Narrative inquiry: locating Aboriginal epistemology in a relational methodology

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Background. This methodology utilizes narrative analysis and the elicitation of life stories as understood through dimensions of interaction, continuity, and situation. It is congruent with Aboriginal epistemology formulated by oral narratives through representation, connection, storytelling and art. Needed for culturally competent scholarship is an experience of research whereby inquiry into epiphanies, ritual, routines, metaphors and everyday experience creates a process of reflexive thinking for multiple ways of knowing. Based on the sharing of perspectives, narrative inquiry allows for experimentation into creating new forms of knowledge by contextualizing diabetes from the experience of a researcher overlapped with experiences of participants – a reflective practice in itself.

Aim. The aim of this paper is to present narrative inquiry as a relational methodology and to analyse critically its appropriateness as an innovative research approach for exploring Aboriginal people’s experience living with diabetes.

Nursing application. Narrative inquiry represents an alternative culture of research for nursing science to generate understanding and explanation of Aboriginal people’s ‘diabetic self’ stories, and to coax open a window for co-constructing a narrative about diabetes as a chronic illness. The ability to adapt a methodology for use in a cultural context, preserve the perspectives of Aboriginal peoples, maintain the holistic nature of social problems, and value co-participation in respectful ways are strengths of an inquiry partial to a responsive and embodied scholarship.

Keywords: narrative inquiry, relational methodology, Aboriginal knowledge, diabetes, narrative analysis, story, culturally competent scholarship, nursing

Introduction

Narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly 2000) is about the study of epiphanies, rituals, routines, metaphors, and everyday experiences. Places of inquiry and practice that are filled with complexities, hopes, dreams and intentions. By learning how to frame research puzzles, enter inquiry fields, and compose field and research texts, experience and story are kept central in a qualitative approach that uses narratives to excavate deep understanding and meaning embedded in our lives. While practicing advanced nursing, I lived and worked in Aboriginal communities in British Columbia and the Yukon, Canada. I experienced Aboriginal stories, professional stories, and family stories that deeply and profoundly influenced our human condition together.

Puzzling over how to think narratively, I play memories across time, discover myself amidst stories of others, and interpret new ways forward in old and new story lines. Narrative inquiry offers me a way of understanding experience, and of imagining how I might research it. I propose that through the interpretive activities of both researchers and participants, the process of co-participating and co-constructing stories inherent in narrative inquiry reveals a circular way of understanding experience. I make a philosophical
comparison between two paradigms of thought – the hermeneutic circle and the Aboriginal sacred circle, suggesting how both may appear to be integrated in relation to ways of thinking. By introducing opportunities for increased self-awareness through storytelling and dialogue, I explore how an inquiry that encourages the discovery of positive attitudes and dispositions critical to the success of research viewed as process and text can be realized.

In this paper, I add to the growing body of scholarship by critically analysing narrative inquiry as an innovative research approach to explore Aboriginal peoples’ experiences of living with diabetes. By highlighting the relational orientations of a three-dimensional narrative inquiry space (Clandinin & Connelly 2000), I propose that reflective analysis through the actions of narrative inquiry will generate new forms of knowledge. In overlapping Aboriginal peoples’ perspectives with my Anglo-Irish perspective, a shared methodological paradigm will emerge that places in context the experience of living with diabetes from a new angle. My intent in forming the analysis is not to discredit inquiries that do not seek a shared methodology. Rather, I want to raise attention to the overlooked epistemological implications of Aboriginal ways of knowing for nursing science to highlight how Aboriginal epistemology can influence the development of knowledge and practice in nursing. I begin this analysis with my own narratives of experience ‘in living’ with Aboriginal peoples.

Narratives of experience

Childhood reflections of an Indian presence

In the summer of 1967, I went to an ‘Indian Midden’ to be amidst an archaeological ‘dig’. I remember how elated I was, shaking soil too heavy for a handmade sifter. Staring at the beads I had collected, they were remnants of an unknown past. Beads that had to do with historical lives where people had gone about everyday living. Sitting in this desecrated place, I imagined myself in this past life at the same time I was aware of my own moment, a fleeting present. In a timeless way, I felt our paths crossing. Light as a feather, I let my thoughts float away as I reflected on an Indian presence.

Aboriginal relational perspectives

While nursing on the Aboriginal landscape, I loved to hear the children’s stories when they knocked on my door and we walked to nearby beaches. Caressed by coastal breezes, we laughed and played, losing ourselves in a lightness of being. I loved to hear the stories of young girls as their innocence caught the eyes of curious school boys. Giggling and winking, they let me gaze on their sweetness of being. I loved to hear the stories of men and women who spent their days at river camps catching and preparing salmon. Teaching and sharing, they invited me into a generous way of being. I loved to hear the stories of elders who touched my heart with so few words, but said so much. Gentleness and wisdom emanated from their faces and kindness from their hearts, with emotions deep as the sea. Visiting and listening, we blended our ways of knowing – souls dancing in a spirit of being.

Connecting First Nations stories to my stories

In recalling and recollecting the strong stories of my life, I realize that they nourish and reconstruct all others. First Nations peoples’ stories and my nursing stories have entwined to create new ones in the renewal of our lives. Like a meandering river, the currents of life gently nudged us to her shallows and forced us unforeseen into her depths. Trying to understand my location in our overlapping lives, these stories were set in place and time on the fringe of culture where body and spirit unsuspectingly met – stories connecting in intermingling storied minds.

Narrative inquiry as a relational methodology

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggest ways to discover deeper historical, cognitive and ethical dimensions that come from the lives of people, including how they are composed and lived out, where conversation is placed in research, and what aspects of experience requires studying. Given that reflection and action are between people telling their stories, co-participation and co-construction in the retelling requires researchers and participants to think together. Do we think alone? According to Freire (1973):

The thinking Subject cannot think alone. In the act of thinking about the object s/he cannot think without the co-participation of another Subject. There is no longer an ‘I think’ but ‘we think’. It is the ‘we think’ which establishes the ‘I think’ and not the contrary. This co-participation of the Subjects in the act of thinking is communication. Thus the object is not the end of the act of communicating, but the mediator of communication. (p. 137)

As I think about the object of story as being between the teller and receiver of stories, narrative perspectives create paths to understanding that reside in flexible frameworks of inquiry. By exploring a connected sense with a historical past, recent and present life events, and perspectives on what narrative inquiry is about, a circular process of relational understanding from research done together develops.
Locating narrative inquiry in research inquiry


It is now recognized that narrative inquirers need to differentiate between story as defined within the ethnology paradigm and story as defined within the phenomenology paradigm. For the ethnographer, stories are told and co-constructed by the participant who has responded to a set of interview questions, which are identifiable in the data. Rather, for the phenomenologist, stories are ‘the components of the stories they tell (reconstruct) in order to convey the meaning they intend the listener to take from the story’ (Bailey 2002, p. 575).

The form of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly 2000) within narrative research that I, as an interpretive researcher, have chosen for the purposes of my research study provides me with the means to consider the development of a phenomenological and hermeneutic method, focusing on the integration of narrative theory with understanding of ‘lived experiences’. Hermeneutic phenomenology illuminates what is, and brings out that which is taken for granted. As I inquire into what it means to study the experience of living with diabetes, the concepts of culture, health, experience and life become inextricable intertwined. Thus I have come to know phenomenological stories as philosophical stories of experience, using narrative as a means of uncovering the Aboriginal meaning of living with diabetes.

Nurse researchers, such as Benner (1985) and Leonard (1989) have contributed to my choice of narrative as a form of qualitative inquiry. These authors have influenced my thinking of why a Heideggerian hermeneutical position offers a philosophy with a specific process suitable to the types of questions that look at how people live and experience health and illness. In addition, Drew (1998) has drawn my attention to how Heidegger’s descriptions of the meaning of being human resonate with my experiences of nursing. I view her emphasis on the importance of researcher self-reflection and the researcher’s experience being included in the research process as a way to strengthen qualitative inquiry perceptive and insightful.

Hermeneutic circle

As a philosophy of how humans understand experience, the hermeneutic circle is a concept derived from the Greek word ‘hermeneia’ – to express, interpret and translate. Meanings hidden in phenomena are revealed as knowledge from reflective hermeneutic thinking, a process requiring no clear method with procedural steps. Instead, a process open to many possibilities referred to as a hermeneutical circle of understanding reveals a metaphor for dialogue moving back and forth between parts and the whole. Heidegger (1962) included in the circle, knowledge of our cultural and historical experiences. He directed an ontological turn as the hermeneutic circle became interpretive of human beings.

Gadamer (1975) uses the hermeneutic circle in a description of a circular relationship between analyses and understanding that reveals something new from something familiar, as a result of using different angles of perception. Thus hermeneutics informs a strategy allowing for the study of everyday understanding and practices, and the study of relational issues embedded in everyday activity. The task of hermeneutics is to understand how the horizon of the interpreter and the horizon of the interpreted become enmeshed and create meaning in that context. Through dialogue each person gives up a little of the self to the other and the new horizon that is co-created becomes a piece of the interpretive process, a hermeneutical circle of understanding. Is experience ever outside relationship? I think not; being in relation provides a continuous unfolding texture to human experience.

Aboriginal sacred circle

In terms of an unfolding texture to human experience, I now turn to a discussion of the hermeneutic circle and the Aboriginal sacred circle, revealing the appearance of some similarities. As a First Nations woman of Western Canada, Bird (1993) explains:

…[the sacred circle is a] major paradigm of Native thought: life, time, seasons, cosmology, birth, womb, and earth are intrinsically located in the symbology of the circle. Within this circle we are returned to beginnings to consider how far we have come as Native [peoples]...the Native literary tradition...encompassing and reflexive, a reciprocal meeting of beginnings and possible futures. (p. vii)
These powerful words speak in interesting ways about circularity and well-being. Moreover, notions of holism are further understood as the sacred circle is integrated with the medicine wheel. Also a First Nations woman from Western Canada, Lavallee (1993) interprets:

…the medicine wheel is a symbol used by Native people in North America and stands for the Universe and all natural things of Creation and the Earth. It means unit and keeps us (Native people) together physically and mentally. We get strength spiritually from each other by being together in a circle. (p. 149)

The hermeneutic circle and Aboriginal sacred circle for me suggest complimentary ways in which to think about the development of a circular process of relational understanding within research. Relative to understanding notions of reflection, experience, and relationship, I perceive both metaphors for thinking and speaking point to a back and forth between parts and the whole as a way of interpreting experience. Additionally, emphasized are ways of returning to storied beginnings for considering possible futures. In an Aboriginal context, it makes me think about an existential understanding of community, its strength and ability to shape and sustain.

As major paradigms of thought, I realize both place no emphasis on a method, but instead view a process where many possibilities exist. It makes me understand how both reflect characteristics of reflexive thinking, cultural and historical knowledge as experience, and interpretation of human beings as essential. Further, both ideas are circular in their analyses and understanding, whereby something new emerges from something familiar. It is almost as if both reveal a mystical or unpretentious way for issues of relationship to become clearer when perspectives differ. Thus narrative inquiry may encompass a circularity of understanding in two paradigms of thought that have the ability to speak in different, egalitarian ways to many people.

Three-dimensional narrative inquiry space
Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggest that thinking about a three-dimensional narrative inquiry space is like imagining a dynamic, living space – stretching and changing. Focusing on a three-dimensional narrative space as interaction, continuity and situation, highlights the importance of storytelling as a conduit to the narrative quality of experience through time and cultural expression.

Interaction – personal and social
In pursuing an understanding of indigenous world cultures, I have come to appreciate that oral narratives are formulated through representation, connection, story and art. I want to retrieve from such sources valuable interactions that highlight understanding and wisdom through personal and social experiences, and opportunities for immediate interpretation of what is being presented. In my mind, narrative inquirers discover through stories a world that is further exposed, where bridges appear to new interpretations and understandings. As sociologist Plummer (2001) explains:

…to tell the story of a life may be one of the cores of culture, those fine webs of meaning that help organize our ways of life. These stories…connect the inner world to the outer world, speak to the subjective and the objective, and establish the boundaries of identities… (p. 395)

I find the idea of identities as ‘big as life’ contribute to an enigmatic quality found in stories. The philosopher Crites (1971) refers to this as enabling us to share our particular and universal human qualities, our differences, our similarities, our happiness, and our sorrow. Profoundly, it is recognizing how we get caught up in the ‘mundane’ stories that shape us like ‘sacred stories’ – storied ways of knowing (Clandinin & Connelly 2000).

Continuity – past, present and future
From an Aboriginal Canadian perspective, I see the past and present expressed in stories and art serving as signposts for future progress towards Aboriginal self-determination policy and self-government. I have witnessed artistic expression that illuminates dimensions of continuity in Aboriginal epistemology in this way. For instance, counter-narratives of historical events around the elimination of the ‘Indian’ rationalized as the extinction of an inferior people devoid of culture, are prevalent in mainstream society today. These narratives help me understand how their form reinforces Aboriginal peoples’ attempts to understand persisting acts of racism.

Situation – place
Silko (1996) discusses what was involved in writing short prose pieces and long essays in which ‘the written words depended upon visual images, or pictures, to fully express what I had to say’ (p. 15). I have learned that the importance of situation as place is understood as representation, for example, in the following American Indian landscape revealing that:

…Pueblo people have always connected certain stories with certain locations; it is these places that give the narratives such resonance over the centuries. The Pueblo people and the land and the stories are inseparable…a written word as a picture of the spoken word. (p. 14)
Native American voices such as Silko speak of story and art as a way of life, a freedom to live a truth, and a means from which wounds from past inflicted degradations heal. Narrative inquiry as a relational methodology preserves story, art, and healing as elements of each other found embedded in Aboriginal peoples’ family and community life.

Ethics of narrative inquiry

The ethics of narrative inquiry involves being in relationship with human beings, which requires accountability and responsibility. The principles of ethical practice are significant in terms of what is right to do (deontological ethics), of achieving what is good (consequentialist ethics), and of exemplifying the qualities of character necessary to live well (virtue ethics). From these theories emerge ‘goodness’ criteria for the qualitative inquirer, such as considering participants first; safeguarding participants’ rights, interests, and sensitivities; communicating research aims; protecting the privacy of participants; not exploiting participants; and making written material available to participants (Newton 1995).

Narrative ethics

Essential to the process of narrative inquiry is the consideration of narrative ethics (MacIntyre 1981) or virtue ethics as an approach to ethical reasoning. Such an approach considers the relationship between a substantive conception of human nature, such as the notion of ‘goodness’ or purpose of human life and its relationship to personal identity and the virtues, such as esteemed qualities of character. Thus narrative ethics draws on ethical theories that direct a view of morality as an intelligible telling and living of a life over time in which the importance of personal identity, the virtues of character, and story form an approach toward ethical reasoning that frame human relations in research.

Negotiating a research relationship

As I consider entering into research relationships with First Nations, creating field texts, and writing storied accounts of people’s experience of living with diabetes, Polkinghorne (1988) reminds me of ‘the importance of having research strategies that can work with the narratives people use to understand the human world’ (p. 15). The ethics of narrative inquiry involve learning how to listen and receive stories followed by interactions of authenticity and respect. My intent in forming a negotiated relationship is to emphasize that what and how I think as a researcher about the negotiation of the research relationship throughout the inquiry is essential in recognizing, understanding, and acting upon ethical concerns that surface.

For narrative inquiry to be done ethically, it is critical for researchers to understand how tenuous and in need of negotiation their relationships with participants are (Clandinin & Connelly 2000). It is recognizing the significance of close disclosing relationships with people on research landscapes, and in intermingling life threads, the potential for ‘loose ends’ in those relationships (Clandinin & Connelly 2000). By honouring my research participants in a continually negotiated relationship throughout the inquiry, I am better equipped to know when and how to explain myself to them, while simultaneously trusting in their ability to shape what is of ethical concern.

Inquiry informed by aboriginal epistemology

I apply understanding of stories about lives as powerful, revealing, and transforming directly to exploring Aboriginal peoples’ experience of living with diabetes. Importantly, story embodies significant cultural meanings and sociocultural aspects of the context. Thus I see narrative inquiry as a way to consider research in context and to name those contexts. My intention is not to discuss phases of narrative inquiry but rather to analyse some of its elements that illuminate its congruence with an Aboriginal epistemology formulated by oral narratives.

Oral narratives of story, connection and art

Carter (1993) has assisted me to distinguish between narration and story by revealing story as a special kind of narrative. What has become clear is the difference between what story is and story as a mode of knowing, which points to the narrative quality of our lives where personal stories and researcher stories can be conceived as important sources of knowledge. Given that we learn through storytelling, deeply rooted in cultural life is the inescapable conclusion that life arrives at our doorstep through stories, whether briefly or in detail. Thus I have come to know story as a special kind of narrative that is characterized by ‘events, characters, and settings arranged in a temporal sequence implying both causality and significance’ (Carter 1993, p. 6).

Locating imagination within Aboriginal epistemology has helped illustrate to me how representation, connection, storytelling and art become expressions formulating the creation of oral narratives. From an Aboriginal perspective, I reflect on imagination in art based on Aboriginal epistemology as a way of working through conflict, playing a role similar to autobiography. The effect of art in the dismantling of a colonial stereotype is powerful, both for the artist, and in a political sense for a ‘lived’ society. Thus there is a strong
connection between art as a creative process and the healing of self.

Working with multiplicity

The nature of knowledge and its claims concerning the centrality of story in thinking is an important one for me as a narrative inquirer. Although a story can be taken apart in terms of themes, characters, and incidents, as a whole it exemplifies ‘a distinctive mode of explanation characterized by an intrinsic multiplicity of meanings’ (Carter 1993, p. 6). As such, I view conversation discussed as both method and methodology (Denzin & Lincoln 1994) as having ways of locating, making and revealing meaning.

In an Aboriginal context, I perceive conversation as essential to working with multiplicity in Aboriginal peoples’ stories. Further, I believe that to establish and sustain trust, especially when researchers exhibit cultural differences, acts of sharing knowledge and meaning represented in the use of conversation, require development. I have discovered that it is through the open-ended complexity of such discourse that conversation continues to be shared and valued. In exploring Aboriginal peoples’ stories of diabetes, the research gives voice to Aboriginal peoples' identities in narrative form, which can be expressed in multiple art forms such as published articles and books, or performances of drama and film. Thus central and enduring to narrative inquiry is encouragement for researchers and participants together to trust in life, to listen to their teachings and the stories they tell, and to the stories told to them by whom they teach (Coles 1989).

Notion of coherence

As I consider the question of how to conduct research in a holistic way, I attend to Carr (1986), who proposes the notion of a whole life. He suggests that thoughts regarding personal human existence and character require an examination of personal identity in terms of what is referred to as ‘unity of life’ or ‘coherence of a life-story’. I view the notion of unity of life as a valuable vantage point that offers a perspective of one’s life to understand coherence and meaning as parts hanging together. To illustrate, consider an autobiographer who tells a life story as it is lived but also the biographer who tells the same story as a whole life story after the person is not alive to tell it. Can the notion of temporality be removed from meaning?

I think not. From a First Nations unity perspective, Ron Sebastian, a Northwest Coast Gitskan Wet’suwet’en artist, commissioned by the Prince George Two Rivers Art Gallery in British Columbia, Canada, designed and carved a crest pole for display in front of the new building. The design Sebastian chose for the project represented a confluence of philosophies – a crest pole promoting unity and healing from past colonialist practices. By carving four figures into the pole – white, black, yellow and red – the pole symbolized the opening up between people and healing of the discord that exists between nationalities. Entitled Unity and Diversity, this powerful piece of art is a First Nations contribution destined to remind the world of the necessity to heal the chasms established between peoples and societies unable to share in the wealth of their differences.

Eliciting aboriginal stories of diabetes

The process of narrative inquiry that I am undertaking involves co-participating with four Aboriginal people living with diabetes and co-constructing their Aboriginal stories of diabetes. I anticipate engaging in six to eight audio-taped conversations with each participant, lasting 1½–2 hours. We will talk about their life stories, their stories living with diabetes, and sort out a storied view of experience by thinking with a story. We will try to make sense of what is surfacing in our minds through conversation, as well as the meaning these stories have for us. We may consider items that help tell stories, such as looking at photographs, artwork, letters, and poems. I will then share with the participants some of my writing about story being in our lives. By laying their stories alongside my stories, we will be able to talk about these further, as new stories.

The analysis of data will occur through an interpretive process of moving back and forth between field texts, interim research texts, and research texts shaped by questions of meaning and social significance. In attending to the complexity generated from positioning field texts within spaces of interaction, continuity, and situation, further interpretive-analytical considerations will contribute to the epistemological status of the texts. A synthesis of my own and four participants’ life stories, and their experiences of diabetes that include identity and relational processes, will evolve into a co-constructed narrative about the experience of living with diabetes, as well as diabetes as a chronic illness.

Implications for nursing development and practice

In my program of diabetes research, narrative inquiry represents an alternative culture of research for nursing science to generate representations of Aboriginal people’s ‘diabetic self’ stories, and to coax open a window for co-constructing a narrative about diabetes as a chronic illness.
Based on a review of the literature, non-insulin diabetes mellitus (NIDDM) is now a leading cause of morbidity and mortality in native North Americans, and is emerging as an increasingly important health problem among Indigenous peoples of the Americas, South Pacific, New Zealand and Australia (Young et al. 2000). As well as leading to premature death, diabetes as a serious chronic illness leads to medical complications and disability. In considering a variety of research paradigms, I take the view that inherent to beliefs about health and the fundamental human condition, appropriate methodologies require serious reflection on diabetes and First Nations as context. It is taken as axiomatic that the health of Aboriginal peoples is the product of a complex web of physiological, psychological, spiritual, historical, sociological, cultural, economic and environmental factors. How does nursing science assist us to understand the interconnected strands of this complex web?

As I have discussed, the ability to adapt a methodology for use in a cultural context, preserve the perspectives of Aboriginal peoples, maintain the holistic nature of social problems, and value participation in respectful ways, reflects strengths of an inquiry partial to a responsive and embodied scholarship. Given the social and moral mandates and theoretical requirements of nursing as a science, the ability to adapt a methodology for use in a cultural context is imperative. I propose that narrative inquiry, as a new way of thinking about diabetes, will stimulate discussion and critique of the alignment of our methodologies with outcomes that along with yielding an intended set of knowledge claims may also yield something else. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) remark, ‘many narrative studies are judged to be important when they become literary texts to be read by others not so much for the knowledge they contain but for the vicarious testing of life possibilities by readers of the research that they permit’ (p. 42).

**Conclusion**

I have discovered that narrative inquiry is about interpreting the threads of life woven in the fabric of our daily lives. Narrative inquiry is about eliciting from life stories the insight, essence and resonance that accompany the experiences of a researcher overlapped with experiences of participants. Narrative inquiry represents an alternative culture of research for nursing science to generate understanding of Aboriginal people’s experience of health and illness.

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