



University of  
**Salford**  
MANCHESTER

# ‘Making narrative portraits : a methodological approach to analysing qualitative data’

Rodriguez-Dorans, E and Jacobs, P

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2020.1719609>

<b>Title</b>	‘Making narrative portraits : a methodological approach to analysing qualitative data’
<b>Authors</b>	Rodriguez-Dorans, E and Jacobs, P
<b>Publication title</b>	International Journal of Social Research Methodology
<b>Publisher</b>	Taylor & Francis
<b>Type</b>	Article
<b>USIR URL</b>	This version is available at: <a href="http://usir.salford.ac.uk/id/eprint/61190/">http://usir.salford.ac.uk/id/eprint/61190/</a>
<b>Published Date</b>	2020

USIR is a digital collection of the research output of the University of Salford. Where copyright permits, full text material held in the repository is made freely available online and can be read, downloaded and copied for non-commercial private study or research purposes. Please check the manuscript for any further copyright restrictions.

For more information, including our policy and submission procedure, please contact the Repository Team at: [library-research@salford.ac.uk](mailto:library-research@salford.ac.uk).

# 1 **‘Making narrative portraits: a methodological approach to analysing** 2 **qualitative data’**

## 3 **Abstract**

4 This paper proposes the method of ‘narrative portraiture’, which, located within the wider  
5 field of narrative studies, offers an analytical tool to narrative data. Two research projects,  
6 one on disability and one on identity, are used to illustrate how the method can be applied.  
7 While the paper will focus on the methodological benefits and limitations of the approach,  
8 throughout the article we also highlight the ethical concern of representation. We suggest that  
9 through ‘narrative portraiture’ research findings can be contextualised in broader social  
10 narratives without losing sight of the unique personal qualities of the research  
11 encounter. Thus, we argue for the importance of bringing the participant and their everyday  
12 life experience into focus, highlighting that a portrayal of a sole story can be, not only a  
13 medium to understand a research phenomenon, but also a valuable research output in itself.

14

15           Keywords: Narrative, data analysis, qualitative, stories, ethics

## 16 **Introduction**

17 Many researchers who work with qualitative data end up with numerous pages of written  
18 material, which can make it difficult to know where to start. In this paper, we propose an  
19 analytical approach to working qualitatively with data emerging from interviews, focus  
20 groups, observations, or other sources that involve people’s narratives. The method, which  
21 we call ‘narrative portraiture’, can be complementary to thematic approaches as it helps  
22 researchers to engage with qualitative data at different stages of the analytic process. We  
23 suggest that it is a helpful technique to employ at the beginning of the analytic process, aiding  
24 the researcher to form an in-depth understanding of each participant’s or case’s story.  
25 Conversely, if the data analysis has concluded or is near to an end, it offers a means to  
26 enhance the presentation of research findings and honour participants’ stories.

## 1 *Strengths of narrative approaches*

2 Thematic approaches to data analysis have been criticised for ignoring context and  
3 differences between individual accounts (Ayres, Kavanaugh, & Knafl, 2003). While  
4 interview and text sequences are coded and recoded into smaller units, their meaning can be  
5 decontextualised because categories instead of process frame the analysis. Maxwell (2012)  
6 argues that in such ‘similarity based’ analysis, categories start to replace the original  
7 connected data structure. Thus, one of the dangers with categorical coding is that it threatens  
8 ‘the local web of causality’ (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 151). Narrative approaches, on the  
9 other hand, work closely with context. Maxwell (2012) identifies them as ‘contiguity based’.  
10 While thematic approaches would look at abstract connections across people’s lives, they risk  
11 losing the person’s individual stories in the process. Contiguity based approaches stay with  
12 the same person or process throughout. Through the methodological approach we present in  
13 this paper, we attempt to understand individuals and specific processes. However, we suggest  
14 viewing thematic approaches and narrative approaches not as incompatible, but rather as  
15 complementary to one another. They are helpful to answer different questions during the  
16 research process and can feed from and into each other.

17 Whilst qualitative studies have been dominated by thematic approaches to data analysis  
18 (Mitchell and Egudo, 2003), narrative has always had theoretical relevance in social sciences  
19 (J. Bruner, 1991, 2004; Gottschall & Wilson, 2005; D. P. McAdams, 1997; Ricoeur, 1991)  
20 and recently it has become more popular within qualitative research from a methodological  
21 perspective in disciplines such as psychology and psychoanalysis (Seidman, 2006; Freeman,  
22 2007), anthropology (Scutt and Hobson, 2013), sociology (Frank, 1995; Maines, 1993), and  
23 organizational science (Beech, 2000; Abma, 2000).

24 Narrative approaches explore how people make sense of their experiences (Riessman, 2008),  
25 as well as seeing stories as a powerful medium to communicate information (Mitchell and

1 Egudo, 2003, Gottschall & Wilson, 2005). Examples of narrative approaches concerned with  
2 meaning-making are, amongst others, narrative inquiry (D. McAdams, 2008; J. Speedy,  
3 2005), narrative profiles (Seidman, 2006), narrative ethics (Frank, 2014), narrative analysis  
4 (Gee, 1986; Gee & Grosjean, 1984), and narratology (Todorov, 1971). Other approaches  
5 focus on stories as a powerful way to present and transform textual data such as writing as a  
6 method of inquiry (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005), autoethnography (Ellis, Adams, &  
7 Bochner, 2011), and poetic inquiry (Butler-Kisber, 2010).

8 Within the field of narrative, some approaches analyse discourse (Arribas-Ayllon &  
9 Walkerdine, 2008; Georgakopoulou & Goutsos, 2004) and voice used (Gilligan, 2003;  
10 Woodcock, 2005), which leads to an abstract focus on knowledge construction. We argue that  
11 people's narratives have ontological relevance in themselves and that there is value in  
12 attempting to write about and reflect 'the ordinary lives of people' (Shakespeare, 2014; p. 52)  
13 and in staying closely with the research experience. We turned to narrative as it helps  
14 researchers to embed social meaning in the concrete, particular doings of people (Erickson,  
15 1977; Flyvbjerg, 2006). As Ken Plummer (1995) states, individuals tell stories, which are not  
16 only personal, but which form part of larger situational, organisational, cultural, and historical  
17 narratives. Narrative puts the personal and the social in the same space; in an overlapping,  
18 intricate relationship (Jane. Speedy, 2008). Narrative portraiture can add to the existing field  
19 of narrative research because, by staying close to the raw data, we bring the participants back  
20 to the centre of the research. Our approach aims to use narrative to build a bridge between  
21 participants, researchers, and audience by communicating people's experiences more directly.

22 In this paper we will illustrate how we used narrative portraiture in two separate  
23 research projects by discussing two examples of narrative portraits constructed from (i) in-  
24 depth interviews relating to individual participants; and (ii) data from case studies involving  
25 interviews, observations and documents. We will offer some guidelines for other researchers

1 to apply this approach to their own research. We also emphasise the need to pay attention to  
2 the inevitable ethical tensions that emerge when working with people’s narratives and  
3 sensitive data.

4 We refer to ‘narrative’ as a more encompassing term that explores how people make  
5 sense of life through the act of narrating. Narratives can refer to personal, family, national,  
6 cultural, social, or historic domains (J. S. Bruner, 1986; D. P. McAdams, 1997). When using  
7 the term ‘story’, we mean a smaller unit (traditionally understood with a beginning, middle,  
8 and end) that can be contained within a greater cultural, social, or personal narrative  
9 (Georgakopoulou, 2007; Gottschall & Wilson, 2005; Plummer, 1995).

#### 10 **A proposition for narrative portraiture**

11 Narrative portraiture acknowledges that researchers have certain knowledge of the  
12 phenomenon under investigation – which is informed by the literature and their scholarship –  
13 but we believe that there needs to be more space given to the actual stories people tell about  
14 their own lives. In doing so, narrative portraiture becomes a decolonial methodology because  
15 it disrupts the common research practice of privileging the researcher’s interpretation and  
16 over-analysing people’s narratives. As any other method, narrative portraiture still reflects the  
17 standpoint of the inquirer, but it aims to make transparent its process and present a product in  
18 which the participant is visible and cognisable. By selecting and rearranging extracts from  
19 interviews, observations, field notes, or documents, we create portraits that offer a glimpse  
20 into the subjects’ lives. The portraits align with life story research (Etherington, 2009; D.  
21 McAdams, 2008), in-depth case study research (Flyvbjerg, 2006), narrative profiles  
22 (Seidman, 2006), structural narrative analysis (Labov & Waletzky, 2006) and, by doing so,  
23 the method captures rich material that often escapes the scope of other forms of analysis.  
24 Narrative portraits depict social phenomena through people’s stories of everyday life

1 experience. They are thus able to bridge the gap between individual and society. Furthermore,  
2 the use of portraits showed us that research findings, at least in the two research fields in  
3 which we were working, are often ‘hidden’ in areas of participants’ lives that might not be  
4 associated with the main focus of our research questions. We suggest that our narrative  
5 approach helps to capture contextual nuances that are otherwise often overlooked.

6 We want to highlight that this method does not aim to produce accurate realities;  
7 instead, we present narrative portraiture as a methodological tool that aims to reflect,  
8 interpret, and communicate narrated experiences. We strive to respect voices by working only  
9 with the structure of the text – what comes first, what comes next, what comes after that – to  
10 allow the text to read fluently and easily. The depictions are therefore the participants’  
11 narratives but still our editorial work reflects a negotiation between their narrative identities  
12 (D. P. McAdams, 1997) – that is, how they see themselves and how they tell their stories –  
13 and more relational identities (Anderson, 2012b) – that is, what they decided to share with us,  
14 what they projected to us, and what we imposed onto them. With these negotiations in mind,  
15 we crafted our portraits by collating memorable passages of our data. We believe that a  
16 personal way of approaching people’s narratives is not only important but also necessary,  
17 especially in cases where power has been disproportionately unbalanced and where voices  
18 have been silenced. Mignolo (2009) writes that in the politics of knowledge, ‘bio-graphical  
19 configurations’ determine who is and who is not allowed to create knowledge. He urges to  
20 call into question the principles and practices that maintain hierarchies of power in the  
21 production of knowledge. In this case, through narrative portraiture, we aim to leave  
22 participants’ narratives mostly uninterpreted as an acknowledgement of their expertise on  
23 their own lives. The portraits are presented at length in an attempt to show that people’s  
24 stories are worth listening to. This deliberate emphasis on moving away from abstract  
25 interpretations does not equate a lack of analysis. We believe that analysis can come in the

1 form of a detailed, systematic, and structural examination of people’s narrative to then  
2 arrange it into what we call a narrative portrait: a rich and expressive first-person account in  
3 which participants voices prevail.

#### 4 **The process of making narrative portraits**

5 Narrative portraiture is helpful in answering research questions that: (a) are concerned  
6 with context and relationality; and (b) aim to capture processes in detail. These qualities  
7 allow researchers to engage with crucial aspects of research, such as ambiguity and change,  
8 within personal narratives. We tailored our analysis method aided by a combination of  
9 Labov’s and Waletzky’s (Labov, 1972; Labov & Waletzky, 2006) structural approach to  
10 narratives; case study research (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2014); life  
11 story research (Riessman, 2008; Walmsley, 1995); and Dan McAdams’ analytical devices for  
12 personal narratives (D. P. McAdams & Bowman, 2001; D. P. McAdams & Guo, 2014). We  
13 complemented these analytic approaches with a series of theory-driven analytical features  
14 that helped us to identify aspects that were specific to our research topics, in (author’s name  
15 blanked for blind peer review) case these were (1) the erotic; (2) romantic relationships; and  
16 (3) their intertwinements with identity processes, whilst in (authors’ name blanked for blind  
17 peer review) case these were the identification of key influences in decision-making  
18 processes from an ecological perspective. Table 1 shows this tailored method and the specific  
19 questions and key words that can be derived from them.

20 Using a narrative approach might appear to the outsider to involve little analytic know-how,  
21 being merely a representation of the data. But we believe that developing a coherent narrative  
22 from vast amounts of qualitative data requires skill and can be approached in a methodical  
23 manner.

1           The analytic strategy we propose fulfils two tasks: first, it offers a detailed description  
 2 of the story, illustrating process and context (the ‘how’); and, secondly, it provides an  
 3 indication of underlying reasons and influences (the ‘why’).

4           The analytic steps suggested by us involve coding for: (1) Characters; (2) Time; (3)  
 5 Space and Circumstances; (4) Key Events; and (5) Intersection of phenomena of interest. The  
 6 following table can be used as a guide to start the analytic process.

7 Table 1 – analytic tools to aid the process of making narrative portraits

<b>CODES</b>	<b>RESEARCH QUESTION</b> *helps to illustrate	<b>KEY-WORDS:</b> What to look for
<b>Characters</b>	WHO – Important characters; Relationships between characters	Names, pronouns, the first person (“I”), experiences or events involving other people
<b>Time</b>	WHEN – Historic context; Sequence of story; Experience of time	Dates, Years, Conjunctions of time (after, before, when...), Time periods (weeks, months, days)
<b>Space</b>	WHERE – Geography; Political, cultural, social, economic context	Macro-geography (cities, countries, continents), Micro-space (across the road, in the kitchen, at the hospital), virtual spaces (online, state of mind, an emotional space)
<b>Key-events</b>	HOW/WHY – Connections and Relations; Interactions; Turning points; Wider influences	Strong emotions surrounding event, Link to important decision that is made, Change in narrative after event
<b>Phenomena of interest</b>	HOW/WHY – How is phenomena of interest narrated, conceptualised, experienced; Where is phenomena of interest located; Intersection of concepts and context	Pre-identified themes of interest e.g. ecological perspective, identity, disability ...

8

9           An in-depth account of what happened when, where, and with whom might seem very  
 10 descriptive. However, in the first instance, before interpreting and explaining the data, it is  
 11 useful to write a holistic description, outlining the story or stories. The descriptive insight can  
 12 then subsequently inform a deeper exploration of the data to explore questions of ‘why’ (Yin,  
 13 2014).



1 *Application of narrative portraiture in two projects*

2 In this section, our aim is to explain how this narrative analysis method looks in practice.

3 Each author will draw on their PhD projects and describe their experiences of using the  
4 approach. Due to the sensitive data that was generated, the information we represent here has  
5 been crafted into composites that aim to illustrate the method rather than focus on personal  
6 details.

7 *Narrative portraiture in a project on gay men's identities- [Name of author 1]*

8 In my doctoral research, I explored the contributions that sexual, erotic, and romantic  
9 connections make to gay men's sense of identity (*reference blanked for blind peer review*). I  
10 was interested in understanding what these relationships mean to gay men. To conduct this  
11 study, I interviewed ten gay men of different ages and backgrounds living in the United  
12 Kingdom, each of whom provided narrative data during unstructured one-to-one, one-off  
13 interviews. Drawing upon a narrative structural analysis, I analysed my findings in two  
14 ways: first in the form of idiographic narratives and, secondly, as an overarching analysis  
15 with central themes identified across participants' narratives. One of my first thoughts while  
16 transcribing was to produce a summary of the participants' stories in order to reflect my  
17 impressions about them and introduce them to the reader by means of the third person voice.  
18 The use of the third person voice to describe and interpret participants' narratives made me  
19 realise that this practice was reproducing the dynamics that many of these participants had  
20 experienced throughout their lives: others have analysed, questioned, and determined the  
21 soundness, logic, and validity of their relationships, their identities, and their very own  
22 existence. As members of a population that has faced numerous challenges, many gay men  
23 have learnt to live in secret; to not disclose their identities at school, in the workplace; to  
24 conceal their erotic desires with friends, families; and some have concluded that their stories

1 belong at the margins of society. That realisation made me work on a method that would  
2 allow me to use participants' own words. The use of participants' own words started to show  
3 methodological potential in the sense that it was representing knowledgeable, empowered,  
4 dignified individuals who knew about their lives and were creating meanings around their  
5 experiences without much interpretation from my 'expert' researcher's view. This  
6 observation made me rethink the function of my data analysis and renegotiate the balance  
7 between interpreting participants' narratives and listening whilst trying to uphold the view  
8 that they are the experts on their own lives (Anderson, 2012a). This methodological attempt  
9 to balance the power between the researcher's role in interpreting the data and the  
10 participant's expertise in their lived experience is what I called 'narrative portraits'.

11 *Narrative conversations in a project of transition processes in the lives of young people*  
12 *with severe intellectual disability – [Name of author 2]*

13 As part of my PhD, I explored how decisions are made for and with young people with severe  
14 intellectual disability who are moving from education to adult services (*reference blanked for*  
15 *blind peer review*). I was interested in how those involved make their decisions, how external  
16 influences shape the transition process and how young people themselves were involved. I  
17 was looking for an approach to narrative that could illustrate people interacting  
18 within their social, cultural, and economic spheres. During the data collection process, I  
19 followed three young people with severe learning disabilities, their parents, and professionals  
20 involved through the journey from school to adult services. This involved interviews with  
21 parents and professionals at different points in time; spending time with young people; and  
22 reviewing relevant documents. When I came to the analysis I struggled to find a way to  
23 include the perspective of the young person. As all three young people were mostly non-  
24 verbal, I needed to think differently about including their 'voice'. This led me to narrative as  
25 a way to give a glimpse into the life of the person, a life that seemed largely dependent on

1 decisions made by others, organisational structures and resources available within local  
2 authorities. I decided to use my interviews with those that were close to the young person, my  
3 observations and own reflections to craft what I called ‘narrative conversations’ to give an in-  
4 depth account of the transition process and the everyday life experiences of the young people  
5 and their families. I had noticed how certain elements of my data seemed to be ‘talking’ to  
6 each other. In interviews, for example, people were referring to the same events and key  
7 decisions. I started by using timelines (Yin, 2014) and by mapping the decision-making  
8 process across time, before developing narrative conversations using participants’ own words  
9 to reflect on key-events that I had identified in the timeline of each transition process, as well  
10 as using my observations to reflect on the involvement of the young person.

11 In the end, each case was introduced by a summary of the transition written from the  
12 perspective of the narrator (me). The summary was followed by the timeline and an  
13 introduction of key-actors, their roles and relationships. Figure 1 shows an example timeline  
14 and how interview extracts were connected to identify key-events during the analysis (for  
15 example, ‘the respite transition’). The final write-up included a narrative that followed the  
16 timeline. I used the identified key-events as headings to introduce steps within the decision-  
17 process, followed by extracts from interviews, which illustrated different people’s  
18 perspectives and reflections on the process. I weaved in my own narrative between interview  
19 extracts, including vignettes from my encounters with the young people and reflections on the  
20 processes from my observations and field notes. Being able to incorporate observations and  
21 interview extracts showed how young people were influencing the process to some extent  
22 through their behaviour in their immediate environments. The narrative conversations read  
23 like a play and this led me to record an audio play based on a composite case, which was  
24 made available to the public and shared by third sector organisations (insert link to audio play  
25 after blind peer-review). Narrative portraiture enabled me to communicate how the transition

1 experience is like for young people and their families and it challenged my own views of  
2 young people as merely passive within the process.

3 Having contextualised the two projects that originated this method, we will now look  
4 more closely at the five analytic steps that we propose as a guideline for the narrative  
5 portraiture.

## 6 **1. Characters**

7 For researchers interested in interpersonal or relational phenomena, it is crucial to identify the  
8 characters in participants' stories, as they will become an essential part of the data analysis.  
9 The first step in this method of 'narrative portraiture' consists of 'colour-marking' the text,  
10 which can be done with electronic or hard copies of the transcriptions. Using a colour that is  
11 consistent across all transcripts helps to have a quickly identifiable visual cue. As seen in  
12 figure 2, the text highlighted in blue indicates all the people who are present in the narration.  
13 Characters can be present in the story explicitly or implicitly. For example, in the research on  
14 gay men's identities, participants often talked about 'sexual experiences', which implies  
15 another person in addition to the teller. The 'sexual experience' is therefore colour-marked in  
16 blue, as it implies the presence of a 'hidden' character. This first step in the narrative  
17 portraiture method equates the location of characters in terms of Labov and Waletzki's  
18 (2006) guidelines. Further analysis will benefit from categorising the participant as the  
19 protagonist, and other characters as main, secondary, unfolding or incidental characters.

## 20 **2. Time**

21 The second analytic step we suggest is to take a linear approach to understanding process,  
22 although this is not the only possibility. Linear approaches can be problematic because a  
23 sequenced structure is applied to people's lives, when life can often be rather chaotic and  
24 formless (Frank, 1997; Freeman, 1998). When developing stories, researchers should try to

1 capture the way in which the stories were told to them and some narratives might not follow a  
2 linear pattern (Goldstein, 2012); McAdams, 2006). For examples of ‘chaotic’ narratives, see  
3 Frank, (1995). Additionally, when exploring processes involving different people and when  
4 trying to capture macro influences, timelines might need to have different layers. Timelines  
5 can thus be simple or complex, involving diverging paths and gaps. To develop timelines,  
6 interview transcripts, field notes or documents can be coded looking for references to time  
7 and identifying relevant events, actions or experiences. To create timelines, researchers might  
8 want to use visual displays using software such as Microsoft Excel or Adobe Illustrator.

9

10 (Insert figure 1)

11

12 The timescale can be as short as the immediate past (moments ago) to a longer scale (years  
13 ago). A sense of time is identifiable when participants state it overtly through sentences such  
14 as: ‘*I was 20*’, ‘*I haven’t spoken to my mum in 15 years*’, or it can also be more implicit,  
15 ‘*when I was studying at Manchester University*’, which can only be put in a timeframe in the  
16 context of the narrative as a whole.

### 17 **3. *Orientation in Space and Circumstances***

18 The next step in the narrative portraiture method invites researchers to identify the  
19 ‘orientation signs’ (Labov & Waletzky, 2006). To do this, we suggest colour-marking – green  
20 in figure 2 – all the sentences that orient the story in space and circumstances. ‘Space’ can be  
21 understood as macro-geography (cities, countries, continents), as micro-space (a bedroom, a  
22 desk, across the road), or it can be a virtual space (online, a state of mind, an emotional  
23 space). This part of the process constitutes a mapping process that can be very clear as in ‘*we*  
24 *came to Manchester*’ or ‘*he lived 300 miles away*’. In the second sentence the implication of  
25 ‘300 miles away’ gives us a different quality that needs to be analysed in the context of the

1 whole story.

#### 2 **4. Key events/Turning points**

3 Going back to the storyline, we now suggest identifying key events and turning points. The  
4 storylines will include various events or actions but not all of them will stand out or help with  
5 understanding the ‘why’ within the research question. Key events might relate to important  
6 relationships, changes in people’s lifestyle, inner and outer changes, and individual or  
7 external influences (such as the introduction of new legislation, economic or political change,  
8 an illness, a change in perspective, or losing a close friend). Within this process, it becomes  
9 important to keep an awareness on how internal and external influences interact; this will  
10 help with developing a holistic and in-depth understanding of the interdependence of  
11 individuals and their environments moving through time.

#### 12 **5. Intersection of phenomena**

13 Often researchers in social science look for complex phenomena that involve three or more  
14 concepts, aspects, or factors. When working with complex narrative data, we suggest looking  
15 at this intertwining of concepts by locating how they operate separately in the narrative  
16 and mapping them in the same way as the characters and orientation in space and  
17 circumstances. The task requires operationalising these concepts according to the theoretical  
18 framework of the research. For example, in the research on gay men’s identities the three  
19 concepts that needed to be operationalised were ‘identity’, ‘erotic’ and ‘romantic’  
20 relationships (*reference blanked for blind peer review*). In this case, the theoretical  
21 framework brought to light that ‘identity’ often comes across in the narrative when the  
22 individual is in crisis (Lawler, 2014), therefore, it was crucial to locate – and colour-mark –  
23 those episodes of crisis in the narration.

1 (Insert figure 2)

2 In figure 2, romantic moments have been identified as they are coloured in yellow, erotic  
3 moments have been highlighted in pink, and episodes of identity crises are identified with a  
4 stormy cloud. With these elements mapped out, the coloured and signalled text provides a  
5 visual indicator of the intersection of the three concepts. This intersection constitutes a core  
6 feature of the narrative portraiture method as it offers the opportunity to locate complex  
7 concepts that are often difficult to pin down. An example of a narrative portrait derived from  
8 this method can be seen in the following link, which presents the story of Gustav, a man  
9 whose narrative of ‘not being properly gay’ demonstrates the complexity of some people’s  
10 narratives and the need to show those intricate qualities (insert link after blind peer review).

## 11 **Discussion**

12 Narrative portraiture offers a political shift towards focusing on people rather than on abstract  
13 results. Whilst a common understanding of the purpose of methodological approaches is to  
14 elucidate concepts, identify categories, or themes to understand certain phenomena, narrative  
15 portraiture brings the person to the fore and highlights that a portrayal of a sole story can be,  
16 not only a medium to understand a research phenomenon, but also a valuable research output  
17 in itself. Thus, in narrative portraiture the key ‘finding’ of a research project is the person’s  
18 story. In communicating people’s stories and providing the context in which these stories  
19 happen, the method involves the audience and recognises them as able to understand the  
20 phenomena under investigation, ask questions, and draw their own conclusions. In this way,  
21 readers/listeners are more active in the construction of knowledge and become witnesses to  
22 the existence of people whose lives are largely hidden from mainstream society.

23 In both of our research projects, meeting with participants and listening to their  
24 experiences and views made strong impressions on us. This made us look for a method that

1 would allow us to acknowledge the research encounter when carrying out our analysis. We  
2 wanted to present findings that were contextualised in broader social spheres, while being  
3 able to evoke the impression of the people we had met. Some approaches to narrative analysis  
4 focus on short stories (Georgakopoulou, 2007) or on the conversational exchanges during the  
5 interview (Gee, 1986; Gee & Grosjean, 1984), but we aimed to see participants' narratives  
6 within the macro context in which these lives happen because we believe that life stories and  
7 identities are best interpreted holistically. As put by Catherine Riessman (1993), some people  
8 knit together a number of themes into coherent and extended accounts that make a  
9 categorisation process difficult and fragment what is an extended narrative. This narrative  
10 approach allowed us to map our data and visualise places where narrations addressed the  
11 intertwining of individual and macro-social aspects.

12

### 13 *Narrative portraits as an evocative method that builds a bridge between research and* 14 *audiences*

15         Depending on their data, researchers will be able to develop different kinds of  
16 portraits. In projects where the role of the researcher is more in the foreground, researchers  
17 might want to consider writing themselves into the story. Narrative portraits give space to  
18 researchers to include their own experiences and this might aid a more transparent reflection  
19 of the research process. By bringing their own reflections and experiences of the research  
20 process into the story, the role of the researcher is positioned and contextualised. We believe  
21 that this might lead to a more transparent account by making the situational conditions of the  
22 research process visible (that is, by explaining what it was like to be the researcher).  
23 Furthermore, the voice of the researcher can build a bridge between the reader and the  
24 participants' experiences as it can be used to offer reflections and pose questions. Similarly,  
25 because the developed stories stay embedded in the concrete actions and experiences of



1 people and offer a more vivid and sensory account (Stake, 1995), they draw the reader in and  
2 build a connection to the reader's own personal experiences as they get a sense of 'being  
3 there' (Vanwynsberghe & Khan, 2007).

#### 4 *Narrative portraiture to help structure and make sense of data*

5 One of the dangers of qualitative research, particularly for novice researchers, is the amount  
6 of data that is collected and the danger that the researcher loses focus and gets lost (Miles &  
7 Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2014). Narrative portraiture will help researchers to structure their  
8 data and understand complexity and ambiguity within narratives, without losing context, nor  
9 losing sight of individual accounts and perspectives. Within interviews, participants might  
10 express mixed views that could be seen as contradictory thoughts or feelings. However, this  
11 apparent contradiction does not invalidate potentially useful data; contradictions are often  
12 associated with the complexity of people's experiences that cannot be 'cleansed' to reflect  
13 neat findings. Contradictions might reflect changes in circumstances within participants'  
14 lives. Narrative portraiture is able to emphasise processes as they occur over time and  
15 therefore is able to illustrate complexity and ambiguities.

16 Narrative portraiture has the flexibility to be used across different data sources such as  
17 interview transcripts, observations, field notes, and documents. Researchers who use case  
18 studies or ethnography might find that the approach helps them to integrate their data. There  
19 is little literature on how to analyse data from different data sources and triangulation is often  
20 conceptualised as adding to research validity on the basis that different methods are thought  
21 to verify the same result. However, within our narrative approach, triangulation is not  
22 understood as a means to test for one single event or outcome. Instead, using different data  
23 sources resembles the process of piecing together a puzzle (Maxwell, 2012). The codes that  
24 we identified in table 1 can be used across data sources to help researchers illuminate

1 different aspects of their data and to look at it from different angles. For example, interviews  
2 can be coded using all five questions within table 1; documents might give the researcher  
3 information about when events took place and who was there; while observations and  
4 fieldnotes can bring in the perspective of the researcher to reflect on key-events and  
5 phenomena of interest.

## 6 **Conclusion**

7 Through narrative portraiture, we analysed and arranged the structure of the data for the sake  
8 of coherence and flow, but the content remained mostly entirely verbatim. We argue that  
9 when the participant's voice cannot be included or the portrait requires additional narration  
10 from the researcher, we are explicit about how our researcher's voice shapes/influences the  
11 narrative. This is a crucial move that aims to account for the 'epistemic privilege' (Pillow,  
12 2015) that defines what counts as valid knowledge, especially when the research poses the  
13 risk of reproducing oppressive dynamics for participants who have been disadvantaged or  
14 have experienced oppression. In one of the examples that we used in this article, the  
15 narratives of gay men were analysed through this method and the final product was presented  
16 in their own words. This act seems essential in cases where groups have been deprived of the  
17 right to speak for themselves, such as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT)  
18 people, whose lives have been medicalised, criminalised, debated, and treated as profane by  
19 medical, legal, academic, and religious authorities but little opportunity has been given for  
20 them to say what being LGBT means to them (Reference blinded for peer review). Thus, by  
21 focusing the analytic work on presenting a more complete and evocative narrative in their  
22 own words, narrative portraiture aims to minimise the common pitfall in which papers  
23 display a quotation of what a participant said and then the researcher 'explains' with their  
24 (our) authorial voice what they meant. Similarly, the second example used in this article  
25 followed young people with severe intellectual disability – on their transition from school to

1 adult services. Since young people were mostly non-verbal, the example shows an indirect  
2 portrait through the narratives of those involved in making decisions for them; parents, social  
3 workers, teachers, adult service staff, health professionals, and local authority management.  
4 The absence of these young people’s voices highlights the power that researchers – and other  
5 ‘experts’ – have in the portrayal of participants’ realities and invokes researchers’ reflexivity  
6 in creating methodologies that make transparent the research process and are accountable for  
7 the ethics of representation.

8 In the case of two of the themes we dealt with in our research projects, we are aware that  
9 these aspects interweave with, and are therefore inseparable from, many other areas of  
10 participants’ lives. The narrative portraiture method allowed us to acknowledge and manage  
11 that complexity while simultaneously focus on the phenomenon under investigation. The  
12 narrative portraiture method as an analytical tool suggests that the emphasis on complex  
13 narratives is, not only comprehensive of the ways in which people experience their lives, but  
14 also reflects the experience of the research encounter and makes both participants’ and the  
15 researcher’s perceptions more visible. This reminds us as researchers that behind the research  
16 findings or outputs, there are people whose stories should be honoured.

## 17 **Disclosure statement**

18 No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## 19 **References**

- 20 Abma, T.A. (2000). Fostering learning in organizing through narration: Questioning myths and  
21 stimulating multiplicity in two performing arts schools. *European Journal of Work and*  
22 *Organizational Psychology*. 9(2), 211-231.
- 23 Anderson, H. (2012a). Collaborative Practice: A Way of Being “With”. *Psychotherapy and Politics*  
24 *International*, 10(2), 130-145. doi:10.1002/ppi.1261
- 25 Anderson, H. (2012b). Collaborative Relationships and Dialogic Conversations: Ideas for a  
26 Relationally Responsive Practice (English). *Family Process*, 51(1), 8-24.
- 27 Arribas-Ayllon, M., & Walkerdine, V. (2008). Foucauldian discourse analysis. In W. Stainton Rogers &  
28 C. Willig (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research in psychology [electronic resource]*  
29 / edited by Carla Willig and Wendy Stainton-Rogers. Los Angeles, [Calif.]; London: SAGE.

- 1 Ayres, L., Kavanaugh, K., & Knafelz, K. A. (2003). Within-Case and Across-Case Approaches to  
 2 Qualitative Data Analysis. *Qualitative Health Research*, 13(6), 871-883.  
 3 doi:10.1177/1049732303013006008
- 4 Bruner, J. (1991). Self-Making and World-Making. *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 25(1), 67-78.  
 5 doi:10.2307/3333092
- 6 Bruner, J. (2004). Life as Narrative. *Social Research*, 71(3), 691-710.
- 7 Bruner, J. S. (1986). *Actual minds, possible worlds / Jerome Bruner*: Cambridge, Mass. ; London :  
 8 Harvard University Press, 1986.
- 9 Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2011). Autoethnography: An Overview. *Historical Social*  
 10 *Research / Historische Sozialforschung*, 36(4 (138)), 273-290.
- 11 Erickson, F. (1977). SOME APPROACHES TO INQUIRY IN SCHOOL-COMMUNITY ETHNOGRAPHY.  
 12 *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 8(2), 58-69. doi:10.1525/aeq.1977.8.2.05x1396r
- 13 Etherington, K. (2009). Life story research: A relevant methodology for counsellors and  
 14 psychotherapists. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, 9(4), 225-233.  
 15 doi:10.1080/14733140902975282
- 16 Flyvbjerg, B. (2006). Five misunderstandings about case : Study research (English). *Cinq malentendus*  
 17 *à propos du cas (French)*, 12(2), 219-245.
- 18 Frank, A. W. (1997). *The wounded storyteller : body, illness, and ethics* (Paperback edition. ed.).  
 19 Chicago, Ill. ; London: University of Chicago Press.
- 20 Freeman, M. (1998). *Mythical Time, Historical Time, and The Narrative Fabric of the Self* (Vol. 8).
- 21 Gee, J. P. (1986). Units in the production of narrative discourse. *Discourse Processes*, 9(4), 391-422.  
 22 doi:10.1080/01638538609544650
- 23 Gee, J. P., & Grosjean, F. (1984). Empirical evidence for narrative structure. *Cognitive science*, 8(1),  
 24 59-85. doi:[http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0364-0213\(84\)80025-7](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0364-0213(84)80025-7)
- 25 Georgakopoulou, A. (2007). *Small stories, interaction and identities*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam : John  
 26 Benjamins Pub. Co.
- 27 Georgakopoulou, A., & Goutsos, D. (2004). *Discourse analysis [electronic resource] : an introduction /*  
 28 *Alexandra Georgakopoulou and Dionysis Goutsos*: Edinburgh : Edinburgh University Press,  
 29 c2004.
- 30 Gilligan, C., Spencer, R. , Weinberg, M. K. & Bertsch, T. (2003). On the listening guide: a  
 31 voice-centered relational method. In J. E. R. L. Y. P. M. Camic (Ed.), *Qualitative Research in*  
 32 *Psychology: Expanding Perspectives in Methodology and Design*. (pp. 157 – 172).  
 33 Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- 34 Goldstein, D. E. (2012). Rethinking ventriloquism: Untellability, chaotic narratives, social justice, and  
 35 the choice to speak for, about, and without. *Journal of Folklore Research*, 49(2), 179-198.
- 36 Gottschall, J., & Wilson, D. S. (2005). *The Literary Animal: Evolution and the Nature of Narrative*.  
 37 Illinois: Northwestern University Press.
- 38 Labov, W. (1972). *Language in the inner city : studies in the Black English vernacular*. Philadelphia:  
 39 Philadelphia : University of Pennsylvania Press.
- 40 Labov, W., & Waletzky, J. (2006). *Narrative analysis : oral versions of personal experience / William*  
 41 *Labov and Joshua Waletzky*: 2006.
- 42 Lawler, S. (2014). *Identity [electronic resource] : sociological perspectives / Steph Lawler* (2nd ed. ed.):  
 43 [Hoboken] : Wiley.
- 44 Maxwell, J. A. (2012). *A realist approach for qualitative research*. Los Angeles, London: Sage.
- 45 McAdams, D. (2008). Personal narratives and the life story. In O. John, R. Robins, & L. A. Pervin (Eds.),  
 46 *Handbook of personality: Theory and research* (pp. 241-261): Guilford Press.
- 47 McAdams, D. P. (1997). *The stories we live by : personal myths and the making of the self / Dan P.*  
 48 *McAdams*: New York, N.Y. ; London, England : Guilford Press, [1997?].
- 49 McAdams, D. P., & Bowman, P. J. (2001). Narrating life's turning points: Redemption and  
 50 contamination. In D. P. McAdams, R. Josselson, & A. Lieblich (Eds.), *Turns in the road:*  
 51 *Narrative studies of lives in transition*. (pp. 3-34): American Psychological Association.

- 1 McAdams, D. P., & Guo, J. (2014). How Shall I Live? Constructing a Life Story in the College Years.  
2 *New Directions for Higher Education*, 2014(166), 15-23. doi:10.1002/he.20091
- 3 Mignolo, W. D. (2009). Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom.  
4 *Theory, Culture & Society*, 26(7-8), 159-181. doi:10.1177/0263276409349275
- 5 Miles, M., & Huberman, M. (1994). Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook. *Journal of*  
6 *Environmental Psychology*, 14(4), 336-337. doi:10.1016/S0272-4944(05)80231-2
- 7 Pillow, W. S. (2015). Reflexivity as Interpretation and Genealogy in Research. *Cultural Studies ↔*  
8 *Critical Methodologies*, 15(6), 419-434. doi:10.1177/1532708615615605
- 9 Plummer, K. (1995). *Telling sexual stories : power, change, and social worlds / Ken Plummer*: London :  
10 Routledge, 1995.
- 11 Richardson, L., & St. Pierre, E. A. (2005). Writing: A Method of Inquiry. In *The Sage handbook of*  
12 *qualitative research*, 3rd ed. (pp. 959-978). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Ltd.
- 13 Ricoeur, P. (1991). Narrative Identity. *Philosophy Today*, 35(1), 73. doi:10.5840/philtoday199135136
- 14 Riessman, C. K. (1993). *Narrative analysis*. Newbury Park, Calif., London, [England]: Newbury Park,  
15 Calif., London, England : Sage.
- 16 Riessman, C. K. (2008). *Narrative methods for the human sciences*. Los Angeles, Calif.: Sage  
17 Publications.
- 18 Speedy, J. (2005). Failing to come to terms with things: a multi-storied conversation about  
19 poststructuralist ideas and narrative practices in response to some of life's failures.  
20 *Counselling & Psychotherapy Research*, 5(1), 65-73.
- 21 Speedy, J. (2008). *Narrative inquiry and psychotherapy*. Basingstoke [England], New York [USA]:  
22 England, New York : Palgrave Macmillan.
- 23 Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks, Calif. ; London: Sage.
- 24 Todorov, T. (1971). The Two Principles of Narrative. *Diacritics*, 1(1), 37.
- 25 Vanwynsberghe, R., & Khan, S. (2007). Redefining Case Study. *International Journal of Qualitative*  
26 *Methods*, 6(2), 80-94. doi:10.1177/160940690700600208
- 27 Walmsley, J. (1995). Life History Interviews with People with Learning Disabilities. *Oral History*, 23(1),  
28 71-77.
- 29 Woodcock, C. (2005). The silenced voice in literacy: listening beyond words to a “struggling”  
30 adolescent girl. *Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice*, 2(1),  
31 144-154. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/17521882.2010.497766>
- 32 Yin, R. K. (2014). *Case study research : design and methods* (Fifth edition.. ed.). Los Angeles: Los  
33 Angeles : SAGE.