

## Why narrative? Reflections on the politics and processes of using narrative in refugee research

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### Abstract

This paper contends that knowledge-making is a political act. In reflecting on the nature of personal narrative and its uses for refugee research, three insights emerge: first, just as the personal is political, so too, the political is personal; next, any storytelling is political in its attention to audience, and is inflected by the discourses available at the time; and finally, researchers must understand that if storying is to grapple with the richness and complexity of lived experience, it will probably be chaotic and messy, as well as clear and straightforward. Researchers wanting to investigate the sociology of refugee experiences might be well advised to ensure that the stories they gather from research participants are not too neat, too straightforward, too much reduced to bare essentials in their telling, lest the chance to allow the stories to become personally and politically resonant be lost. Further, researchers who are conscious of the political resonance of narrative are advised to ensure that they draw attention to the narrative element embedded in their research reports and papers by finding ways to communicate the narratives directly to the commissioning policy makers and politicians through verbal and pictorial seminar presentations, as well as through the reports themselves. These insights have implications for research processes (the gathering and analysis of data) and for the presentation and writing up of research documents.

**Keywords:** personal narrative, storytelling, lived experience, knowledge-making

### Introduction

This paper reflects on the politics of using personal narrative in undertaking refugee research. It seeks to move from a broad discussion of the politics of knowledge-making using narrative to a more specific discussion (no less political in nature) of methodological issues about gathering narratives, about interpreting them, and about writing them up into research documents. In so doing, the paper inevitably reflects on the interaction of the personal and the political in the knowledge-making endeavour.

The paper seeks to address the following questions:

- What is narrative?

- Why use narrative in refugee research?
- What do we mean, methodologically, when we talk about using narrative in research?
- What do we know about gathering stories, narratives, from research participants?
- What do we know about the various ways of interpreting narratives, or of making sense of them?

What do we know about presenting narrative information as part of a research report or research paper?

### What is narrative?

At its most simple level, narrative means story-telling. Narrative scholar Susan Chase defines narrative as

“retrospective meaning-making” (2008, p. 64).

When I come to think of narrative I think of fiction, of novels, of stories. No doubt this reflects my academic background in literature and history. As a feminist scholar I have long been alerted to the politics of knowledge-making, and on reflection I see that it's through fiction that I first began to understand some of the ways in which the personal is political. From Jane Austen I learned about interpersonal dynamics and the dangers of misusing power and authority to manipulate those who trust us; from D. H. Lawrence I learned about the politics of negotiating relationships across class boundaries; from Patrick White I learned about the also-story, the story that lurks beneath the words on the page, brutally disrupting the surface façade and demanding to be heard; and from Virginia Woolf, Doris Lessing, Simone de Beauvoir, May Sarton and a host of other feminist fiction writers I began to glimpse the lifeworlds of women intent on naming and resisting patriarchal oppressions and celebrating the immense pleasures of being a woman. The magic of fiction is that it can take us into spaces we have never inhabited. It can give us access to the most intimate, most deeply personal experiences of characters, and can illuminate, if only obliquely, the spaces where personal dramas intersect with the huge sweep of social, political and cultural circumstances in which they are played out. And this, in my view, is one very good reason for using narrative in refugee research.

### **Why use narrative in researching refugee issues?**

In considering the question of why we might use narrative in writing about and researching refugee experiences, it's important to acknowledge the social and political context within which discussion and debate about refugee issues

occurs. In Australia, policy debate occurs at the macro level. Policies are developed according to principles established by political parties and interest groups; governments are forced by political circumstances to make speedy decisions about how to respond to the plight of groups of fleeing refugees at times of crisis.

Our recent practice of whisking away groups of newly arrived asylum seekers to languish in detention centres remote from all encounters with everyday Australian life has ensured that refugees remain in the public imagination grouped *en masse*, but out of sight, without individual identities. Media reports invariably focus on groups of refugees as potential invaders, rather than on individual stories of courage or torment. In such circumstances, in a country with a history of fearing or diminishing or obliterating those who are different, individual refugees become faceless, and refugees as a group become the Other, to be rejected and feared. The re-election of the Howard government in Australia in 2001 on the basis of what has been established as a deliberate demonising of asylum seekers through a calculated misreading of the event known as the Children Overboard Affair serves as shameful proof of anti-refugee hysteria, and remains, in my view, a national scandal (Marr & Wilkinson, 2003).

Using narrative in research about refugee issues has the potential to intervene here. It rids us of anonymity. It brings life to the subject, and brings the subject to life. It becomes, if well used, a powerful political weapon in the name of human rights. It politicises the personal, and personalises the political. Research methodologist Norman Denzin (2008) argues that using narrative in research on behalf of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups can be explicitly subversive. In a discussion of research

and its potential to engender social change, Denzin argues that "critical personal narratives are counter narratives that disrupt and disturb [dominant] discourse by exposing the complexities and contradictions that exist under official history" (2008, p. 455). To underscore the ethical dimensions of such research, Denzin calls for a research model that makes the researcher accountable to the participants, rather than to an institution or discipline (2008).

One of the most obvious responses to the question of why we would use narrative in research into refugee experiences for policy makers and politicians, then, is that narrative can humanise its subjects. It can provide direct insight into the ways a particular policy will play out in the lives of those it affects. It can illuminate a moment or an entire life just as fiction can, taking us into spaces we have never inhabited. Most importantly perhaps, narrative, through engaging our senses as well as our rational intellect, can provide the context within which our imaginations can fly to the space of the other, to glimpse the world that the other inhabits. A recent fine Australian example of powerful use of narrative in bringing to life the anguish and heartbreak flowing directly from the implementation of official government policies is found in the 1997 *Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families*, known colloquially as *The Bringing Them Home Report* (Bird, 1998). At an individual level, whether we read research narratives as policy makers, or as politicians, or as ordinary citizens, a well told narrative can help us take the first steps towards shedding a fear of the different other, and approaching that other with respect, compassion, wonder and curiosity.

### **What do we mean, methodologically, when we talk about using narrative in research?**

In the last four decades there has been a burgeoning scholarly interest in a range of processes that we might call narrative processes, all of which reflect on or story lived experience and its relation to the broader social, political and cultural questions of our time (Chase, 2008; Knowles & Cole, 2008). Whether we call this work lifewriting, biography, autobiography, storytelling, ethnography, autoethnography, oral history, literary criticism or narrative enquiry, we will be aware that it uses narrative to explore the connections between subjective experiences and the wider world.

When we talk about using narrative in research, we can be referring to narratives gathered from research participants to illuminate the research topic; we can be referring to narratives written by the researcher to illuminate the conceptual underpinnings of the topics being explored; we can be referring to self-reflexive narratives woven by the researcher to illuminate the research process itself; and/or we can be referring, like Helene Cixous (1991) and Lorri Neilsen (1998), to the researcher's own use of narrative writing as the process that fuels the enquiry. This paper focuses primarily on the gathering, interpretation and presentation of stories from research participants to illuminate various dimensions of the refugee experience.

Social science researchers have had a longstanding interest in using narrative. Susan Chase draws attention to the 'rich interdisciplinary tradition defending the study of individuals in their social and historical environments' that informed her own work with narrative in the early 1990s, and acknowledges that today, almost two decades later, narrative

enquiry in the social sciences is "flourishing" (Chase, 2008, p. 57). As a research methodologist, Chase views contemporary narrative enquiry as a subset of qualitative enquiry which brings a diverse range of traditional and innovative research practices to "an interest in biographical particulars as narrated by the one who lives them" (Chase, 2008, p. 58).

So when we talk about using narrative in research, perhaps it's most useful to think of the kinds of research documents that emerge as being on a continuum: at one end is the full biography or lifestory or autobiography; in the middle is the scholarly text based almost entirely in stories gathered from interviewees; and at the other end is the policy document or research paper that uses the smallest, the most fleeting of images drawn from story to illustrate a crucial argument. And along that line, somewhere between the two extreme ends, are all the plays, poems, novels, film scripts, histories, reports, programme evaluations and scholarly papers weaving narrative into their meaning-making processes.

### **What do we know about gathering stories, narratives, from research participants?**

Researchers can collect narrative through intensive interviews, through casual spoken interactions with research participants, through discussion in focus groups, through written archival texts, and through stories written specifically for research participation. There are few rules about the ways narratives emerge. Narratives can be spoken and written; they can be formal or informal; they can be premeditated or spontaneous or both. They can be long or short, and can be about a specific incident or about an entire life.

What about the shape of a story? Does it matter whether it is straightforward or circuitous? We know that stories are not always told chronologically. Nor are they always logical, linear, straightforward. Sometimes they are circular, repetitive, fragmented. And sometimes they combine the linear and the circular in ways which evoke rich and complex worlds. There are no rules for how a story ought to be told, although there are certainly expectations about what makes a story satisfying, thrilling, suspenseful, open, closed, enticing. Drusilla Modjeska (1990) writes evocatively about the ways in which, by combining linear and circular narrative structures, and by appealing both to logic and to the senses, we can give life to a story, and story to a life. This, she argues, is what happens when someone finds their voice.

One of the things we know is that the way we position ourselves in relation to our research participants will affect the kinds of narratives we can elicit (Reinharz, 1992; Reinhartz & Chase 2002; Lincoln 1997; Weiss 1994). Feminist research methodologists such as Shulamit Reinhartz (1992) and Liz Stanley and Sue Wise (1990) have long argued that feminists' heightened awareness of power dynamics has led to feminist researchers seeking to find ways to dismantle the notion of power-over research participants wielded by the researcher, and to attend instead to ways to work collaboratively, collegially and in an egalitarian manner with research participants. It is not so much what questions you ask as how you position yourself in relation to your interviewee that will most impact upon the kind of interview results you receive.

### **What do we know about the various ways of interpreting narratives, or of making sense of them?**

As researchers we have an infinite variety of ways to make sense of the stories we hear. Because the focus of this journal issue is specifically on using narrative in doing research with refugee communities whose experiences will often be dramatically different from those of the researchers or of the policy-makers at whom the research is being directed, I want to take a bit of time here to uncover in more detail what we know about ways of reading. In particular, I want to distinguish very carefully between the narratives we might gather from research participants and the discourses that those narratives might carry.

Researchers who have frequently found themselves to be positioned on the margins of a mainstream discourse (for example, scholars marginalised by gender, race, class, ethnicity or other experience, such as feminist scholars, ethnic minority scholars, religious-minority scholars) will be aware of the politics of meaning-making and will be familiar with the experience of identifying discourses operating in a text when reading and interpreting that text. Such researchers may well find that the work of Denzin (2008, pp. 435-471) extends their thinking about ways to interpret research participants' narratives. Elsewhere, Denzin, in drawing on the work of Fontana and Frey (2008) warns that instead of seeing interviews as unproblematised texts which generate useful information about lived experience and its meanings, researchers must acknowledge that 'the interview is a negotiated text, a site where power, gender, race and class intersect' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 47). Researchers who have been schooled in disciplines which assume the objectivity of knowledge-making (that is, who assume a direct

relationship between empirical data and the "truth" to emerge from it) will perhaps need to re-think their approach to data interpretation when they come to make sense of narratives told to them by research participants. Such researchers are directed, in addition to the work of Denzin and Lincoln (2008) to the excellent introductory work of Cranny-Francis, Wearing, Stavropoulos and Kirkby (2003) whose chapter on Ways of Reading introduces students to the politics of reading and to the politics of meaning-making.

Cranny-Francis et al. argue that all texts (whether they are narratives gathered at interview, or stories told around a dinner table, or reports written about a meeting, or articles written for a newspaper, or academic papers written for a journal, or films made for any purpose) are politicised. That is, all texts, (narratives and reports and articles and films etc) carry discourses. Sometimes the discourses underpinning a text are explicit; sometimes they are implicit. A discourse can most simply be described as a way of talking about an issue or practice (Cranny-Francis et al., 2003). Cranny-Francis et al. provide this definition: "a discourse defines the way that power is distributed in the matrix of social relations that operate around an issue, idea or area of concern. Analysing that discourse is a way of exploring the power relations it mobilises, identifying the distribution of power and making it available for critique" (p. 95). In an everyday sense, discourses will affect our notion of who we are (how we experience ourselves) and how we think, speak and act (how we experience the world).

In their reflections on texts and meaning-making, Cranny Francis et al. (2003) argue that a crucial part of any reading strategy is to identify the discourses operating in the text, and to be able to stand back and consider how

we as readers are being positioned by those discourses, and how we might resist or comply with them. Exploring this issue in more detail, Cranny-Francis et al. cite the work of Gunther Kress who, following Foucault, argues that discourses 'define, describe and delimit what it is possible to say and not possible to say (and by extension – what it is possible to do or not to do) with respect to the area of concern' (Kress, 1985, as cited in Cranny-Francis et al., 2003, p. 93). To illustrate this argument, Kress reflects on the discourse of sexism. Sexist discourse, he explains, 'specifies what men and women may be, how they are to think of themselves, how they are to think of and relate to the other gender; and he notes further that sexist discourse specifies 'what families may be, and relations within the family... It reaches into all major areas of social life, specifying what work is suitable, possible even, for men and for women; how pleasure is to be seen by either gender (Kress, 1985, as cited in Cranny-Francis et al., 2003, p. 93). In other words, our ways of talking about issues are also our ways of thinking about issues, and, further, they tend to determine how we act.

Kress suggests that we come to ask three questions of a text when we begin to analyse the discourses operating therein:

1. Why is the topic being written about?
2. How is the topic being written about?
3. What other ways of writing about the topic are there? (Kress, 1985, as cited in Cranny-Francis et al., 2003, p.95)

Arguably, Kress's three questions apply equally to a conversation, a transcript of interview, or a fragment of dialogue, as to a completed and written text.

Cranny-Francis *et al*/ conclude that these three questions take the analyst directly to:

1. The strategy involved in generating a particular discourse
2. The rhetoric it uses
3. The alternatives suppressed by this discourse.

According to this logic, any narrative told to a researcher will carry, consciously or unconsciously, the discourses to which that participant subscribes. It will be the task of the researcher to recognise whether the reading s/he does of the participant's words is a compliant reading, a resistant reading, or perhaps even a tactical reading – or a combination of all of these. Cranny-Francis *et al*/ define these modes of reading thus: "a compliant [or mainstream] reading of a text is the reading expected from a literate member of the reader's society. It does not describe the reader's or the text's politics, but the politics of reading in the reader's society" (2003, p.115); "a resistant reading of a text rejects the mainstream or compliant reading and instead performs a reading that implicitly or explicitly challenges that reading and the meaning it generates" (2003, p.118); "a tactical reading (also called textual poaching) uses the text as a point of departure for a meaning-making practice that empowers the reader; it does not present itself as a coherent and consistent explanation of textual practice" (2003, p. 130).

Two basic assumptions underpin this kind of understanding of the relationships between readers and texts. Firstly, without readers, there are no texts. A text without a reader is a set of signs that means nothing. Secondly, the ways we read a text are crucially important in deciding what a text can mean. That is, a text does not have a fixed pre-existing meaning: it will mean what the reader deems it to mean, given

the particular history and set of experiences that each reader brings to her reading of the text. Hence, one reader will find a particular story inspiring, full of hope; another reader will find that same story to be distressing, ugly and full of despair.

What this might mean for a researcher into refugee experiences is that the researcher will need to account for the discursive context from which the refugee's stories emerge: issues of cultural specificity, participant history, and exposure to trauma and dislocation as well as to joy and fulfilment will all have to be considered. Hence, as a basic example, if a participant expresses a desire for a 'normal life' in the new country, the researcher will be obliged to read that desire in the context of the discourses surrounding it.

Once a researcher becomes aware of the multiple factors affecting the ways a text can be read, the ethical necessity of making transparent one's own meaning-making processes as interpreter of participant narratives and as writer of research text will be clear. For research participants to understand how their words have been used, and for readers to understand how specific arguments and interpretations have emerged, the researcher must make her/his own politics, ethnicity, and discursive shapings as apparent as possible.

### **What do we know about ways of presenting narrative information as part of a research report or research paper?**

Whatever storytelling mode is adopted, the way a story is told will affect the meanings that can be made from it (Gannon, 2005; Richardson & St Pierre, 2008). In other words, the way a story is used by researchers in the research document will affect the meanings that emerge. Such understandings bring us to the question of audience. Lincoln

(1997) argues that researchers interested in the relationship between narrative and social change need to be particularly attentive to issues of audience. Who will hear or read these narratives? At which particular audience are they aimed? How can the audience be moved beyond institutional complacency, or beyond personal exhaustion, to begin to imagine the horrors, the torment, the griefs, the joys, the pleasures of the lives glimpsed through the stories being told in the research document? What does the researcher hope to do to the reader by presenting narrative as part of the research report, the evaluation, the background policy document?

A further, related question is this: if narrative can be a powerful weapon in the name of human rights, how do researchers ensure that the policy makers and politicians and decision makers who commission their research actually hear the narratives embedded therein? One strategy open to the researcher is to make the narrative component of the research a focal point, communicating it in as many different ways as possible. For example, the researcher can follow up the research report with a seminar presentation to their funding body and relevant stakeholders; s/he can present the audience with an eye-catching poster containing excerpts of narrative; s/he can create an appendix with snippets of story to beguile busy readers; s/he can send human interest stories emerging from the research to a range of media outlets from the global to the local community newspaper.

These questions about presenting narrative information shine the spotlight onto the researcher her/himself. How does the social science researcher,

schooled perhaps in creating authoritative pseudo-objective reports, begin to break free from prosaic research-writing conventions to adopt a more fluid or poetic research writing mode? What examples are there to follow? The intense interest in narrative and in arts-based research in contemporary scholarly circles has spawned an immense methodological literature on ways to incorporate narrative into research documents (See Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Knowles & Cole, 2008). Frequently the researchers most likely to respond to the invitation to break conventional knowledge-making practices are doctoral students and early career researchers (Hopkins, 2008).

I conclude with a story from my own research life, to illustrate the pleasures of learning to write creatively in a research document. I was inspired in this endeavour by reading Drusilla Modjeska's (1990) fictionalised biography, *Poppy*. I found this to be a text where gaps and spaces seemed to come alive, where the life lived off the pages of the book seemed as imaginatively real as the life played out within them, and yet where the desire for ongoing story kept me as reader moving onwards to a not-yet-determined future. Reading *Poppy* gave me insight into ways to bring a text to life. As a researcher I wanted to create a multi-layered, reflective, creatively written text that honours its participants and delights in the research and writing process for its complexity, variety and multiplicity.

I first encountered *Poppy* in 1990. Several years previously I had researched and written an oral history of women's engagement with the peace movement in Western Australia as a Master's thesis, and had been struck by

the difficulty I found in bringing to the page the tenor of the immensely rich and lively transcripts of interview. Almost a decade later, in writing a doctoral thesis exploring contemporary feminist activisms, taking inspiration from Modjeska's work, it's the writing process that I found to be most enchanting (Hopkins, 2009). Although mine is clearly a more overtly theorised piece of writing than is the writing of *Poppy*, while writing the thesis I gestured towards the creation of what Modjeska calls a *native tongue* in my attempt to use narrative strategies (collage; dislocated chronologies linking linear stories; moments of lyric stasis) similar to those used in *Poppy*. During the writing of the thesis, I kept in mind that I was giving life to a story (or a series of stories), and a story/stories to the life that surrounds it/them. In writing of my participants' journeys towards finding voice, I was aware, too, of the fecund significance of silence.

In contrast to the one-dimensional reportage style of my earlier thesis, this time I was aware all along of the need to use a variety of genres to create the text. The storying of the lives that occurs in the body of the doctoral thesis appears frequently as a series of vignettes, sometimes with little or no explicit interpretive or connecting reading made with my narrative voice. In order to allow the voices of my participants to be heard directly, rather than being mediated by my narrative voice, at times I adopted a practice of poetising transcript similar to that created by Laurel Richardson (1992, 1997). To do this I took the exact wording from transcripts of interview, and re-arranged it on the page to create the look and feel of poetry. Such a technique allows the work to breathe, and creates a space from which (momentarily) the participants speak for



themselves. In addition, I placed fragments of feminist bodies of knowledge in these chapters, sometimes with minimal connecting narration. It is not until the end of the thesis that my own narrative voice as biographer intertwines explicitly with my voice as researcher to consistently provide theorised readings of the process of finding an activist voice.

In order to create the impression of the complex swirl of feminist knowledges which represent the life from which my stories are drawn, I created layers of text by placing, throughout the thesis, boxes containing pertinent theoretical insights beside the on-going narrative. Occasionally, where the ongoing narrative is specifically theoretical, I placed a box with an extract from my journal alongside. I saw this disruption of the smooth flow of narrative as a deliberate reminder of the fleeting nature of the coherence we create as narrators of our own stories. Reciprocally, I also saw it as a reminder of the power we might hold as feminist activists drawing on a wide and deep epistemological base both to create our own stories and to disrupt dominant discourses. I intended it, too, to act as a reminder of the complex relationship between theory, experience, and the creation of the feminist self.

It is difficult to describe the pleasures in undertaking research and writing of this kind. One of the impacts is that although the writerly engagement is far from conventional, the eliciting of the complexity of life experiences via multi-layering text, disrupting text, juxtaposing voices appears to approximate the complexity of lived experience in ways which are authentic and grounded. More recently I have pushed the boundaries of these writerly processes further in

using writing as inquiry to explore and to story bodily experiences of health-related trauma (Hopkins, 2003).

### **On reflection...**

In reflecting on the nature of personal narrative and its uses for refugee research, three insights emerge: first, just as the personal is political, so too, the political is personal; secondly, any storytelling is political in its attention to audience, and is inflected by the discourses available at the time; and thirdly, if storying is to grapple with the richness and complexity of lived experience, it will probably be chaotic and messy, as well as clear and straightforward, overlaid with analysis and theorising and underpinned with disruptive subtext. Researchers wanting to investigate the sociology of refugee experiences might be well advised to ensure that the stories they gather from research participants are not too neat, too straightforward, too much reduced to bare essentials in their telling, lest the chance to allow the stories to become personally and politically resonant be lost. Finally, researchers who are conscious of the political resonance of narrative are advised to ensure that they draw attention to the narrative element embedded in their research reports and papers by finding ways to communicate the narratives directly to the commissioning policy makers and politicians through verbal and pictorial seminar presentations, as well as through the reports themselves.

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