Narrative Case Study Research

The Narrative Turn in Research Methodology

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Agenda

1. Definitions
2. Characteristics of narrative case studies
3. Effects of narratives
4. Narrative in philosophy of science
Background
Further Readings

What is a Case Study?

Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary:

“case study: an **intensive** analysis of an individual **unit** (as a person or community) stressing **developmental** factors in relation to **environment**.”
“Case study. The detailed examination of a single example of a class of phenomena, a case study cannot provide reliable information about the broader class, but it may be useful in the preliminary stages of an investigation since it provides hypotheses which may be tested systematically with a larger number of cases.”
Narratology

• Narratology is the question of “how best to get an honest story honestly told.”

  – Clifford Geertz

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Narrative

• “NARRATIVE: Something that is narrated: story”
• “NARRATE [of narrare, latin gnarus knowing]: to tell (as a story) in detail”
• “STORY: an account of incidents or events; a statement regarding the facts pertinent to a situation in question”
• “TELL [of OE tellan and OHG zellen, to count]: to relate in detail, to make known, to ascertain by observing, to give an account”
• “DETAIL [of fr. detaillier, to cut in pieces]: extended treatment of or attention to particular items, a part of a whole”
• Question: Is any text a narrative?
• Answer: No!
Beware of!

- The narrativization of texts
- The textualization of practices

Because:
- It’s a power game and a fallacy
- It reduces everything to text and narrative, and
- Something that’s everything is nothing
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What is a Good Narrative?

• A good narrative makes it impossible for the reader to say “So what?”
• Every good narrator is continually warding off this question
• A good narrative has already supplied the answer before the question is raised

–William Labov
Elements of Narrative

- Narratives do not start from explicit theoretical considerations, but from an interest in a particular phenomenon that is best understood narratively.
- Narrative inquiries then develop descriptions and interpretations of the phenomenon from different perspectives.
Perspectives of Narrators

- Participants
- Researchers
- Others
Monophony Vs. Polyphony

- **Monophony**: The researcher as omniscient narrator and summarizer (objectivism).

- **Polyphony**: Letting the story unfold from the diverse, complex, and sometimes conflicting stories that the actors in the case tells (perspectivism) → Vox populi
Characteristics of Narrative Case Studies

1. Close to reality
2. Focus on details
3. Focus on real life practice
4. Focus on context
5. Focus on *how?* in addition to *why?*
6. Story-telling is key
7. History is key
8. Focus on actors as well as structures
9. Dialog is important
Little Things

• “God is in the detail”, says the proverb
• “So is the Devil”, says Flyvbjerg
• Life is in the detail, and you will not get access to life unless you engage with details
Nietzsche on Little Things

• ”All the problems of politics, of social organization, and of education have been falsified through and through . . . because one learned to despise ’little’ things, which means the basic concerns of life itself.”
Foucault on Little Things

• “[Good work] requires patience and a knowledge of details, and it depends on a vast accumulation of source material. Its ‘cyclopean monuments’ are constructed form ‘discreet and apparently insignificant truths’.”
“The problem with ... [an] approach ... which extracts the general from the particular and then sets the particular aside as detail, illustration, background, or qualification, is that it leaves us helpless in the face of the very difference we need to explore ... [It] does indeed simplify matters. It is less certain that it clarifies them.”

Geertz recommends: "Thick description"
C. Roland Christensen on Proximity

- “My whole work has come to resemble a terrain of which I have made a thorough, geodetic survey, not from a desk with pen and ruler, but by touch, by getting down on all fours, on my stomach, and crawling over the ground inch by inch, and this over an endless period of time in all conditions of weather.”
“In teaching you philosophy I’m like a guide showing you how to find your way round London. I have to take you through the city from north to south, from east to west, from Euston to the embankment and from Picadelly to the Marble Arch. After I have taken you many journeys through the city, in all sorts of directions, we shall have passed through any given street a number of times – each time traversing the street as part of a different journey. At the end of this you will know London; you will be able to find your way about like a born Londoner. Of course, a good guide will take you through the more important streets more often than he takes you down side streets; a bad guide will do the opposite. In philosophy I’m a rather bad guide.”

A good narrative does not provide “maps”, it provides the first-hand experience of “being there.”
The ‘Importance of How?’

- Case studies and narratives are developmental studies. Therefore the question of ‘How?’ gains primacy over ‘What?’ and ‘Why?’

- To begin the analysis with a “how” is to suspect that an extremely complex configuration of realities is allowed to escape when one studies only “what” and “why”.

- **Process** is emphasized over structure
The Primacy of Context

- The “primacy of context” follows from the empirical fact that in the history of science, human action has shown itself to be irreducible to predefined elements and rules unconnected to interpretation.
- Therefore it is impossible, in human affairs, to derive praxis from first principles and theory.
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Basic Maxims of Narrative

• No narrative exists out of total necessity
• Narratives are told in order to envision different futures and to do things differently
Three Main Effects of Narratives

1. Narratives give meaning to experiences we have already lived through, the past.

2. By providing detailed accounts of who is doing what to whom with which consequences, narratives tell us whether the present is satisfactory.

3. Narratives provide us a forward glance, helping us to anticipate situations even before we encounter them, allowing us to envision alternative futures.

In short: We tell stories in order to do things differently.
How Social Scientists Can Make a Difference

- Focus research on serious public issues
- Identify “tension points” in those issues
- Employ the narrative approach to those tension points
- Be prepared!
What Is a Tension Point?

- A point of decision where relations of power are particularly tense and likely to change
- Examples: Planning in Aalborg; misinformation in megaprojects
- Narratives about tension points are particularly likely to trigger action
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Why Narrative?

- Alasdair MacIntyre: The human being is a “story-telling animal”
- A key question of proactive research is: “What should we do?”
- MacIntyre: “I can only answer the question ‘What am I do to?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’”
- Therefore, narratology is seen as more important than epistemology and ontology.
• **Ontology**: How do we know that things exist?
• **Epistemology**: How do we know that we know?
• **Narratology**: How do we tell a valid and coherent story?
Codifying Knowledge

1. KNOW–WHAT: Easy to codify
2. KNOW–WHY: Less easy to codify
3. KNOW–HOW: Difficult to codify

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## The Phronetic Model

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- Application of ethical analysis as part of *praxis*

- Contextual analysis of values and power aimed at dialogue and action
Key Questions of Phronesis

1. Where are we going?
2. Who gains, who loses?
3. Is this development desirable?
4. What should we do, if anything?
The Main Task of Phronesis

- To give concrete examples and detailed narratives of who is getting and using power for what purposes, and to suggest how others might get it and use it for other purposes
Aristotle on the Importance of Cases

- Phronesis is the most important of the intellectual virtues because it secures a balancing of instrumental rationality with value rationality.
- Phronesis functions on the basis of practical rationality and judgment.
- Practical rationality and judgment evolves and operates primarily by virtue of deep-going case experiences.
- Therefore, case studies and knowledge of cases are crucial.
“Phronesis is not concerned with universals only; it must also take cognizance of particulars, because it is concerned with conduct, and conduct has its sphere in particular circumstances. That is why some people who do not possess theoretical knowledge are more effective in action (especially if they are experienced) than others who do possess it.”
“For example, suppose that someone knows that light flesh foods are digestible and wholesome, but does not know what kinds are light; he will be less likely to produce health than one who knows that chicken is wholesome. But phronesis is practical, and therefore it must have both kinds of knowledge, or especially the latter.”
The End

Thank you!

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Bob Dylan on Text and Narrative

• Q: “What can you say about ... your first book?”

• Dylan: “It’s just a lot of writings ... It’s not a narrative or anything like that.”