



Narratives in Research

FAHD ZULFIQAR, *Pakistan Institute of Development Economics, Islamabad.*

Bryman (2012) briefly explains that qualitative data usually results in a large amount of textual and contextual information. He further explains that there are two general strategies which qualitative researchers use to analyse qualitative data; analytic induction and grounded theory. In both strategies coding frames are constructed in which codes are generated either inductively or deductively. While generating codes, categories, and themes, the text reduction technique is employed to condense voluminous data. This process condenses larger amounts of text into keywords, codes, or categories, ‘decontextualises’ or ‘fragments’ the spontaneity and serendipity of accounts, events, and stories told by people. Bryman (2012) names these stories as narratives that are garnering acceptance from both researchers and activists. This Knowledge Brief is an attempt to explain what narratives are, how narratives are collected and analysed, and what narrative analysis entails.

1. WHAT ARE NARRATIVES?

Narratives are stories of peoples, events, and places (Bold, 2012). Narratives are event-centered or people-centered. While detailing narrative, Bryman (2012) narrates:

“An event is something that has happened to a person or thing, at a particular time or in a particular situation. Narratives necessarily tell the events of human lives, reflect the human interest and support our sense-making processes. They have the ability to transform our lives and the contexts in which we live.” Bold (2012; 16)

De Fina (2015) classifies narratives as micro and macro. The depiction, construction, and analysis of narratives as recognised by psychologists, anthropologists, and socio-linguistics go beyond the decoding and deconstructing texts and are more situated in local realities such as experiences of HIV/AIDS patients (Bryman, 2012), classroom settings (Bold, 2012), or therapeutic sessions. These micro-narratives are contextual which are then connected with the event they are embedded in to explain the articulation between context and event. For this reason, in most of the narrative-centered research, interpretationist epistemological and constructivist or postmodernist ontological orientations are upheld by qualitative researchers.

2. WHAT A GOOD NARRATIVE ENTAILS?

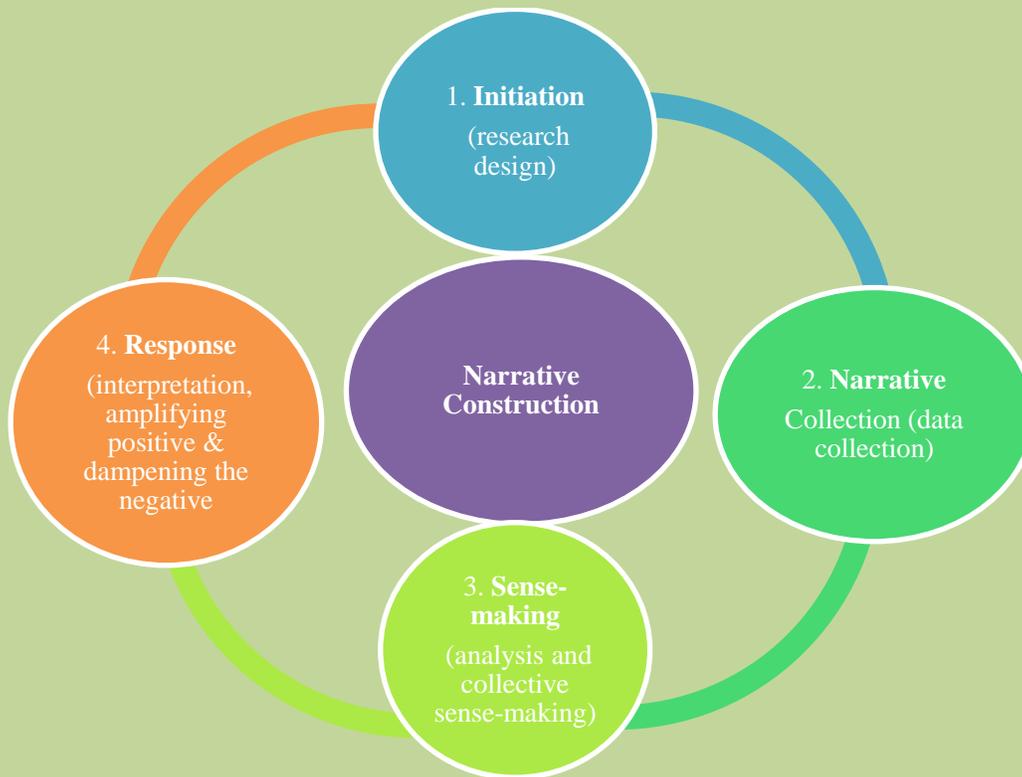
Bold (2012) articulates the following qualities of a good narrative:

- **Liminality:** A narrative providing a space in which the reader can open his/her thoughts to something new.
- **Transgression and Evocation:** A narrative eliciting emotional and experiential experiences from readers.
- **Complexity:** A narrative interweaving ideas, layered characters, and non-linear story-telling.
- **Creativity:** A narrative creating concepts, that are fluid, multi-vocal and fresh.
- **Audience Engagement:** A narrative capturing attention by communicating in particular ways.

A good narrative is also amenable to narrative analysis. Narrative analysis is an approach to analyse qualitative data that focuses on the stories that people tell. These stories can be extracted through a variety of research methods, including though not limited, to semi-structured interviews, unstructured interviews, and participant observation. Narratives can be constructed through, and narrative analysis can be applied to documents (official documents or personal documents such as field notes, diaries, and fiction as well non-fiction materials), images (still and moving), and artwork.

3. HOW TO COLLECT NARRATIVES?

Narratives can be collected through individual and group interviews. Among individual interviews are structured, semi-structured, and unstructured interviews. These interviews are classified according to the type of questions being asked; closed and open-ended questions. The data extracted through these questions can be in the form of short answers which can be easily collated or may extract narrative style responses which require retrospective qualitative analyses (Bold, 2012). However, extraction of narratives through interview types which are specifically classified by the type of questions posited at interviewees, is often viewed as a reductionist approach towards narrative construction. To collect narratives which are richer in tone, deeper in content, and context-laden in their specificity to the individual being studied, discursive and situational and contextual interview types are required. In literature, these interviews are classified as narrative interviews, episodic interviews, oral histories, life histories, experience-centered interviews, event-centered interviews, and Biographic-Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM). In the following is presented the analytical framework derived from the Dave Snowden's framework of narratives and sense-making:



Narrative Interview (NI)

- *Is the method in which interviewee is stimulated to narrate stories with minimum interruptions from the interviewer (Jovchelovitch and W. Bauer, 2000).*
- *The attempt is not to strictly follow the topic guide and question-answer schema; go beyond interviewer-interviewee monotony and rely more on the self-generating schema.*
- *Adopted in cases when the aim is to minimise the influence of the interviewer and verbalise the interviewee's perspectives through storytelling.*
- *Use of language similar to the interviewees is preferred, which embodies a reflexive methodology that the researcher employs while using narrative research design.*

Life and Oral Histories

- *Methods for researching social history, social change, and life events. In some cultures history of the communities is passed down from one generation to the next generation through ancestral stories.*
- *Storytelling becomes a very effective method for eliciting experience-centred narratives which are separated from the event-centred narratives. The latter focuses on the set of events in the narrative without caring much for the story's context.*
- *Context and content are the prime features to be considered while collecting experience-centred narratives.*
- *BNIM is a technique for collecting highly detailed analysis of one's life history, and since this method seeks retrospective stories told over time, it requires a longitudinal research design.*

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

- Bold (2012) asserts that during **FGDs**, individual identities are lost as generalised patterns, and mutual consensus are reached over a range of issues under consideration.
- In doing so, there is a possibility of missing out on individual narratives.
- Despite these potential weaknesses, the dialogue can generate a collective narrative especially when sensitive domains are researched upon.

Participant Observation

- Narratives can be extracted through natural occurring data. Natural occurring data is captured through **participant observation**.
- Observations as a source for narrative construction are being visited and revisited in ethnographic research. The most commonly employed observational technique is participant observation, in which the researcher plays a dual role of a participant and an observer.
- Participation of a participant-observer is relative to the field settings and nature of research. If the content under focus, social realities being explored and lives being studied are novel and intriguing, the degree of participation needs to be more and the relationship between researcher and subjects be reciprocal.

4. LET'S CONSTRUCT NARRATIVES

4.1. Narratives through Drawing



Fig. 1. Depiction of an Abducted Child's Mind¹

¹ The drawing is secured with consent from the school activity carried out by teachers of a private school in 2016 as part of awareness campaign about child abduction and abuse.

Context: As part of an awareness campaign among school-going children regarding child abduction, teachers asked the students of second grade to draw anything that came to their mind. The attempt was to assess the extent to which students were aware of the rampant child abduction phenomenon which havocted Punjab in 2016. This picture depicts the mind of a girl child who is abducted. Her face is sad, and tears are drawn, flowing down her cheeks. The thought bubbles are drawn to show her state of mind and the multitude of emotions she feels. The two thought bubbles on her left show sad emoji. The first thought bubble on her right shows her house, cat, two dolls, and food - the things she misses. The second depicts sad emoji, and the last depicts a knife, two bombs, one pistol, and a slapping hand as the objects or actions through which she can be harmed.

- This method of extracting narratives is gaining much attention in academia as a guiding principle and starting point through which sensitive issues can be efficaciously researched upon, and narratives can be elicited.
- For this particular illustration, semiotic analysis was used to deconstruct and interpret the discursive objects as can be seen in the above figure (facial expressions, thought bubbles and the meanings each of these objects depicts).

4.2. Narratives through Interviews

“I hated my mother; she used to force me to talk to the military officials who visited our house frequently. I was very young and quite beautiful. The military personnel loved to talk to me, my mother knew what their intentions were, yet she would force me to go and talk with them. The military had taken away my father; my mother hoped that if I befriended the military, they would release my father.”²(2012: 114)

Context: Kabita Chakma, the Organising Secretary and former President of the Women Hill Federation recounts the repercussions she and her family faced after CHT underwent full-scale militarisation. CHT is situated in the Southeast of Bangladesh and is inhabited by eleven ethnic groups. The Hill people's alienation is entrenched since the independence of Bangladesh when the Hill people were denied their constitutional rights. A day after Sheikh Mujid ur Rehman was assassinated, RAW contacted Manobendra Narayan Larma (leader of Hill people's political party) to support Hill people's movement, which resulted in the establishment of Shanti Bahini (military unit set up for Hill people in support from India). Upon realising that this association could be a serious threat to Bangladeshi nationalism, the GOC of the Chittagong Division was given hold of the CHT administration. Militarisation aimed to control security scenarios in CHT. In the name of counter-insurgency enormous violation of human rights took place, the adversity of this violation was borne by the entire population but women were particularly targeted. The violence against CHT women was racialised and sexualised in an attempt to dehumanise CHT population.

- Chakma's narrative is both event-based and experiential. It also has a temporal reference since it refers to the time when CHT was militarised (1975-1991). The narrative depicts the psychological and emotional rifts between two women; a mother who forced her daughter to lure military personnel and a daughter whose youth was instrumentalised by her mother to trace her husband.
- The narrative also dilutes the dichotomy of public and private domains in conflict-ridden zones where the public domain is associated with men and the private domain with women. The identity of men as protectors and women as protected is challenged through this narrative. Women in CHT had to head their households when men were in the battlegrounds. Sexual violence against CHT women is another war-time strategy documented by feminist scholars through document analysis of official and non-official records and thematic analysis of the interviews conducted with the survivors of sexual violence.

²An excerpt extracted from an interview conducted by feminist scholar Amena Mohsin. She interviewed Kabita Chakma, Organising Secretary of Hill Women Federation.

4.3. Narrative through Still and Moving Photographs

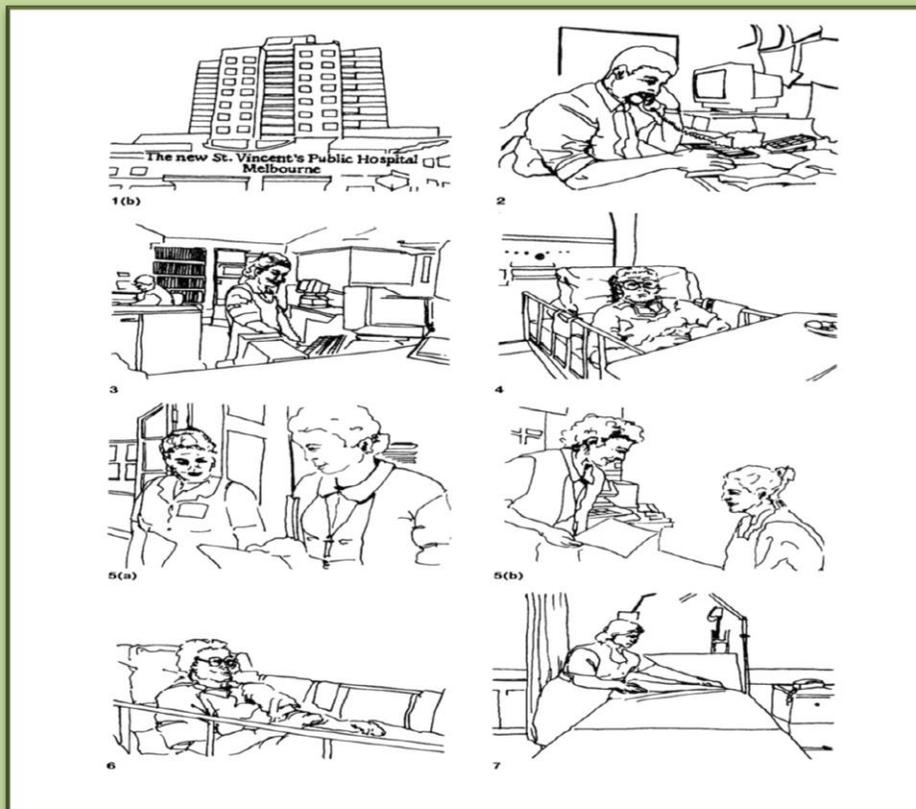
4.3.1. Still Images



Context: Alan Kurdi was one of the at least 12 Syrians who drowned attempting to reach the Greek Island of Kos. Kurdi was three years old and hailed from the Northern Syrian town where conflict resulted in the displacement of locals. The family (elder, eight years old brother, and parents) boarded an inflatable boat that capsized 5 minutes into their journey in Turkey, taking the lives of mother and both sons. The first photograph which went viral on media was clicked by a famous Turkish photographer. The collage of photographs above depicts the linear progression of events, which also stitches narrative structure. This structure touches upon meta-narratives of the refugee crisis, illegal migration, human security, and child protection. The photographs have been converted into different artistic expressions (miniatures, paintings, and hoardings) to create global awareness about these meta-narratives.

Photographs imprint individualised and personalised experiences touching upon micro-narratives. Micro-narratives collate and intersect with one another to create macro-narratives, the way the deconstructed photographs in the collage above have stitched into a macro-narrative entailing refugee crisis and illegal or irregular migration.

4.3.2. Moving Images



The above collage of frames is from a documentary film and has been cited by Leeuwen and Jewitt (2001), who define and divide analysis of moving images into six-level analytical categories. These categories are defined as *frame*, *shot*, *scene*, *sequence*, and *generic stage*.

- Starting with a **generic stage**, we refer to the genre of narrative structure in which there is a story which has a beginning, middle, and an end. The narrative genre starts with the introduction and development of a context, followed by the conflict or contestation in need of a resolution followed by the resolution and finally coda (a reflection or postscript).
- The next analytical category is **sequence** which is composed of multiple scenes which are connected with each other thematically, not spatially or temporally. The connection between the scenes can be across different times and spaces but based on themes, the logical connection between scenes exists.
- In **scenes**, the camera remains in one time-space. Scenes are composed of shots. In **shots** camera moves, but this movement is unedited. The last analytical category is **frame**. A frame is a still extracted from a shot. The figure above is a collage of frames.

Leeuwen and Jewitt (2001) also argue that the process of meaning-making, whether depicted or conveyed through still images, moving images, music, dance, regular conversation, or documentary, perform critical functions which are theorised under the umbrella of **metafunctions** and conceptualised as:

- **Representation**: Through **representation**, the researcher explains to his/her viewers about what the world he/she is studying, what constitutes that world?, how it can be explained?, what meanings are associated with it, and how meanings of that world can be conveyed musically, verbally, textually, and visually. The researcher represents the already presented elements in a film or a documentary according to his/her positionality, understanding, and subjective evaluation.
- **Orientation**: The second metafunction of **orientation** explains that meanings tend to position characters (in a film) with the viewers. The use of different camera angles and shots provides a deeper understanding of the positioning and characteristics of characters in a film.
- **Organisation**: The last metafunction of **organisation** shows that meanings are sequenced, organised and aligned through using technique and equipment. Cinematography, screenplay, editing, and dialogical combinations work in sync to give the narrative structure of a film a much-needed rhythmic flow.

5. NARRATING ECONOMIES

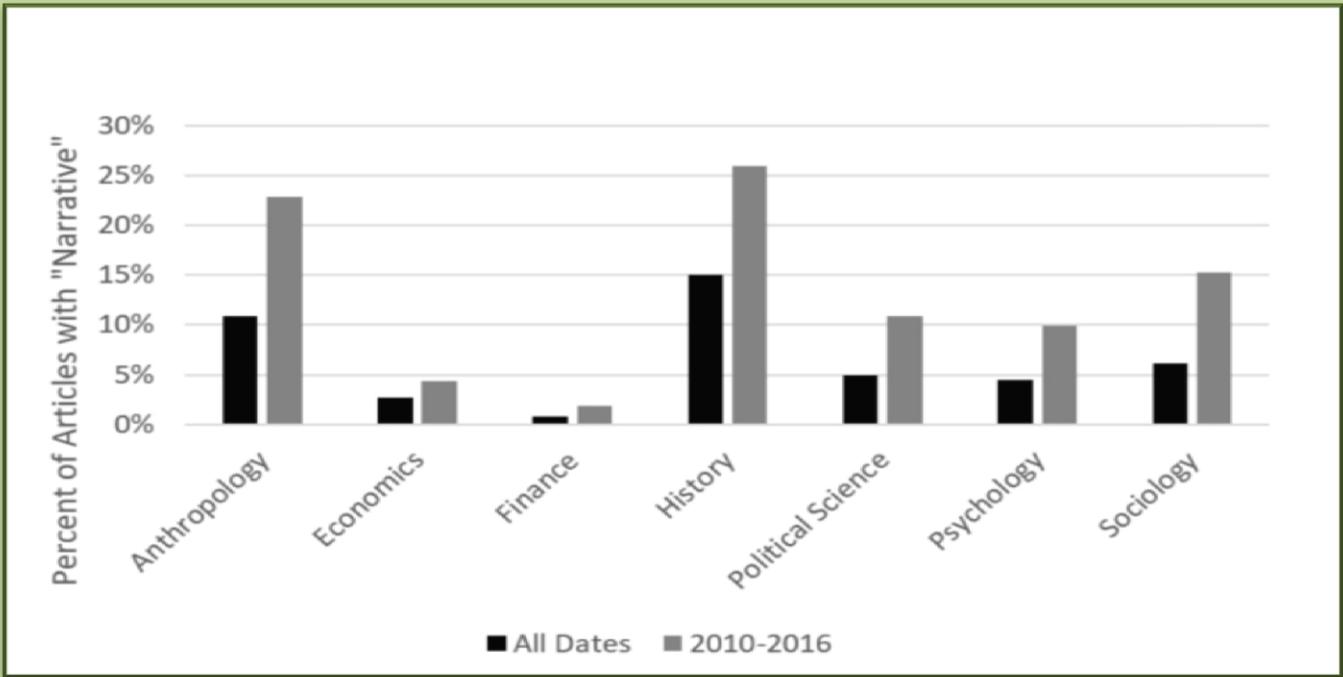
Narrative Economics is defined as:

“The study of the spread and dynamics of popular narratives, the stories, particularly of those of human interest and emotion, and how these change through time, to understand economic fluctuations.” (Shiller, 2017; 3).

Whereas narratives are defined as:

“..Simple story or easily expressed explanation of events that many people want to bring up in conversation or on the news or social media because it can be used to stimulate the concerns or emotions of others, or because it appears to advance self-interest.” (Shiller, 2017; 4)

Shiller (2017) provides an interesting overview about using narratives in social sciences, which the author expounds in graphical exposition as:



Through this graph, Shiller (2017) argues that the experts in economics and finance have lagged in attending to the importance of narratives. Shiller (2017) also explains that economists rarely tend to understand the significance of historic events such as the Great Depression of the 1930s, following events or economic policies through narratives. Some of the artistic expressions to narrate the Great Depression are as follows, which help deepen understanding of economic events.



The attempt in this knowledge brief is to look into different avenues of narrative construction using different ways narrative structures can be developed. These ways can be through employing classical research methods such as interviews or creativity such as drawings, still, or moving images. The narratives constructed through various methods impinge upon explaining contemporary issues, creating awareness, challenging existing socio-cultural structures, or voicing alternative discourses.

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Pakistan Institute of Development Economics

Quaid-i-Azam University Campus, Islamabad

Ph: +92-51-9248137

Email: publications@pide.org.pk

Web: www.pide.org.pk