

Our proclivity for stories entails that asking for a story is a good start to an interview: tell me about a lesson that you taught last week; can you tell me about a recent conversation with your line manager; what happened when you last visited a supermarket, a theatre, a football match, a restaurant; can you tell me something that happened during your holiday. The default tends to be that the interiewee will present a narrative relating to an incident from their experience and because of the relational nature of the way in which our memories function, this is an easy thing to do. Much easier than, for example, providing an on-the-spot generalisation or analysis: what are your priorities your teaching? how would you describe your relationship with your ine manager? What are your strategies in visiting the supermarket? What do you pay attention to when you visit a theatre, what kinds of restaurant do you like? What do you feel you get out of going on holiday? These are much more awkward to respond to. If you ask for a story, then having been presented with a narrative, you can follow up with *probes* to elicit more information about the interviewee’s experience in general: “is it generally like that?”; “Can you tell me about a lesson, conversation, visit that was different in some way?”; and so on. Alternatively, of course, you can ask for more details about a particular point in the story. The responsibility for analysis lies with the researcher, not the interviewee. They may, of course, spontaneously provide an analysis or generalisation, but this is more data for your conceptualisation and should not substitute for it.

Narrative research is commonly, though not exclusively, concerned with lived experience. Because each invividual’s lived experience is substantially unique, interviewing in depth is generally a more informative method of data collection than, say, a pre-coded questionnaire. There is a place for the latter—for example, if we want to explore the theatre-going (or performing) experiences of a large number of subjects—but the items and their codings have to come from somewhere and the use of qualitative interviews, seeking narratives is a good place to start. Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly (2000) point to the poverty of educational testing when interpreted at an individual level:

> Student achievement on a test does not in and of itself tell the tester or the teacher much of anything until the narrative of the student’s learning history is brought to bear on the performance.

> For example, a particular performance might represent the rote application of an algorithm, the application of a set of cues for the solution of certain problems, or a high-level cognitive performance.
>
> In contrast, from the point of view of the grand narrative […], a student's performance on an achievement test is taken as direct evidence of the cognitive level obtained by the student: the more complex the performance behavior, the higher the cognitive level of objective achieved. Thus […], an action is taken as directly evidential. There is an equation connecting action and meaning, connecting performance and cognitive level. In narrative thinking however, there is an interpretive pathway between action and meaning mapped out in terms of narrative histories.
>
> (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; p. 31)

The 'grand narrative' that is referred to here is the psychological theory that connects 'performance and cognitive level'. This is fine when dealing with averages where we might legitimately assume that the distribution of individual narrative specificities would be symmetrical about the mean, but the test does not know and cannot account for local histories and so is effectively meaningless at an individual level.

Similarly, in the present (at the time of writing) Covid-19 pandemic, it is clearly important for governments to keep track of the current rate of infection, the proportion of those infected, the proportion of those who will need hospitalisation, the proportion of those who will need to be placed on ventilators and so forth so that they can plan their response. The 'lockdown' policies that are in operation around the world are in place to prevent health services from becoming overwhelmed. When the danger of potential hospital overload has been avoided and the lockdowns relaxed, however, individuals—especially those of us in an 'at enhanced risk' category will still be at enhanced risk. Of course, this remains a probabilistic risk and, in the absence of a narrative—a theory, in this case—that identifies the causes of the progression of an infection to a dangerous condition—or, of course, a vaccine, I cannot with any adequate reliability predict the ultimate outcome of my trip to the supermarket.

Catherine Riessman (2008) suggests that there are 'key differences' between 'thematic narrative analysis' and, for example, Grounded Theory, that include the use of extant theory in the former, which she suggests is not allowed in GT; sequences are preserved in narrative analysis, but not in GT, which fragments the data; time and place are important in narrative analysis, though not in GT; and narrative analysis, unlike GT is 'case-centred'. As I have indicated in the previous chapter, however, this characterising of GT is inappropriate. GT certainly does admit pre-existing theory, it simply warns against forcing a theory on data where it does not readily fit; sequences and trajectories may contribute to GT conceptualisation where they are relevant to the developing theory, in which case the grounded theory may include codes relating to time and/or space. Glaser's dictum, 'all is data', makes it clear that a grounded theory is data-grounded and is, initially, a substantive theory relating only to the case that is instantiated in the data that has been analysed. This substantive theory may later be developed as a formal GT, but this is not an essential feature of GT data collection and analysis. As I have pointed out in the previous chapter, there are several varieties of Grounded Theory and all are commonly misrepresented in response to which I can say only that, if you are going to criticise or characterise an approach (or recruit another author who does so), make sure you understand it. This, of course, does not entail that you must treat its precepts as laws: conducting and writing about research is fundamentally about designing and presenting an argument and whilst this should be coherent, it is not necessary to maintain coherence with positions that have inspired it, though it is usually a good idea to establish clearly and rationalise one's departures from them.

Apart from its apparent misrepresentation of Grounded Theory, I have found Riessman's book to very helpful in my teaching of methodology to postgraduate students. Rather than present a single approach to narrative analysis, she illustrates several versions including 'thematic analysis', mentioned above in which:

> Emphasis is on the content of a text, "what" is said more than "how" it is said, the "told" rather than the "telling". […] investigators collect many stories and inductively create conceptual groupings from the data. A typology of narratives organised by theme is the typical representational strategy, with case studies or vignettes providing illustration.
>
> (Riessman, 2005; p. 2)

By contrast, with 'structural analysis':

> Emphasis shifts to the telling, the *way* a story is told. Although thematic content does not slip away, focus is equally on form – how a teller by selecting particular narrative devices makes a story persuasive.
>
> (Ibid.; p. 3)

and 'interactional analysis':

> Here the emphasis is on the dialogic process between teller and listener. Narratives of experience are occasioned in particular settings, such as medical, social service, and court situations, were storyteller and questioner jointly participate in conversation.
>
> (Ibid.; p. 4)

Riessman's final example, 'performative analysis':

> Extending the interactional approach, interest goes beyond the spoken word and, as the stage metaphor implies, storytelling is seen as performance – by a "self" with a past – who involves, persuades, and (perhaps) moves an audience through language and gesture, "doing" rather than telling alone. Variation exists in the performative approach, ranging from dramaturgic to narrative as praxis – a form of social action.
>
> (Ibid.; p. 5)

Narative analysis is not restricted to the use of verbal data and Riessman (2008) provides illustrations of narrative analysis that involve the use of visual data. One of these recruits photographs illicitly taken by Japanese Americans interned by the US government (also illicitly) during the second World War, a second, a photographic narrative of the experience and ulltimate death of a cancer patient.

Narrative research may involve multiple subjects in establishing patterns of narrative themes, structures, interactions or performances and can recruit diverse modes of qualitative data collection and analysis as Riessman's examples illustrate. Narrative research may, alternatively, collect data from multiple subjects and settings in order to construct the narrative of a single individual. This approach is exemplified by Elaine Chan's (2010) study of Ai Mei, a young Chinese Canadian girl (also reprinted in Creswell & Poth, 2018):

> I conducted interviews as well as ongoing informal conversations with Ai Mei over the course of the 2 years I spent in her homeroom classroom. I also collected documents such as school notices, announcements of community and school events, notices from bulletin boards and classroom walls in the school, agendas and minutes from School Council meetings, and samples of student work.
>
> (Chan, 2010; p. 115)

> I spent 2 full school years in her homeroom classroom with her, her teachers, and her peers as a participant observer. During this time, I became a member of the classroom, joining the class for activities such as field trips, special school events, band concerts, and school assemblies. More importantly, however, I was a part of their class during the uneventful days of lessons and regular school activities. It was during these times that I was able to build a relationship with Ai Mei and her peers and teachers. They grew to see me as an additional teacher in the classroom who was able to help them with assignments, act as an adult supervisor during in-school activities or field trips, and as a listening ear when they had disagreements with friends or with teachers.
>
> (Chan, 2010; p. 119)

Such an extensive and intensive period of participant obesrvation begins to resemble an ethnography (see the next chapter), except that instead of an empirical focus on a culture or group, as in ethnographic research, Chan's study concentrated on telling the story of one person, Ai Mei. Chan tells this story in terms of linguistic and other cultural dimensions, so that there is the potential for the study of this case to generalise in the sense of asking questions from within a theoretical frame:

> The narrative inquiry approach used in this study facilitated the identification of the many nuances of living as an immigrant student in a North American school context, and provided a framework in which to ponder these complexities.
>
> (Ibid.)

We might say that Ai Mei's narrative contributes to a *theoretical sensitivity* (Glaser, 1978) to the experiences of these students. This brief summary of Chan's study and that of the following research by Kitrina Douglas and David Carless (2009) are not intended to substitute for reading the original works, it's worth the effort in both cases.

Douglas and Carless present a different kind of narrative study that adopts a psychological approach in their study following the experiences of two professional golfers during and following the procees of retiring from professional game. Of particular interest in this piece is the productive use that the authors make of a distinction that they make, following Arthur Frank (1995) between 'story'—that is, the stories that people tell—and 'narrative' that refers to general structures of specific stories (Douglas & Carless, 2009; p. 214 fn.):

> According to Frank, culturally available narrative types structure, locate, and underpin personal stories, acting as a guide for the way life should be lived and providing a frame- work within which accounts of personal experience are created and shared.
>
> (Douglas & Carless, 2009; p. 215)

Quoting John McLeod:

> The stories that, for the most part, construct our lives are 'out there', they exist before we are born and continue after we die. The task of being a person in a culture involves creating a satisfactory-enough alignment between individual eperience and 'the story of which I find myself a part'.
>
> (McLeod, 1997, quoted. By Douglas & Carless, 2009; p. 215)

According to McLeod, a lack of 'narrative alignment' between one's lived experience and an available 'narrative type' may generate tensions that can give rise to mental health problems. This relation between lived experience, narrative types, and the problems associated with narrative misalignment form the theoretical basis for the article by Douglas and Carless.

In an earlier paper, Douglas and Carless:

> … identified a dominant narrative type among women golfers that they call a *performance narrative*. Douglas and Carless described the performance narrative as a story of single-minded dedication to sport performance to the exclusion of other areas of life and self. Within the plot of the performance narrative, winning, results, and achievements are pre-eminent and link closely to the storyteller's mental well-being, identity, and self-worth.
>
> (Douglas & Carless, 2009; p. 215)

A former tour player herself, Douglas had already developed a "trusting relationship"(ibid.; p. 217) with two women professional golfers—named Berni and Debbie in the article—and they accepted her invitation to be involved in her research study. Data collection included interviews with the women over a six-year period, though Debbi's involvement was suspended at one point in consideration of a serious health problem. Interviews with Debbie resumed once she had recovered.

Both women had been successful amateur golfers and had decided to advance to professional golf. During their amateur and early professional careers, the experience of each woman was described as 'living the performance narrative' as described above. However, problems arose in both of their lives that led to what Frank (op.cit) described as 'narrative wreckage'. Berni had been unable to achieve the success in professional golf that she had had in the amateur game and ultimately found herself neetding to write 'begging letters' to tournament sponsors, which she found dishonest and humiliating. Dishonest because she felt unable to tell "[w]hat she felt was the truth—that she was a failure in performance terms" (Douglas & Carless, 2009; p. 221), because "she had a totalitarian view, including a belief that a golfer who fails to perform should not be on tour." (Ibid.)

Debbie became pregnant and decided to have the baby and prioritise this over her career in golf. However:

> the social expectation of what it is to be a mother—to be "available" and to prioritize the needs of the child—is, we suggest, wholly incompatible with the demands of the performance narrative that necessitates an exclusive focus on one's self and achievements in sport. A common result of this perceived incompatibility is that many female athletes, like Debbie, believe it is impossible to combine a career in professional sport with having children. From this position, being a "good mother" would require Debbie to abandon the performance narrative thereby, as she saw it, sacrificing her career in professional golf.
>
> (ibid.; p. 222)

Debbie's story, like Berni's, was untellable and when she eventually did tell it to close friends, they said she was not a good mother (thus proving the point!). Debbie suffered severe mental illness, attempting suicide and finally being admitted to a psychiatric hospital.

> But both women had now reached the point of narrative wreckage, where the performance narrative no longer worked in the context of her life experiences. To reinstate mental health and well-being—to be able to get on with her life—it became necessary for each woman to rebuild her identity through creating an alternative story that more closely fit her current life experiences.
>
> (Ibid.; p. 223)

Berni's mother became seriously unwell, which event shifted her attention from golf. She took time caring for her mother and for other members of her extended family subequently taking on local work, apparently in a pub, enrolling on a coaching degree course, and accepting a job teaching at a local golf club. Debbie remained in psychiatric care, her recovery taking two years, after which she resolved to tell her story, to speak out in an attempt to help others who may find themselves in a similar situation. Douglas and Carless argue that Berni's family emergency and Debbie's hospitalisation provided a space away from golf and a period of 'asylum' from their respective narrative wreckage. During this period, both women were able to re-story their lives along the lines of an alternative to the performance narrative.

> The alternative type of story by which both women created meaning and coherence in their lives can, we suggested, be characterized as a relational narrative. Through telling her life story around the contours of a relational narrative, and enacting these values in her daily life, each woman was able to reinstate a coherent identity that provided a sense of meaning and worth to life after golf.
> (Douglas & Carless, 2009; p. 226)

> the relational narrative focuses "on care and connectedness over and above the masculine values of separation, individuation, hierarchy, and competition"
> (Douglas & Carless, 2009; p. 223, quoting their earlier paper)

The two narrative studies that I have summarised here both present case studies and generalise in that way, as I have said earlier. However, the engagement with theory in each piece is different. Elaine Chan's study of Ai Mei presents her story in a way that highlights key features and dimensions that might serve as a 'theoretical frame' in reflecting on the experiences of immigrant school students more generally. This frame has not been organised as a substantive theory as such, but this does not diminish its potential value in asking questions and anticipating potential problems and areas for action and, indeed, further research.

The research by Douglas and Carless starts out with an extant psychological theory about narrative types and the potential of the misalignment of lived experience with an available narrative type to result in problems with mental health. This theory provides for the interpretation of the stories of the two golfers and clearly has implications for the intepretation of experience more generally. However, whilst the study illustrates the possibility of individuals changing their life experiences to align with alternative narrative types following narrative wreckage, it does not consider the extent to which and the conditions under which standard narrative types might themselves be flexible. It thus presents the sense that we are trapped in a kind of cultural menu system, albeit a menu that is not visible to us until we move outside it.

So, 'narrative' can refer to a story, a structure to stories that may be standard, cultural types, a dialogue, a performance, or a theory at any level of analysis that may be psychological or sociological and may be 'grand narratives, such as marxism or progress, or *petits récits'* (Lyotard, 1984), such as the narratives of marginalised groups. The protagonist(s) may be an individual, a group of individuals, an institution, a nation. It may be presesented as a 'true' event or events or an event that is hoped or wished for, or, of course, it may be fictional. Data may be collected by any method and in any form, though it will generally be qualitative rather than quantitative and may be verbal or in images (still or moving). So is there any specificity at all to 'narrative research'? I would say, probably not if we are thinking of 'narrative' as a technical term. Rather, its meaning is to be interpreted in context, which is the way that non-technical language always works: how are Douglas and Carless or Chan, or whoever using the word in this particular instance? This is why 'narrative' is not in the title of this chapter.