Case Study and Narrative Inquiry as Merged Methodologies: A Critical Narrative Perspective

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Abstract
Case study and narrative inquiry as merged methodological frameworks can make a vital contribution that seeks to understand processes that may explain current realities within professions and broader society. This article offers an explanation of how a critical perspective on case study and narrative inquiry as an embedded methodology unearthed the interplay between structure and agency within storied lives. This case narrative emerged out of a doctoral thesis in occupational therapy, a single instrumental case describing a process of professional role transition within school-level specialized education in the Western Cape, South Africa. This case served as an exemplar in demonstrating how case study recognized the multiple layers to the context within which the process of professional role transition unfolded. The embedded narrative inquiry served to clarify emerging professional identities for occupational therapists within school-level specialized education in postapartheid South Africa.

Keywords
methodology, critical social theory, context, professional role transition

Introduction
This article will describe the first author’s experience of engaging with case study and narrative inquiry as merged methodological frameworks as applied to a doctoral study entitled: A case study of professional role transition for occupational therapists in specialised education in post-apartheid South Africa: A critical narrative perspective. This doctoral study aimed to describe and explain professional role transition (Sonday et al., 2019) as a process and how occupational therapists negotiated their role, agency, and power within a continuously changing context within postapartheid South Africa (Sonday et al., 2019). This article begins with outlining the various layers of context in postapartheid South Africa and describes the political tensions that impacted on occupational therapists’ roles within school-level specialized education. This is followed by a description of how a paradigmatic lens of critical theory informed the choice of case study (Stake, 2008) methodology. Narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) is then outlined, describing how it was used as a means to understanding storied lives within the case. The article concludes with a critical discussion on how case study and narrative inquiry danced together in order to reveal the case narrative of professional role transition.

Contextual Layers and Critical Events
Between 1976 and 1991, rising economic sanctions from the international community and the political tensions that often lead to violent conflicts characterized apartheid¹ South Africa, finally pushing the ruling national party to pledge to negotiate an end to the apartheid regime that it had established (South African History Online, 2017). The engineering of the apartheid system arguably started when Dr. Verwoed (Minister of Native Affairs) in May 1952 declared a number of sociospatial “rules” that clearly emphasized racial divisions while cementing White supremacy (Williams, 2000). It was an accumulation of these types of “racially-contrived planning frameworks” (Williams, 2000, p. 168) that left South Africa in a compromising position regarding the social positions of Black South

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Africans at the end of the 20th century. It was because of the historical unequal development of the South African society that transformation became a priority and an imperative after the first democratic elections were held in South Africa in 1994. Transformation is seen as the defining concept of social change for social and economic justice in South Africa. Understanding the various dimensions of transformation as it is situated in school-level specialized education can help contextualize professional role transition within the South African basic education sector.

The critical events along the trajectory of change in school-level specialized education signifies the contextual triggers that required occupational therapists in specialized education to respond in ways that were often counter-hegemonic. From the onset of the research, the aim was to express an interest in understanding professional role transition as a process experienced by the participants within the context of postapartheid South Africa. By identifying two operational words, “process” and “context,” it was affirmative that a case study methodology was better suited in understanding the process that these particular occupational therapists were negotiating. Stake (2008) further affirmed this choice of case study as they describe it “as an approach to qualitative inquiry which is less focused on the discerning patterns of the group and more in-depth description of the process” (p. 121). Flyvbjerg (2006) acknowledges that people are experts in various everyday skills such as social, technical, and intellectual and that only a few truly gain specialized skills such as flying a fighter jet. What Flyvbjerg does identify is that common to all experts irrespective of the level of skill is context-dependent knowledge and experience. These two components lie at the center or at the heart of the expert professional activity and can greatly influence how the individual engages and uses these expert skills. Considering that the study population was a group of occupational therapists who are seen as experts in their field, it was only fitting that case study research would be the method of choice. Flyvbjerg does also affirm that this professional knowledge and professional expertise lie at the center of case study as a method of learning for the researcher and also for the occupational therapists in understanding how they know what they know. The use of case study as a method using multiple methods of data collection also offered an opportunity for a greater understanding in unpacking the concept of professional role transition.

The Case as a Process

The case of this study is situated within the context of social change and provided an answer to how the occupational therapists were negotiating their role, agency, and power within a continuously changing context within postapartheid South Africa. Flyvbjerg (2006) informed the understanding of an instrumental case and debunked the myth that one cannot generalize from a single case. This study aimed to understand more than just the experiences of a group of occupational therapists, but rather the process of professional role transition. When thinking about the case, context, boundedness, and process helped to define what the case is of. Bounded in time, the process was tracked in relation to the changes in role transition for these occupational therapists.

The benefits of engaging with a case study afforded the opportunity to gather data from many sources. The main source were the narrative stories gained from the occupational therapists working within the special school resource centers. The other sources were several key informants that were well positioned within the Western Cape Education Department, document analysis of education legislative documents, participant observation on school sites, and participant reflective journals. It became evident that a case study design alone was not going to provide the understanding and meaning behind the experiences being told by the participants of professional role transition. Case study helped to contextualize the participants within the larger case of specialized education in South Africa, creating a bounded scenario. However, in order to unpack what the single instrumental case was made of that was bounded by this larger context, another methodological approach was needed. Using narrative inquiry as a merged methodological framework helped shape the understanding of the occupational therapists’ stories. The stories were one of the sources of data that was used to extract the theoretical constructs that made up the case of professional role transition.

The Dynamic That Occurs Between Individuals and Contexts

A critical social theory (Habermas & Habermas, 1971; Freire, 1972) perspective reinforces the reconceptualization of human beings as narrators and emancipators. Taking a critical perspective can provide an offering in understanding meaningful transformation. This theory provides a more critical looking of the interplay between the social, cultural, and political dynamic that occurs between individuals and contexts (Zembylas, 2008). Critical social theory assumes and affirms that there is a relationship that exists between social systems and people, how each is produced and can contribute to the emancipation of both. French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu (1994), approaches power from a development and social change perspective stating that through socialized norms behavior and thinking are guided. His term habitus is described as “not fixed or permanent and can change under unexpected situations over a long historical period” (Navarro, 2006, p. 16). Professional role transition in the research presented in this article was not determined by structures alone but through an interplay between the occupational therapy profession as habitus and structures within the South African education system.

Adopting Bourdieu’s (1994) view on habitus, field, capital, and power supported the objective of the research toward understanding the thoughts, beliefs, values, and judgments of occupational therapists as these are attributed to and shape power relations within the schools and the broader specialized education context but also in how they impact on the occupational therapists’ level of professional agency. Bourdieu’s view provided the lens to understand the process of
professional role transition from the participant’s perspective focusing on the contexts in which they work. His view also assisted in understanding the historical and political factors that were influencing the situated nature of the occupational therapists’ professional role, professional identity, and professional agency.

Narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) gave a new and deeper insight into the complex ways in which individual occupational therapists were impacted on by context. The stories told are of a particular group of people located in a particular geographical location that form part of a particular profession. Therefore, remaining conscious of the influence of context was integral in determining the shifts that describe how these occupational therapists navigate the political tension experienced within professional role transition.

**Narrative Inquiry as a Means to Understanding the Case**

A narrative framework was considered for organizing and interpreting the embedded case data, which were the stories of the occupational therapists. It helped to understand the participants as human beings and as narrators in relation to their occupational identities. Narrative interviews were appropriate as they aimed to explore how occupational therapists in specialized education were experiencing the process of professional role transition and the impact this role change had on their everyday tasks and activities that made up their scope of practice.

It was here where the following reflexive question was asked, *How do the occupational therapists know what they know?* Mishler (1997) describes narrative knowing as the widespread conceptualization of narrative as being one of many approaches that contributes to the transformation of knowing into telling. It is believed by Clandinin and Connelly (2000) and Polkinghorne (1997) that we all live storied lives and everyone has a story to tell. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) drew on Dewey’s two criteria of experience and highlighted that “People are individuals and need to be understood as such, but they cannot be understood only as individuals. They are always in relation, always in a social context” (p. 2).

**The Relationship Between Stories and Context**

A story is described as a narrative structure or form that describes human events. Stories also assisted in the understanding of behaviors, events, and actions that were meaningful for the occupational therapists and how they were embedded within the context of postapartheid South Africa. Sandelowski (2009) describes how the mind is put to rest by the illusion of sequence and order and that narratives just like scientific theories pull together things in real life. It is important to consider that stories explore questions related to human agency, events would always have a retrospective telling, stories are used to support these events in human lives, and that the politics of context and its impact on telling and retelling the stories are critical. Narrative inquiry anticipates that the participants would use context to situate their own experiences using reflection. This was so for the participants of this study, in that through telling their story, they engaged in a process that was based on reflection, structuring their reflections, and narrating their life events in a particular order. It is however acknowledged that a story is only an example of a type of narrative and that a narrative is not only limited to a story structure. Through writing these narrative stories, meaning was developed, and it sparked insight through reflexive iteration (Srivastava & Thomson, 2009) in order to connect with the emerging understandings and insights of the occupational therapists that defined what the process of professional role transition was about.

**Dancing Methodologies (How Case Study and Narrative Inquiry Danced to Answer the Research Question)**

The challenge in managing the balance between appreciating case study and narrative inquiry as methods occurred at various points during the research process. Thoughtfully weighing through logically when to privilege case study and when narrative inquiry gave room for a process of deliberation. The first point of deliberation started off with only using case study as a method. In asking *what and how and when* questions that included what a particular process looks like, case study as a method gave the perspective to understand the context and the process in context. But the question still remains who are these occupational therapists that are engaging in this process and what meaning did they derive from engaging in this process. Case study on its own did not provide the tools needed to describe the experiences of individuals within the process. It was evident at this point that another supportive methodology was needed.

The second point of deliberation was the approach to the interviews. An interview guide approach or structured lists of questions were not going to elicit the experiences, the thoughts, and the feelings of the occupational therapists. An interview guide approach to questions would limit the storytelling experience. Narrative interviewing asking two open-ended questions like “Tell me what it is like working as an occupational therapist in a special school?” and “Has your role changed, tell me about these times?” was the best option. These two questions resulted in a storytelling experience that was closely linked to the contexts participants were working in, contributing to what the case is about.

The third point of deliberation occurred during the analysis phase. Traditionally one would do a within and cross-case analysis of the embedded cases taking a thematic approach, which is one form of analysis. The themes that then emerge from this analysis would be considered as the findings. At this point, using this approach I was able to identify the emerging themes that described the experiences
of the participants. For this study, documentary evidence was corroborated, and a convergence of information from all data sources used was evident, increasing the credibility of the findings. At the onset of the write-up, participants’ experiences were foregrounded, introducing the themes of the case and supporting the themes with relevant quotes from participants. Table 1 showcases the themes and categories that initially emerged.

The themes, however, did not describe the theoretical elements of the case narrative, only the experiences. This called for a further layer of theorization. The fourth point of deliberation was thinking about how the findings should be represented. A case narrative is represented uniquely in various studies using case study as a methodology. A key lesson that was learnt at this point of the research was in asking what does a case narrative look like for this study. A process of theorizing continued at this point in thinking about how not to foreground participants’ voices but rather to describe what the process looks like by identifying the theoretical elements.

In walking the tight rope, getting the balance right was a challenging one. The main challenge that arose was in deciding when to privilege case study method over narrative inquiry and vice versa. Remaining close to the study focus and research question assisted greatly in understanding which part of the data needed to be foregrounded first. Case study was the main methodology of choice, best suited to address the research question, and so describing the social, political, economic, and historical contextual factors that influenced how this process happens for these occupational therapists was a fundamental starting point. The experiences of the participants that took the form of a story format provided real-life experience of what it was like working as an occupational therapist in specialized education. These experiences offered insights into describing how the process was experienced. Five theoretical themes emerged (Sonday et al., 2019) that essentially described and explained the experiences of the occupational therapists within the process of professional role transition.

### Table 1. Initial Themes and Categories That Emerged.

| Theme                                      | Categories                                                                 |
|--------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. “Playing the humble servant role”       | - Source of power—Authoritarian                                             |
|                                            | - No justice                                                               |
|                                            | - Structures dictate role and scope                                        |
|                                            | - Working in isolated pockets                                              |
| 2. “We are not robots, we are OTs”         | - “Being human”                                                            |
|                                            | - Role consciousness                                                       |
| 3. “Our blood runs green”                  | - Impact on professional identity of OTs                                   |
|                                            | - Professionalization of the OT profession                                 |
|                                            | - Being agentic                                                            |

Note. OT = occupational therapist.

### Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to describe how case study as a method was used as a merged methodological framework with narrative inquiry to unearth the experiences of occupational therapists along with a process of professional role transition. Deliberations were highlighted that informed some of the challenges the author faced in making sense of how best to foreground one method over another. The outcome of using the two methodologies in this particular way offers a novel approach to qualitative research.

### Key Messages

- Case study and narrative inquiry as merged methodologies can offer new ways of documenting experiences.
- A critical paradigmatic lens offers opportunities for deeper theorizing of case study as a method.
- Narrative inquiry as an embedded methodology can serve in understanding emerging professional identities in occupational therapists.

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### Note

1. Apartheid is an Afrikaans term meaning “apartness.” It was an ideology that was supported by the South African government and started in 1948. Apartheid called for the separate development of racial groupings in South Africa.

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