Episodic Narrative Interview: Capturing Stories of Experience With a Methods Fusion

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Abstract

Episodic narrative interview is an innovative, phenomenon-driven research method that was developed by integrating elements from several qualitative approaches in a methods fusion. Episodic narrative interview draws on critically oriented theoretical foundations and principles of experience-centered narrative and includes features from narrative inquiry, semistructured interview, and episodic interview. The purpose of episodic narrative interview is to better understand a phenomenon by generating individual stories of experience about that phenomenon. As such, an episodic narrative interview participant provides nested narrative accounts of their experiences with a social phenomenon, within the context of a bounded situation or episode. In this article, the author details the foundations of the episodic narrative interview approach and describes how the method is designed and implemented. The significance of episodic narrative interview is also explored, especially in terms of the ways in which it produces tightly focused, phenomenon-centered narratives that are reflective of particular bounded circumstances.

Keywords

narrative research, methods in qualitative inquiry, narrative, critical realism, narrative inquiry

Narrative research has garnered a well-established place within the domain of qualitative inquiry. Although narrative research has long been associated with better understanding human experience, it was not until the 1990s that a seminal body of discourse began to emerge in the area of narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), which is a distinctive suite of approaches designed for studying stories of human experience. Many other narrative approaches have emerged on the qualitative landscape more recently; some adopt narrative principles in qualitative inquiry ( Cotterill & Letherby, 2012; Heikkinen, Huttenen, & Syrjälä, 2007; McNiff, 2013), while others such as story-bridging (Boeijinga, Hoeken, & Sanders, 2017), organizational storytelling (Boyce, 1996; Smith & Keyton, 2001), narrative ethnography (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009; Tedlock, 1991), narrative case study (Etherington & Bridges, 2011; Simons, 2009), critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003, 2014), and narrative interviewing (Ayres, 2012) involve collecting, constructing, and/or analyzing various forms of narrative data.

Narrative-focused research is characterized by increasing levels of diversity and complexity, growing “more nuanced, capacious, and extensive as it is applied to an ever greater range of fields and disciplines” (Richardson, 2000, p. 168). Individual scholars align with conceptualizations and theories of narrative research that differ substantially from one another, and researchers use an array of narrative-focused methods that are applied to various kinds of stories (Andrews, Day Sclater, Squire, & Tamboukou, 2011). Further, the start and end points of narrative research are often ambiguous, and scholars disagree about how to best achieve balance, consistency, and authenticity when using narrative approaches to inquiry (Andrews, Squire, & Tamboukou, 2013). The complexity that is implicit in narrative research can render it inaccessible to those who are not well versed in the narrative domain (Davis & Dwyer, 2017). So, while there is growing interest in exploring narratives across disciplines and contexts, researchers who are unfamiliar with narrative methods often feel discouraged from doing so.

Episodic narrative interview is a qualitative method that is useful for researchers who are new to the domain of narrative-
focused research. It is a systematic, “funneled” approach that is used to encourage research participants to convey bounded stories about their experiences of particular phenomena. The structure of episodic narrative interview was intentionally designed based on principles of experience-centered narrative (Squire, 2013), which mitigates an “anything goes” approach to conducting narrative research (Davis & Dwyer, 2017, p. 228) and provides those who are new to narrative research a structured place to begin. This is not to say that the aim of episodic narrative interview is to reconcile the inherent tensions in narrative research; alternatively, it offers a way of doing “useful and innovative work across the contradictions, rather than trying to resolve conflicting positions that are historically and disciplinarily distinct” (Andrews et al., 2013, p. 5).

**Definition of Terms**

Several of the terms that I refer to are used variously across disciplines and contexts. Consequently, I will clarify the meanings that I use prior to proceeding with a discussion of episodic narrative interview. First, I interpret the term methodology as a concept that does not “imply specific modes or traditions of data collection, but [refers to] an ontological philosophy of inquiry” (Mueller, 2015, p. 135). In turn, I use method to mean a specific approach or strategy for collecting data (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). I refer to a phenomenon as “a thing which appears, or which is perceived or observed” (Phenomenon, 2019). This could include an object, process, behavior, emotion, relationship, idea, event, factor, concept, or unit of study—anything that a researcher is interested in learning more about. Finally, I employ Squire’s (2013) definition of narrative as a term that encompasses “all meaningful stories of personal experience that people produce” (p. 48, emphasis in original).

In this article, I will begin by sharing my own narrative around the origins of the episodic narrative interview method. I will discuss the foundations that underpin episodic narrative interview and describe how a variety of methods inform the episodic narrative interview fusion. I provide details about how to design and develop an episodic narrative interview protocol, with several examples to illustrate how the protocol comes to life in the context of a research effort. Finally, I will discuss the limitations and ethical considerations implicit in the episodic narrative interview approach.

**Context: Developing the Episodic Narrative Interview**

Early in my scholarly career, I was faced with the challenge of answering a question that I could not find an adequately aligned research method to tackle. I was engaged in a study about the phenomenon of organizational values in education—a contested concept located within a complex social system. I wanted to know more about how people experienced organizational values; specifically, I wanted to understand how people consciously and unconsciously interpreted, negotiated with, and applied organizational values in the context of specific work-life situations. This obviously fell within the domain of qualitative inquiry, so I started to explore a variety of qualitative approaches that I thought might work to help me uncover more about individual experiences with organizational values. Interviews initially made the most sense, as I anticipated that I would only achieve my goal through face-to-face conversations. However, I came up against two obstacles with the semi-structured interview format. First, people had immediate and intense convictions about what the term “organizational values” meant, and they often became defensive or dismissive at the request to discuss organizational values beyond an initial description. This seemed to be driven by the second obstacle: The topic of organizational values elicited visceral emotional responses from the people I spoke to. Although I hadn’t expected this, I did not construe it as a bad thing; however, these initial affective responses from participants seemed to prevent their further, deeper exploration of individual experiences with organizational values.

I realized that I needed to use a research method that would enable participants to approach the topic of organizational values softly and that would provide an accessible way for people to describe their personal experiences with a contested and complex social phenomenon; the ask-and-answer format of conventional semistructured interviews would not work. Additionally, I had been cued to the importance of narrative in this process, as the notion of organizational values often prompted an impulse among participants toward storytelling that seemed to be dampened in the interview format. On many occasions, participants started to tell a story that they then dismissed or ended abruptly, and it was difficult to discern why. I wanted to encourage this storytelling without leading it; I was looking for authentic, participant-driven narratives of personal experience.

I began to investigate narrative-focused options that might better serve the purposes and intent of my inquiry. However, I found that many narrative methods are designed to generate big stories that are event-focused and wide in scope (Patterson, 2013). Furthermore, narrative inquiry and other narrative approaches are focused on contextualized stories as units of study rather than a particular phenomenon of interest. In contrast, I was interested in locating points of resonance among stories that would reveal more about a particular phenomenon instead of a particular context; while my intent was not comparative, I wanted to be able to collect stories about the same phenomenon from participants and perspectives across all kinds of contexts. In implementation, then, existing narrative strategies could not adequately address my primary concern, which was to elicit small, focused narratives about individual experiences of organizational values.

As Flick (2000) asserted, the development of new methods “can be traced back to two roots: to a specific theoretical approach; and also to a specific issue for which the method was developed” (p. 75). The need I experienced as part of my research about organizational values was the issue-based driver for the development of the episodic narrative interview. However, it was also, as Flick (2000) suggested, born out of a specific theoretical approach. I am a critical realist, meaning
that I subscribe to an ontological view that “what is real in the world exists independently of observers” (Mueller, 2015, p. 139). While this may be perceived as a positivist-type stance, it is not—a critical realist extends her ontological belief to both physical and social realities. Additionally, a critical realist suggests that her perceptions of physical and social realities are socially mediated, which means that a consideration of the social context is essential in inquiry. Most importantly, though, critical realists assume a deep structure to social realities, where social life is taken to be inherently complex. This deep structure cannot be adequately understood by empirical or surface-level observation alone. The purpose of research is then phenomenon-driven: It is to uncover as much about the complex, layered, contextually situated reality of social phenomena as possible.

Episodic narrative interview is a method that provides a targeted window into the experiential aspect of social concepts and issues; it helps us to uncover the layered reality of difficult-to-see social phenomena by way of storytelling. My purpose for detailing the episodic narrative interview method in this article is 3-fold. First, the method offers an innovative way of generating tightly focused, phenomenon-driven narratives while still offering participants the opportunity to choose the content and detail of their stories. Second, episodic narrative interview offers an entry point into narrative-focused research, which is an area that can seem both theoretically and pragmatically complex, especially for researchers who are new to the narrative domain. Finally, episodic narrative interview is an approach that honors individual stories of experience and offers a manageable yet rigorous way of collecting and analyzing narrative accounts.

Episodic Narrative Interview: Foundations

The episodic narrative interview consists of elements that were drawn from several existing methods used in qualitative research: semistructured interview, narrative inquiry, and episodic interview. Together, aspects of these methods form the foundation of the episodic narrative interview approach.

Semistructured Interview

Semistructured interview is a method of collecting data that emerge from the interaction between two people; it is a predominant approach to qualitative research across a variety of disciplinary areas (Mishler, 1986; Turner, 2010). Semistructured interviews typically involve one-to-one asking and answering of open-ended questions that are focused on a particular theme (Doody & Noonan, 2013); interviews can be conducted in person, over the phone, or electronically via social media platforms (Irvine, Drew, & Sainsbury, 2012). The purposes of interviewing are to better understand the experiences of others, to discern the meaning that people ascribe to their experiences, or to reconstruct events through multiple viewpoints (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Seidman, 2013). Although developing an individualized rapport with interview participants is generally considered desirable (Irvine et al., 2012), semistructured interviews are most often protocol-driven, where frameworks and questions are meant to be used consistently during each interview in order to ensure neutrality and validity (Diefenbach, 2009; Doody & Noonan, 2013; Mishler, 1986). Careful planning, literal wording, and logical sequencing of interview questions are further advocated as a means to avoid confusion and ensure clarity among participants (Doody & Noonan, 2013; Rowley, 2012).

Although assumptions about uniformity with respect to the implementation of semistructured interviews are prevalent (Mishler, 1986), the “semistructured” approach should be considered as a broad category under which a typology of interview forms has emerged (Seidman, 2013); types of interviews can be further distinguished from one another based on intended function, level of structure, and level of participant freedom, among other criteria (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). Many scholars have proposed and used variations on the semistructured interview to suit their particular needs; episodic narrative interview is a method that builds on this tradition.

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry is a method that focuses on the power of storytelling as means of generating data (Huber, Caine, Huber, & Steeves, 2013). Although narrative inquiry usually involves a suite of specific data collection strategies, it is thought to be a significant departure from the semistructured interview format because of its sole focus on the narrative aspect of communication. The foundational assumptions that guide narrative inquiry include the notion that humans are “storytelling organisms” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2) and that narrative is an essential form of communication that allows people to ascribe meaning to their experiences (Polkinghorne, 1988; Seidman, 2013).

In narrative inquiry, stories are construed as recollections of a person’s life experience that are combined in a way to create a coherent narrative with a beginning, middle, and ending (Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008). Narrative inquiry is the process of listening to, honoring, constructing, and reconstructing stories about the depth and breadth of human experience (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Huber et al., 2013). It is typically considered a fluid field of inquiry (Clandinin, 2013) that involves the formation of ongoing, iterative, or long-term relationships between researcher and participants. Consequently, narrative inquiry often involves many data collection incidences with a small number of participants, sometimes over a period of years (Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008; Clandinin, 2006). The story is of primary interest, and it consequently becomes both the phenomenon and artifact of interest within narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

Episodic Interview

The episodic interview method was developed in alignment with the psychological claim that memories about experience
are tied to concrete circumstances, which include a combination of time, space, situation, and events that form episodes within an individual’s life (Flick, 1997). The episodic interview was designed to elicit participant memories pertaining to these episodes, which are conveyed through very short narratives in a dialogic interview format (Flick, 2000, 2009). The participant recounts their knowledge of a concept across a range of situations, where the concept is contextualized in multiple ways that move from narrow to broad in scope (Flick, 2000). The interview protocol is semistructured in nature, focusing on dialogue in which the researcher is responsible for responding “with deepening enquiries to the interviewee’s answers” (Flick, 2000, p. 82). Although participants choose which stories to tell, the researcher makes a series of advanced decisions about the domains from which responses will be requested or required. Upon conclusion of episodic narrative interviews with a sample of participants, the episodes are compared and the researcher synthesizes narratives into “a chain of relevant situations” (Flick, 2000, p. 81).

**The Context Informing a New Approach**

The three methods described here resonated with me because each of them positions the exploration of human experience as a valuable pursuit (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). To various extents, each of them also acknowledges the importance of participant stories (Seidman, 2013). Despite the details that differentiate these methods from one another, they all allow the researcher to develop rapport and relationships with participants. Participants have the ability to influence the inquiry and to explore their experiences in ways that are meaningful to both participant and researcher. However, after close examination of the three, I realized that none of these methods on their own were well suited to my context nor would they align with my broader methodological beliefs.

Returning to the project that was focused on the phenomenon of organizational values, it was necessary for me to find a method that would uncover the experiential aspects of the organizational values phenomenon. However, the idea of “values” is difficult to get at, especially in the context of personal experience; I quickly learned that it was challenging to elicit authentic stories about experiences with values because of participants’ automatic and instinctive responses to the concept. There are many social phenomena like this—ethics, leadership, loyalty, responsibility, and caring, to name a few—where deep-seated preconceptions about normative behavior are thought to condition participant responses about these phenomena during research interviews (similar to social desirability bias, discussed in Fisher, 1993; Krumpal, 2013). I needed an interview method that was structured around the assumption that the meaning we derive from experiences is not always accounted for directly; that “meaning-making depends upon not only what is explicit…but also what is implicit—what is assumed” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 11).

Furthermore, I was committed to providing participants with the opportunity to tell the stories of their choosing. I wanted to develop a way for participants to focus on “small stories” (Georgakopoulou, 2007); in other words, I sought to acknowledge that all the narratives that humans produce have meaning, even those that are relatively limited in scale (Squire, 2013). Meaningful narratives might be reflective of general experiences or circumstances, but they might also be generated in reference to specific events (Squire, 2013). I was interested in stimulating participants’ narrative orientations to their individual experiences with particular social phenomena. Importantly, this goal was driven by an assumption that narratives represent both an individual’s experience and “the realities from which it derives” (Squire, 2013, p. 52), which is central to the critical realist’s idea of better uncovering the realities of the phenomena we are interested in.

**Episodic Narrative Interview: An Innovative Alternative**

Episodic narrative interview was created through a fusion of various aspects of narrative inquiry, semistructured interview, and episodic interview; the purpose of this fusion was to create a method that would enable enactment of the “conceptual technology” (Squire, 2013, p. 48) of experience-centered narrative research through use of a pragmatic data collection protocol. The term fusion is used in multiple domains and in various ways; it is interpreted here similarly to the way it is applied in reference to fusion cuisine and fusion music. Fusion cuisine refers to the blending of two or more food traditions to create hybrid dishes that feature unique and distinctive tastes (Geiling, 2013; Mariani, 2014). The term fusion music is used to describe music that combines two or more genres into a new musical form (Fellezs, Radano, & Kun, 2011). Characteristic of both types of fusion is a mixing of elements that are perceived to be incompatible, incommensurate, or divergent to create a result that is (sometimes surprisingly) delicious or resonant. I use the term fusion to describe the process of integrating aspects of several distinctive research methods into one, with a result that is meaningful in qualitative research practice.

The way that I chose to combine elements of the three methods was due partly to what I construed as their structural limitations and partly to what elements were important to me as a researcher given both my context and the theoretical orientation I work within. I have borrowed and adapted aspects of each method and combined them in a manner that, in my experience, is well suited to guide data collection in the context of phenomenon-driven inquiry. Although episodic narrative interview was developed within my own critical realist’s frame of reference, I believe that it is well suited as a method used as a part of research agendas located in philosophical orientations such as critical feminism (Luke & Gore, 1992), pragmatism (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Morgan, 2014), constructivism (Costantino, 2012), phenomenology (Adams & van Manen, 2008), and Indigenous world views (Duarte & Belarde-Lewis, 2015); these are philosophical orientations that differ in many ways but are similar in their acknowledgment of the importance of context, social construction, and the
centrality of human experience and relationships in perceptions of reality. The episodic narrative interview fusion is an innovative approach to narrative data collection because (a) it offers a specific strategy for engaging in experience-focused narrative research, (b) it provides a structured protocol that is useful for researchers who are new to narrative research approaches, and (c) it allows for a deep and targeted exploration of phenomena rather than the context those phenomena are embedded in.

Elements of the Fusion

Stemming from narrative inquiry, the foundation of the episodic narrative interview is an assumption that individual stories of experience are intrinsically valuable to the effort of learning more about social phenomena. The episodic narrative interview method, as in narrative inquiry, acknowledges that people make sense of their experiences through constructing, telling, and retelling stories; as such, narratives can help us learn—in a rich and nuanced way—more about the social phenomena that are at the heart of individual stories. A consideration of context, identity, and the relationships that influence the telling of stories is important when developing protocols and analyzing episodic narrative interview data. Finally, the direction of narrative conveyed via episodic narrative interview is funneled and determined by the participant, borrowing from the assertion in narrative inquiry that participants choose stories that are most significant and meaningful to them.

Building on semistructured interviews, episodic narrative interview is modeled on the notion of face-to-face data collection, with short time frames for each data collection incidence (e.g., 40–90 min). Data collection is tightly focused around a particular phenomenon of interest, and data can therefore be collected from a relatively large number of participants located across multiple contexts. As with semistructured interviews, developing rapport with participants is an important aspect of data collection protocols when using episodic narrative interview and enriches the quality of the narrative that is shared by the participants.

The key aspect of episodic narrative interview that is drawn from episodic interviews is the narrative structure derived from particular, bounded occurrences within a participant’s life or work experience. The episode serves to foreground an event or events as the context for the narrative rather than the substance of the narrative (Patterson, 2013). The storytelling in episodic narrative interview is characterized by requests for participants to share small stories that are targeted and focused in nature. Thus, characterizing the kinds of episodes that are of the most interest is important when developing episodic narrative interview protocols.

There are also elements of episodic narrative interview that differentiate it from other forms of semistructured interview and narrative inquiry. These elements align with several conventions associated with experience-centered notions of narrative research (Squire, 2013). First, the method is structured on an assumption that “personal narratives are sequential and meaningful” (Squire, 2013, p. 48). The funneled configuration of the episodic narrative interview offers a bounded framework that participants situate their temporally sequenced stories within. Second, the method draws upon the assumption that, by sharing narratives, people create opportunities for themselves to make sense of experience. Consequently, the episodic narrative interview format is not inclusive of dialogue between researcher and participant; the method is instead built on a belief that storytelling is an inherently human process that requires little more than adequate prompting. Third, the structure of episodic narrative interview provides participants a foundation to efficiently reconstruct narratives “without much social mediation” (Squire, 2013, pp. 51–52). The funneled approach to these interviews reduces a participant’s cognitive load by providing a proverbial skeleton on which they can restructure and recount their own experiences, and consequently a dialogue between researcher and participant is not required. Finally, the episodic narrative interview takes into account a belief that narrative is transformational, meaning that authentic narrative moves beyond a straightforward accounting of events. The episodic narrative interview format is, in a sense, spacious; it grants participants time to reflect and examine the transformative elements of their narratives while still focusing on their experiences with a single phenomenon of interest.

Method: Preparation and Protocol

The preparation for, and implementation of, an episodic narrative interview protocol involves six steps that are summarized in Table 1 and described in detail throughout the following paragraphs. In the description of each of these steps, I will provide examples stemming from my own inquiry about organizational values, described earlier, as well as additional applications of the episodic narrative interview approach from other social science research efforts.

The aim of conducting an episodic narrative interview is to deeply understand a participant’s experiences with a particular social phenomenon; consequently, the method requires that a phenomenon of interest be identified in advance. Therefore, episodic narrative interview is not well suited to exploratory research, though the process may uncover experiences parallel to the phenomenon of interest that prompt further inquiry. It is also important to engage in advanced delimitation with respect to eligible participants. The researcher must consider in advance the kinds of participants who would be likely to have meaningful experiences with the phenomenon of interest and then develop the delimitation criteria accordingly. For example, my project about the organizational values phenomenon was situated within the domain of higher education student services. Since I was ultimately asking about experiences with organizational values in particular student services contexts, I delimited participant eligibility to those student services staff who had been in their formal roles for at least 1 year. I chose this requirement based on the assumption that if someone had been in their role for a year, they would have had experience with the kind of stories I was requesting in the protocol, and
they would have had enough time in their role to ensure that their experience would be meaningfully contextualized.

Once the phenomenon of interest and delimitation criteria have been established, the researcher must design a protocol. The first step of the protocol is an introduction to the interview. This introduction should include a brief description of the purposes informing the research and stating the phenomenon of interest (though researcher should avoid defining the phenomenon at this point—it is important that the participant be provided the opportunity to do this on their own). Importantly, the researcher should also describe the format of the interview, providing an explanation of episodic narrative interview and how the requests for stories will be framed. In my experience, participants can “find it . . . challenging to tell their story—rather than [to] be asked a series of questions” (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016, p. 631); consequently, the initial explanation is an important step for fostering comfort, safety, and rapport with the participant.

The remainder of the protocol for an episodic narrative interview is a loosely bounded framework designed to simultaneously funnel and nest the participant’s storytelling, while focusing it on a particular phenomenon of interest (see Figure 1).

The interview protocol is, at its essence, a request for stories. The principles of appreciative inquiry have been particularly useful for designing story requests as part of this interview format (Cockell & McArthur-Blair, 2012). Appreciative inquiry is both a generative theory and a pragmatic approach to organizational development that leverages the knowledge gleaned from an organization’s periods of exceptional competence (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; Watkins & Mohr, 2001). Stories are one of the key tools used to better understand organizational excellence in appreciative inquiry (Cockell & McArthur-Blair, 2012). Scholars have recently made a compelling case for incorporating appreciative inquiry principles into research practice (e.g., see Lundgren & Jansson, 2016; Reed, 2007); in fact, appreciative inquiry forerunners conceptualized it as an alternative format for action research (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). More recently, appreciatively oriented approaches have been incorporated into collaborative research methods such as the world café (Prewitt, 2011). I have adopted strategies stemming from appreciative inquiry and applied them to the development of episodic narrative interview protocols because requests for stories that are developed in alignment with the principles of appreciative inquiry prime participants to explore the affective components of their experience. Furthermore, appreciatively oriented requests for detail tend to yield rich narratives, most often negating the need for further prompting.

### Getting Started

The episodic narrative interview begins with an invitation for the participant to define, describe, or characterize the phenomenon of interest. This can include two or three prompts that phrase the request for a definition in a variety of ways. In the study about organizational values, the following prompts were used:

Can you tell me what the phrase “organizational values” means to you? How would you define it? How are “organizational values” spoken about in your workplace?

### Table 1. Summary of the Steps Used to Prepare for and Implement an Episodic Narrative Interview.

| Step # | Summary |
|--------|---------|
| 1. | Select a phenomenon of interest |
| 2. | Describe interview process |
| 3. | Definition of the phenomenon |
| 4. | Request: story about an episode |
| 5. | Request: story about the phenomenon |
| 6. | Additions or amendments |

**Step #1: Select a phenomenon of interest**

Researcher must identify the specific phenomenon that they wish to better understand as a result of the inquiry.

**Step #2: Describe interview process**

Participants are provided with a summary of the episodic narrative interview structure and process.

**Step #3: Definition of the phenomenon**

The researcher requests that the participant define or describe the phenomenon of interest.

**Step #4: Request: story about an episode**

The researcher requests that the participant tell a story about a specific, bounded episode.

**Step #5: Request: story about the phenomenon**

The researcher requests that the participant tell a story about the phenomenon of interest within the context of the episode.

**Step #6: Additions or amendments**

The participant should have the opportunity to add to or amend any parts of the narrative that they have shared.
Requests for Stories

Next, the researcher requests that the participant tell a story about an episode. An episode is a situation, incident, period, or occurrence that is, for the purposes of the interview, considered in isolation from other life events (Flick, 1997, 2000, 2009); this can be further contextualized as part of the participant’s work life, home life, volunteer life, and so on. In order to develop a request for a story that is informed by principles of appreciative inquiry, the researcher should consider what kinds of guiding questions or prompts will generate curiosity and create a sense of underlying momentum (Vogt, Brown, & Isaacs, 2003). Open questions or prompts are most effective at this point, especially those that probe for specific detail. Additionally, the researcher should characterize, or bound, the request for an episode in whatever way will be most helpful to elicit participant stories about experiences of the phenomenon within that context. Examples can also be offered at this stage of the protocol, provided that they invite the participant to think broadly when considering which story to tell. In the project about organizational values, the request for the participant’s first story was framed as follows:

Please tell a story about a change that happened at work in the last year. The change can be large or small in scope, and could include small or large groups of people. Some examples include: A change to email protocol, a change in leadership (a new manager, director, or dean), a change in leadership structure in your area, an amalgamation or split in office structure, a policy change that affected your portfolio, a change in funding, a new requirement for your job’s portfolio, new colleagues, an addition of partner(s) to your portfolio, a new collaborative effort—or any other change that was meaningful to you.

(Allow time for the participant to think)

Now, I’ll ask that you tell me the story of that change in as much detail as possible, including information about the environment, where the change took place, the people involved, the nature of the change, what happened, how you felt about the change, and the intended and actual results of the change.

The intent with this first request is to provide a broad context within which the participant can locate his or her first story. The participant should have the freedom to choose their own story and to convey the details in whatever way they feel most pertinent. While this phase of the interview is not a dialogue (no question and answer), the researcher may have to remind the participant about all of the aspects included in the first request for a story. The important goal is to help the participant vividly recollect an episode or bounded situation in which they were likely to have also experienced the phenomenon of interest. The first story is also intended to help the participant feel comfortable with the storytelling format. As such, the researcher should emphasize that it is normal for the participant to request that the initial request for a story be repeated; the researcher should also provide the requests in written form so that the participant has a visual reminder of what the researcher is asking.

When the participant brings the story of the episode to a close, the researcher then requests that he or she tell another story, this time about his or her experience of the phenomenon within the context of the episode. Inviting a participant’s retelling of their experience of the phenomenon is intentionally nested within a request for the participant to first tell a story about an episode; the interview is “funneled” so that the narrative is oriented around a contextualized account of the participant’s experience with the phenomenon of interest. The request for a second story in the study about organizational values reads as follows:

I’m going to ask you now to tell me a story about an experience you had with organizational values, during the time of change you have just described. Please tell this story in as much detail as possible, including your interpretation of the following: Did you notice organizational values in this situation? How did you make sense of organizational values in this situation? What did you think organizational values were (if you thought of them at all)? Who else was involved in your experience of organizational values, and who did you talk to about it? How did organizational values fit in to your everyday life on the job?

While the request for a second story may seem to include a lot of questions, the interview participant will have become somewhat comfortable with the storytelling format; in my experience, participants are typically ready to speak in depth about their experiences with the phenomenon of interest at this point. Throughout the interview, the participant has the latitude to tell their stories—and to take them in whichever direction they feel most pertinent. There can be many stops and starts, and participants often have to talk for a while before they are ready to tell their stories, almost as if they are talking themselves toward the story they want to convey. The structure of the nested interview provides boundaries for the participant to stay within, but otherwise their narrative is entirely unique and self-generated. It is important to remember that while the participants are telling their stories, the episodic narrative interview is not a dialogue. The principles of appreciative inquiry dictate that the researcher serves as an intent and deep listener but not a...
participant in the storytelling (Cockell & McArthur-Blair, 2012). This also aligns with a view of the narrative as being located “within” the participant, thus warranting as little interruption from the researcher as possible (Squire, 2013). The researcher limits interjections to a few well-considered prompts that are only used if the participant is completely stuck. The goal for the researcher is to encourage and elicit the most detailed narratives possible with minimal interruption.

**Concluding the Interview**

The conclusion of the interview involves offering the participant an opportunity to add to, amend, or change any elements of the stories they have told. This serves as an opportunity for the participant to talk about anything relevant that may fall outside of what they have offered previously (Flick, 1997). The researcher may also choose to revisit the participant’s initial definition of the phenomenon, in order to see if he or she still agrees with their original conceptualization—however, many participants do this intuitively without a prompt. This last aspect of the protocol invites the participant to engage in further sensemaking about the stories they have conveyed.

If the participants have been adequately delimited and the protocol is carefully designed, researchers not only find it easy to develop a quick rapport with participants but also witness the telling of meaningful narratives that are ultimately focused around the participant’s experience with the phenomenon of interest. Sometimes it takes two or more iterations of a protocol to develop one that works well, so it is recommended that researchers conduct several pilot interviews prior to starting a larger scale episodic narrative interview project.

**Episodic Narrative Interviews: Strengths and Limitations**

Like any method, episodic narrative interview has strengths and limitations. In terms of strengths, the nested structure offered to participants increases the likelihood that they will recount their experiences in rich detail, even if they are unaccustomed to storytelling. In other words, participants’ narrative competence is increased because they have a limited scope within which to tell their story. Further, the nested stories help participants to focus specifically on their experiences with a phenomenon of interest, ensuring that the data collected are useful for learning and uncovering more about that phenomenon. The episodic narrative interview is enjoyable for both the researcher and participants. The structure of the interview is conducive to establishing a quick rapport; perhaps this is because the participants are delimited according to their role rather than context, and in turn the expressions of the phenomena under investigation are typically tied in a meaningful way to the participants’ roles. In my experience, participants have become very committed to the research and maintain an interest in hearing about, and sharing, the research results.

However, there are limitations to the approach that should be considered prior to its implementation. It is essential for the researcher to remember that a narrative is an internal, subjective account of a socially constructed experience—it is reflective of the complex interplay between past memory, circumstance, context, and relationships. What this means is that “empirical” assessment of the data generated by episodic narrative interviews will yield little in the way of meaningful claims about the phenomenon of interest. The goal of episodic narrative interview is not comparative, which means that there are added demands in the process of analysis to find points of resonance among the narratives.

Episodic narrative interview is also not a suitable method to employ in the investigation of all social phenomena. The researcher’s phenomenon of interest must lend itself to being nested within a series of stories; it also must be experienced by the participants within bounded circumstances. Finally, there is a lot of sensemaking that occurs for participants in the telling of their personal experiences, and consequently there are ethical implications to using this method. Prompting narratives has historically been considered to fall squarely within the domain of therapeutic practice (Andrews et al., 2013), and it often elicits emotional responses from participants. Participants can also question the social, political, or economic dynamics that have informed their particular experiences. The researcher should be prepared to manage these situations by carefully considering risk for participants in advance and developing debriefing protocols and resources accordingly. Furthermore, this method does not include an explicit discussion with participants about how their stories are tied to personal identity, so it is often necessary to provide resources for the participant to follow up with if they want to debrief these connections.

**Conclusion**

I have been talking about episodic narrative informally for several years with my Canadian colleagues and more formally with an international audience at conferences and workshop presentations. After engaging in deeper conversations following these forms of dissemination, it has become clear to me that there is a gap within the narrative research domain. My colleagues have reported needs that are similar in character to my own upon creating the episodic narrative interview fusion, and there seems to be a genuine desire to generate more accounts of the storied experiences of phenomena within social systems. Episodic narrative interview provides an evidence-based, accessible approach to collecting participant stories, which resonates broadly within a variety of disciplinary and theoretical domains.

Narratives are critical to our sensemaking about all kinds of phenomena. However, stories of experience are still infrequently documented, analyzed, or shared. Perhaps this is because stories get lost in the structure of typical interview protocols, or because there is a perception that narrative data are too unwieldy to manage effectively, or because making
sense of narrative data is challenging. The episodic narrative interview method provides an easy-to-use structure for conducting narrative-focused interviews, which mitigates these concerns. It enables researchers to use narrative as a means to explore particular phenomena rather than broad circumstances, and the method can be applied across multiple contexts in order to generate increasingly nuanced understandings of those phenomena.

As a consequence, there is an aspect of episodic narrative interview that renders the method a particularly powerful research tool: Use of this approach generates tremendous potential for identifying patterns. In many cases, it is manageable to conduct episodic narrative interviews with a relatively large group of participants who may be spread across several geographical locations. Every story is unique, and each individual experience is honored through the process of episodic narrative interviewing. However, at the conclusion of data collection, when the narratives are layered with one another, it becomes possible to discern patterns that occur across participant experiences. The patterns are illuminating; they allow us to better understand the holistic reality of the phenomena we are interested in through individualized explorations of human experience.

It is my hope that the episodic narrative interview method will offer a viable solution for scholars who want to engage in narrative types of research and require an approach that provides an accessible fit. This descriptive account of the method represents a first step in innovation: sharing broadly. It has been offered as a guide, and I invite qualitative researchers to use or adapt the method so that we might collectively begin to explore the many avenues for engaging in narrative research.

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