

Qualitative Research: Transparency and Narrative Oriented Inquiry

David Hiles & Ivo Čermák

Faculty of Health and Life Sciences, De Montfort University, Leicester, UK
and Institute of Psychology, Academy of Sciences, Brno, CZ

“ . . . the search for method becomes one of the most important problems of the entire enterprise of understanding the uniquely human form of psychological activity.”

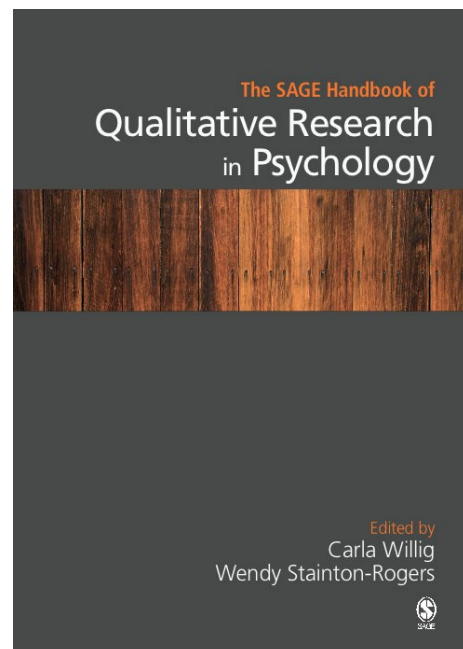
Lev Vygotsky (1978 [1930]) *Mind in Society*. p.65

Introduction

In the eighty or so years since Lev Vygotsky pointed out how the search for *method* had become such an important problem for our discipline, it seems fair to say that there has been some remarkable progress made. And recently, perhaps the most significant development has been the exploration and growing acceptance of a qualitative approach to research methods. Indeed, this is a development that we think Vygotsky might well have approved of. It is a development that it might be said will finally come of age, later this year, with the publication of the *Handbook of Qualitative Psychology* (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2007).

A qualitative approach to research is not really that new at all, but has a very long tradition, and perhaps with a claim to being the original methodology in the development of psychology as a science. But it was overshadowed, and has been overshadowed for far too long, by the quantitative approach.

In this resurgence of interest in qualitative inquiry, a number of important critical issues clearly are emerging. These include, for example: the need to integrate psychological methods with the progress that has already been made in qualitative inquiry in the other social and human sciences; crucially there is a fundamental difference in the logic of inquiry between quantitative and qualitative methods that needs explicitly formalizing; there are also some major challenges to be faced in doing real world research; it should not be overlooked that qualitative



inquiry raises a number of ethical considerations that are different from other approaches to research; there are considerable problems arising out of the rapid proliferation of different qualitative methods; and, with what will be our focus here, there is the critical issue of *transparency*.

In this paper we will focus on the idea that transparency becomes the overriding concern in laying the groundwork for critical evaluation in qualitative inquiry. To illustrate this we will use our model of *Narrative Oriented Inquiry* (NOI), that will be published as a chapter in Willig and Stainton-Rogers' handbook (Hiles & Čermák, 2007). This is a model for narrative research that is firmly rooted in a psychological approach, and the rigor of NOI relies upon making its underlying assumptions and procedures fully transparent. Indeed, the major implication of our position is that transparency should be recognized as the basic requirement of all qualitative research, and indeed, all scientific research.

Transparency

The notion of transparency is the over-arching concern in establishing the quality of qualitative research (see Hiles, 2008). At its most basic, transparency is the benchmark for the presentation and dissemination of findings, i.e. the need to be explicit, clear and open about the assumptions made and the methods and procedures used. Seale, Gobo, Gurbrium & Silverman (2004) recognize, amongst their list of 23 features of good qualitative research, the researcher's need "*to be transparent and reflexive about conduct, theoretical perspective and values.*"

However, it is also of critical importance for every stage of the research process. Table 1 lists some of the key areas where the principle of transparency needs to be applied. The credibility of any qualitative study lies in the transparency of its specific paradigm assumptions. In planning, designing, and carrying out qualitative research there must be a conscious examination of research strategies, selection of participants, and decisions made in collecting and interpreting the data. The stress here is on making explicit the choices, decisions, and justifications involved.

Methods of inquiry, which includes the procedures of data collection and data analysis and interpretation must be clear enough for others to replicate, and therefore must be transparent.

This is possibly *the* important difference between qualitative and quantitative inquiry, i.e. that the emphasis here is on the *procedures* being replicable, and *not* the findings.

Qualitative inquiry requires a thorough critical self-exploration of the researcher's assumptions, presuppositions, decisions, and self-interests, etc. It is important to stress

Table 1: Some key areas for transparency

- (i) Paradigmatic transparency
- (ii) Methodological transparency
- (iii) Transparency for interpretation and data analysis
- (iv) Transparency for reflexivity
- (v) Transparency in critical evaluation
- (vi) Transparency in dissemination

that reflexivity must be applied to the entire research process, and is not merely a consideration of potential sources of bias. The researcher has a crucial participatory role in any inquiry. Transparency and reflexivity therefore go hand in hand, since without transparency, reflexivity is impotent, and in return, reflexivity effectively promotes transparency.

Other considerations include recognizing that collecting data in naturalistic settings requires compromises and adjustments to procedures, and there also is a need for complete transparency with respect to ethical decisions and issues. Variations in the procedures of data collection, management and interpretation must be made as explicit as possible. And yet one further issue needs consideration – the use of computers for qualitative data analysis. For example, Bringer, Johnston & Brackenridge (2004) have argued that transparency in the use of software is crucial for establishing congruence between methodology, data analysis and findings. It is therefore absolutely necessary that software is published with the clearest exposition of its data-handling procedures, theoretical assumptions and limitations on use.

Our position is that in qualitative inquiry the need for an explicit notion of transparency has become most urgent. Transparency can too easily be taken for granted. It can more or less be implied in a discussion of credibility, confirmability, or accountability, etc., or may be referred to simply in terms of clarity and visibility, but a more explicit approach is required. Perhaps there is no more central issue here than in relation to developing and presenting new approaches to inquiry. We intend to illustrate this using our own recently developed approach to narrative research.

Narrative Oriented Inquiry (NOI)

In psychology, narrative inquiry has been a relatively recent development, but now narrative psychology is emerging as a field of study in its own right. While narrative methods of inquiry have enjoyed wide application in the other social and human sciences, they are only now being taken seriously in psychology. There is thus a case for not only a cross-fertilization with other disciplines, but also for developing an approach to narrative research that is firmly rooted within a psychological perspective (Hiles & Čermák, 2007). We call this *Narrative Oriented Inquiry* (NOI). First and foremost, it is a model that explicitly strives towards transparency in the collection and interpretation of narrative data, i.e. the critical issue in the development of NOI was in making its underlying assumptions and procedures transparent.

The emphasis of NOI is upon research with personal narratives, especially concerned with the collection and analysis of data from narrative interviews. However, in principle this can easily be adapted to other kinds of narratives as well, e.g. autobiographical, diary, conversational, therapeutic narratives, etc. NOI stresses that narrative is not merely a distinct form of qualitative data or a particular approach to data analysis, but that it is a “methodological approach”. It requires planning from the outset through formulation of the appropriate research question, as well as appreciation of the subtle paradigm assumptions involved, and a method of data collection called a *narrative interview* (Mishler, 1986a, 1986b, 1999). We stress Mishler’s position, when he argues

that narratives can powerfully reflect one of the crucial means of knowledge production that goes on in our everyday lives. Thus, the primary paradigm assumption that lies behind a narrative approach is the synthesis of a situated-occasioned action perspective together with a view of the individual as actively and creatively engaged in processes of meaning-making, organization and agency. Indeed, in this respect, we might be so bold as to suggest that if the “discursive turn” has been recognized as the second cognitive revolution, then narrative psychology might represent a *third cognitive revolution*. In this context, the model of NOI is essentially a dynamic framework for good practice. It is not intended to be exhaustive and definitive, but sets out to be explicitly inclusive, pluralistic and transparent.

The Model of NOI

The model is illustrated in Figure 1. Only a brief outline will be possible here. A key feature of the transparency of the model is the need to step back a little and take a broader point of view of narrative research from start to finish.

NOI starts with a *research question*. The importance of this cannot be overemphasized, since the research question will tacitly embody the paradigm assumptions. With this research question in mind, a *narrative interview guide* (NIG) is carefully set up, and participants are approached.

The *narrative interview* requires audio recording to generate an *audio text*, which is then transcribed deleting personal identifiers as necessary, to produce a *raw transcript*. The transcript is then read through several times (*reading 1, 2, 3, . . .*). The purpose of this persistent engagement with the written transcript is to build up both a picture of the emerging themes, as well as a picture of the story as a whole. There is usually a continuing need to return to the audio text to clarify the raw transcript.

We begin *narrative analysis* by breaking the text down into *segments*. Some approaches advocate presenting the transcript simply as numbered lines, but the problem is that such lines are more or less arbitrary. Since narratives are basically a sequence of episodes, or events, we advocate setting out the transcript as a numbered sequence of segments, these are basically self-contained micro-episodes, or “moves”, in the telling of the story. This is relatively straightforward and transparent, and merely needs a little practice. The text is then arranged down the left-hand of each page with a very wide margin to the right where annotations can be made. It is this that we call the *working transcript*.

NOI differs from discourse analysis and thematic analysis in that there is a need to do justice to the story as a whole as well as the elements that make it up. A story cannot simply be reduced to a set of themes, although it can be seen as a set of themes where each must be seen in relation to the whole. The version that is presented here is essentially pluralistic, adopting six interpretive perspectives, each chosen for its transparency. The first perspective in effect distinguishes *fabula* from *sjuzet* (see Herman & Vervaeck, 2001; Hiles, 2007). The *fabula* is the basic outline of the events as they occurred (or might have occurred!). This is in contrast to the *sjuzet* which is the “way” in which the story is told, especially the emphasis offered in re-telling the story.

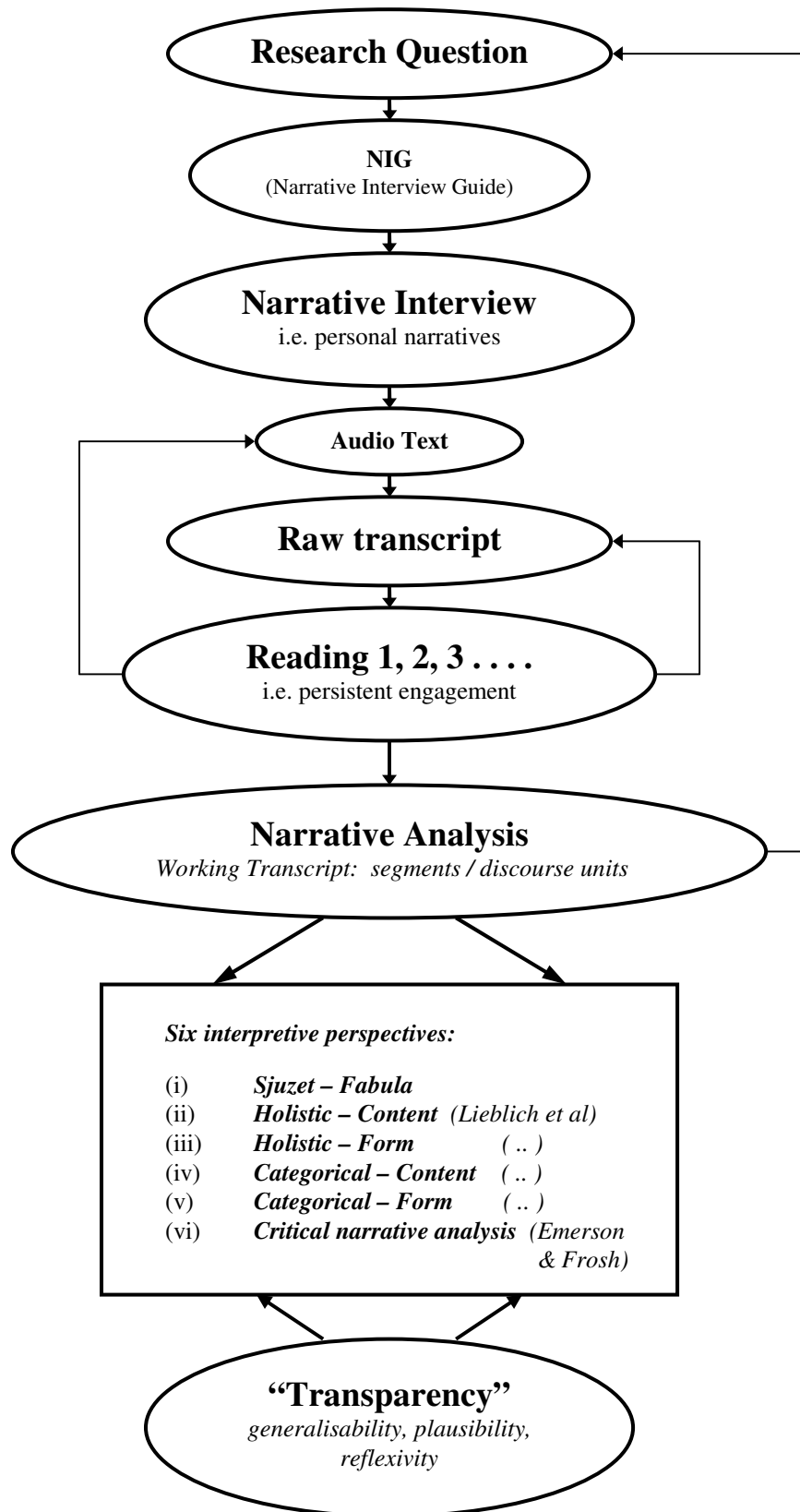


Figure 1: The model of NOI

Perspectives (ii) to (v) in our model derive directly from the comprehensive approach of Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber (1998). Their approach to narrative data analysis offers four distinct interpretive perspectives: *Holistic–Content*, *Holistic–Form*, *Categorical–Content* and *Categorical–Form*. Each of these four approaches may be connected to different types of research question, or different types of text. The point is that these approaches can be used singularly, or in any combination, drawing upon the initial analysis into *sjuzet – fabula*, and feeding into further interpretive approaches where appropriate.

The sixth interpretive perspective that we have incorporated into our model of NOI derives directly from the work of Emerson & Frosh (2004). Their approach offers a critical narrative analysis, that is “. . . *sensitive to subject meaning-making, social processes and the interpretation of these in the construction of personal narratives around ‘breaches’ between individuals and their social contexts*” (p.9).

A brief example of NOI in action - extract from Hanka’s story

1. *Q: Tell me, please, about your experience with breast cancer.*

22. So I just said goodbye to life [sigh, crying], really, I just – had it hard,
23. and he promised me, that we would try to find somebody, if he would operate on me. Because – that the results from the blood, that it doesn’t really look like, but that there really is something in the lungs, so they would try somebody – and that I should not push him forward, since it would take two or three weeks.
24. Well, so that was the period when I just [huh] came to the conclusion somehow, that nothing worse can happen to me, than that I could die, well. And that so many of my dearest ones died, that – just, that I might meet them somewhere, or whatever. So this was somehow quite good, that a person can really reach the bottom and then it was only rising,

This data is a short extract, taken from a much longer interview, from a study by Chrz, Čermák, & Plachá (2006). The purpose here is only to illustrate the plurality of approaches to narrative analysis. The underlining indicates the analysis into *fabula* and *sjuzet* (i.e. with *sjuzet* underlined).

Holistic–Content perspective

This is the first of the modes of narrative analysis outlined by Lieblich et al (1998) which involves exploring and establishing links and associations across the entire story. The emphasis here is upon the *fabula*, but not at the expense of the *sjuzet*. This might involve identifying a core theme for the whole story, or might involve exploring how a specific segment of the text can shed light on the story as a whole. What emerges from this perspective are the notions of “hardiness”, “stamina”, and “desire for life”, best summed up in the core theme of “*finding inner life-strength in the face of death.*”

Holistic–Form perspective

The focus of this perspective is on the form of the story rather than on its content, but with the focus on the *plot*, rather than on the fine detail of the *sjuzet*. The configuration of Hanka's experience with cancer can be characterized in a simplified way. The overall progress of Hanka's story is U-shaped, descending through depression towards a more optimistic turn upwards, moving from loneliness and separation towards integration into the community.

Categorical–Content perspective

This approach to narrative analysis involves breaking the text down into relatively self-contained areas of content, and submitting each to thematic analysis. A crucial theme that emerges is “***acceptance of the illness***” (e.g. [Seg. 24] Unit of analysis: “... *that nothing worse can happen to me, than that I could die*”).

Categorical–Form perspective

This involves a careful analysis of the *sjuzet*. For example, extra-linguistic components, such as laughter, a sigh, or crying, indicate features in the telling which could refer to difficult, still un-integrated, experience: ([Seg. 22] – “*So I just said goodbye to life (sigh, crying), really, I just – had it hard*”).

Critical analysis

Finally, the sixth perspective, follows Emerson & Frosh (2004) in asking – what sort of account of her life is Hanka constructing for herself, and, how does Hanka position herself with respect to her illness, and the series of events that unfold? A crucial identity position (Hiles, 2007) that Hanka adopts is with respect to her not being beaten by the illness. Hanka reflects: ([Seg. 24] – “*So this was somehow quite good, that a person can really reach the bottom and then it was only rising*”).

Conclusions

In summary, the need for complete transparency of paradigm assumptions, procedures and data analysis, as well as in research dissemination, has become even more urgent. We have stressed the critical importance of the notion of transparency as the benchmark for qualitative inquiry. The need to be clear and open about the methods used, and the assumptions being made, we argue must be recognized as the basic requirement of all qualitative research. Furthermore, our point is that transparency is the overriding concern in laying the groundwork for the *critical evaluation* needed in writing-up research. The methods and logic of inquiry, data collection and analysis, if they are to be clear enough for others to replicate, must be transparent. In our example, the rigor of NOI relies on establishing transparency. This means that not only must we be clear to others what we have done and what we have found, but we must also be clear to ourselves, at every step, and at every stage, what it is that we are doing.

Bibliography

- Bringer, J.D., Johnston, L.H. & Brackenridge, C.H. (2004). Maximizing transparency in a doctoral thesis: The complexities of writing about the use of QSR*NVIVO within a grounded theory study. *Qualitative Research*, 4, 247-265.
- Chrz, V., Čermák, I. & Plachá, V. (2006). Cancer, finitude and life configuration. In K. Milnes, C. Horrocks, N. Kelly, B. Roberts & D. Robinson (eds.) *Narrative, Memory and Knowledge: Representations, aesthetics and contexts*. Huddersfield: University of Huddersfield Press.
- Emerson, P. & Frosh, S. (2004). *Critical Narrative Analysis in Psychology*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Herman, L. & Vervaeck, B. (2001). *Handbook of Narrative Analysis*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Hiles, D.R. (2007). Identity Positioning: Narrative analysis of sjuzet and fabula. In D. Robinson, N. Kelly, and K. Milnes (Eds.) *Narrative and Memory*. Huddersfield: University of Huddersfield Press.
- Hiles, D.R. (2008). Transparency. In L.M. Givens (Ed). *The Sage Encyclopaedia of Qualitative Research*. Sage. (Forthcoming)
- Hiles, D.R. & Čermák, I. (2007). Narrative Psychology. In C. Willig & W. Stainton-Rogers (Eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology*. London: Sage Publications. (Forthcoming)
- Lieblich, A., Tuval-Mashiach, R. & Zilber, T. (1998). *Narrative Research: Reading, analysis and interpretation*. London: Sage Publications.
- Mishler, E.G. (1986a). *Research Interviewing: Context and narrative*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Mishler, E.G. (1986b). The analysis of interview-narratives. In T.R. Sarbin (ed.) *Narrative Psychology: The storied nature of human conduct*. New York: Praeger.
- Mishler, E.G. (1999). *Storylines: Craftartist's narratives of identity*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Seale, C., Gobo, G., Gubrium, J.F. & Silverman, D. (Eds.) (2004). *Qualitative Research Practice*. London, Sage Publications.
- Vygotsky, L. (1978 [1930]). *Mind in Society: The development of higher psychological Processes*. Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press.
- Willig, C. & Stainton-Rogers, W. (Eds.) (2007). *Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology*. London: Sage Publications. (Forthcoming)