

Depth and Width: Culturally Sensitive Narrative Inquiry

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Abstract: This paper processes the choice of narrative inquiry and analysis methodologies to conduct research and accomplish optimal inquiry value, especially in the humanistic research domain. It will discuss Narrative Inquiry in context and how this can comprise both depth and width in research, attaining not merely relevant but also rigorous quality. The paper will refer particularly to the author's doctoral research as a source of illustration to narrative inquiry embedded in a contextual framework.

Keywords: Narrative inquiry, contextual awareness, ethical considerations, narrative analysis, supervision ethical problem-solving model

Quantitative research methods provide the researcher with numerical information leading to results that are more straightforward to analyse statistically. These results are reliable when appropriate sampling and strict adherence to the scientific method are applied. However, quantitative methods may lack the in-depth description and elucidations needed in the humanistic field when complex and comprehensive phenomena are to be studied. Sociologist William Bruce Cameron (1963) stated that 'Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted.' Qualitative inquiry allows researchers to develop a deeper understanding of human behaviour and experience, providing an opportunity for a systematic in-depth evaluation of issues that may not be easily answered through other research methods. My inclination was to undertake qualitative methodologies since in one of my masters' research I had focused on in-depth Gestalt therapeutic interventions with a client suffering from trauma; in the consequent masters' study I had interviewed Maltese practitioners regarding multiple relationships in the therapeutic field, while in my doctoral research I had focused on ethical dilemmas in practitioner supervision within the Maltese context.

Attending regular clinical supervision is mandatory for practitioners within the therapeutic field. Supervision consists of meeting a trained supervisor and/or a well-seasoned practitioner to maintain high levels of performance in one's work ethic, mainly processing; normative, formative, and restorative aspects (Inskipp and Proctor 1995); organizational facets (Copeland 2005); and contextual embedding (Lago and Thompson 1997; Carroll and Holloway

1999). 'Normative' refers to the maintaining and adhering of professional ethics in order to safeguard client's rights, uphold the country's law, and maintain values respected in one's community context. 'Formative' refers to the development in the counsellor's practice and competency maintenance at the level the practitioner is in. 'Restorative' reflects the recreating aspect in the supervisory relationship where the counsellor can restore one's resilience and ventilate frustrations, anxieties, and concerns. 'Organizational' refers to being answerable to the organization's policies, regulations, and accountability to the organization's quality of service. 'Contextual' refers to how the context and culture in which one works permeates the therapeutic relationship, the material discussed, and the nature of ethical dilemmas.

Ethical dilemmas in supervision occur frequently as counsellors bring their normative questions (Inskipp and Proctor 1995; Bond 2000; Wheeler & King 2001) which lead to more subtle and complex ethical issues. Supervisory ethical dilemmas also demonstrate distinct characteristics because of the context that supervision is embedded in. However, there is hardly any literature that considers the supervisory professional ethics of responding to the psychosocial challenges of people in the densely populated and intertwined social networks such as those found in Malta. On the contrary, much of the literature appears to follow the dominant Western European and North American cultural assumptions about the individual as the primary unit of ethical concern. This latter concept considers the possibility of privacy as an effective barrier between professional interactions and the rest of the community and overlooks the significance of the social knowledge derived from beyond the immediate professional encounter permeating from the wider collective domain. Furthermore, by adopting an ethic founded on the metaphor of the clinic, a supervisor may be ill prepared for psychosocial encounters and ensuing supervision dilemmas embedded in the characteristic Maltese setting.

Practitioners within such a humanistic field use an on-going reflective stance – a positioning which also needs to be reflected in the kind of research adopted. No one person wants to be a mere statistic when one needs and is using a specialized service such as those within the health, social care, and education domains. A researcher needs to follow this stance also when the nature of research being conducted requires not merely statistics but in-depth comprehension and the capturing of information. Depth in understanding, exploring, and analysing particular phenomena involving experiences, beliefs, and behaviours might not be conveyed in quantitative data.

My Choice For Narrative Inquiry

Throughout my doctoral research, narrative inquiry helped me to explore my practitioner-researcher standpoint. I wanted to 'write from the inside' (Ellis 1995) and understand the meaning of the research participants' lived experience. These, in turn, proved to be both unique to the research participants, as well as representative of others in the field and the context researched. With the narratives that the research participants contributed, more questions were explored, thoughts and beliefs were challenged or confirmed, and new and useful insights were generated (McLeod 2001). Practices are shared endeavours which one learns from and performs in interaction with others (Ricoeur 1990). Through such research these practices can be explored in depth, by widening our understanding within the particular field of study.

The narrative inquiry methodology I particularly used encompassed the following:

- **Practitioner research**, as I am myself a supervisor in the Maltese context researching with other supervisors and practitioners;
- A **reflexive stance** as an active agent in this research process while capturing insight through the narratives and the rich data emerging, thus creating a 'dynamic process of interaction within and between ourselves and our participants, and the data that inform decisions, actions and interpretations at all stages of research' (Etherington 2004: 36). A reflexive researcher is one who is aware of the myriad potential influences and is able to step back and take a critical look at his/her own role in the research process.
- Processing the research narratives as **ethnographic** in nature, as these portray how the research participants experience their practice in relation to the socio-cultural and political environment (Ellis 2004). In auto-ethnographic research, the social and historical contexts are of primary significance as people do not accrue their narratives and experiences in a socio-cultural or political vacuum. Immersed in the research participants' narratives, the researcher and the reader may experience the former's feelings, thoughts, struggles, outlooks, meaning-making, and an 'insider's' view of the cultures in which the stories are embedded (Polkinghorne 1995). The resulting auto-ethnographic texts are therefore 'relational and institutional stories affected by our history, social structure, and culture, which themselves are dialectically revealed through action, feeling, thought, and language' (Ellis and Bochner 2000: 739).

Contextual Awareness In Research

John McLeod (1998) suggests that the original foundational psychotherapeutic approaches were clearly 'monocultural' in nature and did not highlight the importance of 'contextual awareness' while also devoting little or no attention to societal contexts. My doctoral research provided insight into complex ethical dilemmas processed in supervision within the talking therapies field, such as counselling, psychotherapy, and psychology within the Maltese context. Lago and Thompson (1997) focus on the false view that can be given of clients' difficulties if the cultural context is not taken into consideration; this can also be mirrored in supervision.

Malta's interconnected relational context as a result of its small densely populated geography and socio-cultural and political characteristics, combined with diverse therapeutic facets may create particular ethical dilemmas in practitioner work and supervision. By adopting an ethic founded on the metaphor of the clinic, a supervisor or practitioner may be ill-prepared for psychosocial encounters and ensuing supervision dilemmas embedded in the characteristic Maltese setting (Falzon 2011).

Arising from these reflections, the main research questions that were addressed collaboratively with the research participants were:

- What ethical dilemmas do they encounter in their role as supervisors and how do they work through these ethical dilemmas?
- How do they view these ethical dilemmas in relation to the Maltese context and what insight can one attain regarding supervision in this context?

Ethical Considerations In Narrative Inquiry

During the preparation phase prior to a dissertation, apart from the typical procedures detailing extensive considerations of the ethical standpoints, in narrative inquiry embedded in the intricate Maltese context, particular ethical considerations needed to be addressed. The latter comprised, amongst others, the need for mindfulness before, during, and after the journey; reflective relational ethics; trust ethics; respect for the public and private domain of each research participant; and the multiple relationships that one can be involved in, such as collegial, friendship, or professional relationships with the participants. Ethical considerations need to be adhered to meticulously, since in narrative inquiry the private domain experience of the research participant will be explored through the research. The research participants need to be

consulted at all stages of the research so that they are aware of what is being written and that this will not cause them personal or professional ramifications.

Processing Of Narratives

As the researcher further immerses oneself in the narratives, the researcher may become increasingly guided by the participants' co-constructed phenomenological field and pick up further the tacit voice, meanings, and understandings emerging from the narratives. The understanding and critical engagement at this stage is enhanced by continuing dialogue, experiencing tacit understanding, and reflecting on all aspects, including discourse embedded in the experience shared by the research participant. The researcher needs to consider what was discussed with the participants regarding confidentiality; pseudonyms to be utilized; changes needed so that the participants' identities will be well-masked; or any other information that, although discussed during the interview, participants did not want written down in the narrative. After the writing process, the research might need to reconnect with the participants for feedback, any changes that they might want to make, any further reflections they would like to add, and their comments regarding the understandings emerging or the metaphors and narrative representations.

Results Through Narrative Analysis

Polkinghorne differentiates between two methods of analysis when using narratives: the analysis of narratives and narrative analysis. The analysis of narratives uses narratives as data to gain access to the narrator's world, seeking 'to locate common themes or conceptual manifestations among the stories collected as data' (Polkinghorne 1995: 13). Four methods of analysing narratives are: content analysis, conversational analysis, grounded theory, and thematic analysis. In all of these methodologies the stories are seen as providing a representation of the person's reality based on the idea that stories hold the raw material of inquiry. Narrative analysis, on the other hand, treats stories as actually constituting the social reality of the narrator (Bruner 1990; Frank 1995; Ochberg 1994; Riessman 1993) instead of merely being a tool to transmit a set of facts. The underlying belief is that people 'make sense of their experience, and communicate their experience to others, in the form of stories' so that stories 'can be treated as a primary source of data' (McLeod 2001: 104) and as knowledge in themselves. The researcher also needs to take into consideration the language and discourse used. According to Richardson (2000: 929) 'language is not the result of one's individuality; rather, language constructs the individual's subjectivity in ways that are historically and locally specific. What something means to individuals is dependent on the discourses available to them.'

Narrative Analysis As A Catalyst For Further Understanding Of The Context

Paracelsus (1958) stated that one needs to 'Give to each nation its own type of medicine, best suited to it, as it requires. For I can well realize that my prescriptions may turn out to be ineffectual among the foreign nations. And that the foreign recipes may turn out to be ineffectual in our nation.'

The supervisor cannot avoid such socio-cultural issues; so, finding ways of understanding and supporting oneself and other practitioners in situations which are particularly demanding and potentially stressful to all concerned is a must. No ethical principles prepare a supervisor for the contextual complexities that arise. Therefore, within the supervisory realm, various contextual characteristics need to be regularly considered and diverse situations demand that the supervisor resiliently and creatively rethinks and revises the processing and procedures as ethical dilemmas arise.

Through narrative analysis two main aspects were addressed:

1. The diverse supervision ethical dilemmas that the supervisors mentioned, such as issues of safety for clients, supervisee or supervisor, negative boundaries, unconstructive organizational domains, multiple relationships, ethical dilemmas with clients that were not handled well, and other such issues. Since a humanistic practitioner cannot avoid ethical dilemmas also involving socio-cultural issues, it is a must to find ways of understanding and supporting oneself and other practitioners in situations which are particularly demanding and potentially harmful to all concerned.
2. Aspects within the Maltese context that permeate the practitioner and supervisory domains. Fifteen particular contextual characteristics permeating the supervision domain and professions in the humanistic field were predominantly analysed. These characteristics do not indicate that other aspects were not present tacitly (Polanyi 1966) or explicitly in the narratives or by parts of narratives that participants, for confidentiality reasons, asked not to be included in the written narrative. Five examples of contextual characteristics processed were:
 - *Multiple relationships and the interconnected relational domain:* Not experiencing multiple relationships effecting past, present, and future connections or a semblance of disconnection is nearly impossible in Malta. In such a small densely populated island, creating familiar identities, reputation, and relational enmeshments may create, at

worst, conflicting boundaries, multiple relationships, serious ethical dilemmas, and personal and professional ramifications, and, at best, positive connections that speed up certain work needed with clients and a beneficial professional support system. This interconnected relational context also affects the supervisory relationship and ensuring supervisory awareness and integrity in choices made where multiple relationships are present, is vital.

- *Diffusion versus intensification*: Diffusion versus intensification has to be considered since the restricted geographical space may cause an intensification of ethical dilemmas, rather than the diffusion possible in much larger settings. Some of the narratives clearly depicted how intensification of conflict in a small space occurs; one drop of essence in a well is different from one drop of essence in a goblet! An ethical dilemma may combine into diverse multi-layered levels and result in further intensification of issues to the detriment of all those involved, as once the wave surge is in motion, the ripple effects are very difficult to prevent.
- *Private and public domains*: Within the Maltese context, information in the private domain effortlessly permeates the public domain. In the narratives, detrimental consequences arising from the collective domain were portrayed while, at the same time, the collective domain can also be supportive. Practitioners, especially supervisors, need this contextual awareness to work effectively and ethically, particularly in creating safe boundaries that generate trust, while withdrawing from situations detrimental to the supervisory relationship. In supervision, ethical mindfulness, wisdom in actions, trust, integrity, and insight in intricate situations are definite musts.
- *Diffusion versus intensification*: Intensification of ethical issues has to be considered in a small densely populated island (Mitchell 2002; Baldacchino and Farrugia 2002). The restricted geographical space may cause an intensification of supervisory ethical dilemmas, rather than the diffusion possible in much larger settings. Research findings clearly depicted how intensification of conflict in a small space may result in further intensification of issues, to the detriment of the profession itself, client, supervisee, or supervisor. The supervisor has to be attentive, perceptive, and vigilant to pick up any developing intensification of ethical dilemmas since, once the wave surge is in motion, ripple effects are very difficult to prevent.
- *Societal changes* happening on a Maltese macro level need to be taken into consideration, since in such a small island the effects are collective and intensified. The supervisor needs to attend to changes in society, such as economic changes, new political strategies and policies, moral standpoints, and discussions in the media – which

consist principally of one main station and two politically owned ones. The collective force within such a closely knit setting will significantly affect the therapeutic milieu, while possibly giving rise to ethical dilemmas.

Supervisor Standpoints

The supervisor's personal standpoints were also substantially referred to in the research findings. Some of the most significant supervisory aspects mentioned by research participants were:

- Clear contractual supervisory parameters;
- Mindfulness that supports trust, insight, beneficial processing, and a healthy relational framework;
- Open communication that, as far as possible, explores underlying or hidden agendas;
- Respect for personal agency and autonomy that supports supervisees' critical reflexivity;
- Creativity and flexibility so as to meet the here-and-now requirements of the supervisory relationship within the contextual setting;
- Congruency and immediacy needed in process work with supervisees so as to promote growth;
- Collaborative reflections that support positive and enhanced practices with clients, colleagues, the agency, and the wider community;
- Growth through thorough informed processing in the supervisory domain.

Supervisor standpoints will affect the beneficial progression of supervision as this reflects on what is or is not processed, included or left out, while working through ethical dilemmas.

Implications

Development of an ethical problem-solving model in supervision

Through the in-depth analysis of narratives, one could note that a single universal discourse does not apply to different cultural contexts. Narratives embody contexts emerging from dialogical processes respecting relational contexts. Ethical considerations cannot be solely culturally pre-determined, though guided by ethical policies and principles.

Incorporating the diverse aspects emerging from the analysis of narratives, the present author attained a wider purpose for the research by building further on the Ethical Problem-Solving Model developed by Bond (2000) by construing a contextually embedded ethical problem-solving model for supervision.

In brief, this model that was developed through the research considers:

- Conducting a description of the dilemma and its diverse facets;
- Considering dilemma as possibly appertaining to diverse entities;
- Analysing what the setting or network of entities in which the dilemma is embedded in, contribute to this ethical issue and any underlying factors supporting or hindering it;
- Processing cultural idiosyncratic issues since diverse cultures contribute a multi-layered formation to the ethical dilemma;
- Enquiring how societal, associations' or entities' guidelines, ethical principles, policies, or legal framework can facilitate working through the ethical dilemma;
- Identifying possible courses of action;
- Selecting the best course of action, taking into consideration four aspects; universality, exposure in all possible related parameters, justice, and evaluating possible ramifications;
- Implementation of the chosen course of action;
- Retrospectively appraise outcomes in supervision.

Correlation Between Social Connection, Relational Interaction, Geography, And Ethics

Further to analysing the contextual characteristics, the relationship between the levels of social connection, relational interaction, geographical constraints, and particular ethics were consequently also considered. Owing to the idiosyncratic Maltese context, through the findings in the conducted research, a direct correlation was established between the social domain within the context, the subsequent relational dynamics created, and the geographical constraint and its implications even within the confidential domain of therapy and supervision. Thus particular ethical considerations need to be adhered to, so as to establish the safety and stability required within this humanistic field.

The narratives and reflections previously discussed clearly depict a distinct correlation between the high level of social connection, intense relational interaction, geographical constraints leading to inescapability, and the necessity of embracing virtue ethics in supervision within the Maltese context.

Level of social connection: Owing to its small geographical area and density of population, Malta has a highly interconnected society. This interconnection causes an intensification of relationships within the public domain leading to, at best, a supportive network and, at worst, multi-layered and complex difficulties and amplification of relational issues.

Level of interaction: The interrelated social network and a variety of strong affiliations such as family, religion, and political connections lead to a high level of interaction. In Malta, both the levels of connection and interaction are very high.

Degree of geographical constraints: Owing to Malta's small geographical space and high level of interaction, when facing an ethical dilemma there is the possibility of its intensification rather its diffusion. The supervisor needs to process a dilemma thoroughly and analyse well how it can affect diverse domains, as this can have multi-faceted implications.

Virtue ethics: How to proceed and intervene will ultimately be informed by an innate sense of virtue ethics. What supports the supervisor to work through difficulties with integrity will not just depend on ethical principles but one's virtue ethics. There is sometimes a significant personal and professional cost when choosing virtue ethics and integrity; however, in the long term, especially in such an intensely socially connected and interrelated society, the authentic professional will emerge.

Value Of The Narrative Research Domain

This study has substantive applications within the therapeutic supervision domain as it particularly considers ethics in context and supervision ethical dilemmas. Researchers and lecturers need to be convinced and conversant in the research methodology utilized so as to pass its applicability and validity on to their students. They need to be rigorous about the right kind of research to answer the research questions posed. In this paper, I have envisaged to encourage the reader to think more about conducting and seeing narrative inquiry as a methodology that can promote sound research results, addressing research questions that are different from those deliberated by a clinical epidemiology.

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