

## **Narrative Analysis Research: A Tool for Extension Educators**

### **Abstract**

Within the qualitative research community, narrative analysis research is a common method that is used to better understand a person's experiences or a collective experience. The use of narratives in Extension has been limited. Extension professionals primarily have used narratives as tools for conveying the value of Extension programs or, more recently, as one aspect of a broader program evaluation effort. This article focuses on benefits of narrative analysis research and its potential for practical application by those in Extension.

**Keywords:** [narrative analysis research](#), [life story research](#), [qualitative research](#), [interviews](#)

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## **Introduction**

One's lived experiences are the plot events of his or her narrative story, and exploring a person's narrative story allows us to better understand the "why" and "how" of that person. Narrative stories are central to being human because many elements of our sense of purpose and meaning, selfhood, values, and aspirations are based on our narratives (Grassie, 2008). Indeed, the literature includes a wide array of scholarly work showcasing the ways in which many cultures use stories to teach about their societal norms and values (e.g., Howley & Howley, 2010; Rogoff, 2003).

Within the qualitative research community, narrative analysis research is a common method that is used to better understand a person's experiences or a collective experience. The application of narrative methodologies in Extension, however, has been limited. Although encouragement of the use of narratives in Extension has increased over the past few years, Extension professionals primarily have used narratives as tools for conveying the value of Extension programs (Franz, 2016; Peters & Franz, 2012) or, more recently, as one aspect of a broader program evaluation effort (Edwards, Culp, & Jordan, 2019). Despite this history of limited use, narrative analysis research makes sense as a tool for Extension as it aligns with much of the work we in Extension do. Extension focuses on learning throughout the life span, and narratives are how humans construct coherence and continuity across their life spans (Taylor, 1989). Crafting narratives is the way we, as

humans, make sense of the world around us.

## The Methodology of Narrative Analysis Research

A discussion of the methodology of narrative analysis research can help reveal its relevance to Extension work. The foundation of narrative analysis research is incorporating experiences as a mode of learning across the life span. This type of research requires cognizance of a history, a present, and a future within the individual and the associated context.

Life stories research is a narrative theory approach whereby individuals' stories and storylines are understood (Goodson, 2013). For such research, data can be collected in a variety of ways, such as via interviews, focus group sessions, blog entries, and open-ended program evaluation. By gathering both verbal and written data, the researcher can use document analysis, thereby increasing validity through triangulation. It is important to apply the concept of "bathing in the data" (Goodson, 2013, p. 40)—reading through transcripts slowly, recording the main emergent themes both in a notebook and on the transcript pages, and gauging when themes have become saturated. This approach can be paired with various other data analysis techniques. For example, the researcher can construct timelines that show experiences and phases of life to be explored and can extend these timelines as data analysis progresses (Goodson & Sikes, 2001), identifying events within the data and acquiring a holistic view of participants' life stories.

Once timelines are constructed, the researcher can apply other techniques. One example is critical event analysis, which reveals a change of understanding or worldview by the storyteller and allows the life stories to distill events that were most important to him or her (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Using Reighart and Loadman's (1984) content analysis system, the researcher can analyze the content of narrative reports of critical events by classifying the events into type of experience, type of event, category of event, and effect of event. Another option is to analyze *how* a person tells his or her story instead of *what* the person shares. Goodson (2013) argued that there are four types of storytellers—focused elaborator, armchair elaborator, multiple describer, and scripted describer—and that people have either an "open" or a "closed" narrative that explains how narratives affect or direct their lives. Essentially, narrative analysis research enhances understanding of oneself and the other, a person's lived experience over time, who we were, who we are, the journey we have traveled so far, and the journey we are to travel together (Goodson & Gill, 2011).

## Benefits of Narrative Analysis Research

The narrative analysis method acknowledges the constant change that occurs in learning. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) stated, "There is a reflexive relationship between living a life story, telling a life story, retelling a life story, and reliving a life story" (p. 71). There are several notable benefits of the narrative analysis methodology. First, it allows the researcher to examine how the different components of a person's context (e.g., morals, values, beliefs) interact with one another to construct a more holistic view of the person's life (Riessman, 2008). Second, it allows the researcher to explore the personal and the social aspects of learning, which include the individual's learning and the shared environment in which the learning takes place (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 2008). The researcher obtains a more comprehensive view of the learning. In general, the use of narrative analysis research can provide participants in Cooperative Extension programs the opportunity to explain their experiences in their own words and, in turn, expand their knowledge bases. Knowledge increases through telling stories; because narratives "motivate and explain our actions, the stories we tell change the way we act in the world" (Geiger & Sorber, 2013, p. 349).

## Limitations of Narrative Analysis Research

Regarding limitations of narrative analysis research, a main critique centers on the relationship between the researcher and the participants (Goodson & Gill, 2011). A relationship that fosters mutual respect and communication is key in exploring narrative life stories. With this approach, the researcher engages actively with the participants and connects closely with them both on a personal level and within the research domain. Part of the associated limitation was explained by Hatch and Wisniewski (1995), who related concern about the authorship, ownership, and voice of both the participant and the researcher. These notions of power, control, and privacy need to be kept in the forefront so that the participants are not trivialized as a means to an end.

## Applications for Extension Educators

The Cooperative Extension community traditionally has used and championed quantitative methods as primary means for informing the work carried out by Extension professionals. As this article suggests, narrative analysis methodology holds great potential for Extension professionals. Narrative analysis research provides a mechanism for leveraging the power of individuals' stories and gives them voice and agency within a program. Implementing practical applications of this research method, Extension educators can engage with clients both to inform their own work and to enhance the educational experience of those they serve. More than numbers, our participants' stories reveal their educational needs and achievements and the rich, robust, and sometimes powerfully emotional real-life impact of our programs.

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