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Narrative Research

David Carless and Kitrina Douglas
(Leeds Beckett University)

Forthcoming in *Journal of Positive Psychology*

Narrative is both a research method *and* a way of theorising psychological and social phenomena. Although the term *narrative* has become prominent in the last decade or two, its roots stretch back through biographical and life history approaches. Narrative methodologies have informed much of our research over the past 15 years, which has explored mental health and identity development in sport and physical activity contexts (for examples, see Carless & Douglas, 2010a; Douglas & Carless, 2015). Based on this work, we wish to propose six qualities of narrative research that have much to offer positive psychology researchers.

First, narrative offers rich insights into lived experience. Rather than focusing on constructs, opinions or abstractions, narrative methods prioritise an individual's *experience* of concrete events. Rather than 'hovering over the surface' of life, keeping lived experience at arms-length, narrative accounts embrace the particularity and complexity of individual's lived experience (e.g., Carless et al., 2014). Recounting moments of personal experience in story form (detailing what happened, where, when, to whom, what were the consequences) is important not so much to reveal the objective details of events but to understand the individual's subjective responses to those events.

Second, narrative approaches shed light on the *meaning* of personal experience. As others have observed (e.g., McAdams, 1993), telling stories about the events of one's life is a primary way through which meaning is created and communicated. Working narratively allows researchers to learn from each participant's position as expert on her/his own life, understanding and co-constructing meaning through a reciprocal, dialogical interaction. For example, the varied meanings of life in elite sport are evident in our research with professional golfers (e.g., Douglas & Carless, 2009a, 2012a, 2015). Within a trusting researcher-participant relationship, individuals shared personal stories that challenge the widely held (i.e., dominant) assumption that elite sport is all about performance outcomes. Women's *discovery* and *relational* stories broaden life possibilities for athletes and show how

success at the elite level can be achieved while valuing exploration over sacrifice, play over work, caring relationships over self-focus, and sensitivity over mental toughness.

Third, narrative offers insights into the *trajectory of life across time*. Rather than providing a static ‘snapshot’ of a life at a fixed moment in time, narrative methods offer something akin to a ‘movie’ that follows a significant portion of the storyteller’s lifespan (e.g., Douglas & Carless, 2009a, 2009b). This permits consideration of development over time, revealing the consequences of events that might otherwise appear unimportant. For example, our work with military personnel who have experienced physical and/or psychological trauma (e.g., Carless, 2014) illustrates how soldier’s life stories changed over time in response to adverse life circumstances and, later, new opportunities that, as one participant put it, ‘opened some doorways in my head’. This study has direct links to positive psychology as it reveals how stories of loss and isolation were transformed towards more hopeful, connected, forward-looking stories.

Fourth, narrative permits a focus on both the *personal* and the *social*. Although stories prioritise personal experience, they also reveal sociocultural context because an individual’s story is shaped by the dominant narrative/s within their culture (McLeod, 1997). Narrative methods thereby reveal how psychological processes are influenced by the sociocultural structures within which they unfold (e.g., Carless & Douglas, 2013). By attending to the interplay of structure and agency, we learn how individuals negotiate their identity, morality and behaviour within their particular life context.

Fifth, narrative offers insights into what life is like as an *embodied* – living, breathing, feeling – human being. Storytelling is an embodied act that draws on one’s experience of the world through one’s body. Thus, narrative studies reveal how bodies and stories impact, shape and constitute each other (e.g., Carless, 2010). These insights may challenge reductionist and mechanistic portrayals of human beings by providing holistic and emotionally rich perspectives. Using narrative forms (such as stories) to represent research allows participants’ embodied presence and emotional richness to be preserved, engaging diverse audiences (e.g., Carless & Douglas, 2010b; Douglas & Carless, 2008, 2009b).

Sixth, narrative research calls for *ethical relational engagement*. Because “stories as acts of telling *are* relationships” (Frank, 2000, p. 354), good narrative research requires an open, accepting, empathetic and trusting relationship between researcher and participant. This kind of relationship can usually be built only through relational engagement over time, when participants feel safe to express emotions and vulnerabilities that otherwise remain hidden (e.g., Douglas & Carless, 2009b, 2012b). The open interview approaches used in much

narrative research allow participants the freedom to raise issues that are meaningful to them. Sharing marginal, taboo or silenced stories often challenges existing understandings and theories. When we take these stories seriously, it may become apparent that it is *us* – the so-called ‘experts’ – who need to change, as *our* horizon of interest opens and *our* understanding of the many ways of being human deepens.

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