Conducting Narrative Studies in Pakistan: Reflections from the Field

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Abstract

This reflective paper emerges from the analysis of my experience of carrying out narrative studies in Pakistan — a country where narrative research in education is still very young. Field-notes, reflective journals and research memos were the key sources for the analysis. The reflections showcase my experiences of getting the insider's views, co-constructing narratives, and co-constructing the research reality while carrying out narrative research studies in Pakistan. Findings have pertinent implications for narrative research studies in Pakistan and elsewhere in a similar settings.

Keywords: narratives, qualitative research, reflections, teacher educator

Introduction

Background

I initially heard the term narrative research during my Ph.D. coursework. My first reaction was something confusing! My preconceived notions pertaining to ontological and epistemological concerns were the initial obstacles for me (Khan & Austin, 2018). As narrative studies in educational research in Pakistan are rare; therefore, my readings in the domain and classroom discourses with my professors during the PhD coursework led me to use narrative approach in my study PhD thesis which was based on the study of teachers and teacher educators' lives and identities.

This paper comes from the analysis of my field-notes and reflective journals, which I had maintained from the beginning of my entry into the fieldwork. The

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journal entries provided a complete account of my reflections, thinking process, feelings and evolution of thoughts (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006) during the study. To conceptualize the very notion of narratives and to clarify some of the confusions, I read the related review of the literature (Connelly & Clandinin 1990; Connelly & Clandinin, 2006; Cole & Knowles, 2001; Goodson, 1992; Goodson & Sikes, 2001; Knowles, 1992) talked to narrative researchers and read Ph.D. dissertations where the researchers had used narrative approach (Ashraf, 2004; Halai, 2002; Niyozov, 2001), which helped me to develop my own initial conceptions.

What is Narrative Approach?

Connelly and Clandinin (1990) claim that "Humans are storytelling organisms who individually and socially lead storied lives. The study of narrative; therefore, is the study of ways humans experience the world" (p. 2). It is a fact that the meanings of the experiences are best given by the individuals who experience them (Langness & Frank, 1986) because words are always nested in certain background and context. Individuals make attempts to give meanings to their experiences and communicate them to others. Research participants (story tellers) and the researcher collaboratively give meanings to the experiences and communicate them to others. Therefore, a researcher's role is not just narration of actions, but also to give account of the history and context where the life exists. In the context of educational research, narratives have been used to empower teachers' voices and lived experiences (Cole & Knowles, 2001; Denzin, 1989a).

While studying and documenting narratives, researchers enter into participants' personal and professional life experiences (Cole & Knowles, 2001; Connelly & Clandinin, 2006; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Goodson & Sikes, 2001); therefore, a researcher needs to address ethical considerations during data collection, analysis and reporting the lives. For instance, a researcher needs to clarify the possible harms and benefits of participating in the study. In addition, researchers have stated that gender differences between a researcher and a research participant is likely to impact the data generation process (Cole & Knowles, 2001; Goodson, 1992; Halai, 2002). This also raises questions about the authenticity of the data generated; therefore, addressing such challenges is the responsibility of a researcher. My experience of conducting narrative studies in Pakistan are shared in the following sections.

Getting an Insider's View

Researchers claim that getting the insider's views is an important element of narrative studies (Cole & Knowles, 2001; Denzin, 1989a, 1989b) for which they have to know the cultural norms, values and language of the participants. Literature shows that understanding the language, connotations and their meanings and essence pose real questions in trustworthiness and authenticity of the data interpretation (Atkinson, 2001; Denzin, 1989a, 1989b), which is also true for making sense of the contextual realities of the research site (Cole & Knowles, 2001; Goodson & Sikes, 2001). However, during my study in Karachi, Pakistan, my belonging to a very different part of the country with a different mother tongue and different cultural values and norms, required a conscious attempt at understanding the participants with utmost clarity. To overcome this hinderance, I decided to conduct my interviews in Urdu (the national language of Pakistan) and then translated quotations into English for the reporting purposes. Even though Urdu is a second language for me; nevertheless, my own learning of Urdu during school and college education enabled me to make sense of the meanings of the stories of the research participants. Nevertheless, whenever I faced difficulties in understanding some culturally-nested words or phrases, I requested the research participants for explanations and examples.

Thirdly, my stay in Karachi during my Master's and Ph.D. programs gave me an opportunity to experience life cultural norms and values of the city as an insider. Nevertheless, I did realize that understanding culture and languages needs ages; a person may not claim expertise in any second language and culture within a few years. Hence, I reiterate the fact that language and contextual concerns seem to influence the interpretation of the phenomenon; therefore, particular attention in narrative studies.

Negotiating and Co-Constructing Narrative Stories

My experience as a narrative researcher showcased the negotiated and collaborative stance of narratives. The discussions, joint reflections and intellectual debate between the research participants and I always needed negotiation and consensus. Secondly, I realised that conducting a narrative research is a nonlinear process involving multiple cycles of interactions and consultations. At times, in case of contradictory data, I was confused and stuck; as a result, I looked for further

details. I was able to resolve the confusions through consultations and follow-ups with the research participants.

I realised that narrative interviews involved bilateral processes (Cole & Knowles, 2001; Halai, 2001); whereby, I also shared with the research participants the various aspects of my life experience. The sharing of personal stories with the research participants became instrumental in building the trust and confidence with them. The trust and confidence built between the researcher and the research participants balance the power dynamics (Cole & Knowles, 2001).

I realized that power dynamics is a fluctuating exercise; shifting from the researcher to the research participants and vice versa. During the field negotiations, I had no power to force them to participate. Likewise, during the data analysis, I was ethically bound to fulfil the trust and confidence that the research participants had reposed in me. I was always careful about any misrepresentation of the data and I kept asking myself questions. Had I represented and interpreted the findings in their actual essence? Had I used the terms and connotations properly? Did certain terms mean the same for me and for the research participants?

Most of my research participants were women, which could become an issue for the trustworthiness of the data generated (collected) by a male researcher. My experience from the field showcased two aspects during the studies that helped me to overcome the gender difference issue to some extent. Those elements included the age difference between me (the researcher) and the research participants as in one study, all research participants were older than I and hence they considered me as their younger brother. For instance, one of the research participants said:

> *"Aap tou meray chohtay bhahi ki tarah hain, ap se kia chupao! (You are like my younger brother, what should I hide from you!)."*

Secondly, I spent several months in the field during the studies, which also helped me to develop a trustworthy professional relationship with the research participants. However, despite the efforts to lessen the gender gap, I cannot claim that the gender identity issue was resolved completely. My experience showed that men research participants were comparatively more open in their conversations, shared more information and gave examples from their personal lives. Therefore, I

can see the researcher and research participants' gender difference as a limitation in narrative studies in Pakistan.

Co-Constructing the Reality

As narratives are nested in the bedrock of interpretive paradigm; therefore, throughout the life history studies, I was always conscious that a researcher cannot be certain about one universal truth. Because reality in the interpretive studies is socially constructed (Denzin, 1989a); therefore, here the term reality does not represent the truth referred to by the positivist researchers; rather, it gives importance to the trustworthy accounts in the lives of the research participants (Atkinson, 2001).

Most of the data in my studies came from the research participants' self-reported stories. Critics raise questions pertaining to the assumptions about the authenticity and the researcher's bias; for instance, others may claim that a story is an interpretive account and therefore it can be biased (Denzin, 1989a; 1989b). As Woods (1985) puts it that the research participants may not tell the truth or they hold back the truth they perceive. Second, they may tell the truth they perceive, but it may not actually represent what they felt or believed at the time when they were actually experiencing the phenomenon; and lastly, the participants may interpret their past events through their current perceptual framework, and thus it may not represent the past.

I tried to address many concerns through looking for additional evidences, which I call fingerprints that involved diary events, correspondences (letters), reports, meeting minutes, wall displays, students' work and assignments, informal talks as well as seeking examples from multiple occasions. I would reiterate the fact that reality formation is a voice jointly raised by the researcher and the research participants, where the former plays the role of a mediator and a co-constructor of the voices. Hence, the research reports are not mere autobiographical accounts of the research participants' life experiences; rather, they are accounts of stories told by them together with my interpretation of their stories.

Conclusion and Recommendations

During my research, I felt that the narrative approach enabled me putting myself into the shoes of my research participants and to realize the complex and

interwoven realities of human life experience as persons as well as professionals (Cole & Knowles, 2001; Goodson & Sikes, 2001). In doing so, I did not only listen to the stories, but also felt them in my heart. The approach helped me to capture the individuals' lives and through them making sense of their professions, practices and roles (Raina, 1997). The trust-based relationship between me and the research participants enabled me to access the tacit, hidden and personal knowledge (Murray & Male, 2005) of the research participants and to put them forth to public critique. Becoming a narrative researcher in a context where the approach is very new is a challenging exercise. A researcher needs to develop the capabilities to take the insider's views, to become a negotiator and co-constructer of experiences. I therefore recommend that the researchers who employ narrative approaches in a particular context, should critically analyse their experiences and reflect upon them to highlight contextual challenges and their solutions in connection with the use of narrative approaches (Khan & Austin, 2018). This will enable searchers to learn from each other's experiences.

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