

# *Narrative analysis: The Personal Experience Narrative approach*

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*Abstract— this paper takes a more informed look into the personal experience aspect of narrative analysis. The research method of narrative analysis would be analyzed along with a narrative from an engineering graduate student to better demonstrate its validity and show its practicality as a research method in the engineering field.*

*Keywords— narrative analysis, personal experience, evaluation, orientation, abstract.*

## *INTRODUCTION*

The concepts of narrative and life story have become a significant part of the repertoire of the social sciences since the mid-1950s. There have been several proponents [1-10] of the importance of narratives in qualitative research. A narrative is a story that contains a sequence of events that take place over a time period. It mostly follows a chronological order and usually contains a link to the present on the form of a lesson learnt by the narrator. Narrative analysis seeks to find the link by analyzing and evaluating various parts of the narrative.

## *RESEARCH METHOD*

Historical research [11-17] was carried out to find data and evidence correlating to the utilization of narrative analysis in various real world issues. This yielded an impressive amount of data that showed the validity of narrative analysis in the qualitative field of research. Nevertheless, the author seeks to use this data to support and better understand the value of narrative analysis through the personal experience narrative approach. Narrative analysis, even though the topic of study, was used to evaluate some interesting narratives and sought to glean out the valuable insights and lessons that were being shown and taught by these stories. There was also what the author calls “social interaction analysis” in which the interaction between the author and people in his social circle was scrutinized to find interesting evidence, opinions and facts that could contribute toward the ongoing research. Review-centric research [18-22] was additionally applied in line with

historical research to compare and unearth more understanding of the importance and practicality of narratives and narrative analysis in the field of research not only attributed to science but other important aspects of life e.g. social research.

## *BACKGROUND*

We all love stories. They are easy on the mind and can be quite entertaining. According to Berger (1997:4) a narrative is a story, and stories tell about things that have happened or are happening to people, animals, and aliens from outer space, etc. That is, a story contains a sequence of events, which means that narratives take place within or over, some kind of time period. This time period can be very short, as in a nursery tale, or very long, as in some novels and epics. Narratives are very important in the culture of human beings as they tend to showcase the values being taught by our culture, and our culture as a whole, in a less formal and more enjoyable manner. Schank (1990) classifies narratives into:

- 1) Official Stories: Stories we learn from official sources e.g. church and school.
- 2) Invented (Adapted) Stories: Stories created by people.
- 3) Firsthand Stories: People’s own experiences. These are the stories we talk about the most.
- 4) Secondhand Stories: Firsthand stories of others that we have heard or remembered.
- 5) Culturally Common Stories: These are stories gotten from our environment.

The narrative can be written or spoken. The spoken narrative uses the oral language which is mostly used in daily life to establish and maintain social relations while the written narrative employs the written language which is used to decipher and transfer information. Researchers have long since tapped into this wealth of knowledge understanding the importance of narratives [23-27] in the constantly ongoing research of an individual’s field of interests and the myriad issues that plague our world such as cancer, global warming,

financial meltdown etc. They have sought many different ways to gain insight from this wave of information. Narrative analysis comes forth as one of these methods. Narrative analysis is a research method that is applied to a narrative by means of breaking the narrative into constituent parts that each have an integral role to play in the narrative. These parts would be discussed in more detail later on in the paper. As much as myths and tales by moonlight spark our imagination and teaches us valuable lessons, it's those experiences that we or someone close to us has that resonates the most with us. These are personal experiences and they stick mostly because they are that – personal. These stories have directly impacted our beings due to their visceral realism in our lives. A personal experience narrative is a story which was experienced firsthand by the narrator i.e. the person telling the story. The author has decided to expand upon the premise of personal experience narratives and include secondhand stories i.e. other people's personal experiences as well.

#### DISCUSSION OF MODEL

##### 1) Goal (Personal Experience Narrative)

Goal: A look at the personal experience narrative and elements of the narrative structure and evaluative language used in oral and written narratives. (Ozyildirim, 2006) p.1209” [28-32] Narrative analysis in this form is readily explored to view the various parts (i.e. factors) merging to gather to form the narrative which, in this case, is of the personal experience form.

##### 2) Factor 1 (Abstract)

F1: “The **abstract** summarizes the whole story and consists of one or two clauses at the beginning of a narrative. (Ozyildirim, 2006) p. 1211” [33-37] An overview of the narrative, while not overly necessary, is very instructive in giving the reader or intended audience a fore-glance at what the narrative is all about.

##### 3) Factor 2 (Orientation)

F2: “**Orientation** gives information about the time, place, characters, and their activity or the situation in what will follow (Ozyildirim, 2006) p. 1211”. [38-42] The orientation provides the necessary information regarding the time frame, location and characters involved in the narrative. After all, readers should know the cast of characters performing in a play.

##### 4) Factor 3 (Complicating action)

F3: “**Complicating action** clauses are narrative clauses that inform the audience about what happened (Ozyildirim, 2006) p. 1211”. [43-47] This is the nitty-gritty of the narrative as it goes into detail about the content of the narrative i.e. what actually happened. This forms the body of the narrative.

##### 5) Factor 4 (Resolution)

F4: “**Resolution** informs the audience about how the complicating action was resolved. This section indicates the

termination of a series of events by releasing the tension (Ozyildirim, 2006) p. 1211”. [48-52] There can never be a

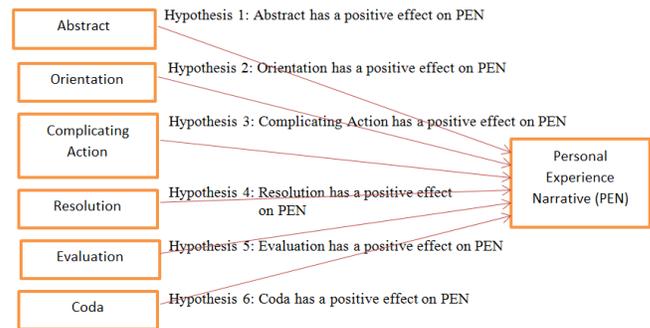


Fig. 1 Path Diagram Showing Factors That Affect the Personal Experience Narrative

beginning without an end. The resolution ties in the narrative, effectively concluding the story as told.

##### Factor 5 (Evaluation)

F5: “**Evaluation** forms the emotional side of the narrative and explains why the story is worth telling (Ozyildirim, 2006) p. 1211.” [53-57] This is where it gets pretty interesting as the narrator uses the evaluation phase to communicate how he/she felt during the time the narrative took place. More light would be shed on the evaluation phase later.

##### Factor 6 (coda)

F6: “**Coda** clauses are located at the end of narratives and indicate that the story is over, bridging the gap between the narrative proper and the present, or sometimes providing a short summary of the narrative (Ozyildirim, 2006) p. 1211”. [58-62] This contains what can be referred to as the “lesson learnt” from the narrative. Every narrative is in the past. This question is “how did it affect your present?”

The factors in Fig. 1 will now be applied to a narrative described by a participant of the interviews and social interaction analysis. This is a secondhand experience narrative but as revealed earlier, the author has included secondhand experience narratives into the personal narrative approach. After all, the experience is still factual and personal to the participant. The narrative goes thus: “I had an interesting computer lab experience this semester. It happened in the 3rd week of the semester; I participated in a computer lab class where my class was taught how to use a sound recognizable control system. The program needed to operate the system was not functioning on my computer. Fortunately, the Indian lady beside me offered to assist me by showing how the program worked on her system. I was relieved and quite pleasantly surprised to be offered help. We got to talking and exchanged contacts. She was the first foreign lady friend I made and

despite our racial background, we found it easy to communicate and help each other.”

For a personal narrative to be properly analyzed, the following factors outlined in the model above must be in place. All factors come together to describe the surroundings, characters and circumstances in the story. The evaluation, as noted conveys the emotional reflection of the narrator and produces the reason the story is being told. The factors are explained below with their varying parts in the sample narrative shown:

1) Abstract: This serves to show the overview of the narrative. Ask the question: “What was the experience about?” In this case, the abstract was: **“I had an interesting computer lab experience this semester.”** This gives the intended audience a preconceived notion of what the narrative is all about. Therefore, the audience will know that the narrative had to do with an interesting experience that occurred in a computer lab.

2) Orientation: This shows information about the time, place, characters and their activity or the situation in what will follow. Asks the questions: “Who was the person or persons involved in the experience?”, “When did the events take place?”, and “What were the events?” and “Where did the events take place?” Orientation: **“It happened in the third week of the semester; I participated in a computer lab where my class was taught how to use a sound recognizable system.”** Now, we know the participants of the narrative, where the narrative occurred, when it occurred and the events that took place.

3) Complicating Action: This informs the audience about what happened. Obligatory for the narrative and contains the climax or high point of the story. It asks the question: “What happened?” In the sample narrative: **“The program needed to operate the system was not functioning on my computer.”**

4) Resolution: This informs the audience about the resolution of the action. It indicates the termination of a series of events. It asks the question: “What finally happened?” The resolution was: **“Fortunately, the Indian lady beside me offered to assist me by showing how the program worked on her system.”** The climax has been resolved i.e. the intriguing action in the narrative has been affected in one way or the other.

5) Evaluation: This forms the emotional side of the narrative and explains why the story is worth telling. It asks the question: “How did you feel during the experience?” In the narrative: **“I was relieved and quite pleasantly surprised to be offered help.”** Humans are emotional beings and are strongly motivated by their emotion during certain experiences. Joy, anger, sadness and fulfillment are just some of the reasons why people’s personal experiences are narrated to others. This is very important in qualitative research because a person’s emotional state can dictate how whether a narrative is told well or not during an interview or social interaction.

6) Coda: Located at the end of the narrative. The coda indicates that the story is over, bridging the gap between the narrative proper and the present. It asks the question: “What

did learn from this experience.” The coda in the narrative: **“She was the first foreign lady friend I made and despite our racial background, we found it easy to communicate and help each other.”** A good story should always convey a lesson to be learnt. How else do we as humans develop from our experiences?

#### *IMPORTANCE OF MODEL/NEW INSIGHT*

The model has shown the author the importance of narrative analysis in qualitative research. The narrative was broken down into coherent and easily understandable parts that can be fully utilized when carrying out research using this research method. The fact that all the independent factors have a positive effect on the personal experience narrative only helps to cement and validate this form of academic inquiry. I believe that narrative analysis will gain much more prominence in this currently and rapidly expanding intermingled world of global teams. To further elaborate, searching for a set of data and analyzing or comparing that set to another set of data concerning a particular phenomenon is a goal of research. In the engineering, as with other technical fields, it has been discovered that the level of communication between fellow engineers during a given project contributes highly to the success of that given project. As [63] illustrated, lack of proper communication that fosters a better understanding of a team member’s role and the importance of his task in a project can lead to unfulfilled targets regarding the project or outright failure. In a multinational environment such as the environment the author is in, I believe that narrative analysis can better give us clues into solving many interracial issues that are inherent in a multinational community.

#### *CONCLUSION*

Narratives are a way of life and I think it’s a very huge advantage for all parties interested in a particular phenomenon that it is fully utilized for research. I stress interviews and social interactions because these tend to be informal and, as such, enable the participants to readily reveal more information regarding a particular issue. This is already in effect at the University of Bridgeport with the course evaluation form which seeks to find out student’s impression about a particular course at the end of the semester. As always, things can be improved and those willing to be participants can be interviewed about their experiences regarding graduate education in the university. Narrative analysis can then be used to review these stories and reveal redeeming and positive patterns which can be put to good use in a future endeavor of the research area concerned. Of course, this can be applied to all other areas of the academic experience. No other form of information dissemination spreads a required message like a good story. It can be intriguing, entertaining and very easy to comprehend. Why don’t we utilize this universal carrier of information to gather data on creating solutions that lead to a better human experience? I’m sure that there is a trove of untapped insights and information that can be gleaned from narratives with the use of narrative analysis in more future research.

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