

Using Narrative Inquiry to Collect Research Data on Life Experiences

Narrative, or the telling of stories, is fundamental within human experience. It allows the narrator to explore facets of life events, the learning that occurred, and the importance of what happened. In telling stories, the narrator shares the complexities of time, place, circumstance, and interactions with the audience. The narrative inquiry research methodology seems intuitively useful for plumbing an individual's life experiences and their meaning: what happened and why, as well as how it happened, and why it was important, and researchers sometimes focus on critical events or incidents that offer insights into complex social and cultural issues (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Asking study participants to recall critical events also allows the researcher to capture elements of time, challenge, and change. Critical events may have occurred long before the individual is asked to recall them but they are remembered because they have had a profound effect on the individual's understanding or actions.

The Study Design

Narrative Inquiry was the methodology chosen for research involving the professional life experiences of four women library directors, specifically their career advancement and leadership development. Research questions included: When and why did they make the decision to apply for positions as managers or directors of libraries or to take a leadership role? What is their definition of leadership and has it changed over time? Are there stories, conversations, or critical incidents in their development as leaders that have been documented or that they can identify? Who or what influenced them and their career progression?

The women academic library directors who were interviewed were supportive of the approach and willing to engage in rich dialogue about themselves and the professional and personal contexts in which their accounts and experiences were situated. The study participants recalled events that had happened many years previously, that had meaning, both positive and negative, and that caused them to adapt, to think and/or to act differently as a result. At the same time, study objectives and research questions were explored through in-depth qualitative interviewing that encouraged recall, promoted thinking and reflection on the participants' experiences, and produced narrative data. As Labaree advised, "The goal is to create an in-depth profile of the respondent's life experiences relative to the research problem being investigated" (2006, p. 126). And, as Klenke (2008) described, this technique has the advantage of allowing participants to describe what is important and meaningful to them rather than responding to structured questions that may or may not reflect their values or perspectives. The use of a narrative inquiry design generated data from the point of view of their experience, within their context, thinking, values, and actions. Engaging the participants in telling their own stories generated raw material to explore the nature of career advancement and leadership development through narrative analysis. For this study, the researcher worked along the categorical-content dimensions, using two approaches to analysis of narratives: restorying and thematic analysis. With thematic analysis, the data were coded into categories or themes using an inductive approach that allowed themes to emerge as the interview texts were examined. Restorying (Creswell, 2008) allowed the researcher to analyze the narrative for critical incidents or events, identify key elements such as setting, characters, action, problem and resolution, and then re-write them in a logical and chronological sequence of ideas or activities. Both restorying and thematic analysis are commonly used to analyze narrative data and interpret and present findings. In this study, the

findings were presented thematically and supported by narrative excerpts and descriptions of critical incidents that the study participants provided, which is another commonly used approach to framing qualitative research (Labaree, 2006).

The Importance of Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry was used in this study to reveal and describe the professional lives of the study participants. Trust in the interviewer is essential to narrative inquiry, and, if this is gained, powerful stories or critical incidents can be elicited from research participants. The importance of narrative and power of stories cannot be underestimated in teaching and learning as well as for research. As is seen in this study, the stories told by study participants, sometimes articulated as critical incidents, and sometimes simply in answer to a question, are life experiences that draw in the reader and offer the researcher rich and complex understandings and lessons. Narrative inquiry is invaluable in exploring research questions because data are generated from the point of view of the study participants' experience, and within their context, thinking, values, and actions. It is a rich form of qualitative methodology that should be considered for research involving human subjects, and where insights into complex social and cultural issues are desirable. In the study of career advancement and leadership development of women library directors it was instrumental in exploring the research questions that dealt with how expectations, perceptions, experiences (opportunities and challenges), and adaptive capacity shaped the leadership development of the women directors.

The results of this study contribute to strategizing on the part of women who are interested in leadership roles and promote fuller understanding of both the challenges and opportunities inherent in these roles. The study is also of interest to those who seek to understand the role of women in librarianship and how their leadership has influenced the development of libraries and of the profession.

Creswell, J. W. (2008). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research*. (3rd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Merrill Prentice Hall.

Klenke, K. (2008). *Qualitative research in the study of leadership*. Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing.

Labaree, R. V. (2006). Encounters with the library: Understanding experience using the life history method. *Library Trends*, 55, 121-139.

Webster, L., & Mertova, P. (2007). *Using narrative inquiry as a research method*. London: Routledge.