

REVEALING STORIED LIVES - LIFE STORY NARRATIVE INQUIRY IN NURSING AND MIDWIFERY: AN INTERVIEW WITH ROSE McELDOWNEY

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Abstract

Narrative inquiry is a methodology encompassing a range of research approaches such as autobiography, biography, life history, oral history and life story. As nurses and midwives engage significantly with people through stories, it is not surprising that narrative inquiry has found a place in the repertoire of nursing and midwifery research methodologies. This article is the tenth in a series based on interviews with nursing and midwifery researchers, designed to offer the beginning researcher a first-hand account of the experience of using particular methodologies. It focuses on life story narrative inquiry as the methodology used by Rose McEldowney (RCpN, BA, MEd, ADN) in her PhD research about the experiences of nurse educators teaching for social change in nursing programmes in New Zealand.

Key Words: Research methodologies, narrative inquiry, life story.

Life story narrative inquiry

Nurses and midwives in their everyday working lives engage significantly with people through stories. An understanding of a person's health needs, for example, is often gained through the stories they tell. Telling stories is also part of practice. We pass on stories in the oral handover between shifts and our written exemplars of practice often take story form. Through these 'narratives of experience' meaning is created as stories are interpreted and re-constructed. It is therefore not surprising that storytelling and narrative have found their niche in the research methodologies used by nurses and midwives. A range of

methodologies fall within the general group called narrative inquiry. Autobiography, biography, life history, oral history and life story, for example, all work with stories of significant experience. These stories, often generated through conversations conducted by the researcher with participants, form the narrative texts that the researcher interprets.

Narrative inquiry is an emerging methodology in nursing and midwifery research. Depending on the research interests and theoretical positioning adopted by the researcher,

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narrative inquiry can sit within different research paradigms. Within the interpretive paradigm the research can focus on the interpretation and meaning of individual stories. If the researcher uses a critical theoretical lens, such as feminism or critical social theory, the narrative inquiry will reflect the assumptions of the radical/critical paradigm. With a post-structural positioning, the narrative inquiry will include notions such as discourse and deconstruction. Whichever paradigm the researcher chooses, the process of narrative inquiry is a complex yet richly rewarding approach to research.

This article is the tenth in a series based on interviews with nursing and midwifery researchers (refer to Giddings & Wood (2000) for background information on the series). It offers the beginning researcher an introduction to narrative inquiry and, in particular, to life story as a research approach within this methodology. It relates the experience and personal reflections of Rose McEldowney, who used life story narrative inquiry in her PhD research focusing on the experiences of six nurse educators teaching for social change (McEldowney, 2003). In a series of conversations over eighteen months, Rose explored the 'what, why and how' of teaching for social change as a political act within nursing education in New Zealand. The educators taught courses in mental health, women's health, cultural safety and community development. Life story narrative inquiry enabled a depth and richness to emerge in the interpretation of these nursing, teaching and life experiences.

Rose McEldowney (R Comp N, BA, MEd, ADN) is a Senior Lecturer in the Graduate School of Nursing and

Midwifery at Victoria University of Wellington. Rose will have her PhD award conferred at graduation in December. Rose (**RMcE**) was interviewed by Pamela Wood (**PW**).

Interview



PW: *Why did you choose this particular methodology, Rose?*

RMcE: I was particularly drawn to it as a way of working in more depth and over time with a group of participants. I've always been interested in storytelling. A lot of researchers, educators and practitioners talk about nurses leading 'storied lives', and how we use storytelling a lot in our practice. So I've always been drawn to that way of inquiry. As the focus of my thesis was on stories of teaching for social change, focusing on the micro level, the day-to-day experience, I thought this would be the way I could really get into some depth and meaning with the participants as they told their stories. I asked them to talk about the 'what, why and how' of teaching for social change and what it meant for them, what was significant in their lives in relation to that, and to give me examples. Rather than having a large number of participants, it was more about selecting a group who I felt could really reveal that everyday-ness of practice.

PW: *What was it about narrative inquiry and life story that allowed you to do that?*

RMcE: One of the things that happens in being able to talk about significant aspects of their lives, about key stories of teaching for social change, as one talks and thinks and remembers and revisits things that have happened, a kind of theorising develops within the storytelling about their practice. It also gives the person the opportunity to call forth what is really meaningful for them. I don't think you can do that quite the same in an interview. I think the essence of the process was that we were able to build over time. Initially they might tell a story about something that came into their mind, but after going back and revisiting it, we were able to draw out more meaning, an interpretation. So they actually became interpreters as well, of their own stories, as I did as the researcher, which is a really interesting aspect of using this methodology.

PW: *Can we disentangle some terms for a minute? When I read the literature on this kind of methodology it seems to me that the term 'narrative' is used in different ways by different people. What is your understanding of narrative inquiry, and life story, and how these two connect?*

RMcE: I guess inherent in narrative inquiry is the notion of engaging with people in conversation. I use the word 'conversation' rather than interview because I think it leaves it a bit more open for people to have some kind of input into how the process is managed. Narrative inquiry usually relates to that whole idea of revealing the lived experience. Now, you can do that in lots of different ways. I see narrative inquiry as being an umbrella term. It's inter-disciplinary, because

it initially emerged from a literary perspective and then through the social sciences - anthropology, psychology, sociology. It was about the 1930s that it was first written about and over time it's been adapted. Narrative inquiry has been influenced quite strongly by history, phenomenology and hermeneutics. And now nursing and midwifery are very much into storytelling as a way of generating material to interpret (e.g. Frid, Ohlen & Bergbom, 2000; Vezeau, 1994).

PW: *So we're dealing with quite a complex methodological area here. Narrative inquiry can encompass so many different ways of approaching research.*

RMcE: Yes. The key thing is being explicit within your project about how you're working with ideas, that is, your methodological approach. How am I using this? There's no methodological recipe in the literature for how you work with narrative. There are different ways we can engage with this type of inquiry, though. Different approaches to generate material for interpretation – texts, stories.

PW: *You describe narrative inquiry as an umbrella of approaches. Could you say some more about those different approaches?*

RMcE: Narrative inquiry is a qualitative methodological approach, but within that there are lots of different strands. Autobiography, self-story, is quite popular now. When Megan-Jane Johnstone (1999) published her article on reflective topical autobiography, it's almost like it gave nurses entrée into using that approach, because before then it wasn't seen as legitimate research. Then there's biography, which is

writing about another. And then there is the group of oral history, life history, life story.

PW: *So what do you see as the difference between them?*

RMcE: Well there are some differences in the way that the researcher engages with the participant and the way that the project is shaped and what the focus is. You have to ask, what are the questions for the inquiry? What is it that you are wanting to reveal? Under the umbrella of narrative inquiry I selected out life story narrative because I was wanting to go back and find out about these people, what makes them tick, why they do what they do. It's a managed process, going back and saying, what were some of the early experiences that were significant? I guess there is an element of life history in that. It's difficult to tease them out and I think people do shift between life story and life history.

PW: *As you said, you're doing it in a managed way, keeping the focus on your particular topic. How did you do that?*

RMcE: Yes, the focus was on experiences as they related to the topic. What were the key moments? What were the things along the way that held you and actually were transformative moments in bringing about change? That was the focus. I took it from what had been, to now, and to what might be in the future. One of the things I found really useful was to develop a story map and from that to focus on certain aspects of their lives.

PW: *Developing a story map was a unique feature of your PhD research, wasn't it.*

RMcE: Yes, it was a way to enter the field of inquiry.

PW: *Can you explain briefly what the story map was?*

RMcE: It's a one-page diagrammatic schema of the possible journey through the conversations. It's about creating space for hearts and minds to speak. I set it up so that the initial aspect was about laying down the process, so I could check each time with them that it was still okay. Then the story map looked at the specific questions to focus on in the research.

PW: *So you had different questions for each of the conversations you could see might happen, through time?*

RMcE: Yes. I set it up in two series of conversations. The idea was to have a review of the process part of the way through. I could pause and think, where are we going to? And if I needed to shift anything, I could. And they could do that as well. Underlying the conversations was that whole praxiological process of reflecting, linking, connecting, synthesising, at the end of each series of conversations.

PW: *What does the term praxiological mean to you?*

RMcE: It's a process of reflection and engagement with the material. Then action in taking it back into the next conversation. It actually carries over across all participants. As researcher, you're carrying not only the conversation you're having with this participant, but this one, and this one too, and what connects all them as well. A very important element of working with text is that interpreting, reflecting, synthesising process, and taking it back, taking it back. That's the praxiological process - well, that's how I explain it. Other people may

have another take on it, but that's how I saw it developing the depth.

PW: *What are the key elements of life story narrative inquiry?*

RMcE: One element is that the researcher is very much part of it because you can't disengage from the conversation, particularly if you've also had the experience of teaching for social change. In the main it was about hearing their stories, not trying to put mine on top of theirs.

PW: *A lot of the time we come to a research topic because of our own interests and experiences. So there will always be some aspect of our story embedded in the research.*

RMcE: Yes, it's really important that that's made explicit as well. From those experiences we generate the questions we want to research. And it influences the type of approach that we will use. With life story, I was very drawn to it.

PW: *What are the other key elements?*

RMcE: It sits in part within the 'interpretive turn', the interpretive paradigm. The material is generated through the conversation, or may be given to you in other ways. The participants gave me other material like photos and poetry, so that also became text to interpret. That whole interpretive process is one of the key underlying features of life story. There is an interpretation and re-interpretation. It happens between the researcher and the participant. The participant has access to their stories.

PW: *As constructed by you from the conversation?*

RMcE: Yes, although as well they had a copy of the story map to guide the

process, and they received an audiotape and transcript of the conversation. The idea was that they could listen to the tape or read over the transcript and prepare for the next conversation. So they are basically listening, hearing their own voice, hearing their own interpretation at that particular point in time, although they may re-interpret that again. So it's like a never-ending cycle.

PW: *And you must be interpreting that material as well, in between the conversations.*

RMcE: Yes, almost like going through and doing a first level analysis. Looking at it, seeing if there's anything that stands out, anything that's not clear, taking it back into the next conversation to have some more explanation or development.

PW: *What are some other key elements?*

RMcE: The next key element is about 'context'. Stories are always contextually bound, in historical, social, political ways. I don't believe that you can look at something in isolation. We're contextually situated beings. We bring our history, our values, beliefs, with us. Our lives are lived in particular ways and we bring the stories and the remembering, the reviewing, the interpreting. That's embedded in the stories, which come from a time when certain things were happening. So it's important to include that as well. Participants may not always include that. That may be one of the roles of the researcher, as contextualiser, putting some of that in.

I could identify some of the key things. We come to our research with key interests in mind and some experiences that help locate us

alongside our participants. So it's a little easier. That's something to think of in terms of tips for new researchers - it's important to think through why you're doing a particular study and how you're going to do it. I wouldn't want to do something that was totally outside of my field. It's a good idea to stick to something that's manageable even though you sometimes think it isn't (laughs).

PW: *You were also familiar with teaching for social change.*

RMcE: I was really up front right from the beginning that my project was political, and that the position I took was a critical feminist position. That provided a conceptual framing for the study. The critical feminist writers, particularly in education as this was about teaching for social change, had extended the thinking around issues of justice and equity and resistance to change. The notion of hegemony is important, which is the way the dominant view is such a key influence on how people think and act.

I was looking at critical interpretation because that addressed issues of justice, equity, and critiquing power relations. The nurse educators I spoke with were people who taught within the contested areas of the curriculum like cultural safety, mental health, women's health and community development, where people are disadvantaged, and were trying to shift that and challenge the dominant view. These are ideas talked about by critical feminist educators so that framed my interpretation.

PW: *Apart from being clear about any theoretical positioning and how it relates to narrative inquiry, are there other key elements of this methodology that researchers should think about?*

RMcE: Another key element is that there is a heuristic process. Both the researcher and the participant are looking at uncovering or revealing the meaning of the lived experience. It leads to an enhanced understanding about a particular phenomenon - in this case teaching for social change. Moustakas (1990) writes really well on that heuristic process. He talks about six phases of unfolding meaning behind an experience. You don't have to follow it slavishly, you can adapt ideas and processes.

PW: *Would you see this heuristic process as being similar to the analysis stage in another research approach?*

RMcE: Yes. The heuristic process means sitting with it, dwelling with the material and seeing what starts to emerge, what starts to show itself. Often it's about going back again and again, taking off the layers as you go through. For example, one phase Moustakas (1990) talks about is 'incubation', where you sit and think. It takes up thinking moments and sleeping moments, every minute of the day, actually.

PW: *How did you start that heuristic process?*

RMcE: This is a handy hint. I had a notebook, and it was really helpful for me. It fitted in with another handy hint, which is if you're going to undertake this type of research then you have to be organised, especially if you're going to go into great depth. It's about keeping track of your material, making sure it's all clearly identified. I set up a spreadsheet on the computer - what was the interview, who was it with, what dates? Was it a C-60 or C-90 tape? Had it been sent off for transcribing? What was the quality like? So I had a complete picture of everybody and all

their material. I did the same for the transcripts. Each participant had a file.

PW: *Do you mean a computer file?*

RMcE: Yes, and a paper file. I put the transcripts in a ring-binder for each participant. Then I thought, this is quite overwhelming. I had read quite a few texts and articles (e.g. Bailey & Tilley, 2002; Cortazzi, 1993; Emden, 1998b; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber, 1998; Ochberg, 1996; Riessman, 1993) that talk about narrative analysis, working with stories, and still didn't get anything absolute. But if you're prepared to spend time, one of the things that happens is it starts to fall into place. What am I going to do with all this material, over 700 pages of it? It's about dwelling with the text, immersing yourself in it, waiting to see what reveals itself.

PW: *There's obviously a need to allow time for this to happen. It seems to me that sometimes beginning researchers aren't aware of how much time they need to sit and think about things. We can't hurtle through a process of analysis without allowing that time.*

RMcE: Yes, so they'll only be able to reveal a certain aspect.

PW: *Or level of interpretation.*

RMcE: Yes. From the conversations, I already had a bit of an idea about some of the things that were starting to make me go 'ooh, that was interesting'. I started by writing a 'herstory vignette' for each participant (Hughes & Huby, 2002). What was significant for them, growing up, becoming a nurse, becoming an educator, and anything else that was meaningful, trying to capture who they were as individuals. Then I went back to all the transcripts for each

participant, and then looked across all the participants. So that's when the notebook became very handy. I would process all the things that were starting to cluster around ideas, things that came out of the conversations, or chunks of text that were very revealing. It got richer and richer and more amazing as time went on.

Then I noticed there were things starting to coalesce, some ideas becoming key plots within stories. Going back to the story map guided me through that process in how I could contain it, with having so much material. The next part of the interpretation was developing story themes that started to emerge from their texts. They were the subplots that clustered around some key stories.

There was a lot of cross-referencing within and across participants' texts. I used lots of different coloured stickies. I didn't use a software package such as NUDIST or INVIVO although a lot of researchers do. You can get hooked up with that and you don't always spend the time with the material. I didn't want to skim over it, I wanted to get to the heart of it. The process I used really addressed that.

When a whole lot of things coalesce, they aggregate into something quite significant, something bigger. It's a bit geological really (laughs). You see sand, rock, stones. Gems that are a coalescence of certain crystals and water trapped in a rock. You get a whole lot together. You call them aggregates. They almost become physical entities, these things that emerge - on the paper, of course (laughs).

PW: *You mentioned that you gave the audiotapes and transcripts to the participants. Did they see your interpretations as well?*

RMcE: Yes, I gave the herstory vignettes and story themes to each participant. They felt I had interpreted their stories well, that I had remained true. I said to them all the way along, you realise this is going into the public domain? Once you agree to it, it's going out, so think carefully about anything you don't want to go out. Two or three came back and said they'd like a sentence or two taken out. That was great that they did that, because they had to feel okay about it.

PW: *Are there other key elements?*

RMcE: 'Temporality', locating the events within a particular time, is another key contextual element. People like Polkinghorne (1983; 1988; 1995) and Ricoeur (1981; 1991) talk about the importance of locating a story within time. In working with life story, people are working in the present with you but you're asking them to think back, to recall and remember and rethink about something that happened way back, to hold it in the past but talk about it in the present, and to think about the future. The 'life' of life story is a cue in about temporality.

Clandinin and Connolly (1998; 2000) are writers I found really helpful. They come from an education perspective and have done a lot of writing about different approaches to narrative inquiry. They say that narrative inquiry inhabits both social science and artistic spaces. I really loved that. They talk about a three-dimensional perspective to narrative inquiry but I think you could get even more multi-dimensional. There are so many

different facets to it. It's quite complex. It sounds simple, doesn't it. We'll sit down and tell a story, have a chat (laughs). It's probably one of the hardest ways of undertaking research. But saying narrative inquiry inhabits both social science and artistic spaces is giving you license to be creative and to call forth your aesthetic sense of self.

PW: *As a researcher.*

RMcE: As a researcher, but also to engage the participant in that process as well. I left it open to the participants, if they wanted to give me anything that they felt enhanced their story or captured something. That's why I ended up with poetry and photos or other mementoes. I was interested in participating in that as well, so I wrote some poetry myself. I felt that synthesising the material they had given me and creating something out of that was in itself an aesthetic process. So narrative inquiry lends itself to some wonderful, creative opportunities. It's very powerful.

PW: *Are there any other key elements?*

RMcE: The other key thing is about 'muthos'. It arises from Aristotle. It's about the act of 'emplotment'.

PW: *What did that mean for you in your research?*

RMcE: Writers like Ricoeur (1981; 1991) say that if you're telling a story, as well as it being contextually situated, there are also players. People play a role in this. And there are plots that emerge within and across stories, and subplots. What is happening here? Why are things the way they are? It's about looking at these ideas and synthesising them into a particular plot which then becomes the basis of the story, my

story themes. So this act of emplotment is really about transforming several stories or subplots into one synthesised story that includes a key plot.

When you engage in life story narrative inquiry, the researcher and participant come together. There is a speaking together, a co-vocation. While the researcher has the ultimate role, because you're doing it for a particular purpose, the other person is also self-interpreting and looking at plots. They may not name it as such, but I believe that's what happens.

PW: *So this idea of co-vocation is about coming together and speaking together, calling up the stories together and giving voice to them.*

RMcE: Yes, and the participant is a key person in the whole process. They're the players, and the researcher gets to do the overview, bringing it together with the different plots for the whole. Works with the act of emplotment.

PW: *Let's recap on those key elements for life story narrative inquiry.*

RMcE: The researcher is very much inside their own questions and methods of inquiry and that's made explicit. Narrative inquiry can sit within the interpretive paradigm - material is interpreted and re-interpreted and given meaning by the researcher, primarily. The stories are contextually bound, historically, politically, socially, culturally - the stories don't exist outside of a context. There is an inherent heuristic process - both the researcher and participant uncover the meaning of the lived experience to enhance the understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. The whole notion of temporality is inherent in the

stories - you locate events in time - they're engaged in the present but going back and interpreting past events, bringing them into the present and possibly the future. Narrative inquiry inhabits both social science and artistic spaces, and has been influenced by different aspects of social sciences and philosophical and theoretical perspectives, like phenomenology. And finally the whole notion of muthos and the act of emplotment.

PW: *What were the highlights for you in using life story as your approach to narrative inquiry?*

RMcE: I found it really exciting to see how the whole process unfolded over time, from the development of the story map to how the participants and I, together, did build on previous conversations and did get more into the depth. I believe that using life story narrative inquiry for this study enabled that to emerge.

PW: *When we ask people to reflect on their past experiences, there is the possibility that some might become upset or distressed. How did you consider that in relation to your research?*

RMcE: I had talked about that in my ethics application, because whenever someone is asking people to reveal experiences there is always that possibility of distress or vulnerability. I did have three instances where participants felt distressed. One participant got extremely angry, the tears just came, and it was about things being so unfair in an issue she was talking about. I had already considered what I might do in that instance. I checked in with the person, turned the tape off for a while, talked through it, commenced again. It was an important part of her

experience of teaching for social change. A couple of others found that it brought up for them some painful memories but they still wanted to put that out because they thought it was important. It's about being mindful in qualitative inquiry about vulnerability, the distressing moments.

When I was doing my ethics application, I said I'd negotiate going back a number of times for conversations and the committee felt that this was intrusive. I had justified why I was doing that, but it is intrusive. I was asking six people to give up a lot of time, and in total over about eighteen months, but the key thing was negotiating with participants, keeping it open.

A crossover between ethics and rigour is about giving voice to the participants. Whose voice is put out there? It's about acknowledging that the researcher's voice is part of it. Not trying to deny that. Obviously you have a significant role in the interpreting so part of that ethical process is being up front about that. What is put out there is the interpretation.

Another thing is confidentiality and identifiability. A small number of people, in a very focused research project. New Zealand's not a large country, so if people do not want to be identified how do you ensure from your point of view that they aren't? When I was writing the stories I was trying not to put anything in that might identify them.

PW: *And the participants had the chance to see all that material before it went out in your thesis, so they could make their own decision about how much of them as a person was revealed.*

RMcE: Yes, and I said it would be open until the day I had to print it off and put it in for examination. And that worked really well. It also gave me time for closure, to speak to each one of them. Have a conversation with them individually.

PW: *That must be an important thing when you have had so many conversations with them over an eighteen month period. You develop quite a relationship with them for that research purpose. How do you bring that to a close in a way that feels okay for you and for them?*

RMcE: I thought about that early on, where might this take me and how can I manage this process? So I went back to the story map and thought, okay, I have to finish this somehow knowing that the story is never-ending and could go on and on and on. If I give them an opportunity to talk about the 'dreaming and hoping story', this brings a sense of closure to this project. So that's where we ended.

PW: *Were there any particular difficulties associated with this methodology?*

RMcE: I don't know about difficulties but I think my research was very complex. The complexity definitely tested my brain.

PW: *Was that complexity to do with the research topic or the methodology?*

RMcE: We were talking before that it seems simple to ask people to tell you stories about some experience, but it is actually very complex. The other part that added to the complexity was generating all that material, then being overwhelmed. What am I going to do with all this? This is mind-blowing. So I think the amount of material that life story generated, and

the complexity of working through it, took a lot of thinking through. On reflection, if it wasn't managed in a particular way it could get away on you (laughs). And it takes a lot of energy to manage it. It's time-consuming, because of the thinking. But handy hints for the new researcher – one of the things I learnt from the process is that there are rises and falls in the researcher's energy levels. It's about thinking through when you are going to be at your thinking best, or most energetic best, for getting into the really in-depth thinking, versus doing some of the more housekeeping things, like making sure your references are up to scratch and accurate. It's about being mindful of your own abilities and processes and where you'll put your energy.

PW: *Saving the mundane tasks for when you're feeling mundane.*

RMcE: Yes (laughs), and some days I'd be able to get stuck in and write a lot and then the next day there wasn't a lot of energy so I'd write about the ethics, or how I selected the participants. It's about knowing yourself and what you're able to do.

PW: *Are there other helpful hints?*

RMcE: Staying open to possibility in the interpreting, not foreclosing on anything.

PW: *You mentioned some writers before. What other key references would you recommend?*

RMcE: There's no key writer, one 'shining light'. Because narrative inquiry is interdisciplinary, sometimes you have to go outside nursing. I've mentioned Clandinin and Connelly (1998; 2000) and there's Linde (1993). I also found that there are a lot of nurse researchers who

have written about narrative inquiry in nursing. There's Diekelmann (2001), Koch (1998), Emden (1998a; 1988b), Sandelowski (1991) and Vezeau (1994). Lynne Giddings used life history, of course (1997). Janice McDrury and Maxine Alterio (2002) looked at stories in practice and learning through telling and writing stories. Hatch and Wisniewski (1995) is a really excellent text. It talked a lot about rigour. I always consider using fiction too. Another thing for a new researcher is to continue reading, read widely, continue to read fiction. It's amazing how some of those ideas might influence how you interpret something. Just might be the little gem that you need.

PW: *What about the Sage publications?*

RMcE: Yes, I find that series from Sage on qualitative research to be really helpful. They're very concise. There's Atkinson (1998) and Riessman (1993). Then there's the whole group of texts on the narrative study of lives (Josselson & Lieblich, 1993; 1995; 1996; 1999; Lieblich & Josselson, 1994; 1997). They're very user-friendly. And they give you different perspectives, because it's wide open. There's no recipe, so it's about reading and thinking, and what's happening in this study.

PW: *What do you see as the future for this methodology in nursing and midwifery research, Rose?*

RMcE: I think it could have a special place. But these days in the Performance-Based Research Funding environment where outputs rule, I don't think that life story lends itself to quick turnaround. I think that it is time-consuming and I wonder about its place. It's sad, because if you want to reveal depth

and complexity in people's lives, this is one way you can do that. For me, it was the most appropriate way. I'm really convinced about that. It just jelled. It really did work. I do think it is a very important way of doing research, because nurses are engaged in telling stories of practice.

PW: *Is there anything we haven't covered that you think we should?*

RMcE: Just one other thing. I've written quite a lot in my thesis about life story and how I positioned it, so that's available for anyone who might want to see it.

PW: *I think people would find those sections of your thesis helpful if they were choosing this methodology.*

RMcE: I thought a lot about it. And wrote about the ontological and epistemological aspects, which I hadn't seen written like that elsewhere.

PW: *Can you say more about that?*

RMcE: I believe the ontological aspect of life story narrative inquiry is very much about your own lived experience, how you engage with stories, writing them, reading. I love reading. Writing stories. It's always interested me. Then the epistemological aspect is that philosophical inter-disciplinary influence on how it's developed over time.

PW: *Will you write an article on those aspects?*

RMcE: Yes.

PW: *Good. It will be a great help to researchers thinking about this methodology. Thank you very much Rose, and congratulations on completing your PhD.*

Conclusion

Narrative inquiry is probably the most versatile of the qualitative research approaches. There is no 'shining light' or prime source to guide the beginning researcher using narrative inquiry as with other methodologies such as grounded theory and critical hermeneutics, but rather multiple resources from other social science disciplines. The theoretical positioning often emerges as a researcher engages with their participants' stories. It is a methodology which can be used in different ways within different research paradigms. It can sit within the interpretive paradigm and focus on the interpretation and meaning of individual stories. When a critical theoretical lens such as critical social theory or feminism is applied, as in Rose's research, the inquiry reflects the assumptions of the radical/critical paradigm. Inclusions of notions such as discourse and deconstruction would indicate a post-structural positioning.

At first sight, asking people to tell stories might appear an easy methodological choice for a beginning researcher – it fits well with our nursing and midwifery practice. As Rose's story shows, however, there is a methodological complexity which challenges researchers as they engage with participants' narratives. What is generated from this process, one which involves substantial time and reflection, are rich texts about life experiences. Rose McEldowney's account of using life story narrative inquiry offers beginning researchers an insight into this complex but extremely worthwhile research approach. For a summary of basic information about life story narrative inquiry, refer to Table 1.

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Table 1. Basic information about life story narrative inquiry

Key terms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Storytelling • Hermeneutics • Heuristic process • Contextuality • Temporality • Muthos – act of emplotment
Paradigmatic approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Qualitative • Interpretive • Radical/critical • Post-structural
Origins	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First mentioned in 1930s • Emerged from social sciences • Influenced by anthropology, psychology, sociology, history, phenomenology
Purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To reveal the meaning embedded in ‘storied lives’
Focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-depth exploration of significant life events related to a research topic or phenomenon
Research question	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is significant in the life of this person in relation to this phenomenon?
Sampling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Purposive sampling - an individual or group selected because able to provide stories or narratives in relation to the phenomenon
Data Collection Methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-depth conversations • Often a series of conversations over time • Transcripts of conversations provide narrative text for interpretation • Texts may also be gathered in written or other form (e.g. photographs)
Analytical strategies (systematic and procedure oriented processes)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple and often developed when engaging with material • Interpretation and re-interpretation • A heuristic process to uncover meaning • Significant events or experiences in person’s life story identified from conversations - may be presented as vignette • Researcher and participant may co-construct and interpret the story or stories in relation to the phenomenon • Researcher tells the story or series of stories about the phenomenon, with significant ideas clustered as plots and subplots