Choosing Less Conventional Paths in Methodology

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Abstract: This article reflects on the methodology and some of the methods used in conducting my doctorate research, which addressed the research question on the perceptions and experiences of senior female leaders in the Education Department in Malta. The article can serve as a reference and enlightenment for prospective researchers during their study, in particular for their methodology chapter. Choosing the best methodology and methods to conduct research is always a burden for a researcher, even though in the opinion of some scholars there is no standard route for conducting research (Reinharz 1992; Ropers-Huilman and Winters 2011; Wadsworth 2001). While the research design is often based on the notion of “fitness for purpose” (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2001: 270), one still has to identify and address several issues to ensure that the investigation is sustainable, practicable, and feasible. Conducting qualitative research is not an easy task, in particular acknowledging the fact that some positivists’ views consider quantitative research as more credible and appropriate. However, a qualitative researcher must keep in mind that people’s experiences, including that of the researcher, are very subjective and depend on different factors such as time, gender, family, culture, hopes, opportunities, and visions. While the participants in the research may share some common factors, one still has to be aware that their experiences are unique. Thus, while an exploration needs to construct a meaning and well interpret the experiences of the participants, one must be conscious about one’s experiences so as not to skew the findings of the investigation because of biases. This article opens with how a researcher can be imaginative in presenting the findings in an investigation. Thus, the first section reflects on a dramaturgical praxis on how one can use performance to present the findings in a research. This is followed by some notions of qualitative research. The meaning and importance of case studies, and why one might choose narratives in research, are then delved into. An important aspect in research methodology is philosophical assumptions and how a researcher deals with this phase in the study. Finally, the article considers some aspects in qualitative data collection and analysis, and some ethical implications one must consider in a study.

Keywords: methodology; qualitative Research; new Paths; performance

Introduction

According to van Stapele, “as a researcher I am acutely aware that my own positioning within the relevant discursive frameworks is reflected in the choices I make in the selection of parts of the narratives, and in the meanings I dictate to them” (2014: 17). Concurring with van Stapele’s statement, a researcher must acknowledge and be very conscious that one’s positionality will influence the handling of the data in terms of both deciding what material to include or exclude, and its interpretation. Without any doubt, previous research and scholarly literature will somehow affect the choice of methodology, but every study is unique. Likewise, the choice of methodology by the researcher will be influenced by personal beliefs, perceptions, biases, and in some way the researcher’s life experiences.
This article explores an important aspect of choosing different paths when conducting research. Consequently, the first section will delve on how a less conventional way—in this case the use of drama—can be used in research to present one’s findings. It proceeds on the significance of the qualitative paradigm to conduct research and progresses in explaining case study. This article seeks to establish a rationale for choosing a narrative approach in an exploration. I will later also describe philosophical assumptions in an investigation. An explanation regarding the use of narrative inquiry in eliciting the stories from the participants follows, together with a brief literature on the importance of interviews. An important phase in research is how to analyse the data. For this reason, this article will also explain the approach one can take in analysing the data and the importance of interpretation in qualitative research. Finally, the article closes with some ethical implications a researcher needs to consider in conducting a study.

**Using Drama in Research**

This section immediately examines the importance in exploring different paths in presenting the findings in research—one of which is the use of drama. The presentation of the findings moves away from the perhaps more traditional approaches, but “with this comes a need to pay attention to the ethical considerations” (Showunmi and Fox 2018: 3). This section delves into what scholars affirm about radio drama and staged performance—two aspects used in presenting my findings in my research.

The intention in presenting the dramatised narrative of the findings is to offer the audience the opportunity to enter and enjoy the theatre by imagining the stage and the radio, being a part of them, and feeling that the crafted stories can be their stories. Nonetheless, one must be vigilant, since “no matter how we stage the text, we—the authors [researchers]—are doing the staging. As we speak about the people we study, we also speak for them” (Richardson 1992: 131). Denzin (2003: 8) asserted that a “performance is an interpretive event involving actors, purposes, scripts, stories, stages, and interactions,” and from this perspective the researcher must acknowledge that they are the interpreter of the different events in the drama, with the possibility that other researchers could easily advocate a different interpretation. I view drama or performance as a means through which the audience can live, observe, and listen to the actor/s in particular events.

Presenting the findings as a performance helps providing better insights into real lives (Conrad 2008) and facilitates the presentation of the participants’ lived experiences more credibly and vividly, and thus generates information on the phenomenon being studied (Saldaña 2008). Presenting a case study as a performance, rather than closing the curtain, will open it up to further interpretation. Not to lose context and meaning from the interviews, long verbatim quotes can be used.

Radio drama is a performance without a visual component and relies solely on acoustics like dialogue, sound effects, and music. Radio drama can be so powerful that Crook (1999: 8) asserted that: “It is auditory in the physical dimension but equally powerful as a visual force in the psychological dimension”, and thus, the listener can imagine the characters and the story. An important feature in radio drama is the actor’s voice, the spoken word, the emphasis the actor places on their voice together with “sign systems”: “language, voice, music, noise, silence, fading, cutting, mixing, the (stereophonic) positioning of the signals, electro-acoustical manipulation, and original sound (actuality)” (Huwiler 2005: 51). All these generate meaning and better understanding for the audience. For this reason, it is suggested to use different font formats, such as italicised text, to describe the tonality and emotions of the actor (reader). Nünning and Nünning (2002), in Huwiler (2005: 51), further
added that radio plays in the form of narratives are “not merely a literary form or medium of expression, but a phenomenological and cognitive mode of self- and world knowledge”.

Concurring with Barone (2007: 466), the aim as a researcher or storyteller in dramatised narratives is not to look for certainties about “correct perspectives on educational phenomena but to raise significant questions […] that enrich an ongoing conversation”. Performance is an alternative way of understanding and knowing the participants in the research; it “engages participants in a process of knowledge” and is “a unique and a powerful way of accessing knowledge” (Conrad 2008: 609). Transforming narrative texts from the interviews into a drama helps to “construct meanings” (Norris 2008: 631), and although it can be seen as different from traditional approaches, it is “a no less valuable way of creating understandings […] The playbuilding genre recognizes that its processes structurally framework knowledge” (Norris 2008: p. 631).

**Qualitative Research**

Positivism approaches considers truth to be found in numbers and can be quantified; on the other hand, the interpretivism approach considers life experiences as data, and such data are not numbers and cannot be quantified as they are subjective and there is always room for interpretation. Qualitative research offers the participants and the researcher a time for reflection on their mutual experiences.

Denzin and Lincoln (2011) offered a generic definition on qualitative research:

> Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. Qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including fieldnotes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalist approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (3)

Many scholars define and describe qualitative research in a similar way. The natural settings or the world of the research are informed by the concept of the phenomena being studied, the researcher’s experiences, feelings, and perceptions, together with the experiences of the participants. The social world is not an objective entity and qualitative research assumes the multiple realities of “the world” (Merriam 1988). While the participants may have several similarities, one must bear in mind that everyone is different, with different experiences, contributing “multiple perspectives and interpretations” (Wellington et al. 2005: 97). The researcher attempts to make this “world visible” by making sense of it and interpreting the perceptions and experiences of the participants.

Denzin and Lincoln’s line, “These practices transform the world” (Denzin and Lincoln 2011:3), generates some deep thoughts to the researcher. Will the research transform the world? Will it transform the researcher’s world? What and which is the researcher’s world? Is the research being investigated a perception or a reality? Reflecting on these issues one can realise that the transformation of the world would make sense through one’s own experiences and perceptions, and how they fit in with the experiences and perceptions of the participants. The hope of the researcher is that more people would benefit from the research, and would be an addition to the academic literature on the phenomena being studied.
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Case Study

Different researchers from different disciplines have contributed to strengthening case study research. The variety of disciplinary backgrounds, with variations in ontological and epistemological orientations, has added to its complexity, resulting in different definitions and descriptions of what case study research is and how to use it. While some researchers view case study research as a methodological approach with a rigid research strategy (Harrison, Birks, Franklin, and Mills 2017), other approaches like that of Stake (1995; 2006), consider case study as being less structural and closely identifying with the study by setting parameters and context of the research. Harrison et al. (2017: 8) described Stake’s case study research (1995 2006) as one with a “strong motivation for discovering meaning and understanding of experiences in context”, where the researcher’s interpretative role is essential to the process, and “an interpretative position views reality as multiple and subjective, based on meanings and understanding”. From these perspectives, a researcher must be aware and prepared to which direction and approach the study will proceed.

Harrison et al. (2017), citing several other scholars, stated that interviews are methods used to achieve the goal of co-constructing data. They further asserted that, for Stake (2006), interviews and observations are the preferred methods, and since during the interviews the researcher bonds with the participant as a partner to discover and generate new knowledge, interviews are the main data collection method, and stress the importance of rigorous procedures to set the research process. Thus, identifying the key topics or research questions that affect the case study is of great importance (Harrison et al. 2017). These help in setting the context for the case study and are key elements for data collection, which in turn will be used for the data analysis.

Narratives

According to Gibson, Shanks, and Dick (2017), “narrative analysis treats stories [...] as knowledge, which constitutes the ‘social reality’ of the narrative” (173), and as stated by Goodall (2008), “narrative epistemology” is a distinct way of understanding the world and a “way of knowing” (14). This suggests that a good beginning of narrative inquiry starts by using the narrative interviews. Concurring with Denzin (2016), stories can give insights into human experiences. A narrative is a story or account of connected events, real and/or fictitious, aimed at imparting a message. It is the “sequence and consequence” of organised selected text, which is eventually connected and evaluated as meaningful information, usually for a particular audience, which makes text narrative (Riessman 2005). The researcher definitely needs to select adequate text from the transcripts for quality narratives. After thorough analysis, the researcher needs to organise and connect the text to create the story—which can be in the form of a performance. Narrative inquiry is about using field texts, such as interviews and life experiences, to understand how people generate meaning in their lives as narratives; the focus is on human knowledge, which is collected from the participants and the extent to which this knowledge is valuable. According to Goodall (2008), “narratives are our way of knowing” (15), and Sikes and Piper (2011) further asserted that narrative accounts are “the only ethically and methodologically acceptable and indeed the only possible way of getting any sense of the lived experiences that [they OR researchers in this field] wanted to investigate and re-present” (298).

These persuasive quotes suggest that narratives are a very suitable method to approach a study, since it gives participants the opportunity to provide enriching information. While there are different definitions of narratives, leading to different methods of analysis, all require the construction and selection of text from interview transcripts, which is then analysed and interpreted, since “narratives do not speak for themselves” (Riessman
2005: 2). The participants’/interviewees’ responses form part of a relational activity during which they narrate their story at length, many times deviating from the original questions. Riessman (2012) described such narratives as case-centred. In their narratives, the participants share their personal troubles and great knowledge about social and historical process is obtained. In the words of Riessman (1993: 2), “individuals become the autobiographical narratives by which they tell about their lives”.

Narrative analysis is about “interpreting things” and there is no one method how this is done (Riessman 1993). Nonetheless, decisions about what to include in the narrative story and what to leave out are exclusively up to the researcher, as are the interpretations of the participants’ stories. However, one must always bear in mind that these interpretations are subjective and that others can create a different story, but this same subjectivity adds more value to the story. In agreement with Crotty (1998), the justifications we make in our methodology and methods reflect how we view the world, which relate to the researcher’s way of thinking, axiological positioning, and the choice of narrative methodology and methods. As Plummer (1995: 87) further affirmed: “For narratives to flourish there must be a community to hear; [...] for communities to hear, there must be stories which weave together their history, their identity, their politics.”

**Philosophical Assumptions**

An important aspect in every research is that the researcher reflects on and expresses their philosophical stance. This is done through the adopted methodology and any clarifications of the methods used and approaches taken within a framework of philosophical assumptions (Harrison et al. 2017). Creswell and Poth (2017) described these using four philosophical assumptions. The ontological issue relates to the nature of reality, which is socially constructed rather than being a given. The epistemological assumption is the way knowledge is acquired by getting as close as possible to the participants during the interviews. Axiological assumptions are about the values in research, involving several statements on one’s positionality, including the values endorsed and biases. As such, methodology and methods are the procedures used in the process of the research.

Mills and Birks (2014: 18) defined philosophy as “a view of the world encompassing the questions and mechanisms for finding answers that inform that view”. This statement of Mills and Birks may spark several uncertainties to the researcher since they first state that philosophy helps the researchers to fill gaps in knowledge, but then they add that qualitative research raises more questions than it answers. Raising more questions in a qualitative approach, rather than closing down an episode, is important. Philosophically, case studies can have both a realist or positivist perspective, where one single reality independent of the individual exists. Case studies may also have a relativist or interpretivist perspective, where multiple realities and meanings exist (Harrison et al. 2017). Subjectivity does not invalidate experiences and truth, but rather strengthens the concept that multiple realities exist around a phenomenon. Case studies have the benefit that they are not aligned with any fixed ontological, epistemological, or methodological position (Harrison et al. 2017).

As suggested by Harrison et al. (2017: 6), “Qualitative paradigms are broad and can encompass exploratory, explanatory, interpretive, [and/] or descriptive aims”. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011: 9), three important characteristics of qualitative research are:

1. capturing the individual’s point of view;
2. examining the Constraints of Everyday Life;
3. securing Rich Descriptions.
Although one can adopt different methods how to obtain data in qualitative research, in-depth interviews give the researcher the chance to know, understand, interpret, and give meaning to the experiences of the participants, those experiences which the interviewees deem important to share with the researcher. Through their narratives, the researcher experiences the social world. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) emphasised how qualitative researchers believe and value the rich descriptions of the social world, an important aspect which is usually appreciated by the researcher in the vast amount of text the participants share. The researcher must acknowledge that all transcribed text is valuable, but then concrete choices need to be taken, albeit difficult decisions on what to include in and exclude, so that they would stick to the context of the study, notwithstanding that much of the omitted text is of great interest.

Epistemology is a field in science concerned with the nature of knowledge, how to understand our world. Understanding is about how we interpret the knowledge acquired through experiences, which may be influenced through various factors like beliefs and perceptions. In this respect, the interview questions must be posed to reduce biases as much as possible, but nonetheless it will be unavoidable that some biases would surface both during analysis and consequently in the findings.

Concurring with Gibson et al. (2017), from the social constructionist lens, the narrators are somewhat interdependent and entrenched in various aspects such as their culture, context, understandings and experiences, and value that knowledge is obtained from people and experiences. From this respect, a researcher, in particular coming from a small island like Malta, must be aware and acknowledge various influential factors like: culture, stereotypes, perceptions, different values, the time of data gathering, and fear of exposition, considering that many people know each other and politics may influence the responses. An important statement a researcher must keep in mind is that of Riessman (2005: 6) that: “The ‘truths’ of narrative accounts are not in their faithful representations of a past world, but in the shifting connections they forge among past, present, and future.”

Trustworthiness

An important aspect in research is how much the study is trustworthy. Traditional views of validity and reliability relate to whether the study gives the researcher what they expected to find, in a sense “‘measuring' what you say you are” (Mason 1996 in Bryman and Bell 2015: 400) and “the degree to which a study can be replicated” (LeCompte and Goetz 1982 in Bryman and Bell 2015: 400). Concurring with Bryman and Bell, this is difficult or impossible to reach in qualitative research.

Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) view is that the soundness of a qualitative project rests on four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility would be the extent to which results are believable from the perspectives of the participants, since they are the only ones who could legitimately judge such a criterion. Adding to this, I add the readers, as they would know if the stories are credible. Transferability referred to generalising the capability of the research. Ellis, Adams, and Bochner’s (2011) description of generalisability in qualitative research is how much the “story speaks to [readers] about their experience” (7), how much the story is able to “illuminate” the readers. Readers provide validity by comparing our story with theirs, by finding similarities and differences, and by the feeling of being informed by the story we write (Ellis et. al. 2011). Dependability is linked to the researcher’s emphasis on acknowledging the ever-changing context in the research. By confirmability, Lincoln and Guba (1985) meant the extent to which the findings could be corroborated by others, which could be done in various ways, either by referring to other studies in the findings, and/or by playing the devil’s advocate role and providing contradicting observations.
Interpreting information in research is somehow influenced by one’s perceptions and experiences. Biases exist in many formats. Confirmation bias is the tendency to interpret information in a way that confirms pre-existing beliefs and hypothesis, which may result in a skewed output, one totally seen from the lens of the researcher. For this reason, and for better trustworthiness and credibility, the transcripts need to be revisited several times. As much as possible, the researcher needs to keep an open mind and really listen to multiple voices while accepting other insights.

Concurring with Plummer (2001), the importance in telling a story is to enable the readers to enter the subjective world of the researcher. Validity means “verisimilitude”, where readers can feel that the experiences described are “lifelike, believable, and possible, a feeling that what has been represented could be true” (Ellis et al. 2011: 7). In accordance with Riessman, “There is no canonical approach to validation in interpretive work, no recipes or formulas” (2013: 184).

**Eliciting Stories from the Participants - Interviews**

Before the actual interview, it is advised that the researcher pilot the questions to make sure that the questions would be fully understandable and are refined accordingly. Piloting is very important in the research process since this “is crucial to its success” (Cohen et al. 2001: 260). Cohen et al. (2001) further add that piloting helps in removing uncertainties and ensures that the questions being posed to the participants are clear with no or the least possible room for misunderstanding.

Spoken language is considered as one of the most powerful tools humans use to communicate with each other, as language plays an important role “in bringing experience to understanding” (Freeman 2008: 388). An important method to obtain the data of the main research question are in-depth interviews, since interviews offer an excellent method to obtain a comprehensive picture of the participants’ experiences in their own words (Schutt 2006). Interviews allow the researcher to explore multiple perspectives and “explore in detail the experiences, motives, and opinions of others and learn to see the world from perspectives other than their own […] [I]nterviewing helps reconstruct events the researchers have never experienced” (Rubin and Rubin 2012: 3).

Interviews are a two-way communication between two persons “for the specific purpose of obtaining research-relevant information” (Cannell and Kahn 1968: 527). Interviews allow greater flexibility and freedom both for the participants and the researcher. In-depth interviews offer “fitness for purpose” (Cohen et al. 2001: 270) since they are “exploratory” (Oppenheim 1992: 65) and “loosely structured” (Mason 2002: 62). The interviews allow generating knowledge (Kvale 1996) and they permit both the participants and the researcher to discuss global concepts from a different point of view (Barker and Johnson 1998; Laing 1967).

Narrative interviews as a data-collection method provides the opportunity for the participants to voice their experiences and perceptions. Narrative interviews employ a post-structural approach in research where the interviewer respects the participants’ stories. It is a method where the interviewer neither agrees with nor contradicts the answers (Rolling 2010). Rather, narrative interview as a method looks for what is possible and makes apparent what the interviewer would otherwise have classified as certain (Rolling 2010).

For record purposes and not to lose essential information, it is recommended that the interviews, with the participants’ consent, are recorded, and maybe as a precaution they should be recorded on two devices. If needed, as suggested by McCracken (1988), the
interviewer needs to use prompts or probes to give the participants the opportunity to elaborate on their life experience in their own voice. As Cohen et al. (2001: 279) claimed, the researcher must bear in mind that “it is often after the cassette recorder or video camera has been switched off that the ‘gems’ of the interview are revealed, or people may wish to say something ‘off the record’”. However, that is part of the confidentiality pact in the research process, and the researcher has to make sure that, for these declarations, no notes are taken and their assertions are not included in the findings. It is suggested that immediately after each interview the researcher scribbles further notes on other observations. This gives the possibility to remember as many details as possible which otherwise would have been missed. If needed, for clarification purposes, participants are to be contacted again to elaborate on some details emerging from the interview.

Transcriptions

Transcribing is a crucial step since there is the chance that some data will be lost or distorted (Cohen et al. 2001). Inevitably, the originality of data is lost in transcriptions since transcription involves translating from the oral and interpersonal into the written language (Kvale 1996). While it is suggested to transcribe the recordings in their entirety, the researcher has no choice but to be selective about what to include and what to leave out, and which direct quotes to use or not to use to support their arguments (Nisbet, 2006). After the interviews are conducted and transcribed, and comments according to the notes taken during the interviews are inserted, data analysis commences.

Data Collection and Analysis

Qualitative data analysis involves preparing and organising the gathered data by reducing it into themes through a coding process, with the purpose of describing the events to which the data refers, and even going beyond: “we want to interpret, to explain, to understand—perhaps even to predict” (Dey 1993: 31). Some scholars disagree about the generalisability across the larger population in qualitative research and argue that the focus should be in representing the experiences of the participants (Clandinin 2013; Ritchie, Lewis, Elam, Tennant and Rahim 2014). While the representations of the experiences of the participants in qualitative research are very important, likewise it is significant how some other scholars describe generalisability in qualitative research. Scholars like Leung (2015) and Carminati (2018) argue that with the “rising trend of knowledge” (Leung 2015: 326) obtained from qualitative research such as in narrative/life stories, generalisability becomes relevant—as described previously.

There are several ways to analyse the data gathered and it is the responsibility of the analyst to choose the best approach to interpret and find meanings from the data according to the phenomenon being investigated. Data gathering, data analysis, and presenting the findings are not three distinct processes but they are interrelated and they frequently intertwine. “The Data Analysis Spiral” as described by Creswell and Poth (2017: 186) is a very suitable approach in qualitative research. The first loop in the spiral is “managing and organizing the data”, where the data can be gathered through the interviews. After which data is transcribed, full transcriptions are suggested, and notes taken during the interviews are reviewed. The second loop involves “reading and memoing emergent ideas” and this is done by reading the transcripts several times, each time taking notes and memos. The third loop is “describing and classifying into themes”, where the data is described, classified, and interpreted.

When the final themes are developed, “developing and assessing interpretations” follows. During this stage, it is imperative that the reviewed literature is used to compare and
contrast it with that of the participants. The final loop is “representing and visualizing the data”, and this is done by presenting the findings of the study.

An important decision in research is what to leave out and what to include when presenting the findings. To do this and to use what the researcher considers to be the most relevant information for the study’s presentation, the hybrid approach of inductive and deductive coding process as described by Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006) is very applicable. By relevant, one is not implying that text left out is irrelevant, but rather one has to make a choice, which according to the researcher’s interpretation best suits the study. After revisiting the transcripts and notes several times, one has to decide on the main themes. The hybrid approach allows the researcher to decide which themes are deductive and which are inductive. Usually deductive themes emerge from the interview questions. An approach for the inductive themes is grounded theory as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). This includes, the need for the researcher to familiarise themself with the data, coding the data to search for themes, reviewing the themes, defining and naming the themes, and finally doing the writeup.

Translation

When conducting interviews in Malta, a researcher must be aware of the language and be more cautious on the transcripts, given that Malta is bilingual and participants may answer in Maltese and/or English. Most research in Malta, including the research questions, are posed in English, but some participants will prefer to share their experiences in our mother tongue, Maltese, and in a way, this presents another complexity in taking the right decisions. Being bilingual, with both English and Maltese recognised as the official languages, there still exists the problem posed by Phillips (1960: 184), that “almost any utterance in any language carries with it a set of assumptions, feelings, and values that the speaker may or may not be aware of but that the field worker, as an outsider, usually is not”. Therefore, it is highly recommended that the transcribed translated text will be reviewed repeatedly, allowing for any modifications. Nonetheless, there are struggles to find the correct equivalent of phrases. In a way, this gives the researcher the opportunity to understand some traits of the participants better, especially when they switch to the Maltese language to express themselves better.

Interpreting the Data

Merriam (1988) asserted that the world is highly subjective and, for this reason, interpretation is much more desirable than measuring, and according to Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009), interpretation is itself an art relating different skills including one’s perceptions. It is recommended that, immediately after each interview, the researcher spends time reflecting on and taking notes of what was observed and could not record. This also means that during the transcriptions, the researcher relives the moment when the participants shared their experiences. The transcriptions need to be read and reread, and memos and descriptions are taken each time, since each time fresh information is attained (Krathwohl 1998). Gay et al.’s (2009) in Castle (2012: 127) advice is very helpful, that of beginning data interpretation by answering the questions: “What is important in the data? Why is it important? [and] What can be learned from it?”—according to the context of the study established by the researcher’s chosen perspective.

An important aspect during the interviews is the silence of the participants. Silence is very important and relevant, and worth interpreting. Interpreting words requires the utmost consideration, but interpreting silence is more difficult and one should be even more guarded against any assumptions. Thus, in the interpretations, a researcher may also consider not just to focus on the spoken voices of the participants but also to explore
their silences. The interpretations obtained from the interviews are then grounded in the literature explored during the literature review and other observations discovered from the voices of the participants.

**Ethical Implications**

_An important and critical aspect in research is ethical issues. The most important ethical concern is to do all that we can to ensure that we re-present lives respectfully and that we do not use our narrative privilege, or, put another way, our narrative power, to demean, belittle or take revenge (Sikes 2010: 16)

*Researching, writing about and re-presenting lives carries a heavy burden regardless of whatever methodology [...] our own stories usually implicates other people as there is very little, if anything, that we do in total isolation (Sikes 2015: 1)*

The two quotes of Sikes gather the fundamental ethical innuendoes for several qualitative research. Doing what you can to ensure that the people mentioned in a study will not be harmed in any way is crucial. Since the findings, apart from reporting the participants’ narratives gathered from the interviews or other methods, also include others—or as declared by Sikes they “implicate other people”—great caution needs to be taken throughout the whole research process (Kvale 1996).

Research ethics implies applying moral principles so as not to harm anyone even after the research process and it requires the promotion of respect and fairness (Kahakalau 2004; Sieber 1992). This means that during the whole process, but in particular during interpretation and writing the findings, responsibility and accountability of what the researcher is to write are continuously taken into consideration. The human aspect must never be taken for granted or overlooked at any point in the process of the research (Borg and Gall 1979). Thus the usual ethical issues in any research process must not be ignored: that of not forcing the participants to take part; guaranteeing confidentiality and anonymity as far as possible; posing questions in a way that does not harm the participants; and upholding the participant’s right to withdraw at any time without any consequences (Cohen and Manion 1994; Cohen et al. 2001; Schutt 2006).

Part of the ethical procedures in most research is to get official approvals from necessary bodies. In addition, before the interviews, the participants need to be safeguarded by being provided with a detailed information sheet, signing of the consent form, and conducting the interview in a safe environment. Furthermore, the participants are also given the approval letters. These procedures would usually be carried out in every research, but as Clandinin and Connelly (2000) asserted, gaining signed informed consent, which according to Cohen et al. (2001) and Schutt (2006) also implies informed refusal, is not enough, since anonymity throughout the whole inquiry is usually a great issue. This concern can be even more of an anxiety if the research is conducted in a small community like Malta with its small size, where many people know each other, a setting which Damianakis and Woodford (2012: PAGE NUMBER) described as a “small connected community”. Louisy (1993) acknowledged the fact that living on a small island–St. Lucia, similar to Malta–had repercussions. Therefore, in presenting the findings, a researcher must be aware that one “cannot realistically offer anonymity and definitely can’t” (Sikes 2012: 135), and it is suggested that the participants will be alerted, and if the need comes the transcripts and findings are given to them again to doublecheck their responses and the outcomes.

Apart from this, a researcher must be conscious that the participants in the study might know each other very well and this presents an ethical dilemma: the risk of unintentional
disclosure of the participants and others involved in their narratives (Kaiser 2009; Schutt 2006; Tolich 2010). Thus, one must be very aware how to present the findings. It is suggested that the participants’ names and any other means of identification gathered during the interviews do not appear in the study, and fictitious names or pseudonyms are used. However, participants must still be made aware of the limitations of anonymity and possible risks. Notwithstanding all this, the advice of Ellis (2007: 24) regarding “the ethics of what to tell” is very relevant, and a researcher must leave out transcribed data which in some way discriminates or harms the participants or any other mentioned persons.

As inquirers, it is very important to think about our stories, others’ stories, and all that relates us together in our shared lives. This calls for relational ethics and it “calls us to social responsibilities regarding how we live in relation with others and with our worlds” (Clandinin 2013: 30). As Kimmel (1998) asserted, “whatever the ethical stance one assumes and no matter what forethought one brings to bear on one’s work, there will always be unknown, unforeseen problems and difficulties lying in wait” (cited in Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2011: 88). Moreover, although a researcher attempts to cover all possible ethical issues, one must be aware that there will always be risks, despite the best intentions.

**Conclusion**

The aim of research is to obtain knowledge, and using any methodology would be to present “a body of knowledge about the other” and a “deconstructive research is that it is not obsessed with getting to the truth but to highlight epistemological and ethical inadequacies in the attempt to know the other” (Galea 2008: 25-26). Tierney (1998: 68) further added that, seeking “new epistemological and methodological avenues demands that we chart new paths rather than constantly return to well-worn roads and point out that they will not take us where we want to go”; and, according to Goodall (2008), when we write or tell a story, “we create alternative pathways to meaning that are imaginative and analytical” (14) that connect the teller to the listener or reader. From this perspective, a researcher needs to make sense of the data and try to “chart new paths” to produce knowledge.

This article presented some important features one needs to consider in the methodological approach a researcher takes to conduct a study – in particular the qualitative approach. Wellington et al. (2005: 96) declared that “justifying methodology and methods is an extremely important part of any research account since it is on the match between methodology and methods and research focus/topic/questions that the credibility of any findings, conclusions and claims depends”. For this reason, choosing the methodology and method/s is crucial in research.

Stories give the possibility to readers to interpret them differently (McCormack 2004) but this widens the perspectives rather than limiting them (Lather 1991). In fact, by presenting the findings in the form of a narratives or a similar approach, readers will be given the opportunity to follow their interpretation and construct a meaning. I end this article by appropriating Sandelowski’s (1994: 61) quote which in my judgement many qualitative researchers can apply for their study:

>[W]hen you talk with me about my research, do not ask me what I found; I found nothing. Ask me what I invented, what I made up from and out of my data [...] I am not confessing to telling any lies about the people or events in my studies/stories. I have told the truth. The proof for you is in the things I have made–how they look to your mind’s eye, whether they satisfy your sense of style and craftsmanship, whether you believe them, and whether they appeal to your heart.
References


