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Storying stories: a narrative approach to in-depth interview conversations

CORALIE MCCORMACK

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Researchers working within a narrative paradigm frequently engage in in-depth conversations with participants. Analysis and interpretation of these conversations often involves reducing long stretches of text to codes and recombining the codes into themes that move across stories, across people and across contexts. In this paper the process of storying stories is presented as an alternative way to approach and re-present interview conversations. In this process interview transcripts are viewed through multiple lenses—active listening, narrative processes, language, context and moments—to highlight both the individuality and the complexity of a life. The views highlighted by these lenses are then used to write interpretive stories. Finally the interpretive stories are brought together to form a personal experience narrative. The simultaneous mirror/window quality of these narratives provides the reader with a reflective space within which to re-imagine their own life. For researchers, and for students pursuing courses in research methods, this paper fills a gap in a research literature that is largely silent about what to do after researchers have transcribed their interview conversations.

Introduction

Researchers working within a narrative paradigm frequently engage in in-depth conversations with participants. However, when these conversations conclude researchers face a daunting task. Faced with page upon page upon page of interview transcript researchers often find they feel ‘terrified and overwhelmed’ and ‘at a loss as to where and how to begin’ (Kiesinger 1998: 84). When these conversations travel across the lifetimes of several individuals, and/or have been conducted with one individual over a long period of time, the feeling researchers often describe is one of ‘drowning in a sea of interview transcripts’. They find the narrative research literature ‘largely silent about ways to approach long stretches of talk that (take) the form of narrative accounts’ (Riessman 1993: v).

This paper describes my response to these dilemmas—the process of storying stories—developed as part of my doctoral research (McCormack 2001). This research explored the question: How does the experience of being a postgraduate research student change the way women construct and

Coralie McCormack is a lecturer in an academic development unit in the Centre for the Enhancement of Learning, Teaching and Scholarship at the University of Canberra, Canberra, ACT 2601, Australia. Her research and teaching interests focus on the experiences of postgraduate research students and supervisors and on the evaluation of teaching; e-mail cem@cts.canberra.edu.au

experience leisure? This exploration occurred through in-depth conversations with 13 women over their time as postgraduate researchers. In practice this meant three or four conversations lasting between one and a half hours and two and a half hours over a period of three or four years.

The process of storying stories draws its principles from the broad areas of feminism, postmodernism and qualitative research to place its practice within a narrative inquiry framework. It adopts, adapts and extends elements from each of these areas to the cross-disciplinary nature of my research topic and to the particular context in which my PhD research was undertaken. The process of storying stories is thus both similar to, and different from, approaches to working with interview transcripts developed by other researchers.¹

Storying stories draws from both kinds of narrative inquiry framework: 'analysis of narrative' and 'narrative analysis' (Polkinghorne 1995). 'Analysis of narrative' is where researchers seek stories as 'data' and then analyse those stories for themes that hold across stories. 'Narrative analysis' is where researchers gather descriptions of actions and events as 'data' that are then used to generate stories through a process of emplotment. The research process I describe here both seeks personal experience stories and generates stories by composing stories about those experiences. Research in this sense is a process of storying stories.

This process explores individuals' understandings of their experience in the context of their everyday lives while simultaneously looking to the wider social/cultural resources on which people draw to help them make sense of their lives. It assumes these understandings are constructed and reconstructed through stories (Mishler 1999, Clandinin and Connelly 2000), that '(o)ne of the best ways to study human beings is to come to grips with the storied quality of human experience' (Connelly and Clandinin 1994: 4046), and that stories are characterized by a particular structure; a beginning, a middle and an end (Cortazzi 1993, Riessman 1993).²

Stories re-present the outcomes of a series of reconstructions (Riessman 1993). The initial reconstruction is by the participant as she/he recalls an experience and then describes that experience for the researcher. The researcher then reconstructs this experience as she/he transcribes, analyses and interprets the experience. A further level of reconstruction occurs as the reader reads and reacts to the experience. Knowledge constructed through this process is recognized as being situated, transient, partial and provisional; characterized by multiple voices, perspectives, truths and meanings. It values transformation at a personal level, individual subjectivity and the researcher's voice.

The purpose of this paper is to open my process of storying stories to the scrutiny of other researchers by describing in detail each of its stages. To do this I have divided the paper into three sections. The first two sections describe the two stages of this process; constructing an interpretive story and composing a personal experience narrative. The steps and associated activities that compose each of these stages are summarized in table 1.

The first section describes the two steps involved in constructing an interpretive story from the many pages of transcript generated from an in-

Table 1. Summary of the process of storying stories

Stage	Steps	Tasks
Construct an interpretive story (Stage 1)	Step 1: compose the story middle	Re-connect with the conversation through active listening. Locate the narrative processes in the transcript. Return enriched and constructed stories to participant for comment and feedback. Respond to the participant's coments. Form the first draft of the interpretive story middle: List agreed story titles. Temporal ordering of story titles. Add the text of each story. Redraft story middle: View the transcript through multiple lenses: language, context and moments. Take into account the views highlighted through these lenses.
	Step 2: complete the story—add a beginning and ending	Compose an orientation and choose the title. Add a coda. Use visual form and textual strategies to enhance the presentation. Share the story with the participant. Reflect on the story in the light of the participant's comments. Compose an epilogue.
Compose a personal experience narrative (Stage 2)	Step 1: construct a personal experience narrative	Temporally order the interpretive stories in a single document. This document forms the personal experience narrative. Share the personal experience narrative with the participant. Respond to the participant's comments.
	Step 2: construct an epilogue to close the narrative	Reflect on the personal experience narrative in the light of the research question(s). Add an epilogue to summarise these reflections and close the narrative.

depth interview with a participant; composing the story middle and completing the interpretive story by adding a beginning and ending. The second section describes the two steps involved in composing a personal experience narrative; temporal ordering of the interpretive stories and constructing an epilogue to close the narrative. This second stage in the process of storying stories follows when, as occurred with my PhD research, interview conversations are conducted with a participant over several years, and multiple interpretive stories are constructed. Excerpts from interviews with one participant (Anna³) have been included to illustrate some of the steps in the process of storying stories.⁴

In the third section of the paper I suggest that an interpretive story offers an alternative mode of representation of interview transcripts which:

- retains the situated nature of the participant's experiences;
- highlights the individuality and complexity of a life;
- reveals the in-process nature of a life;

- includes the multiple voices of the researcher and participant; and
- offers the reader the possibility of multiple interpretations and the potential to positively re-story their life.

The process of storying stories is one process other researchers may wish to consider as they approach their interview transcripts. The process of storying stories however, is not without difficulties or dilemmas. In the Coda I reflect on the tensions and risks for both the researcher and the participants.

Constructing an interpretive story

For each interview the researcher begins the process of storying stories by constructing an interpretive story composed of a beginning, middle and end (table 1).

Composing a story middle

The first step is to compose the story middle. The researcher begins this step by immersing her/himself in the transcript through active listening. Next, the stories told by the storyteller during the interview are located. Then, the other narrative processes—argumentations, augmentations, theorizing and description—are identified and used to construct additional stories. All the stories are returned to the participant for comment. The researcher then responds to the participant's comments. Temporal ordering of the stories forms the first draft of the interpretive story middle. The next step for the researcher is to reflect on, and redraft, this text in the light of the views highlighted by the lenses of language, context and moments. This completes the construction of the interpretive story middle.

Active listening. As active listener the researcher listens to the tape several times. Firstly, to check the accuracy of the transcription and secondly, to brainstorm her/his initial reactions to the interview and reflect on assumptions that may influence later interpretation (Mauthner and Doucet 1998). As suggested by Mauthner and Doucet (1998:127–128):

(T)he underlying assumption here is that by trying to name how we are socially, emotionally and intellectually located in relation to our respondents we can retain some grasp over the blurred boundary between their narratives and our interpretation of those narratives...(and) that our intellectual and emotional reactions to other people constitute sources of knowledge.

These authors suggest that during this process of active listening the researcher asks the following sorts of questions as she/he listens to the interview tape:

- Who are the characters in this conversation?
- What are the main events? Where/When do they occur?

- As researcher, how am I positioned in relation to the participant?
- As researcher, how am I positioned during this conversation?
- How am I responding emotionally and intellectually to this participant?

To inform on-going interpretation and reflection I recorded my responses to these questions in my research journal.

Locate the narrative processes. Narrative processes provide one view of how the participant as storyteller constructs and gives meaning to her/his life. The researcher reads the interview transcript locating the four narrative processes or 'styles of presentation' suggested by Rosenthal (1993: 69); stories, description, argumentation and theorizing, and one additional process—augmentation. I added this fifth 'style of presentation' after initial analysis of my interview texts suggested that as a conversation proceeded, participants often expanded or added information to a story told earlier in the conversation which provided more than description and was not necessarily theorizing.

Initially, the researcher locates the stories. As suggested by William Labov (1972)⁵ (described in Cortazzi 1993, Riessman 1993) stories are differentiated from surrounding text by recognisable boundaries; a beginning (an orientation describing who, what, where and when) and an end (a coda which brings the story to a close). Included within these boundaries is an abstract (summarizes the point of the story), an evaluation (highlights the point) and a series of linked events/actions organized chronologically or thematically in response to the question: And then, what happened? The evaluation—because it answers the question: Why was the story told?—forms the title of the story. The evaluation of the story represents for the listener 'how they (the teller) want to be understood' (Riessman 1993: 20). The story below is from the transcript of Anna's second interview:

Evaluation

Yeah it's going well. I've had the freedom to do what's important to me.

Orientation

In my environmental science degree

Abstract

there was nothing about sustainability and recycling and composting and worm farming, permaculture and it was all about ahm (pause) just a lot of theory really and not much practical and studying the environment but I think if, you know, you want to care about the environment you need to live sustainably with it and...

What happened?

so I was a bit disappointed that wasn't in the course and all the people I knew who really care about the environment aren't at the uni. There's all these sorts of things happening with permaculture gardens and community things I wanted to try and bring them together a bit in the project I'm doing. I really believe in it and I wouldn't have been able to do it as an undergraduate.

Coda

So yeah a lot of things have been happening.

The researcher then looks at the parts of the interview text not re-represented as stories; the narrative processes of theorizing, augmentation,

argumentation and description (Rosenthal 1993). As people tell their stories during an interview they may also use these narrative processes to enrich their stories and to help the listener get the point of a story. During an interview a storyteller may become reflective, trying to work out 'Why?', attempting to theorize their experience. Often, as the interview proceeds, a storyteller will add information to stories already told as the conversation stimulates recollection of additional story pieces (a process of augmentation). Sometimes what is added may not be part of an already told story, but may be an abstracted element from outside a story (a process of argumentation). Such elements bring to a story other factors the narrator feels add meaning to the story. Storytellers may also take the time to describe particular people, places or things in detail. While these descriptions when read alone offer little in the way of interpretation or explanation, they do inform the listener by adding detail to the picture built up through other narrative processes.

The stories identified in the interview transcript are then enriched with this additional information. Sometimes, the researcher is given sufficient information through the other narrative processes used by a participant to construct additional stories.

Return stories to participants. The enriched stories and the constructed stories are then returned to the participant accompanied by a letter asking the participant to respond to the following questions:

- Does what I have written make sense to you?
- How does this account compare with your experience?
- Have any aspects of your experience been omitted? Please include these wherever you feel it is appropriate.
- Do you wish to remove any aspect(s) of your experience from this text?
- Please feel free to make any other comments.

Participants made few changes to the stories I returned to them. Changes were for clarification or to 'correct' grammar. These changes were incorporated into the stories. For some women, reading these stories encouraged reflection. Anna, for example, said at our second conversation:

... I thought about it for quite a while afterwards actually, yeah... it really did make me think especially about holiday... it just made me think about it more, notice more what people were talking about... actually after that interview I went on a field trip as a tutor with my supervisor with all the students and he saw it as work and I saw it as holiday... so I thought it was interesting the same thing for him was work and for me was holiday but yeah I guess it's just going to different place or doing something that you don't normally do.

Form the first draft. Construction of the story middle continues by listing the titles of the constructed and enriched stories agreed upon by the researcher and participant. From this list, the researcher selects the story titles that speak to the plot. The plot for my interpretive stories was

configured around the topics of leisure and postgraduate study. I select on the basis of story titles because the titles are a summary of each story's evaluation, and as such, represent the point of the story (Cortazzi 1993, Riessman 1993). Temporal ordering of the story titles provides the outline of the interpretive story middle. Adding the text of the story titles forms the first draft of the interpretive story middle.

Redraft the interpretive story middle. Ongoing development of the first draft of the story middle continues as the researcher looks at the transcript through the lenses of language, context and moments.

Language is central to the analysis of an interview transcript because it is 'more than a means of communication about reality' (Spradley 1979: 17, in Campbell 1996: 263). Language functions to construct individual identity (Fairclough 1992, in Grant 1996). Looking through this lens the researcher asks: What features of the language of the interview transcript impact on its interpretation and how do they impact? To respond to these questions, the researcher examines three language features; what is said, how it is said, and what remains unsaid.

What is said includes the following:

- word groupings or phrases that indicate the relationship of self and society (e.g. of course, it was natural that);
- words that assume common understandings, uncontested 'knowledge' or signal a request for understanding (e.g. you know);
- words that make space for thought (e.g. uhm);
- specialized vocabularies (the way particular groups/communities use ordinary words in special ways or use variants of common words that are specific to their community); and
- words participants use to talk about their self image, about relationships.

How it is said includes structural features such as:

- active/passive voice;
- speech functions (questions, commands, statements, exclamations);
- where the personal pronouns 'we', 'I' and 'you' are used by the participant, particularly in relation to herself (How does she see and present herself? Where does she shift between these pronouns?) (Mauthner and Doucet 1998, Morse 1999);
- occurrence of internal dialogue (I said, then I said) and internal/external dialogue (I said, then you said, then I said); and
- metaphors and other kinds of imagery.

What is unsaid, but signalled in the text, includes performance features such as periods of silence (noting the length of the silences), tone, speed of delivery, inflections, emotions, volume and hesitations.

Next, the researcher examines the context in which the stories were told. Stories are simultaneously situated within a particular context

(context of situation) and within a wider cultural context (context of culture) (Halliday 1985). The context of situation is the immediate social situation of the storyteller and the listener. In this case the context of situation is the interview. This context includes the autobiographical context each participant brings to the interview and the interactional aspects of the relationships between the interview participants.

With respect to the context of situation, the researcher asks of the transcript:

- What can I learn from the participant's response to my opening question and to my wind-up question?
- What can I learn about our interactions from the appearance of the text? For example: the number of questions and answers; who asks the questions; the type of questions asked; who interrupts whom, and where and how frequently does this occur?
- What can I learn about our interaction from what is not said in the text? For example: Does the participant ask me a question without giving me time to respond? Are there places in the interview transcript where I feel I could have responded but didn't? Why didn't I respond?

The context of culture is the social, political, cultural, historical and structural conditions of the wider society in which the stories have been experienced, told and retold. Paying attention to the context of culture involves asking:

- What cultural fictions (the dominant collectively held meanings that relate to individual experience) does each person draw on to construct her/his view of what counts as being a person?
- How have these ways of talking, thinking and being positioned each individual? Where does she/he conform to them? Where does she/he resist or challenge them? Where does she/he rewrite them?
- Examining the context of culture the researcher can explore the 'natural', apparently taken-for-granted positions available to an individual to understand themselves (and so their lives). The researcher can look for times and places where each individual reconstructs her/his sense of self through acts of accommodation, challenge or resistance. These moments of re-construction—'epiphanies' (Denzin 1994: 510)—are times that 'alter and shape the meanings persons give to themselves and their life projects' (Denzin 1994: 510).

The researcher reflects on the additional information and/or alternative viewpoints (and contradictions) highlighted by the lenses of language, context and moments then redrafts the story middle to take account of these additional understandings. Though I approach each interview transcript with the same process, which particular views, which features of a particular view, and how these features contribute to redrafting the interpretive story middle, differ for each person and for each interview with the same person. For Anna's first interview, for example, the views of the transcript highlighted by the multiple lenses of language, context and

moments suggested Anna was trying to make sense of leisure in her life. Hence, in redrafting her interpretive story middle I used the following visual and structural strategies to re-present these views:

- Alternating the free flowing uninterrupted text of Anna's short stories about her postgraduate experience and the jagged, interrupted, stop/start nature of the text of her theorizing dialogue about leisure.
- Including the two types of narrative process (stories and theorizing) in proportion to their occurrence in the interview, that is, much more theorizing than storytelling.
- Alternating things Anna is certain about (e.g. the difference between postgraduate study and undergraduate study) with things she is not certain about (e.g. meaning of holidays).
- Including Anna's words in all their ambiguity and messiness to highlight the frequency of occurrence of words indicating uncertainty such as 'I guess', 'I think', 'probably', 'I don't know', 'ahm', and the repetition of these words, for example, 'I think so, I think'.
- Including the performance features of our conversation such as silences, pauses and hesitations.
- Using presentation techniques such as short sentences, line spacing, white spaces on the page and lines of dots trailing off into nothingness.
- Acknowledging and bringing to the attention of the reader the interaction of Anna as storyteller and Coralie as listener and researcher by including long stretches of our dialogue which highlight the tension Anna is experiencing when she speaks of leisure, as well as the tension her tension is creating within Coralie.
- Using multiple typefaces to call attention to the multiple voices in the story (Anna's, Coralie's and the researcher) and to challenge the notion of a unified authorial voice.
- Including questions inviting the reader to join our struggle.
- Using a title which presents in Anna's own words both her uncertainty and struggle around the concept of leisure and the reflective nature of our conversation.

Completing the interpretive story

To complete the interpretive story the researcher: adds a beginning (an orientation) and an ending (a coda), shares the story with the participant, and finally, reflects on the interpretive story in the light of the participant's comments by writing an epilogue.

To compose the beginning the researcher thinks about questions such as: What would the reader need to know to orientate them to the story middle I have constructed? and How can I present this material in a way that creates an atmosphere that foregrounds what is to come? To construct the ending the researcher thinks about how each person was feeling at the close of the interview and what this suggested for the conversations to come.

The example below shares the orientation and coda for the interpretive story constructed from Anna's first interview conversation. It includes the comments from my journal that relate to my construction of each of these story elements. The visual presentation uses two fonts; one to indicate the text I composed and another for Anna's stories:

The orientation: Puffing, her backpack hanging from one shoulder, helmet in hand, Anna stands in my doorway. Apologising for being late she explains that her bike had a flat tire as she rode into uni along her favourite bike path, the one that winds its way through Black Mountain Reserve.

I ride my bike to uni every day, you know, when I'm riding through the bushland I'm thinking of the beauty of the bush, the rosellas, the other birds; nothing else seems to matter. Then in the evening after I've ridden home I listen to music, remember the beauty and feel the passion. I've always loved nature.

As a child I grew up in Tasmania. We lived near the beach so I used to walk along the beach all the time. I loved the mountains and the sea. My grandparents, all my four grandparents, were farmers. My father's parents had a market garden. I used to visit my grandparents a lot and my grandmother had two older sisters, there were four of them, they all lived close to each other and I'd stay with them a lot and yeah we did a lot of gardening there. My parents always had, in Hobart most people have a big vegi garden, not so much in Canberra. So I suppose I grew up with, I think, back in the 70s, we had everything in our garden. We had chooks, and vegetables and fruit and everything. On my mother's side they were early settlers in Tasmania and they lived right down south, in the south west, and had an apple orchard so I guess those old people, yeah, people talked about gardening a lot I suppose. Yeah. So I guess it (loving gardening) is from them. Gardening was part of my life growing up.

Nature was part of holidays too. I remember a holiday in Borneo. We walked on the beach, canoed out to an island, climbed a mountain to a point above the treeline where we saw pitcher plants. So I suppose it's not surprising that I chose to study science and the environment as an undergraduate student. But when I finished my science degree I didn't really know what to do. So I did voluntary work for a while. I started going to environmental education meetings every week and it was like a whole new world really. I really enjoyed it and we were allowed to talk about things that we never could in our science degree and I got on really well with the people there and I was really interested in their work, their studies. I thought I'd like to learn more about this and do some research. So I applied and got in.

Now I'm doing something that I think is important.

Coralie's journal notes: The use of the doorway in the opening sentence signifies that Anna is entering a particular personal context—my office (the world of a full-time academic/postgraduate student)—and the interactional context of an interview.

I use first person to signify that at the same time as Anna has moved into my world I have also moved into hers. To reinforce this movement into Anna's world I move straight into her orientation (her words).

Anna's story gives some background such as where she grew up, the area of her undergraduate study, and what I want to emphasise most her love of nature and its importance in her life. I want to evoke in the reader the same feelings as Anna did in me at our first interview conversation. That is, her commitment to the environment and her love of nature.

Anna's voice dominates the orientation. This is done to begin to set the scene for the latter part of the story. Anna is confident talking about nature. She is the teller and I the listener. This

contrasts with our roles when we speak of leisure but is similar to how she talks about postgraduate study.

I complete the orientation with some background about her vision for her research and the university community that I feel the reader will need to know but which is not in the orientation.

The coda: The conversation hangs, unfinished, seemingly there's nowhere to go, nothing more to be said. The first side of the tape clunks to a halt.

An omen.

We end our conversation.

But I can't stop thinking about this conversation. What is it about leisure that makes it so difficult for Anna to talk about, yet after only a few weeks she has stories to tell of her experience as a postgraduate student? Is there something about age (as a young woman Anna has fewer life experiences to draw upon) or that leisure hasn't been a particularly important part of her life to date, one that she hasn't given much thought to?

At this stage in her postgraduate experience, leisure for Anna seems to be an activity that is relaxing, often spontaneous, something you don't have to do. Study is enjoyable and different from paid work which is something you have to do and often isn't enjoyable. Study is closer to leisure than work.

Will study continue to exhibit some leisure-like elements or will it become more work-like? Will the physical labour in the university garden become her leisure? Will leisure be a relevant concept for Anna during postgraduate study? Will leisure be part of her postgraduate experience at all? And in the end, will the university be the first in the region to establish a community garden?

We'll see . . .

Coralie's journal notes: Present tense to give immediacy to our struggle. Short to be consistent with the style of this story. Use of the word clunk to bring in sound to help catch the reader's attention and bring the reader back to the present. Also indicates the tension I have been feeling as Anna talked. I pose some questions that look forward to the next conversation.

The completed interpretive story is then returned to each participant. As with the earlier feedback, the only changes participants made were to reduce the messiness of the text (e.g. delete the uhms and ahas or improve the grammar). A few women (e.g. Lydia's comment below) included a personal note of appreciation when they returned the interpretive story. Other women replied positively when asked about the story at the start of the next interview. Anna, for example, at our second conversation, said of the first interpretive story: It's good the way you did it, it's really creative. . . I remember reading it and thinking whoa this sounds really interesting I didn't think I was that interesting. I think it was the way you wrote it. . . I enjoyed reading it.

Excellent, Coralie, I wonder how many other people you have helped with your ability to story their experiences. This is a lovely gift for me! Thank you. . . . This is a wonderful construction of my life.

Sorry about so much content and rambling at the first session. Yes, you are the first person to ask me my story through a leisure lens. You have told it well and I thank you for being such an astute listener and interpreter... Lydia's story will be interesting. I think you have captured my story and my problem in a nutshell. I don't like being controlled by powerful organisations unless they really are about the individuals in it!! And their leisure! Good luck with your PhD—you are a wonderful writer!!

After reflecting on the interpretive story, and any feedback from the participant, I added an epilogue. The example below presents an excerpt from the epilogue to Anna's first interpretive story followed by the notes I made in my journal as I constructed that excerpt.

Epilogue excerpt: For Anna, the interconnectedness of her life and her love of the environment and gardening, developed during her childhood, was silenced during her undergraduate science studies. Her expectation of the culture of postgraduate research was that she would have the freedom to study what she wanted, pursue her passion, develop and implement her ideas and through the writing of the thesis tell her story. She felt that with her chosen research topic and methodology (action research) she was doing something important. Her passion was as strong as she began her postgraduate study.

Coralie's journal notes: From the benefit of distance it seems to me that the strength of Anna's passion for the environment may be an important contributor to the plot of the stories to come. I think that Anna's passion could result in both advantages and disadvantages as her postgraduate experience unfolds. At the moment I don't know how the balance will fall—in favour of the advantages or in favour of the disadvantage. But I feel I need to flag it at this stage.

Writing the epilogue concludes the construction of an individual's interpretive story from an interview transcript. The longitudinal nature of my PhD research (interviews conducted at yearly intervals over a student's entire period of candidature) meant the process of constructing an interpretive story was undertaken for each interview conducted with each participant. For Anna, for example, four interpretive stories were constructed; one from each of the four interviews conducted over the four years of her candidature.

Composing a personal experience narrative

Each interpretive story re-presented a participant's experience as they reconstructed that experience at a particular point in time (i.e. at the time of each interview). A personal experience narrative re-presents a participant's experience across multiple points in time (i.e. across all of the interviews).

When all conversations with a participant were completed, and an interpretive story constructed for each conversation, temporal ordering of these interpretive stories formed a personal experience narrative. For each participant the personal experience narrative contained each of the researcher's interpretive stories of each of the interview conversations in the order in which they occurred (i.e. the interpretive story constructed from the first interview, followed by the interpretive story constructed from the second interview and so on).

A personal experience narrative is thus composed of nested stories.⁶ Nested within each participant's personal experience narrative are the

interpretive stories constructed from each interview conversation and nested within each interpretive story are the stories identified in, and constructed from, the text of each interview. The visual representation of Anna's personal experience narrative (figure 1) illustrates the nesting of her stories within her personal experience narrative.

The personal experience narrative was returned to each participant, however, none of the women made changes to the text. Only Carla returned comments with her personal experience narrative:

- *Yes it makes sense. In fact it pulls together a lot of threads (to continue the embroidery motif) that I thought were unconnected.*
- *I believe you have accurately reflected the substance of the story I have been constructing. Your conclusion and the questions you pose highlight the tensions with my mother. This is interesting because I have always believed that the chief source of tension was with my father. The narrative you have constructed from our interviews places my experience of leisure within my relationship with/to my mother. You have uncovered a truth I was only vaguely aware of.*
- *I have made minor comments throughout the text where I thought clarification was needed.*

To close each personal experience narrative I added an epilogue. The epilogue was a space where I could reflect on each participant's experience across their entire period of enrolment as a postgraduate student in relation to my research question. In these reflections I drew from the stories within the interpretive stories, within the personal experience narrative, recurring story evaluations (the evaluation summarizes the point of the story) and linked these to relevant literature about women's conceptions and experiences of leisure and postgraduate research. In the epilogue to Anna's personal experience narrative for example, I reflect on her increasing uncertainty about leisure, her sense of powerlessness as a postgraduate researcher and her reconstruction of her story as an enabling fiction rather than a narrative of loss ending in tragedy.

This second stage of the process of storying stories—composing a personal experience narrative—is of particular value where the researcher is working with a small sample size, or needs to bring together material from many interviews with a participant conducted over a long period of time. It may not be appropriate to research where a larger number of participants are involved or where the research brief does not demand such a level of detail. The first stage of the process of storying stories—composing an interpretive story—has wider application⁷.

Why compose an interpretive story?

Interpretive stories offer an alternative mode of re-presentation of interview transcripts to the traditional approach. In the traditional approach a transcript is fractured into smaller segments of text (codes) and then recombined into themes which move across stories, across people, and across contexts, to be fitted into a researcher pre-determined framework. Through this cutting up process 'the discrete, separate and different individuals [interviewed] are gradually lost' (Mauthner and

Anna's Personal Experience Narrative

I wanted to make a difference, but it just wasn't possible

Anna's Interpretive Stories

Leisure ... yeah, I don't know. Gosh it's making me think (Interview 1)

My project is my whole life (Interview 2)

What's the point of writing a thesis because nothing's going to change (Interview 3)

It just wasn't really possible (Interview 4)

Interview Transcript 1

Stories identified in, or constructed from, Anna's first interview transcript nested within her first interpretive story titled: Leisure ...
yeah, I don't know. Gosh it's making me think.

Gardening was part of my life growing up

Now I'm doing something that I think is important

Postgraduate study is very different from undergraduate study

We worked out our relationship early on

Leisure ... yeah, I don't know. Gosh it's making me think

Interview Transcript 2

Stories identified in, or constructed from, Anna's second interview transcript nested within her second interpretive story titled: My Project is my Whole Life.

I've had the freedom to do what's important to me

You don't get much leisure as a postgraduate student actually, my project is my whole life

Interview Transcript 3

Stories identified in, or constructed from, Anna's third interview transcript nested within her third interpretive story titled: What's the point of writing a thesis because nothing is going to change.

I somehow got caught up in a lot of political things

Right at the time when I felt like 'I can't handle this any more' I got pregnant

There haven't been many relaxing times in the last six months

I think it's a complex issue, leisure

Interview Transcript 4

Stories identified in, or constructed from, Anna's fourth interview transcript nested within her fourth interpretive story titled: It just wasn't really possible.

What's happened since the end of October? Well, probably not a lot to do with my thesis

Some changes have been made, it hasn't all been for nothing

I have made sacrifices, leisure is definitely one of the sacrifices

Figure 1. Nesting of story titles within Anna's personal experience narrative.

Doucet 1998: 138) and the complexity of their everyday lives simplified. Then, during the recombination of codes into themes, the clues to understanding provided by language features in their transcribed context are lost. The same words may have different meanings in different contexts. The context in which the words were spoken, performed and heard is lost when they are put into discrete codes. That is, the contextual, structural and performance aspects of language are lost. Lost, too, is the interactional context in which the words were spoken and the multiple voices spoken in that context. The situated nature of the text is lost.

Interpretive stories open to the reader the possibility of multiple interpretations. Interpretive stories 'frame meaning possibilities rather than close them' (Lather 1991: 113). They offer the reader multiple pathways along which to travel through a story. The reader can choose a linear pathway, starting at the beginning and finishing at the end. Alternatively, the reader may choose to follow a particular voice within a story. Whatever path the reader takes as they actively construct meaning, the reader can consider the multiple perspectives offered by the multiple voices in the text.

Interpretive stories also open to the reader the possibility of re-storying their life. Stories do this because they have the potential to reveal both the individual and the collective aspects of experience (Richardson 1990, McCormack and Pamphilon 1997). For individuals, stories act as a mirror—we learn about ourselves—but also as a window—a way of looking into the past, present and future experiences of others (Jalongo *et al.* 1995). Searching for the individual and collective aspects in stories encourages readers to examine and question their own experience by searching for commonalities and differences in the experiences of the storyteller.

Coda

'Doing narrative research is an ethically complex undertaking' (Jossleson 1996: 69). This complexity engages the researcher in a continual struggle 'with the larger questions of how to care for persons in the research and how to share their stories in meaningful and ethical ways' (Schulz *et al.* 1997: 483). We struggle because as noted by Plummer (1995) power and emotion are inextricably intertwined. We struggle because as Elbaz-Luwisch (1997: 82) recognized 'stories are most instructive when they are most personal' however, this is also the time 'when the owners of the stories are most vulnerable'. We struggle because some participants may be empowered through the process of developing a collaborative account. For others, however, the process could generate conflict, denial and retreat.

Feminist scholars suggest we involve our participants in the interpretive process by returning what we write to them for comment. Collaboration and negotiation of meaning can then occur (Lather 1991, Reinhartz 1994). However, this process is not without its 'difficulties and dilemmas' (Mauthner and Doucet 1998: 139). What if participants do not

wish to be involved in commenting on their stories, as was the situation with Anna and Mary? What if participants do not seek collaboration and negotiation of meaning? Lydia, Grace and Carla responded to my letters with 'minor' changes rather than requests for ongoing involvement in developing the stories. Accepting the level of participation each woman chooses, and accepting that this level of involvement may vary over the life of the project, is part of the practice of being an ethical researcher.

Another part of our struggle with the ethically complex nature of narrative research is the need to resolve difficult questions, such as: Whose story do we construct? Researchers need to be mindful, that when they compose stories, they do not become 'colonizer of the subjects through re-telling their stories' (Garrick 1999: 152) and so re-write a participant's story in such a way that it becomes the researcher's story only. It is also important that researchers do not write their experiences out of the story by including only their voice as disembodied reporter of an other's experiences. In the end, though, 'no matter how we stage the text, we—the authors (researchers)—are doing the staging' (Richardson 1992: 131). However, we can do this 'staging' in ways that simultaneously re-present both the individuality and complexity of a life. We can use visual form and textual strategies and structure that allow both the participant and the researcher to hear their voices and see their experiences in the interpretive story and that invite the reader to interact with the stories. Such a research text is possible through a process such as *storying stories*.

Notes

1. The following works were particularly influential in developing the process of *storying stories*. The work of Cortazzi (1993), Riessman (1993) and Rosenthal (1993) who alerted me to the use of different narrative process in a text and to the structural elements of stories described by William Labov. Connelly and Clandinin (1994) and Polkinghorne (1995) alerted me to the fundamental role of stories in constructing human experience. The work of Mauthner and Doucet (1998) (who in turn acknowledge the influence of Brown and Gilligan (1992) on their work) was particularly influential in developing the stage of *storying stories* I term 'Active Listening'. I had begun to develop a process of active listening during my Masters research (McCormack 1995). The inspirational work of these authors suggested ways to develop active listening into the more reflective and questioning process used in my PhD research. Through the work of Mauthner and Doucet (1998) and Morse (1999) I was alerted to the role of the personal pronouns 'we', 'I' and 'you' in constructing identity.
2. While each of the interpretive stories is written within the structure of the traditional Western narrative (beginning, middle and end held together by a plot) I recognize that not all stories and not all people construct their lives (and stories) in this way.
3. Participants chose a pseudonym.
4. The purpose of this paper (to describe in detail my process of *storying stories*) and the space constraints of journal writing do not permit the inclusion of the personal experience narrative constructed from Anna's interviews. See McCormack (2000) to read the interpretive story—*Leisure ... yeah, I don't know. Gosh it's really making me think*—constructed from Anna's first interview or McCormack (2001) for her personal experience narrative. Readers could also contact me personally.
5. While initially influential, I did not go on to apply to my interview texts William Labov's structural approach to identification of story elements based on the occurrence and temporal sequencing of narrative clauses. Also, I do not wish to suggest that these elements map perfectly onto all stories.
6. Use of the term 'nested' stories by Clandinin and Connelly (2000: 63) provided the idea from which I developed the visual representation of the process of composing a personal experience narrative presented in figure 1.

7. For example, I have used the process of constructing an interpretive story to develop case stories for use in workshops for postgraduate supervisors and students. A colleague and I have included interpretive stories in a conference paper (McCormack and Pamphilon 1997).

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