

Article

Breathing in the Mud: Tensions in Narrative Interviewing

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Abstract

This article explores important questions around the often taken for granted approach to interviewing within narrative inquiry. When I applied an interview approach that emphasized the dialogical, performative, and social, tensions were provoked that muddied my assumptions and equilibrium. By sharing my story, I invite readers to reflect upon the researcher's role in interviewing. I address tensions that arose between (a) presence and performance, (b) equality and power, (c) leading and following, (d) insider and outsider, (e) influence and neutrality, and (f) trust and responsibility. I come to describe the craft of co-constructing stories with another as breathing in the mud—a dynamic process in which the researcher moves between the tensions of getting stuck in one moment and finding brilliant presence in the next. Discussion focuses on how a researcher might use tensions as catalysts that ignite clarity and advance how narrative interviewing is enacted.

Keywords: interviewing, narrative inquiry, Riessman, metaphor

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The Story

The interview is today and I have to prepare. I feel a soft tightness arise in my breathing and gut, a tightness intermingled with butterflies, a heaviness and a lightness at the same time. I am aware of the time all morning, moving slowly. I kneel on my office floor, staring back at the papers that surround me like angel wings. The folder with the interview guide, now dotted with sticky notes that buoy my confidence and remind me of what I don't want to forget. There is the participant file, opened, and I thumb through the consent, the biographical sheet, other loose notes. I feel as if I am beginning to know this man a little bit, on paper. I then turn to the little pile of equipment on the floor, by my bookcase. I test the recorder. The battery light flashes to assure me I have power. I scoop it up, place it in a small green silk bag. I add spare batteries, the microphone attachment, the help booklet. A sigh. I get up off my knees, now stiff. I stand, gather and place my papers and equipment into my tote bag. Check the time. Good. I scribble the address on a sticky note and leave my office. I walk down the hall and stop, check my look in the mirror. Hair okay? Jewelry, maybe too much? My outfit? A nod to myself, it's okay. Finally I set off in my car, feeling a relief to be starting the process.

I find the participant's address, see the house. It is 2:30, I am early as planned. I park on a side street, not directly in view of the house. I turn the car off. Sit. Wait. I pull out my meditation, read it in slow silence. I close my eyes and invite a peace into my center. Time passes. At 3 sharp, I gather my bag and walk up the sidewalk to the house. The yard is neat, a small garden bed that has been tended to. I arrive at the front door, knock, and face the door with anticipation and some angst, a smile in my eyes.

As the door opens, I see the face of a human being, and our eyes meet. A tentative smile. I feel safe in that moment, no radar alarming. I introduce myself. He must also feel it is okay, as he welcomes me in. I offer a handshake. Humility easily covers me as I feel the weight of privilege, of being in this man's home, of being allowed to enter and to ask him of his experience of living with illness. I temper my genuine joy in being here to bear witness with the fact that I am here on a mission with clear deliverables. He asks if it matters where we might sit. I suggest the kitchen table if that is available. I want the intimacy of the chairs, what I imagine will be a comfortable space, with a table to write on, to set the recorder on. We walk through to the kitchen, and my eyes scan everywhere. I try not to be obvious, more subtle glances, and I cannot help but do this; I am hungry for a thousand details. I decline the offer of tea but accept a glass of water. We chat and settle in, linger for a bit. I pull out the recorder and hold it as an alien intruder that must be acknowledged. An awkwardness, the idle chit chat eases for a moment, we set up and test the equipment, review the consent. This is no ordinary conversation with a friend at the kitchen table. I feel a tension that interrupts genuine presence with the reality of knowing every word will be recorded. I become distracted momentarily. My eyes leave his face and shift to the equipment. I test it. Plead with imaginary techno gods that it works okay. I feel a pressure to capture the story, his story, our story, on the machine. The green light is on, it must be okay. What can I do now but trust, refocus, and begin to engage with the person before me.

To engage is easy and it is not. I offer a prompting statement, "Can you tell me about" And he answers back. I try to listen and not over influence, to not lead. Do I nod? Do I smile? To be genuine, yes, but I am a researcher, so maybe not so much. I am interrupted by a flash thought about others on the research team who will later listen. I want to do well. Should I ask more, listen more, am I getting good material? Did I word that correctly? These thoughts bump about in my head. I am listening and observing, but at the same time am observed. I feel a bit breathless. My mind returns to listening. Looking at the man but also looking away, not wanting to over look or seem too intense. So much to consider and balance. A sense of muddiness. And then this all

falls away and I am my unencumbered self, lost in the story, engrossed in the twists and turns, curious and amazed by what I hear. It feels like pure presence. In-between and back and forth, aware of the situation and then lost in it. He says something and I think it is perfect, this will make an excellent quote. I smile. Then suddenly I am aware of the time. Too long, long enough? An hour and a half has flown by. Is he tired? We pause, review, decide we are okay to end. And click off the recorder. It is as if a lightness enters the room. We are more natural, more casual and chat with the freedom of being off the record, just two people with no audience. We laugh, we talk about our everyday lives. I gather my self, my papers, my equipment. We say goodbye, and a hug at the front door feels right. I depart, walking away, sensing the magnitude of the exchange, sensing I am changed but not yet sure how.

I get to my car. I lean back into the seat, shut my eyes. Flooded with thoughts and emotions. I just sit, gather myself, take in the moment. But not for long. I am dying to check the recorder. I turn it on: is the story there? Yes? Yes! Thank you, thank you. The sound is clear. Oh my, relief. Okay, ground myself. I want to reflect on the interview and record this now, in the moment. It is my turn to record my story of hearing a story. And I do. I jot down a few notes to guide me, and then begin to talk into the recorder. It is about a 4 minute reflection. I ramble a bit as I speak and try to use sophisticated language, descriptions that suggest in-depth understanding and insight. I try to be objective as I describe the setting, the emotion, and flow of the interview. I talk too about my reactions to what was said and not said. Then I stop, it is done. Everything back safe and secure in my tote bag. And I drive off, vibrating with energy, still digesting what took place during the interview.

Introduction: Troubled Waters

My intent in pursuing narrative research in a nursing doctoral program was to apply a fulsome methodology that emphasized interviewing and resonated with me as an experienced health care professional. I came upon and embraced Riessman's (2008) case-centered approach, with its emphasis on the dialogical, performative, and social. It seemed straightforward, and I naively believed my clinical experience and ease of conducting thousands of interviews would help smooth my transition to researcher. And yet as my understanding of the complexity of narrative inquiry evolved and inherent assumptions were illuminated, it became unexpectedly troublesome to co-construct stories with persons living with life threatening illness. Tensions, questions, and angst arose during participant interviews that took me by surprise and sent me on a path of sense making.

This shift in awareness of what I attended to meant that interviewing changed and at times took on a heaviness as innocence was lost, replaced by a new felt seriousness, depth, and responsibility. I accepted the idea that threads of constructionism and performance are part of all stories, yet this clouded my aesthetic notions of mystery and romance with stories. A lens of constructionism led to a peeling back of what I saw and heard on the surface in order to glimpse at and expose influences at play. Tensions now arose where none had existed; for example, what I understood as presence was complicated by an understanding of performance. That such a heartfelt disruption of my way of being in the world, experiencing it, and knowing myself could transpire by taking up a research methodology with an intensity that came to feel like embodiment was not spoken of in the academy or the literature. Was I alone in experiencing tensions that seemed irreconcilable? It seemed natural for me to turn to storying, to voice and seek words to put upon my experience of interviewing. In essence, this storying served as a means to write into the darkness (van Manen, 2002).

By telling a composite story of my interview experience, I aimed to make explicit tensions amplified by my rigorous and passionate taking in of Riessman's (2008) narrative methodology. I did this through exhaustive self-reflection, discernment, and analysis of my experiences and pre- and post-interview notes related to 44 interviews of adults living with life threatening illness over a three and a half year period. I present for consideration six inter-related tensions that a researcher may stumble upon: (a) presence tempered by performance, (b) equality by power, (c) leading by following, (d) insider by outsider, (e) influence by neutrality, and (f) trust by responsibility. What follows is an exploration of this breathing in and through a metaphoric muddiness towards a more clear understanding of complexities often hidden within narrative interviewing. The metaphor is intended to evoke. It invites us to re-imagine and generate new insights and possibilities within the interview process; as such, it contributes to critical questioning of taken for granted methodological practices within the ever evolving area of narrative research.

The Interview: Background

I begin this exploration of tensions in the interviewing experience with a brief foray into the interview itself, that foundational interaction within narrative research that is used as a means to seek and obtain a study participant's storied experience of a lived event. The interview as method is well established. Interviews are most often recorded in the moment, transcribed verbatim, and converted to a transcript that offers exactness and efficiency to data collection. While this interview approach makes sense for the most part and appeals to human sciences such as nursing (indeed it is not easy to conceive conducting an interview in any other way), the interview story presented here unearths tensions that can surface and yet are invisible within the transcript and more broadly within discussions about interviewing.

Understanding the interview is important as it is a powerful method and a critical component of narrative inquiry. Interviews are the medium through which data are generated and form the foundation for all that ensues within a research study. The interview has changed over time from its anthropological roots to that of hiring research assistants to conduct audio recorded and more recently video recorded interviews. And the interview continues to evolve, from being thought of as a straightforward method of data collection to more of what Gubrium, Holstein, Marvasti, and McKinney (2012) describe as a dynamic interactional communicative opportunity. This reframing and questioning of the traditional interview method is in part related to changes in long standing ways of thinking, for example, a moving away from a quantitative-qualitative war to new spaces that welcome a proliferation of paradigms and multiple methods approaches to inquiry (Chase, 2011; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). As well, the emergence of advancing technologies, beginning with the rise of miniature recording devices in the 1950s, has made it possible to record interviews with ease. In many ways this technique revolutionized qualitative research and became instilled as the standard approach we know today (Kvale, 1996; Riessman, 2008).

The recording of research interviews has become so accepted as to be taken for granted and an often unquestioned practice. We rarely pause to consider what price we pay for this technological gift of being able to transform an audio recording into a concrete data transcript. On the surface, there is a freedom and ease in being able to capture concisely the spoken story. The ability to record frees the researcher to focus on the interaction versus trying to rely on memory or to take copious, distracting notes. I expand on this momentarily but for now return to the interview story to suggest that the privilege afforded by recording stirs tension; the very presence of the device as part of the interview acts to influence and introduces a performative aspect for the interviewer and participant.

Methodology: Narrative Interviewing

I delve past interviewing as method to its deeper situatedness within narrative inquiry. Here, narrative interviewing is understood as a dynamic approach used to generate stories as a data source, stories that help gain access to a participant's actual lived experience (Duffy, 2007). Within narrative inquiry, it is commonly accepted that lived experience is shared by way of a story or narrative (Sandelowski, 1991), and that this basic human expression is seen cross-culturally regardless of ethnicity, language, or culture (Chafe, 1980; Levi-Strauss, 1972). As a narrative researcher I understand stories as a way to share experiences with others, to give meaning and gain and build understanding, and to influence compassion toward others in our world (Engel, Zarconi, Pethel, & Missimi, 2008). Because we can never access the direct experience of another, we try to get as close as possible and rely on a story teller's retelling of their experience, as I did in interviews of adults living with life threatening illness. While some narrativists use the terms story and narrative with great specificity, most others including Riessman (2008) have adopted the contemporary practice of using the terms interchangeably, as I do for purposes of this discussion. A narrative researcher first comes to an understanding of what is meant by a story, and then draws upon philosophical beliefs that underpin narrative inquiry and shape how the interviewing exchange will actually happen. And I suggest it is these assumptions that muddy interview waters.

Applying Riessman's Narrative Approach

“... knowledge is constructed in the everyday world through an ordinary communicative act – storytelling” (Riessman, 2008, p. 14).

My approach to narrative interviewing is informed and inspired by Riessman (2008). To situate research interviewing within a solid methodology adds complexity; it changes the lens with which the researcher sees the world and amplifies everything that transpires in the interview. You are changed. I thus expound on Riessman's “hybrid dialogic performance methodology” that emphasizes “how talk among speakers is interactively (dialogically) produced and performed as narrative” (p. 105). As such, narratives support the performance and construction of a person's identity. Riessman extends aforementioned tenets of qualitative interviewing to understand the narrative interview as a *whole event*, taking into account the informal pre- and post-interview chatter and the formal recorded interview. Her approach is compatible with the use of open-ended questioning, audio recording, and transcription of the interview. Face to face interviews are emphasized, as is the establishment of *trust* and *relationship*. The researcher is an *active participant* in the interview, ideally engaged, genuinely present, and authentic. The aim is to be open and subjective, and to see each story as *contingent* (a linking of ideas or events). The researcher does not interview “to get” the story, but rather enters into and explores the story with the participant such that they *co-construct* it together. It follows that each interview that comes into being is unique, as two people are engaged and responding to one another in the moment.

I expand on two critical beliefs that impact interviewing in the narrative approach of Riessman (2008) and her mentor Mishler (1986): the *dialogical process* and *social influences*. A view of the interview as dialogical means that narrative accounts are co-produced and what the interviewer says is as worthy of attention as that of the interviewee. The context is vital and shaped by the back and forth dialogue of two active participants. The researcher aims to generate a detailed account. A second assumption is that narratives are social acts, a way for us to perform our identity and to use language in certain ways to achieve the telling we desire. The narrative interview is imagined as a discursive, collaborative exchange in which two individuals jointly construct the story and the meaning, and from which a hallmark, detailed account is generated.

Within this dialogic and social act, Riessman (2008) acknowledges constructionist strands and emphasizes the role of influence from the social world; a belief that the story is “constructed by socially situated individuals from a perspective and for an audience” (p. 23). This is compatible with a view of social constructionism, such as that defined by Crotty (1998). He suggests the meaning of an object, in this instance a story, is contingent upon and emerges only when we interact with it. Furthermore, this interaction requires a researcher to have curiosity and imagination, and to approach an object “in a radical spirit of openness to its potential for new or richer meaning. It is an invitation to reinterpretation” (Crotty, 1998, p. 51). Emphasis is on the social, the belief that the social is so interwoven into the personal that it is impossible to untangle them. That is, our culture as a collective has a deep rooted hold on us and influences how we see objects, making the generation of meaning always social. In this way social constructionism is also relativist, as our sense making is just that, a standpoint at a moment in time, an interpretation. The connection between social constructionism and narrative is that any description rendered, such as a story, is not seen as a mirror or a straightforward representation of reality but a complex representation containing the plural voices of many.

I found that to take up a view of social constructionism within narrative inquiry influences how I perceive the narrative interview, and more critically, how I conduct it. As a researcher, I do not find a story but become an active participant in a relational interview exchange. The participant and I co-construct stories in a dynamic moment in time. Said another way, an interview generated story is not just *about* an experience that happened to the participant but now becomes an alive new moment experienced unto itself.

Findings: Tensions Arising in the Lived Interview

I return to my initial story of preparing for and conducting a narrative interview as a way to illustrate how key beliefs that underpin Riessman’s (2008) approach influenced me. In the story, I share hesitancy, questioning, and a back and forth uncertainty associated with awareness of these beliefs at play on and in the interview process. At times I somehow manage to find that magical, possibly transcendent, third space (Doll, 2003) and place where all constructions fall away and pure presence happens. It is to experience what I will refer to as a Levinas-like moment of human connection with the person you are interviewing, a moment where a connection is felt and we exist in, know our self, and respond to the “other” beyond the physical, more towards the ethical and existential (Levinas, 1966). Writing and reflecting on the experience allowed me to enter deeply and lay bare actions and experience as lived. I could step away from the experience as if a stranger to it and critique the practice of interviewing anew. My story illuminated an undercurrent of tensions within the lived interview experience, a struggle and discernment of how to be whilst between tensions that took on a vivid energy. Through reflection and close attention, six dynamic and inter-related tensions came to light.

Presence Tempered by Performance

Riessman (2008) and others emphasize the importance of presence: emotional attentiveness, engagement, and listening. Remen (1996) speaks of listening generously, of using silence, and of bearing witness, for example to be genuine and physically express this by leaning in, maintaining eye contact, nodding, smiling, or using a tone of empathy. Following a narrative methodology obligates one to interview with as much transparency, connection, authenticity, and compassion as possible, as the interview in and of itself is also an intervention and participants are often vulnerable. As the interviewer and participant interact and co-construct what evolves, both are changed. There is an ethic at play as well, what Gadwin (1990) refers to as a “truth constituted anew” (p. 36) by the personal coming together of two individuals, subjective-subjective.

And yet this ideal of presence may slip and become tempered by a desire to perform well. Riessman (2008) suggests all stories are performed and contingent, influenced by audiences hidden and present. As a researcher, the ego whispers to me to do well and contribute to the research team I am part of, who will later listen to the interaction. My presence at times seems to walk a faltering line between authentic genuineness and a metaphoric performance for this hidden audience. The recorder distracts me, alerts and emphasizes my desire for imagined perfection: to do it right, get the good story, and perform in a certain way. I assumed I could be subjective so easily, only to find it is not so. Tension is generated as I pretend the recorder is not there and yet face the reality of attending to its functioning. Pre- and post-interview, the unrecorded conversation happens in a more natural and less formal way, leading me to question if recording facilitates or flattens the story telling. Does it push us toward a focus on what is said over other expressive aspects such as emotion, the gaze of the eyes, facial expressions, the folding of the hands, and so on? I was surprised at my hidden resentment toward and personification of the recorder as intruder, capturing every word, dominating, holding me captive to its magic: manipulating presence. It may be the recorder is a mixed blessing: it allows the researcher freedom but also acts to distract and influence what is being co-constructed.

Equality Tempered by Power

Riessman's (2008) methodology emphasizes the importance of reciprocity, equalizing power imbalances, and creating equality as much as possible through a sharing in the interview process. The teller and listener play active, influential roles. This ideal can create uncertainty in the moment as the interviewer delicately walks on personal and professional boundaries, whether imagined or actual, and makes in the moment decisions about just how open to be, how much information to share, and the depth of pursuing or not pursuing a curiosity that arises in the story. Do I open that door? There is tension in being there as a researcher to listen and at times wanting to console, offer clinical advice, or suggest advocacy, and discerning what is appropriate and when. How does one minimize the unseen cloak of power we wear that gains us access to the individual and his or her experience; power associated with having education, being a health care professional, in this instance a nurse, and in saying I am affiliated with a university research project. We have privilege and must continually question and examine how it presents itself and influences the interaction, the trust generated and depth revealed, and the story paths that are taken and equally as important not taken. Riessman suggests an interview ideally be extended to include observation, an ongoing relationship, and conversations over time with participants. This is not so easily achieved, and I wonder, for how long, how deep is the relationship and the conversation? Do I say "yes" to the requests for a photo of myself, to a friend request on Facebook, and to the offered gift box of tea? Do I offer a birthday gift as I genuinely wish to do? Do I call a participant after discovering we have a mutual friend who has died? Do I act on my instinct to give a participant money to buy new clothes? Can one so easily turn off genuine engagement? I think not. My desire to stay in relationship after the interviews are complete is real, but how to do this ethically given the power imbalance? I will hold forever a shadow of "power over" given that I know intimate fragments of their illness experiences as revealed to me in the context of a confidential research exchange.

Leading Tempered by Following

A belief in this narrative methodology is that the teller of the story leads the way in a retelling or reconstruction of their lived experience. The interviewer, as an active participant in co-creating what transpires, aims to be dialogical: to follow all threads of the story as it unfolds, to be genuinely curious and to ask, engage, be spontaneous, and to give up control in the interview. This artful way of being requires finesse and a subtlety not so easily achieved. How do I balance

spontaneous engagement responses with an intention to not interject such that I revert to a more traditional leading or overly influencing the conversation? This can be tension generating as in-the-moment thought process becomes laden with interruptive self editing and questioning: am I being too curious, asking too much, or not enough, and how cautious should I be as I do not want to inadvertently do harm by asking something too sensitive? This applies not only to dialogue but also to decisions about place, for example deciding where to physically be or sit for the interview. Do I lead and suggest a preference such as at the kitchen table, a place where the everyday sharing of illness stories often happens literally and metaphorically (Berman, 1991; Remen, 1996) and which may be a comfortable, familial place that will add intimacy and generate richer story detail, or do I pull away from any influence and follow their lead?

Insider Tempered by Outsider

As a nurse researcher conducting interviews I ponder my situatedness: I am both a knowing insider and a not knowing outsider. I know about chronicity and illness and have a sense of what persons living with illness may experience. I am an outsider in two ways: I do not personally have an illness or direct experience with participants' specific treatments, medications, or local supports, and I accept that I can only ever get close to but never actually know another's direct experience—I always rely on the teller's retelling. This not knowing affords me some naiveté and a genuine openness, concern, and ability to be surprised; it supports my ability to not lead so much as to follow. But do I miss key threads in the interview story that I might have focused on more in the moment if I was more of an insider? And yet knowing too much can create equally delicate moments, as in the instance when an older woman living with HIV tells me she has no health concerns. I know she has a five to eight times greater risk for developing cervical cancer (Robinson, 2013), and in a split second I make a decision of whether to introduce this knowledge or not, weighing the context and my role and the moment we have created together. Dancing inside my head as fast as I can.

Influence Tempered by Neutrality

As a narrative researcher I believe in a constituted self and the influence I bring to bear on the interview participant by my physical and social being: my body, race and gender, my education and life experience, and so on; what I represent to the interviewee based on embedded social understandings and how this influences their response. I am aware of my look, how I act, and what I say. During an interview, I experience fleeting thoughts about the degree of my influence. I wonder how I influence through my smile, my appearance, my gazing upon and looking away. What influence is imparted by how close I sit, or by my touching a participant's arm as a gesture of kindness? And this is all important and profound, as narrative meanings are shaped between the interaction of the interviewer and the context of the story (Riessman, 2000). We change the person interviewed and ourselves, in ways we do not always understand at the time.

Yet I grapple with trying to influence as little as possible, pulled by a desire to not over-construct or over-shape. And this in-between space at times feels slippery, possibly unattainable within a view of social constructionism. Might my attempts at trying to neutralize influence lead to a lack of authenticity? Does my awareness and analytic deconstruction of influences at play pose a threat to the sacredness of a story being told? I am deeply aware that the story I leave with is very different from what another interviewer may have evoked. The interview exchange and experience are so unique and intimate, an unreplicable reflection of two persons in a moment in time. My awareness and over thinking of the role of social influences is so heightened at times as to feel unhelpful ... gets me stuck. I falter in the mire.

Trust Tempered by Responsibility

The persons I interviewed volunteered; they wanted to tell their story of living with illness and trusted me as a researcher with this. Riessman (2008) highlights that storytellers want to be engaged, and that stories do important work: narratives are strategic, functional and purposeful, and allow a meaning-making function to be set in motion. I believe this, that all sorrows and the weight of living with illness can be borne if we tell them; that we tell stories to live. I hear this expressed by participants and know this to be true in my bones. It is this powerful combination of their trust and personal sharing by a vulnerable person that humbles me as I leave the interview. It swirls about with other emotions, one being undeniable relief that I now have data to work with. At one point I feel a pang of guilt that I may have come out further ahead; that I have “taken” something from the participant. And this might be true if not for the weight of responsibility that rushes in, that call to research work and the responsibility to now do justice with the new story we constructed. This inherent responsibility of a narrative researcher to illuminate meaning through analysis of the interview stirs tension. The participant trusts us to do this, and yet to do it well in light of knowing the depths of all that comes to influence and impact seems daunting to say the least. I concur with Riessman that a narrative does not speak for itself; that any narrative is so embedded with social influences and taken for grantedness that to be used for research purposes it will require close interpretation, continued analysis, and investigation. This knowing lands with a certain heaviness and lays bare so much as to bury any remaining naiveté I may have had about the interview. I come to experience interviewing anew, as a craft, with a criticality I had not known previously. I feel great responsibility and privilege to do this well, to pay full honor to the voice of the storyteller.

Sense Making

Complexity accompanies the narrative researcher and yet I also find the act of the interview to be a time and place of privilege. Narrative interviewing uniquely amplifies and shines a light on the story a person tells about their lived experience. To achieve this, the interviewer is called upon to have an awareness of their presence in relation to power, leading, being an insider, being non-influential, and establishing a trustworthiness to receive the story. While these ways of being may seem familiar or assumed, they are complex in their own right. To layer upon this an interview practice that emphasizes dialogical, performative, and social constructionist threads (Riessman, 2008) is to add further complexity. An interviewer may feel an opening up and take on a heightened awareness of influences at play that do not simply cozy up but instead stir tensions. My story points to such angst and tensions that portray a messier reality of interviewing. The interviewer may have an initial experience of disruption and being caught in a muddy place between what appear to be linear and opposing dichotomies, for example the notion of presence tempered with an understanding of performance and other influences. Imagine I am interviewing Norm who is 55 and has been HIV positive for 13 years. Listening to his story, I have an acute awareness of social factors at play that contribute to his harsh reality of living with stigma and poverty. AND I also physically feel the human loneliness and pain that lie underneath this. I falter at times in interviews, wondering how best to engage, wondering which path to follow with reflections or questions, and what to foreground in the actual dynamic exchange. It is here that a researcher may feel discomfort or uncertainty, and indeed may slip if not fall. To action an in-depth and critical narrative approach may suddenly seem unhelpful to the interview process. I suggest the challenge and art of interviewing is to stand in this muddiness as it arises; to not resist but rather to be still, seek to name the swirl, and let the troubled waters slowly settle.

It takes courage for a researcher conducting narrative interviews to begin a process of sense making and enrichment, to pause and hold within themselves what may feel like conflicting pulls.

And yet I suggest insights and awareness are not only helpful but necessary. For me, this process involved the naming and unpacking of the origin of tensions experienced. Once named, it was easier to see I was over-emphasizing and indeed embodying the power of the idea of social influences that was so markedly and continually shifting my understanding of presence and power and leading, being an insider, and trusting. Practicing a narrative approach that takes into account social influences makes the notion of co-construction come alive in a powerful and humbling way. I entered into what felt like deep dark waters and confronted existential questions: where does influence end and agency begin, and do we ever have experiences that are truly personal and created? Can an individual ever rise above the myriad of influences that are part of life? Can we change our story? Can an interviewer rise above the context and come to accept a constructionist view as one way to understand the world? Like soil and water combining, the dialogical and constructionism feel muddy at times and I find myself needing air, wanting to add a lightness to the mixture. And I do.

A way to gain clarity may be to not hold the constructionist threads within narrative so tightly such that they distort, disorientate, or dampen spirit and amazement. To keep in mind that social constructionism is a thread running through, not a blanket woven so tightly as to smother mystery. Immersion afforded me a way to mature with these ideas, such that after some time the light began to shift, and I came to arrive at a place of accepting the tensions without judgment or a need to choose. To shift from an “either/or” place that limits to an “and” thought process that invites abundance. To accept that these tensions cannot be reconciled nor is it desirable that they are; to feel uncertainty and to let it be. To acknowledge any tension as a first step and then at some point to trust, surrender, and let it fall away, to be genuinely present, in that moment, with the other. And come to envision construction as active, accepting that all is constructed and then setting it aside. And this is no easy feat, to hold a critical awareness of social influences at play and their impact on the life of a person I am interviewing and to not feel the weight of our collective human condition. Yes, a sense of despair threatens to creep in when I consider social influences that are so complex and not easily addressed, feeling somewhat powerless, and knowing in my being that we, the greater we, must and can do better. But I keep this cognitive way of knowing in balance by returning to the equally powerful human connection felt in the moment. To experience this, to have a sense that we are all one, is to feel a deep compassion that renews hope in the spirit. We can rise above social influences, be it the story of Victor Frankl or the extraordinary courage lived every day that I hear in interviews with persons living with life threatening illness. I came to hold this awareness of social influences as important as a means to get underneath and find meaning, while not losing sight of the person who trusted and shared their story.

In light of this discussion, how might we go forward? I began this article sharing how assumptions underpinning a narrative interviewing approach may initially prove to be troublesome. While I questioned at times whether tensions stirred were valuable, I now respond with a resounding “Yes!”... with temperateness and sensitivity. Such tensions may be vital to narrative researchers as they add complexity and intensity, an amplification to be sure, and also act as catalysts to keep the interview process dynamic. Tensions keep the interviewer alert in that they call us to pause, to continually question and tease apart, to rethink or gain new insight; to possibly generate a new narrative turn. These tensions call us to keep pushing toward a new synthesis of constructionist influences and creativity within narrative interviewing. Can we re-imagine the interview? Gubrium et al. (2012) call for a transformation to narrative interviewing, suggesting that how we currently understand the subjectivity of the participant has been oversimplified. They imagine a more interactional sensitivity and artful collaboration between interviewer and participant. Hendry (2007) also suggests a radical deconstructing of the interview, a shifting away from obtaining a recorded representation of the story to seeing the

interview as a faith act based on deep listening that extends to hearkening and heeding what is said with humility and faithfulness. Also taking us into the future is Rachel Naomi Remen. Through The Healer's Art course designed for health care professionals, she calls us to listen generously and consider our narrative encounters as an act of service. Gadow (1995) also reminds us about being of service and the importance of intersubjectivity and contingency within narrative as that way through which we "offer one another our experience" (p. 213).

Does this discussion contribute to narrative research? Yes, as more researchers take up aspects of narrative inquiry, we have an opportunity to not take it up blindly but to continually question and improve; to be accountable and to value various ways of knowing. Ultimately, we engage with the person before us to listen to their story of how illness or some event impacts their life. Such an interaction, often occurring through an interview, is a human art form and not a mere set of natural and spontaneous techniques to be applied. It is a way of breathing in narrative wholly that requires attention and intention, to self and other. Whatever the future of how we go about generating a story, this has relevance across all practice domains as we all interact with others and listen to stories of experience. We can always gain insight into how we listen and hear the other, and how we with others co-construct our realities. As expressed eloquently by nurse philosopher Gadow (1995):

If we believe that patients' lives depend on us but not ours on them, dualism has triumphed. But if nursing is a world where we live, rather than a service we offer, then they and we together constitute it, inhabit it, each depending upon the other to share local knowledge about where safe passage may be found. (p. 212)

Conclusions

Taking up a narrative interview approach does not happen so easily, as tensions may arise between presence and performance, equality and power, leading and following, being an insider and outsider, influence and neutrality, and the tension between trust and responsibility. I do not suggest these tensions are good or bad, but rather potentialities to be aware of as they act to make the interview experience more alive. Therein lies the beauty, as by attempting to untangle tension in the interview process we may arrive at a new place, one of co-constructing and creating, where we are aware of and name social influences and then feel free to hold them to the side. We may feel more confident as interviewers to slip into the rich in-between place where any sense of pulling dichotomies falls away. We may at times stumble, and when this happens it may be the best way forward is to not resist but instead breathe deeply and let moments of troubled presence awaken us such that we re-imagine the interview process and generate new possibilities.

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