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Writing your thesis  
A guide for postgraduate students

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# INTRODUCTION

*Anne Ryan and Tony Walsh*

This book is designed for students returning to learning at postgraduate level in the Arts and Social Sciences. It is an expanded version of an earlier publication entitled 'Researching and Writing your Thesis'. The additional material in this volume has been included in response to requests from readers.

As with the earlier version the contributors have not attempted to replicate what is valuable in existing research texts, instead they have sought to produce a book that addresses the particular concerns of postgraduate students who may not have engaged in formal studies for many years. Such students are likely to be both excited and daunted by the prospect of writing a thesis; the book attempts to meet their needs in a practical way.

We are aware that while much has been written about how best to structure and deliver courses to accommodate the needs of adult students, little attention has been paid to supporting and guiding adult students when it comes to writing a thesis. It has been our experience that most mature postgraduate students select topics for their theses that relate directly to their personal or professional lives. Because of their life experiences they are familiar with the nuances and otherwise occluded features of these environments and as such they are well placed to produce new knowledge as well as informed and informative theses. However, unlike traditional students who move directly from school to degree programmes and then continue on to further studies, those who return to undertake postgraduate diplomas or degrees after a significant break often worry that they have lost touch with the skills of studying and writing for academic purposes. The content and layout of this book have been informed by the experiences of mature postgraduate students while writing their theses. Although mature postgraduate students are the primary target audience, it is hoped that the book will also be of use to a wider audience of researchers.

## **The purpose of the book**

The main purpose of this book is to explain in a clear and straightforward manner how to research and write a thesis and to do so within a post-positivist conceptual framework. To do this we:

- Provide an exploration of post-positivism in a research context;
- Outline a step-by-step approach to constructing and writing a thesis;
- Focus on the data-gathering methods used by students undertaking post-positivist research;
- Explain the terminology commonly encountered in research literature;
- Invite adult students to recognise the contribution their life experience can make to their research;
- Guide students towards sources of information.

A secondary purpose of this book is to highlight the intrinsic value of acquiring expertise in research and its applicability beyond the world of academia. The capacity to adopt an investigative position and to draw on a range of data gathering and analytical skills are invaluable in the work place. They are essential tools when called on to produce position papers and complete project applications or evaluations. They are also vital aids to assessing the worth of other research or when commissioning research.

### **The art of thesis-writing**

Each new thesis is part of a chain of knowledge. It builds on or challenges what has gone before and will in turn be built on or challenged. Writing a thesis gives you an opportunity to make your unique contribution to deepening the collective understanding of a topic, event or phenomenon. To contribute in this way calls for expertise in your chosen topic and an ability to conduct research. These capacities, however, need to be augmented by a sense of wonderment, curiosity, and a desire to make meaning of the world. This book, like all research books, can only provide insights into the skills required. You, as the thesis writer, must supply the passion, fervour and creativity, all of which are necessary to enliven your contribution to knowledge.

A questioning disposition, combined with a topic that is of interest to you, will ensure commitment to the work without which the thesis is likely to lack conviction and may never be completed.

### **How to use this book**

The first chapter in this book explores post-positivist research and discusses the implications of this approach for every stage in the conception and construction of a thesis. This is a chapter you should read through first to get an overall sense of what is meant by the term research in the context of post-positivism. As your thesis writing progresses it may be useful to return to Chapter One regularly to refamiliarise yourself with the specific details that are relevant to the part of your thesis you are working on at that time.

### **Chapter One: Post-Positivist Approaches to Research**

This chapter traces the origins of post-positivism. It first looks at positivism which, although it continues to influence much of our everyday thinking on what constitutes reliable research, has many shortcomings when it comes to providing insights into multifaceted social phenomena or events. Post-positivism emerged as an attempt to provide an approach that can accommodate and embrace these complexities.

This chapter considers the position which post-positivism affords the researcher: that of a learner whose task is to interpret the meaning of what s/he encounters rather than to establish universal truth. Within the researcher-as-learner position there is ample opportunity to draw on what you already know. As you sift through information and decide on its level of importance for your study and as you decipher the sometimes obscured meanings embedded in this information, you will become aware of the multiplicity of lenses through which you encounter and view the world. In doing so you will review your existing wealth of experiences in ways that allow for new insights. This chapter highlights how the discipline of this approach will enable you to encounter afresh what you already know.

### **Chapter Two: Constructing Your Thesis**

This chapter aims to demystify the process of researching and writing a thesis by defining key terms and outlining the practical steps you need to take to get started. It describes what a thesis is and how it is structured. It suggests how to go about selecting a topic and a research question that will focus your work. It outlines the role your supervisor will play and offers advice on what you can do to get the maximum benefit from his/her support. The chapter finishes with a brief overview of the breadth of learning that comes from writing a thesis.

### **Chapter Three: Sourcing Information for Your Thesis**

By posing a series of frequently asked questions, this chapter explains how to access different kinds of information from both printed and electronic sources. It provides guidelines to help evaluate the quality of the information and concludes with a section on how to construct a bibliography or list of references.

### **Chapter Four: Critical Thinking and Your Research**

This chapter explores the importance of critical thinking within a post-positivist approach to research. The chapter argues that critical thinking is a cyclical on-going process that informs all aspects of the research process. It also demystifies what is meant by the terms and concepts involved in critical thinking. It explores the implications of critical thinking for how you approach the reading, data gathering, data analysis and writing of your thesis.

### **Chapter Five: Originality in Post Graduate Research**

Universities require that postgraduate research is original. This chapter explores what is meant by originality in terms of the topic you choose, how you approach the topic, the research methodologies you use and how you construct your thesis. In doing so it suggests strong links between the requirement for originality and that of being critical as discussed in Chapter Four.

### **Chapter Six: Doing a Review of Literature**

This chapter details how to construct that important core of your thesis, the literature review. It discusses the role of the literature review within the overall thesis; it talks about what should be included and what can be excluded; and it contextualises these decisions within the post-positivist approach introduced in Chapter One. It also emphasises the importance of starting to write up the review as early as possible and provides guidelines on how to begin and how to refine your early drafts as you read more and deepen your understanding of what is already known about your topic.

### **Chapter Seven: Methodology: Collecting Data**

This chapter delineates the importance of understanding how you approach your research topic and the subtle interplay of forces that shape your data.

### **Chapter Eight: Selecting a Methodology: A Case study**

This chapter underlines the importance of choosing a methodology that provides the best access to the data you require in order to address your research questions or objectives. The chapter instances the use of a methodology informed by a feminist epistemological stance in order to explore complex gendered dynamics in a particular work site.

### **Chapter Nine: Using Narrative Inquiry**

This chapter explores the use of narrative inquiry as a post-positive research method. The chapter suggests how stories can be used to explore the meanings that inform behaviours, values and assumptions. The chapter concludes by providing a detailed description of the use of auto-ethnography and fictionalisation in research.

### **Chapter Ten: Methodology: Analysing Qualitative Data and Writing up Your Findings**

In this chapter the concept of analysis is carefully detailed followed by an explanation of the component steps to a successful interpretation of data.

### **Chapter Eleven: Academic Writing, Control and Letting it Flow**

This chapter explores some of the practices and processes used in creative writing and considers how they might aid you in writing your thesis.

### **Chapter Twelve: From Carthorse to Pegasus: Using a Research Journal in Thesis Writing**

This chapter explores how a research journal can be used to record the varied experiences encountered when undertaking research. It considers how the act of journal writing hones the writer's capacity to be reflexive. This in turn creates the conditions that favour a critical and creative appraisal of the thesis topic and an increased understanding of one's own epistemological stance.

### **Chapter Thirteen: Finishing Your Thesis**

This chapter details the different tasks that need to be accomplished in order to complete your thesis. It begins by looking at the purpose of the final chapter. Two key questions are posed that will serve to guide your thinking as you compose a conclusion that will consolidate the research and writing you have done so far. It then details the opening and closing segments of the thesis that frame the main text.

A black and white photograph of a landscape. In the foreground, there is a wide, calm river or lake. The middle ground is dominated by a dense line of trees, possibly a forest or a wooded area. The background shows a hazy, overcast sky. The overall tone is somber and atmospheric.

CHAPTER ONE

POST-POSITIVIST APPROACHES TO  
RESEARCH

# CONSTRUCTING YOUR THESIS

*Anne Ryan and Tony Walsh*

## **Introduction**

This chapter explores a number of questions most commonly asked by students as they embark on writing a thesis:

- What is a thesis?
- How is a thesis structured?
- How do I select a thesis topic?
- How do I formulate a research question or hypothesis?
- How can I be sure I take an objective angle in writing my thesis?
- How do I start my thesis?
- What is theory?
- What can I expect from my supervisor?
- What will I learn from writing a thesis?

## **What is a thesis?**

A thesis is the written account of your systematic exploration of a particular topic or subject area. Research is essentially the term that encapsulates this process of exploration.

Postgraduate students, particularly those who have been out of education for some time, often view research as unfamiliar and difficult. The reality is that research is neither alien nor mysterious. Kirby & McKenna (1989, p. 17) suggest that 'we already do research as we interact with the everyday world...where we focus on problems, ask questions, collect information and analyse and interpret data'. For example every time you plan a journey, shop for something you need or select from a menu, you seek out information, you sort it, you draw on what you already know, you take account of your available resources and you make choices. As a researcher you will use these same skills. The main difference is that in the research process you exercise these skills in more conscious and formalised ways and record what you do in writing.

**Student Comment:**

*Doing the research on my chosen topic was actually not much different from asking the kinds of questions we all ask from day to day about the things that interest us. I found that I pursued the research process in two parallel ways. First there was the reading on how to do research. Then there were conversations with family, friends and colleagues, snippets heard on the radio, random thoughts or reflections occurring while driving, falling asleep or daydreaming. I felt it was important to capture these and I kept a notebook at hand to jot down these rich but more random ideas. What I wrote wasn't always useful to put in my thesis but writing things down helped me to get used to recording what I was thinking and I found myself becoming more alert to everything.*

A more formal definition of research suggests that it is a process of critical enquiry carried out in a systematic way. These key words are elaborated in the box that follows.

Research is a **process of critical enquiry** undertaken in a **systematic** way.

**Process** implies an activity that proceeds in stages. This means that there is a clear step-by-step procedural route followed by the researcher and clearly evident to the person reading the completed thesis. It is important for the researcher to remember that while the underlying approach is a step-by-step one, this does not necessarily imply a linear progress. Each new discovery can generate revisions in other parts of the project.

**Critical** implies interrogation, analysis and judgement. It implies the recognition and questioning of underlying assumptions - both your own and those of others, including the experts you will encounter. Words such as 'analysis' and 'analytic' are embodied in the concept of critical. While good research must always accurately and creatively describe and chronicle, it must also explore the reasons and conditions that cause events to take place. It's not just about asking the *who* and *what* questions; it also requires you to look at the *how* and *why* questions.

**Enquiry** is where there is a focus on a particular topic of interest, which needs to be purposeful in that it contributes to, draws on and/or questions what is currently known within a specific field of study. (cont.)

**Systematic** is the necessity of looking at your research in terms of clear stages that need to be dealt with in a logical and orderly fashion. This approach allows you to construct order out of what could easily become chaos if not consciously managed in a systematised way.

**How is a thesis structured?**

The structure of a thesis follows a fixed format, although aspects of that format may vary somewhat depending on the topic being explored and the norms of the department where you are studying.

The main body of the thesis is constructed in three parts. The first part sets the scene for the research question you have decided to investigate and gives a general background to it including what is already known about the topic. It also includes a rationale for your choice of research question. The central part of the thesis presents your research and a discussion of what you have discovered. The final part explores the meaning and relevance of your findings in light of what is already known about the topic.

While these three parts perform different functions they are essentially interdependent. The thread that links them is your research topic. The first and last parts serve to frame your research. Within each part there may be one or more chapters depending on the size of your thesis and the requirements of the department to which you are attached. When writing a chapter of the thesis it is important to be conscious of the section to which it most appropriately belongs. Once you locate the chapter appropriately it is possible to stay focused on its function within the overall structure of the thesis.

In addition to these three central parts, every thesis also contains a number of additional pieces. You will need a title page, a list of acknowledgements, an abstract and a table of contents. These come before the main text. Appendices and references come after the text. As these pieces are usually compiled when the thesis is nearing completion, they are outlined in detail in Chapter Thirteen of this book.

It is always a good idea to look at other people's theses, in order to get an idea of the various ways that students lay out their chapters and structure their work. You may get access to these through the department where you are studying or you can consult theses in the library.

The first task in developing a thesis is to select a topic.

## How do I select a thesis topic?

When selecting a thesis topic there are three key points to bear in mind:

1. Select a topic that interests you;
2. Select a topic that is relevant to your field of study;
3. Select a topic that is amenable to academic research in the context of a thesis.

### 1. Select a topic that interests you

While a thesis is an academic research exercise it offers you an opportunity to indulge your curiosity and to find out more about a topic in which you are really interested. There is a common misconception that a thesis topic must be highly technical, or very difficult. This is not the case. However, what is vitally important is your relationship to the topic. Ideally you should find the topic fascinating.

#### Student Comment:

*Everyone is advised when choosing a thesis topic to go for something you are passionate about. This is so valid; at least then you are unlikely to end up bored stiff by the topic and completely unmotivated to keep going.*

At the very least the topic you pick needs to hold your interest over the length of time it takes to complete your thesis. If you are undertaking a Masters degree you may well have to live with this topic for between one and two years. For a PhD you will spend a minimum of three years with the topic and perhaps much longer. Hence it has to be something that is likely to sustain your enthusiasm and curiosity.

### 2. Select a topic that is relevant to your field of study

The second consideration to bear in mind is that your thesis topic needs to be relevant to your area of study. All theses are meant to add to what is already known in a specific subject area.

A thesis may do this by:

- Providing new or innovative analyses of current thinking;
- Combining information from various sources to reveal new conclusions;
- Exploring aspects of a subject not previously studied or widely known.

#### Student Question:

*I was really excited about my thesis topic on the information needs of adults returning to learning. Now I've discovered that someone in a different department did a thesis on an almost identical topic two years ago. Do I need to pick another topic?*

#### Answer:

*Not necessarily. In fact you are really fortunate that work has already been done on this topic. This will be a useful source for you to consult alongside other writing in the area. The fact that the thesis exists allows you to refine your research question so that you build on what has already been done. The list of references at the end of the 'similar' thesis will also be very useful for your literature review. Every researcher brings their unique life experience and understanding to bear on their research and this invariably means that two theses on a similar topic will result in new and different insights. Discuss this further with your supervisor.*

### 3. Select a topic that is amenable to academic research in the context of a thesis

Finally, you need to get some idea about the availability of information on the topic that interests you. You may have a very interesting topic, which is relevant to your course of study, and about which you have a passionate curiosity, but it may be difficult to find relevant literature, or to conduct your research within the timeframe available to you. If this is the case now is the time to either reconsider your topic or refocus on an aspect of it that is amenable to your purpose.

There are two common difficulties that students encounter when selecting a thesis topic:

- 'I just can't come up with a thesis topic. I really can't think of anything to write about';  
and
- 'I have a lot of ideas. How do I decide which of these is the one to work on?'

These are very common dilemmas. If either applies to you try the following exercises.



## Exercises:

### Selecting a thesis topic

#### If you have no ideas...

1. Write down all the subjects that you can think of which interest you.
2. Now take a look at the various areas of your life, work/professional, recreational, family, the groups you belong to, the interests you have, significant events in your life history and so forth. List these.
3. Now ponder the following:
  - Are there any themes that recur in both areas? If so note these.
  - Which of the emergent subjects most interest or engage you? Make a note of these.
  - Are there areas that you always thought you'd like to follow up if only you had the time? Write these down too.

Now look at your lists and note:

- Which of the listed areas most capture your interest?
- Which would you really like to know more about?
- Which have you questions relating to?

Of these, prioritise:

- Which have a clear relevance to your field of study?
- Which are most accessible in terms of information?
- Which do you feel a sense of passion for?

Now make a shortlist of the three or four topics which most fulfil these criteria.

4. Talk over your shortlist with your supervisor.

#### If you have too many ideas

1. List all of your ideas.
2. Prioritise them in order of your interest or passion.
3. Prioritise them next in terms of their relevance to your field of study.
4. Now prioritise them in terms of accessibility of information.
5. Finally create a short list of the three topics that are most amenable in terms of interest, relevance and accessibility.
6. Talk over your shortlist with your supervisor

Remember that your research topic can emerge from interests that do not at first glance appear to offer scope for an academic study. The following example illustrates how an MA student formulated a topic from life experience.

#### Student Question:

*My paternal grandfather was in the Old IRA and at every family occasion his medals were proudly taken from above the big sideboard in our sitting room, for all the family to admire. In contrast my mother's father was in the British Army. He died when she was twelve. Back in Donegal, where his widow and young family lived, the silence that surrounded any mention of his job in England made me aware from childhood that this was something we should not talk about. My mother told me recently that, as the child of a deceased British army soldier, she could have got a scholarship to go to secondary school in England. The local priest advised her mother against following this up. As a result my mother never went to secondary school and is still bitter about this.*

*Now I realise that this ambivalence to the part in history my maternal grandfather played, was not unusual in the Ireland I grew up in. But for years I've been fascinated by my grandfather's story and that of the other men who joined the British Army. I suppose what particularly gripped me was how that particular experience was not only written out of history, but how this process left a legacy of pain and bitterness in our family. I'd really love to be able to do my MA thesis on this, but I don't know how to tackle it.*

**Answer:**

*This student decided his interest in this topic lay in exploring and naming the societal influences that privileged one set of experiences and marginalised the other. His focus allowed him to examine the societal power discourses that serve to create heroes or anti-heroes. (Discourses are covered in Chapters One and Ten)*

Once you have identified your topic, your next task is to formulate a research question or make a statement (hypothesis) that encapsulates the specific aim of your thesis.

**How do I formulate a research question or hypothesis?**

In order to formulate your research question or hypothesis you will need to read recent publications dealing with your topic and/or talk to people active in the field with a view to identifying current issues and concerns.

**Student Question:**

*I've picked a really interesting topic to do my thesis on – adult education in Ireland since World War Two. I think I'd like to do a comparative study between Ireland and the rest of the world. My problem is there are hundreds of books and articles written. I've over twenty books out of the library just now and I feel I'm drowning in information.*

**Answer:**

*This student has identified a topic and now needs to formulate a research question that establishes the precise parameters of her intended area of study. To do this she needs to identify: (i) the specific aspects of adult education that she will focus on, and (ii) the countries she wants to consider. She will need to establish a rationale for selecting both the aspects and the countries.*

Establishing your research question is challenging. Your question or hypothesis needs to be precise so that you do not find yourself grappling with a morass of material because you are not sure what exactly is relevant to your thesis. The question also needs to be feasible given the constraints of time and the prescribed size of your thesis.

It is important to point out that while we talk of a research question, research is rarely about coming up with a definitive answer to that question. Instead it is about gaining new insights that further our understanding of that aspect of the topic which you have chosen to investigate.

Bear in mind that the hypothesis or question once chosen rarely remains static; it will change, evolve and be refined throughout the thesis. Although it will be constantly honed it is not possible to begin to compile the thesis until the first version is clear in your mind. Many students find it useful to write their initial question or hypothesis on a card and put it somewhere where they can look at it regularly, replacing the old version with the more up to date form as it emerges.

**Student Question:**

*I set out with a particular idea for my thesis and now find it is developing in a completely different way. I felt very certain of my research question as I began my research. The more I read the less certain I become. Now most of my views and theories have been turned upside down. It's a very confusing time. Should I go on or pick something safer?*

**Answer:**

*This is a common difficulty. Every researcher encounters shifts in their own perspectives. As you glean more information on any topic it is usual to question your original choices. Learning to manage this sort of uncertainty is important. If you return to your hypothesis or research question regularly and modify or refine it in light of your reading and reflection you will incorporate the shifts in your perspective that come as you engage with your subject. Constant revision will keep you focused and in control. As stated earlier research is a process rather than a linear progression. Each new discovery can generate revisions including a refining of the research question. There are circumstances when it is appropriate to change to a totally different topic, however you can be assured that whatever research question you select within that new topic, it will also need to be refined as you proceed.*

The following exercise is useful in helping to refine your research topic and to establish the precise focus of your thesis.

**Exercise:****Refining your research topic.**

Compose a sentence to complete each of the following using no more than twenty words.

- I am studying...
- Because I want to find out who/why/how ...
- In order to understand how/why/what...

Completing the sentences is difficult particularly at the start of the research process. Most researchers will be dissatisfied with what they write until they are almost finished the thesis. This is due to the dynamic nature of research. The task of thinking through these statements and finding words to describe what you are doing is part of the process of refining your focus. By completing these sentences every so often, you can test your progress. It is particularly useful to get someone else to listen to or to read your statements and comment on the clarity and feasibility of your aims.

**How can I be sure I take an objective angle in writing my thesis?**

Students often ask whether their beliefs and attitudes will influence the research process. As mentioned in the introduction to this book, the authors view research through a post-positivist approach. Within post-positivism the notion of an objective or detached researcher is seen as a myth. It is recognised that as a researcher you bring your life experiences, values and ways of viewing the world to bear on how you approach any topic. This is considered to be the case with even the most logical and deductive questions, methods, and approaches – your biographical affinities and experiences are always at play, and they influence the questions asked and the approach taken. The topic, the specific questions, the data, the analysis of the data and the significance of the findings are all filtered through your frames of reference or meaning repertoires. In a post-positivist approach your presence as the researcher is considered a strength. Crucially, however, you need to show an awareness of your meaning repertoires, and to display the capacity to reflect critically on them.

**Student Comment:**

*It's very disconcerting to have your view of your subject, and lots of other assumptions about the world dismantled; but I suppose it's in this dismantling that you learn.*

We have already discussed the importance of developing an awareness of your own epistemological and theoretical stance in Chapter One of this book. As you become aware of your frames of reference or meaning repertoires you are defining this stance. You need to be conscious of it as you work on your literature review and as you analyse and write up your data. You need to draw attention to your stance and to its significance in the introduction to your thesis. Explain how you were drawn to the topic you have chosen, how your professional background and/or personal story has influenced both your choice of research question and your response to it.

**How do I start my thesis?****Student Comment:**

*When I was writing my thesis I compared its opening structure to a novel. This involved setting the scene in the introduction and using this as an opportunity to grab the attention of the reader, to lure them into the subject by titillating their curiosity to find out more by reading on.*

**What should be covered in the introduction?**

The introduction is one of the most significant sections of a thesis. It needs to tell the reader *what* the thesis is about. It also needs to define *why* the research question is worthy of attention and to assert *why* it is relevant to your broad area of study. Finally it needs to tell the reader exactly *how* the thesis is structured.

In theses that are over 15,000 words in length it is usual for the introduction to form a standalone chapter; in shorter theses it generally forms a section within the first chapter. In either instance its purpose is to:

- Outline your research question/s;
- Explain the relevance of your chosen area of research both for yourself and within your general field of study;

- Describe how your thesis is structured.

Essentially the introduction should expand the thesis title and describe the substance of your thesis in a nutshell, explaining the significance of your research question to you its author, as well as to the wider field of study. It should also include an outline of the broad areas of theory and related research to be discussed in the literature review. It should describe the design of the study. You may also include your methodological approach and your techniques for collecting data (see Chapter Seven for a detailed discussion on the possible alternative locations). It is also useful if the introduction sets out in brief the content of the chapters that follow. Your introduction should provide a smooth transition into the main body of the thesis. In addition the way you write your introduction should enthrall your readers to such an extent that they feel compelled to explore the heart of the work (Day, 1996).

In summary the Introduction has seven main purposes:

1. It introduces your topic and research question;
2. It stimulates the reader's interest;
3. It gives the content of the thesis in a nutshell;
4. It defines the significance of your topic to the your broader field of study;
5. It makes links between the choice of topic and your personal and professional experience;
6. It sets out in brief the content of the chapters that follow;
7. It provides a smooth transition into the main body of the thesis.

#### **When should the introduction be written?**

The introduction is usually drafted in the early stages of writing your thesis and is then periodically revisited and refined as the thesis evolves. It is never possible to finalise it until the thesis itself is at an advanced stage. While the introduction needs to provide a guide to the whole thesis there needs to be a particularly close correlation between it and the last chapter of the thesis; the introduction signals where you intend to go and the concluding chapter indicates what you have discovered on that journey. The evolving nature of the introduction very clearly reflects the fact that a thesis is a work in progress right up to its final moments.

Each chapter and the sections within chapters are interdependent. If you make a change in one area of your thesis this will very likely effect a number of other areas including the introduction.

Many researchers do not even begin to construct the introduction until they are writing the conclusions to their research. While this is an option, there are advantages to drafting the introduction early in the process and reworking it as the thesis progresses. The main benefit is that each time you attempt to articulate the purpose of your thesis it serves to focus your thinking and raise the kinds of concerns and doubts that help to refine your research question. Revisiting the draft introduction on a regular basis also serves to keep you focused on your research question. As you progress it is likely that you will shift the focus of your research and adjust your question accordingly. If you have a working introduction that you amend and change as you go along you will be better able to track any subtle or more dramatic changes that occur.

Before your thesis is completed you need to check that everything outlined in your introduction is included in the body of the work, and that each substantive point made in the body of the text is referred to in the introduction.

#### **What is theory?**

Theory refers to hypotheses that explain particular phenomena.

There are two distinct bodies of theory you need to engage with when researching – firstly, theories pertaining to your thesis topic and secondly, theories pertaining to the research process. The first of these refers to the knowledge that already exists around your topic and to knowledge which may add background and depth to your research. All academic research is concerned with moving scholarship forward; with building on what is already known. This means that as a researcher you are required to familiarise yourself with the key thinkers in your area of interest. You will need to know the issues on which there is agreement among these thinkers and those on which there is disagreement and the reasons for these disagreements. You will also need to be aware of shifts in thinking in the past and even more importantly those that are current. It is useful to identify these early on in the thesis construction process in order to contextualise your piece of work.

The second set of theory relates to the research process itself. Research is a formal process. The credibility of your research is dependent on how you gather and utilise information and your awareness of what is considered best practice with regard to the specific methods you have used. For example if you use interviews or questionnaires to glean information for your thesis you need to know how to construct questions, how to administer the questionnaire or how to conduct the interview and technical information of this kind. You also need to consider philosophical issues that generally pertain to less tangible issues such as the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee. When you construct your thesis you have to take account of both these aspects of the data gathering process. Your thesis will record how you conducted your research and you will refer to writers who have identified how your approach takes account of what they have described as best practice. Chapters One and Seven in this book deal in detail with methodological considerations.

Students often worry about theory. As a mature student returning to postgraduate studies you have probably selected a topic that you know from a practitioner point of view. You may, however, be less familiar with theories that inform this practice.

Theory provides a lens through which you view your particular topic. All academic research is grounded in theory. Your thesis is no different. Once you have selected a research question you need to consider the theoretical framework which will best enable you to explore that question. Theory provides a range of general explanations that have been found useful in providing answers to 'how' and 'why' questions. For example in addressing the question 'How do people learn?' or 'Why do organisations behave in particular ways?' a particular theoretical framework will provide a discrete range of explanations. These will enable you to tease out and explore the issues that lie behind these questions. Essentially theory allows you to become an observer, to compare and contrast and to come up with differing explanations about a topic or event. It provides a structure to discuss what you observe and to speculate on its meaning. It allows you to put order on and deal with complexity.

Theory is necessary in order to

get some grip on complexity, to narrow the problem, to develop parallels with other situations that may seem different, but provide the basis for new ways of looking at things. Only theory can give us access to unexpected questions and ways of changing situations from within. (Schatz & Walker, 1995, p. 107)

In your writing you need to make the theories you use explicit.

Specific disciplines have their own dominant theoretical perspectives. Psychological or sociological theories will provide differing vantage points from which to consider a research question. Each will tend to highlight different aspects of what is being examined, will focus on different questions and will emphasise specific facets within their explanation. Psychological theory is likely to highlight patterns of individual response; sociological theory is likely to focus on social or group patterns. The choice of theory, which will offer an appropriate lens for your study, is akin to focusing your telescope on a particular piece of landscape whose detail, terrain, light and shade you wish to explore. In selecting the theoretical framework through which to view your subject you need to be guided by the dominant theories in your field of study, the aspects of the topic that the theories highlight, and their relevance to the thesis question or hypothesis you have chosen.

It is never possible to consider all aspects of an issue. In selecting a particular theoretical framework you are explicitly indicating the aspects of the topic that you wish to highlight. In analysing a particular topic for your thesis you may need to draw on a number of theories.

#### **Student Comment:**

*I had a great idea for my thesis and was really excited about it. Then I saw my supervisor. He told me that while my thesis proposal would make a really good project report it wouldn't make a thesis because it lacked any theoretical framework. What is a theoretical framework and why does a thesis have to have one? I guess I'm asking what is the difference between a thesis and a long essay or report? I think if I could figure that out in my head before I start it would save time in the long run.*

Students undertaking research for the first time often remark that they do not know 'where to put the theory' in their thesis. In making this kind of remark, they are working on the assumption that there is one special place for theory and that it should be confined to this area alone. On the contrary, theoretical considerations should form a constant theme in your thesis. While they usually come under more intense scrutiny in the literature review, they should by no means be restricted to that part of the study. You need to refer to them in your introduction, explore them in the literature review, refer to them again as you discuss your methodology, and, crucially, consider how useful they have been to you and how you have developed them, in the analysis and discussion of your data. You also need to make reference to them in your conclusions and recommendations.

## What can I expect from my supervisor?

As a postgraduate student you will be allocated a supervisor to support you in developing and completing your thesis. As well as being familiar with the subject matter of your thesis, your supervisor will have expertise in the process of constructing a thesis and in research methodology.

The supervisor has four distinct areas of responsibility:

1. To be familiar with the standard of thesis required for your programme of study;
2. To establish a level of rapport that is sufficient for you both to engage in dialogue where ideas can be generated, developed, challenged and refined;
3. To create an environment which facilitates you in generating the best thesis you are capable of at this particular stage of your academic career;
4. To maintain an observer position so as to provide you with objective comment.

Supervision provides a learning context in which the specifics of your thesis provide the medium through which the teaching/learning is mediated. In this arrangement your particular research learning needs are paramount.

In general your supervisor will:

- Meet with you on a one-to-one basis to discuss your progress;
- Discuss your ideas;
- Read written drafts of your work;
- Provide you with feedback;
- Encourage you towards clarity of thinking and expression;
- Help you to refine your ideas;
- Question your thinking;
- Invite you to critique your underlying assumptions;
- Critique the structure of your work.

Proofreading and technical proficiency are *your* responsibility. Work presented to your supervisor for comment should already have been checked for grammar, spelling and syntax.

It is often a good idea to find a colleague, friend or fellow student with a good eye for such detail to fulfil this task.

To make the best use of the supervision process you need to:

1. Stay in regular contact with your supervisor.
2. Prepare for your one-to-one sessions by:
  - Having clearly framed questions;
  - Sending written material for comment ahead of the session;
  - Being open to suggestion.
3. Bear in mind that your supervisor needs time to:
  - Read your work;
  - Formulate a useful response.

In the course of your supervision you can expect your supervisor to challenge your thinking and encourage you to fulfil your potential to construct a meaningful thesis.

## What will I learn from writing a thesis?

Writing a thesis offers you an opportunity to gain a deeper knowledge of your topic, of the research process and of yourself.

### Learning about your topic

In the course of writing your thesis you will read widely in your subject area. As a result you will develop a richer and more complex understanding of your topic and the wider context in which it is embedded. This means that you will become familiar with current thinking, and know the issues on which different commentators agree or disagree. Invariably students comment on the breadth and depth of knowledge they have gleaned on their chosen topic by the time they have finished their thesis. They also note that this sense of new learning was retrospective and was not necessarily evident as they were immersed in the process.

### Learning about research

Writing a thesis requires you to gain a comprehensive understanding of research methodologies. In order to address your research question you are required to choose

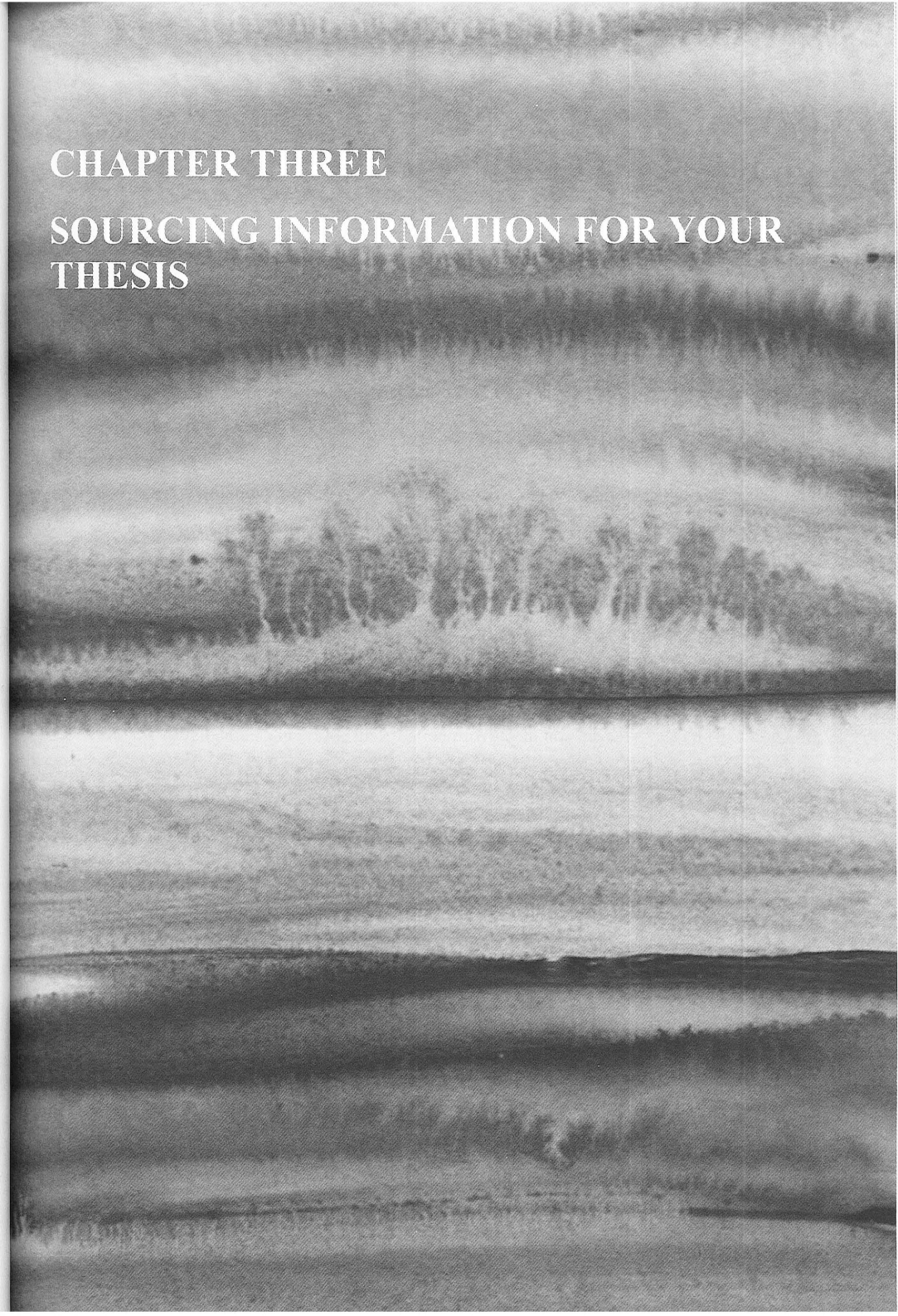
appropriate methodologies to enable you to explore your subject. This means that you are required to gain an appreciation of the various possible options open to you and in the course of the thesis you are called on to justify your choice of methodology. You will also learn how to gather data and present and analyse your findings. This learning, which is necessary to produce a thesis, is also particularly useful for those who are required to conduct, evaluate or commission research in their work environment.

### **Learning about yourself**

Writing a thesis requires you to view and critique your topic from a number of different perspectives. As you interrogate your topic you will also find that you are beginning to question the assumptions that have been central to your ways of seeing the world. While you may not necessarily change your views you will become conscious of them and aware of the assumptions that underlie them. This allows for the possibility of personal change and development.

## CHAPTER THREE

# SOURCING INFORMATION FOR YOUR THESIS



# USING NARRATIVE RESEARCH

*Tony Walsh*

## Introduction

People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories. Story, in the current idiom, is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful. (Clandinin & Connolly, 2000, p. 373)

Stories and story-telling are central to human experience. From earliest times narrative has formed a crucial component in our living and communication. In Chapter Two of this book Anne B Ryan argues that stories are a useful tool for post-positivist researchers. This chapter introduces narrative inquiry, contextualized as a *post-positivist* research genre. (Narratives can also be gathered and analysed in positivist ways but an exploration of this topic is outside the scope of this book). Narrative inquiry concentrates on stories as a way to examine the content and processes of human meaning making and one which also uses stories to communicate researchers' impressions to a wider audience. The chapter's purpose is to whet your appetite, rather than to provide a comprehensive overview of what is both an exciting, slippery and emergent field. It looks first at the role and significance of stories in human living. Having considered the origins of narrative research it then explores some of the distinctive aspects of the genre and concludes by examining two (of the many) forms of narrative inquiry-autoethnography and fictionalization

### **The significance of stories**

Looking at human lived experience we notice that story-telling plays a range of important roles. Through stories we connect with each other and order our experiences. And through the 'grand narratives' of society (such as Marxism, liberalism, feminism or nationalism, Buddhism, Islam or Christianity) varying groupings make sense of the world – often in varying and contradictory ways.

Societies, groups and organisations use stories to educate, to inspire, to warn and to pass on what they consider to be important information. Through accepting meta-stories individuals conform to wider group, tribal or organizational membership and assent to the group's implied or explicit assumptions; it is equally true of course that through *resisting* such stories individuals redefine their identity, or on occasion decide to join other collectivities with their



particular stories and assumptions. In the recounting of stories human groups socialize their members into what they consider acceptable ways of thinking, believing or behaving.

### Stories as primary creators of meaning

Many theorists argue that story-making and storytelling are the *primary* modes through which human beings make sense of their world and their experience (Andrews, Squire, & Tamboukou, 2008; Frank, 2004; Speedy, 2008; White, 1995). They contend that the stories we tell are not just passive vehicles for communication but active agents, operating at various levels of consciousness to form our assumptions and shape our actions. In doing so stories highlight certain aspects of life or meaning, hide others and direct our thinking along certain avenues. And of course an absence of stories about certain events or people also conveys definitive messages about what we believe, think or wish to communicate.

### Stories tell us

While *we* tell stories, in a very real sense stories also tell *us*; they tell us forth in particular ways, guises and identities (Frank, 2004; Meyer, 1996). For instance, family stories author particular identities for specific members. Likewise, societies author the identities of specific groups through story. This is one reason why it is so important to examine their effect on lived experience. The important stories which are significant in defining meaning, assumptions and consequently behaviour, are sometimes quite explicit; often however they reside at an implicit or semi-conscious level. The latter are often particularly potent - partly because it is difficult to recognize and critique what is not explicit. Their effects however will be clearly *felt* even when they are not always cognitively acknowledged or recognized

### An example

A good illustration of the power of both explicit and implicit story lines is seen in an examination of the changing narratives that have been used to define and police Irish identity. In different historical eras very different stories have been told about what it is to be Irish - or not! In the recent past, for instance the dominant story-line, although this was often not openly acknowledged (and rarely critiqued), was that an individual or group had to be white, heterosexual, nationalist, Catholic, born in the country and with at least a cursory knowledge of the Irish language and the GAA to be seen as truly Irish. The effect on those who did not measure up was strongly *felt*. In more recent years the definition of Irishness has broadened extensively, becoming much more inclusive of political, religious and cultural variety. Inscribed in the definitions which we all use as part of our day to day, or professional lives,

there are a range of (often quite implicit) stories about how we need to behave and think in order to be seen as *truly* belonging. The stories which we hold about identity both describe, define and demarcate. This example of how stories define identity underlines why narrative research contends that the gathering and examination of both explicit and implicit stories constitutes an important mode of entrée into how individuals, cultures or groups, structure and make sense of their world. Stories both prescribe and explain behaviour and they reveal assumptions.

### Exercise

Take a moment to reflect on an organization to which you belong, or know well (perhaps related to work, sport, religion or politics).

- What are the main stories which are told by the organization about itself?
- What stories are told about it by outsiders?
- Now consider what do these stories reveal about the organization? About its assumptions? About the society in which it exists?

### Origins of narrative research

Given that stories constitute such a significant part of human life it was only a matter of time before academics became interested in their potential as research tools. In recognizing their power researchers tend to approach stories in three different ways: they study the actual structure of stories with a view to seeing how they work; they analyse particular stories to explore the meanings which they point to and they explore stories as a way of coming to a deeper understanding of how individuals, or groups of individuals, operate in the world and make sense of their experiences. In this chapter we will look mainly at this last approach as it is the one which we (the book's authors) have found most useful and relevant to exploring social realities.

### Beginnings

Anthropologists and ethnographers were among the first researchers to take an academic interest in stories. They tended to present and analyse stories taken *from* a particular culture or group, or alternatively to tell their own stories of such groups. In either instance they were attempting to act as mediums, aspiring to make the experiences, behaviours and meaning-making of one (usually minority or lesser known) culture accessible to a wider audience. Of

course their gathering of stories as well as their analyses and communication of all this was invariably affected by their own assumptive worlds and the personal, professional or cultural lenses (or *stories*) through which they either consciously or unconsciously made sense of their experiences and observations. Sometimes such biases were acknowledged, sometimes not - we will return to this important issue later.

### **Variety of approaches**

In due course the work of anthropologists and ethnographers came to the attention of a wider range of academics who began to understand the potential relevance of stories to their own areas of research interest. And narrative inquiry developed as an important and evolving genre largely within the theoretical context of post-positivism.

In recent years researchers, usually positioned within the social sciences and coming from areas as varied as sociology, adult education, theology, psychology, organizational behaviour, defence studies and history have become fascinated with the potential that storied research could bring to their areas of inquiry. Academics coming from such a wide variety of disciplines brought their own varied (often contradictory) insights, purposes and ideological positionings to the emerging discipline of narrative inquiry. Consequently the world of storied research is very multifaceted with many differing emphases involved and a wide and growing range of methods employed. All of these are continuing to evolve.

### **The core of narrative inquiry**

All this makes the discipline difficult to capture in simple terms. Perhaps the best short-hand conclusion, at least for the present, is to say that narrative research encapsulates many forms of inquiry whose common denominator is the use of story in social research. In narrative research story may be used as a focus for the exploration of social phenomena and/or in the representation of data to an audience. Another core conclusion is that narrative research encourages the collection, exploration and analysis of stories, including those of the researcher, as an entrée to processes of meaning and identity construction.

### **Creativity and narrative inquiry**

While the variety of methodologies involved makes for a difficulty of neat encapsulation around narrative research this also presents possibilities for the use of innovative forms of inquiry in the service of attending to and communicating meaning. The use of creative forms (or combinations of form), *once these are rigorously theoretically justified*, is encouraged in

ways which would be considered inappropriate or unacceptable in other more traditional research paradigms. This apparent looseness has occasionally led to accusations of theoretical sloppiness or lack of academic rigour being levelled at narrative inquiry. However narrative researchers contend that a core requirement, as in all good research, is a forensic attention to the conceptual justification of any techniques used in a particular context. In what is a broad and creative approach to social inquiry poetry, art, cinematic techniques and theatre as well as various forms of written expression (used either singly or in combination) all become potential vehicles for expression in the service of narrative academic inquiry.

### **A broad discipline**

Narrative research is a very broad discipline in that it uses stories in lots of different ways with a view to *wondering* or *hypothesizing* about human behaviour and assumptions. In keeping with its post-positivist origins it honours tentativity in approaching the highly complex and interwoven world of social phenomena. It tries not to be prescriptive and contests the notion that 'research findings' are objective or ultimate truths about a topic or group because it recognises that research representations are themselves stories (rather than totalizing truths or ultimate realities) which researchers tell about certain events or phenomena. Narrative research often focuses on *difference*, not with the intention of 'discovering' universals about human behaviour or assumptions, but rather to open up particularities of experience to a wider viewing. In doing so it tends to focus on the personal or the local, the unusual or marginal of lived experience. In this Department we have tended to use storied research as a way to gain deeper understandings of varied forms of marginality, to hypothesise about how power works, to wonder about processes of silencing or occlusion and to reflect upon and to critique our own complicity as educators (both personally and professionally) in these dynamics. Recent work emanating from this Department using narrative methods has included exploration of topics as diverse as reflexivity in academic supervision, the silencing of minority groups, Irish Defence Forces' peacekeeping efforts in Liberia; and Protestant identity in Ireland.

In summary then the discipline of narrative research recognizes stories as quite unique conduits - lived and told filters - through which humans engage in the projects of building lives, relationships, collectivities and meaning. Stories are seen as a rich entrée which help us to think about how people utilize (or resist) power, how they create, adapt to, or refuse change, and how they structure their reality, and experience their world, in relation to certain sets of assumptions. The communication (or in some instances the creation) of stories in

ways that move both heart and head is also a core requirement of most forms of narrative inquiry.

### **Unique aspects of narrative research**

As a research methodology which has developed largely within the theoretical context of post-positivism narrative research emphasises a number of preoccupations and core values.

#### **The significance of the personal**

Narrative inquiry emphasizes the significance of personal, as well as cultural, community or organisational stories. 'Narratives invite us as listeners, readers, and viewers to the perspective of the narrator', (Reissman, 2008, p. 9). In contrast to traditional positivist research genres it also attends to the importance of feelings and emotion. Michel Foucault (1994) emphasizes the importance of seeing both lived experience and personal emotion as rich material for social exploration. He argues that the key to a useful and enlightening social inquiry is frequently created by drawing on the participant's (or often more importantly) the author's personal experience of a particular topic, of its being experienced as personally or socially problematic. Foucault uses his own personal experiences of mental disturbance, of imprisonment and of sexuality as starting points to explore these areas on a much wider societal canvas. In doing so he engages in a particular inquiry into such areas with a view to developing a deeper and more nuanced understanding of a topic.

#### **Transformation**

Foucault also engages in social exploration with transformation in mind, to gain not just a more comprehensive understanding of how people construct themselves, but to invite himself and 'others to share an experience of what we are, not only our past but also our present... in such a way that we might come out of it transformed' (1994, p. 241). Narrative theorists underline the importance of such liberatory or transformative agendas through attending to concerns based in the real life experience of research participants or inquirers (Andrews et al., 2008; Butler, 2005; Clough, 2002; Davies, 2008; Richardson, 1997). The exploration of such interests or preoccupations can open to view different ways of seeing or understanding. Such engagement can reveal possibilities for reflection, agency, change and transformation for individuals, for groups and at times for society. As Richardson argues, individual or collective stories

that are based in the lived experiences of people, and deviate from the cultural story, provide new narratives; hearing them helps individuals to replot their lives because they provide an alternative to absent or powerless texts...we can write here a postmodern culture that is a product of situated persons, creating transformative and liberatory narratives. (Richardson, 1997, p. 58)

Such stories 'retain more of the 'noise' of real life' (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2001, p. 4). Developing a nuanced understanding of how people live their lives, in ways that reveal rather than conceal ambiguity, can help us to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the intricacies of the interrelationship between individual (or group) experience and the wider society.

An important feature of narrative research is that it reveals, through the exploration of the personal, what other forms of research conceal. This provides a means of enhancing our understanding of lived experience and particularly of ordinary or marginalized lives and consequent possibilities for transformation and change.

#### **Exercise**

Create a short list of the people and experiences that have been really significant in your life. In reflecting on this question include both personal and professional areas of your life experience.

- What are the central stories which you tell yourself (or have been told) about them?
- What feelings were with you at the time? Now?

If your partner, best friend, or someone with a completely different perspective were to describe these experiences or to recount these stories how might they be different to your accounts?

Now take a moment to consider what such stories may say about dominant discourses in your society? About the exercise of power and resistance?

#### **Exploring power**

Narrative inquiry is concerned to allow the normally occluded plays of discursive power, embedded in assumptions, relationships, conversations and social interactions - and their effect on lived experience - to emerge into visibility (Etherington, 2000). The stories which

people tell (or indeed those which they do not – or are not allowed – tell) will often display the exercise of such power and the modes of operation involved.

In her commitment to narrative research Bronwyn Davies (2008) argues that an examination of everyday narratives highlights how the normal interactions of everyday life constitute sites for the exercise of power. Because of their usualness or familiarity, they often pass beneath the radar of critical scrutiny. Relationships, conversations, social interaction and chance remarks are all sites through which dominant societal discourses are enacted. Both those who are the targets and those who are the perpetrators are often completely unconscious of their implicatedness in exercises of oppression and of how they are supporting or buying-in to the exercise of societal power. A unique function of narrative research is, as Clough argues, that stories create avenues through which we ‘can make public those experiences and perceptions that other methodological approaches and research techniques are unable to reveal’ (2002, p. 8) and hence disrupt ‘the ongoing repetitive citations of the known order, citations that offer some a viable life and at the same time deny it to others’ (Davies, 2008, p. 128).

St Pierre (2000, p. 484) argues that researchers have a responsibility not just to scrutinise the world but *their* practice and to ‘examine our own complicity in the maintenance of social injustice’ in the context of research.

A prime aim of narrative inquirers is to use stories not just to record but to create transformation in thinking and perception through communicating effectively with an audience at both cognitive and emotional levels. The focus of their work includes moving ‘the ‘heart and the belly’ as well as the ‘head’’ (Bochner, 2000, p. 271).

### **Reflexivity**

All research comes from a particular context and involves particular motivations. These materially effect both the procedures chosen for gathering information, the research process and the relationships and the meanings which are attributed to the results. As Clough (2002) points out, *all* research comes from a particular *position*, has particular *political* motivations and seeks to *persuade* or influence its audience in specific directions, and with particular ends in view (hence narrative inquiry’s questioning of even the *possibility* of researcher objectivity). While there is a strong temptation to ignore or to downplay such inconvenient realities, narrative research encourages the explicit owning of these influences and their effects. Even more importantly it demands an explicit acknowledgment of the central influence which the personhood of the researcher, the effects of professional background,

culture, contexts, life experience and assumptive worlds exert in how researchers go about their work. These *all* have significant influences in what is seen, heard or ignored in the data gathering process and in the attribution of meaning in the analysis. The notion of *reflexivity* emphasises the need for the researcher to be critically aware of how *they* are implicated in the research in ways which materially effect both processes and outcomes. For instance how the researcher is seen and the quality of the relationship which develops between the researcher and participant will materially effect both the quality and the type of information which the latter imparts and an explicit awareness of this needs to be woven into the research.

Reflexivity is a meticulous and painstakingly learned skill; few of us possess it naturally to any marked degree. It is a skill which involves our becoming aware of the world around us, including the people and events which impinge upon us (including our context, participants, students, colleagues) and *our responses to them*. It implies taking this awareness and allowing it to inform

our actions, communications and understandings. To be reflexive we need to be aware of our personal responses and to be able to make choices about how to use them. We also need to be aware of the personal, social and cultural contexts in which we live and work and to understand how these impact on the ways we interpret our world. (Etherington, 2004, p. 19)

Reflexivity involves a rigorous focusing on the self in its world, a standing outside the processes, contexts and ways of being of the self to become a questioning observer. This involves a radical re-positioning, the taking up of a critical stance which, as Hertz suggests, ‘involves self questioning and self understanding....to have an ongoing conversation about experience while simultaneously living in the moment’ (1997, vii). It was traditionally described as the process in which a practitioner examined ‘their practice, and their approach to practice, using their full range of critical, affective, spiritual, practical and knowledge based faculties’ (Bolton, Allan, & Drucquer, p. 196, 2004). It is often a vexed and always a challenging practice. It does however contribute to the critique and radicalisation of research and research practice and to researchers ‘becoming politically, socially as well as psychologically useful’ (Etherington, 2004, p. 27).

### **Engaging in ‘little science’**

An important and highly significant aspect of narrative research is that it engages with the small, the local and the emergent rather than seeking to encapsulate universal trends. It engages with what Denzin (2005) calls ‘little science’, and sometimes the notion of ‘little

places...big issues'. It provides ways of recording and increasing our understanding of the experience of those 'whose lives and histories go unheard, unseen, undocumented – ordinary, marginalized and silenced lives' (Bathmaker & Harnett, 2010, p. 3). This preoccupation with individual, ordinary or small group experience raises the question of the relevance of narrative research to a wider understanding of the world and to its relevance to processes of social or organisational change. It is the conviction of narrative researchers that the lens of (often idiosyncratic) individual or minority experience provides an important vantage point for increased awareness of that context and this can *sometimes* promote an increased understanding of wider societal dynamics. Both the effects of social or organizational structures and the possibilities for change in both can often be most usefully understood through an examination of the 'little science' of personal experience or of taken-for-granted practices. This can often make explicit, as Bathmaker and Harnett argue, 'the stranglehold of oppressive metanarratives that establish rules of truth, legitimacy and identity' (2010, p. 4).

### **Radical emphasis**

Narrative research is viewed as radical in that it contests traditional notions of researcher objectivity, the generalisability of conclusions to universal application or indeed to other groupings. It emphasizes the impossibility of objectivity, instead acknowledging and valuing researcher implicatedness both in the topic of research and in the processes chosen for the inquiry. It also contests notions of 'truth' valuing instead many possible 'truths'. At its core narrative research is also disruptive of traditional 'scientific' research canons, urging experimentation with innovative methods and the combining of art, poetry, fiction and conversation in inquiry. This of course unhinges the researcher from the security of accepted canons, introducing uncertainty and inviting creativity. Such tendencies may disturb the person implementing such research, as well as other researchers and often those engaged as participants. As Hubbard et al. argue narrative research is

a form of analysis that raises more profound questions about ontology and claims to truth [...] Methodologically, this is manifest in attempts to deconstruct, disturb and interrupt existing accounts of the world and experiment with forms of academic enquiry based not so much on re-presenting the 'real' but living it in different ways. (Hubbard, Kitchen, Bartlet, & Fuller, 2002, p. 85)

### **Criticisms of narrative research**

Narrative research is often criticized because its findings are tentative; there are limited assertions as to the validity of such findings for wider populations or more general contexts

and there are no claims towards the unearthing of underlying 'truths'. The genre acknowledges these criticisms but argues that its usefulness is in privileging the personal and the local, and in valuing divergent realities. In these aims it attempts to be educative in bringing to the awareness of a wider grouping a particularity of experience through evocative representation. And *sometimes* it acknowledges that what is observed may aid our understanding of other, or wider realities and contexts as well.

Narrative research claims to result in moments of knowing of a particular 'other' or group of 'others'. Another criticism which is levelled at narrative research is that such claims are inherently flawed due firstly to the contingent nature of the act of observing and secondly the impossibility of ultimately and incontestably knowing the other. Narrative inquiry openly acknowledges that what it provides are rich glimpses rather than a totality of knowing (Jewett, 2008). Rather than replication or universality, it seeks to evoke in an audience increased understanding of 'otherness', a promotion of self and social critique and an increased reflexivity through engagement.

Forms of narrative inquiry are sometimes criticised as being overly subjective, lacking in academic rigour and of being self-indulgent. In accepting the accuracy of this criticism, Davies & Gannon (2006) contend strongly for processes within narrative research which privilege critical reflexivity on the part of the researcher which addresses and removes any tendency towards self indulgence. They argue for the validity of human emotion as a site for exploration. They also contend for the foregrounding of the life experience of researcher and research participants, but in ways that are rigorously reflexive. This reflexivity should also be supported by the critical application of conceptual frameworks. The personal is a deeply significant site for the creation of knowledge but one that must be explored through conceptual analysis and exploratory self-questioning of the discourses which are implicated in the creation of particular experiences of subjectivity.

### **Two narrative approaches**

In this section of the chapter we briefly explore two distinctive forms of narrative inquiry, autoethnography and fictionalization. We include these here as we (the authors) have found them particularly helpful for our particular purposes, however there are many equally rich and useful forms, including life story research, thematic analysis and narrative interviewing (as well as others) appropriate to use, depending on your topic, context, and what you wish to achieve. And of course you may also opt to use a variety of such methods in combination.

## X Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a particular form of narrative inquiry in which the researcher presents (and often, but not always analyses) stories of *their own* experience as part of a subgroup or subculture. For the purposes of the inquiry the researcher may elect to become part of a sub grouping which they wish to study or alternatively they may draw on their own experiences as existing members of such a subgroup. For instance Bernadette Barton (2011) having been fascinated for years by the world of erotic dancing, pursued a research inquiry by becoming an erotic dancer for eighteen months in order to experience this world from the inside. She then wrote up and theorized her experiences hence conveying something of the thinking, experiencing and ways of being of that world to a wider audience. Jane Speedy (2008), on the other hand has written a number of stories drawn from her own experience as a counsellor. These latter evocatively written stories, often presented without theoretical commentary or analysis, convey a rich sense of what it was like for her to occupy this role in a variety of settings. The stories also communicate in a very vital way a sense of the context, the power issues involved and the difficulties and texture of life experienced by both client and therapist.

### *The researcher as medium*

In autoethnography researchers then become mediums, part simultaneously of two worlds. As emissaries from a lesser-known world of which they are a part, they bring senses, information and accounts to a majority world of which they are also a part. In criss-crossing boundaries autoethnographers use their own experience to describe and to convey a sense of the lesser known context. While they 'write about themselves, their goal is to touch a world beyond the self of the writer' (Jenks, 2002, p. 174). In a desire to communicate effectively with this wider world autoethnographers weave evocative accounts designed to convey 'the astonishing particularities of individual lives and larger notions of culture and knowledge, subject and object, and knower and known' (Jewett, 2008, p. 50).

### *Accessing minority ways of being*

Autoethnography as a method of social inquiry offers an entrée to the varied and changing ways in which (usually) non-dominant individuals or groups experience and make meaning of their world. It does so through recording, reflecting on and presenting a particular researcher's feelings, perceptions and life experience as part of such groupings (Jewett 2008). As a method of social inquiry it very deliberately sets out to notice, reflect on and draw from feelings, bodily experiences, reactions and behaviours of both self and others in its attempts

to convey a minority world to a wider or majority. In doing so it subverts more traditional research methodologies which ignore or silence the personal. It seeks to attend to and 'make relevant those aspects of being that are suppressed by analytic strategies that draw a veil of silence around emotions and bodies' (Davies and Gannon 2006, p. 3). Autoethnography also constitutes an effective attempt to contest the occluding practices which often operate in the majority world to silence minorities or those who are socially marginalized. In doing so it contests the 'conditions of inarticulation' (Barton 2011, p. 440) which often characterise minority or marginal experience.

### *A demanding methodology*

It is important to recognize that autoethnography is both rigorous and demanding as a research pursuit. It calls for levels of awareness and critical insight on the part of the researcher which are highly challenging. It is both a difficult and often an emotionally costly pursuit, since it involves the researcher in a rigorous reflexive and deeply challenging engagement with their own life experience. Ellis (2004, p. 37) argues that 'authors focus on a group or culture and use their own experiences in the culture to reflexively bend back on themselves' and hence to 'look more deeply at interactions between self and other'. Davies and Gannon (2006) warn against sloppiness and self indulgence in this practice; to be effective it must be rigorous, questioning and forensic. Autoethnography privileges the subjective experience and the subjectivity of the researcher and aims to convey the *feel* or *texture* of what it was like to be in the midst of the experiences which they describe.

### **Fictionalisation**

Fictionalisation is increasingly being used in narrative research as a way of communicating research material which is either too sensitive or too difficult to convey directly. Increasingly it is also argued that the core messages of a particular research endeavour can in certain circumstances most usefully and *validly* be conveyed through the use of fictional devices. For instance Kim Etherington (2000) has written extensively using fiction to convey the core messages of the experiences of abused clients. In doing so she addresses a core requirement of narrative research, to reveal what is normally hidden by the obfuscations and occlusions which have their source in societal discourses or in emotional fragility. Clough uses fictional accounts to invite critical attention to the effect of Government educational policy in socially deprived settings. He advocates the use of such fictionalised accounts as a research device to raise awareness and as a tool for political change (Clough 2002).

### **Deriving from real events**

Researchers employ fiction to create accounts which describe events or situations that are *real* in the sense that they are based in *real* events. However they use symbolic equivalents (Yalom, 1989) rather than the actual events, people and behaviours in portraying this material. This device conveys meaning, while simultaneously protecting those whose lives and situations would otherwise be exposed. Sikes (2010, p. 25) describes such fictionalised accounts as 'composite stories, in which everything described had happened but where characters and contexts were made up'. Personally I have found this method particularly useful in researching the life experience of an Irish minority group in a country where memories are long and minorities vulnerable.

### **Creating fictional accounts**

Fictionalized representation in narrative research derives from an extensive engagement with the life experiences of research participants (including those of the researcher) around a particular topic or topics. The resulting material is then converted into a narrative or series of narratives which are not, as told, a factual account of a particular set of circumstances, but the atmosphere is real and the events described are woven from events which are real. In creating fictionalised research processes writers create tales which *could* be true. After Yalom (1980, 1989), 'they derive from real events and feelings and conversations, but they *are* ultimately fictions: versions of the truth which are woven from an amalgam of raw data, real details and (where necessary) *symbolic equivalents*' (Clough 2002, p. 9; original emphases). Their aim is to allow the emergence of experiences and possibilities which might not otherwise appear, or which other more traditional methods cannot reveal. It is through the efficacy of fictional devices that new knowledge is created and old worlds challenged. 'The fictionalization of ...experience offers researchers the opportunity to import fragments of data from various real events in order to speak to the heart of social consciousness' (Clough, 2002, p. 8).

### **Verisimilitude and verifiability**

In using fictionalised accounts *verisimilitude* rather than *verifiability*, the engagement of the audience, and the integrity of the stories to the lives they seek to portray are the criteria of moment (Booth, 1996) rather than traditional research measures. Banks and Banks (1998) argue that it is such issues of effective expression and communication that must be central to scholarly inquiry in challenging the traditional forms. They claim a cross over between fictional genre and academic research writing in the creation and meaningful communication of knowledge. This argues for 'the admission of the fictional construction of life experience

as a research form no less legitimate – and considerably more persuasive – than any other' (Clough, 2002, p. 15). Richardson and Lockridge (1998) argue that the academic validity of fictional research texts is measured in the creation of meaningful connections with the reader, thus moving the focus for the assessment of quality, or efficacy, to processes of representation and audience engagement. They note that audiences for research texts vary from academic and interested 'lay' readers' to policy makers.

### **Conclusion**

According to Andrews et al. (2008) there is no single, all encompassing definition of narrative research as the genre is so broad and multi-faceted. Instead they emphasise a unifying primary rationale for using narrative inquiry: the encapsulation and examination of the minute and complex world of human living and experiencing. They note that the gathering and presentation of such nuance may not be readily possible through other forms of inquiry. Narrative research is distinctive and of particular value *because* it seeks to obtain and represent such information, information concerning the fragile and often contradictory experiences of human living, emotion and meaning-making. It is concerned to allow the texture of these processes to emerge into visibility in such a way that

[...] we are able to see different and sometimes contradictory layers of meaning, to bring them into useful dialogue with each other, and to understand more about individual and social change. By focusing on narrative we are able to investigate... how narratives are silenced, contested or accepted. All these areas of enquiry can help us describe, understand and even explain important aspects of the world. (Andrews et al., 2008, pp. 1-2)

Displaying its post-positivist influences, narrative research privileges partial, contingent, contested, varied and local ways of knowing, and it recognises the contextual and limited positioning of any 'knower'. The aim is to create useful knowledge, change in perception and transformative understanding through *communicating* elements of lived experience to both heart and head. It is transgressive of traditional research norms, valuing the local and the personal and contesting traditional notions of 'truth' and generalisability and it is transgressive of dominant societal norms, by foregrounding occluded knowledge and marginal experience.

### **Finally**

Having read this chapter on narrative research it may seem at first sight that it is of little relevance to you unless you are intending to use a full narrative methodology. This is not the

case. Stories often constitute useful tools in gathering or in presenting research. The following are areas which you might find it useful to consider.

- Bear in mind that the self is an important site of knowledge in the construction of a thesis and researching the themes and discourses that surround a topic. Your stories around a topic can illuminate or open your thesis topic, or give you ideas for interviews, focus groups or questionnaires. Bear in mind too that stories can constitute useful ways for you to insert yourself, your insights or your voice into the thesis.
- In gathering information/data keep an ear tuned for the stories which people tell in response to your questions – or in response to focus group (or other) discussion. Frequently people will tell stories, or use them as illustrations in response to questions or a discussion. Sometimes such stories will contain themes, details or information not easily apparent or otherwise surfaced. Occasionally such stories will open up whole new areas as possible lines of inquiry around your topic. If this happens you can follow these accounts seeking more information-or indeed inviting more stories or more detail.
- When you are in the earlier stages of choosing your research topic, or in exploring which routes to go down in relation to a particular topic, it may be useful to think about any stories which you hold, remember or have been told that relate (directly or indirectly) to the topic. Reflecting on such (personal or other relevant) stories relating to your topic can reveal categories, concepts, themes and possibilities not always evident in the relevant literature.
- When you are constructing your thesis (or sections of it) stories can constitute useful focusing strategies whereby you can capture your readers' attention, or direct (or re-direct it) in certain ways. A good, well chosen and artfully constructed vignette woven into the introductory section can often grasp the reader's attention and draw them into the thesis in a powerful and compelling way, setting the tone for the whole study.

If stories, as a result become a significant part of your methodology you will of course need to give a conceptual rationalisation for this.

## Exercise

### Writer's activity

Take twenty minutes to write a story which relates directly to your thesis topic; it could usefully relate to an incident, vignette or personal experience that 'speaks' to you around your topic. Give the story to a fellow student to read.

### Readers' activity

Reading your colleague's story work on the following questions – make notes, which you will later discuss with the writer.

1. Reading the story what themes really strike you? Note these.
2. Looking again at the story, what is revealed through the writing in terms of
  - Power
  - Fresh insights
  - Discourses – both strong and muted
3. Given the topic, what themes or discourses might you have expected to see, but did not find in the story?
4. What stories does this exercise seed in your consciousness about this topic?

Make notes on all these and return/discuss them with the writer.

### Writer's activity

Now as writer reflect on your colleague's notes.

1. Consider how you could use these notes or the stories you have written, or other stories:
  - To illuminate your thesis topic;
  - To open the thesis, or a chapter of the thesis (a focusing device);
  - To start off an interview or a focus group, or to stimulate the thinking of respondents to a questionnaire;
  - For other possibilities? (cont.)



2. What other stories does this exercise seed in your consciousness?

3. What new understandings - or possibilities - have emerged for you as a result of engaging in this exercise?