In Pursuit of Aesthetic Research Provocations

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In keeping with new narrative metaphors in the family therapy field and new epistemological approaches to clinical interaction, literature as a paradigm for qualitative inquiry and evaluation is discussed. Description of a research project that explores how fictional literature can be integrated into graduate programs reveals a multi-layered, aesthetic approach to family therapy research and training as well as the design of project-specific methodology (Chenail, 1992a).

Keywords

qualitative research

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Few scholarly experiences have excited (and exhausted) me as has my dissertation project regarding training family therapists. Although the project came to a formal end (I am currently inundated with bound copies of the dissertation), it continues to grow and expand in a variety of ways: I have been called upon to design several graduate level courses incorporating my ideas about aesthetic approaches to teaching and learning, many students have asked for copies of my work, and I have been asked to describe what I did and how I decided to do "it."

Reflecting back upon this intriguing process, I am thankful for the openness and flexibility of my doctoral program's faculty (at Nova University's School of Social and Systemic Studies in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida). Throughout the research design, I was invited and given every opportunity, both as a clinical researcher and researching clinician, to contemplate and to play with provocative questions about investigative inquiry (Chenail, 1990/91). I was continually encouraged to explore myriad possibilities and to create a project-specific methodology (Chenail, 1992a). This, in turn, led to new questions about qualitative evaluation, multiple perspectives about my research, and a multi-layered approach to data analysis.

In order to review these ideas, I will attempt to retrace the particularities of the project, the development of my research design, and methodological choice points. In doing so, the passage of time and the creative act of my recollections may transform the original experiences and activities. During such a transformation process, admittedly, something may be lost and something may be gained (Reinharz, 1983). Readers of this description are invited to further transform my re-constructions, thereby contributing to the ongoing narrative about the project.

Description of the Project and Setting the Context

In keeping with new narrative metaphors in the family therapy field [See Carlos Sluzki's (1992) paper in *Family Process* - Editor's Note] and new epistemological approaches to clinical interaction, I explored how fictional literature could be useful in training graduate students. A

few family therapy educators describe the gradual integration of stories and novels into their courses and programs (Gale, 1990; Rambo, 1989; White, 1989/90). I decided to design a didactic module based upon excerpts from the four volumes of *The Alexandria Quartet* by Lawrence Durrell (1961a, 1961b, 1961c, 1961d).

The Quartet is a tale of many truths or the unknowable nature of an ultimate one. The story is told from differing viewpoints and time sequences, portraying a richness of multiple voices and the unpredictability of human experience. A brief description of *The Quartet* provided participants with an overview of *The Quartet*'s myriad plots and complex outcomes. This information offered a context for understanding the module's excerpts. The module also presented definitions of two clinically useful concepts frequently associated with the new epistemologies, multiple perspectives and uncertainty of outcome, followed by two literary illustrations of each concept.

The choice of excerpts involved careful analysis of *The Quartet* for exemplary relationships and experiences that conveyed these key concepts. Descriptions of each interaction or event were located across the four volumes, and several passages for each concept were identified. This process included "why . . . leave out this and include that?" (Schneidau, 1987, p. 139) and was likened to Langer's (1957) description of artistic intuition, starting with the perception of the whole and then progressing to distinctions among its parts.

Emplotment

Participants were students who had completed their initial year of training in the Ph.D. Family Therapy program in the School of Social and Systemic Studies of Nova University. The project was based upon analysis of three in-depth interviews with each student-trainee. During the initial interview, participants responded to general questions regarding familiarity with the new epistemologies, or any of their concepts, and potential or actual applicability to their clinical work. A brief information sheet elicited descriptive data about the participants' background.

A second interview was conducted the following week after they read the module to delve into the particularities of this training experience. As an open-ended forum, participants chose whatever aspects of the module they wanted to elaborate upon. I shared my initial findings during a third interview 2 months later.

Designing Project-Specific Methodology

Having been trained extensively in conventional and experimental methodology, I had learned the value of these approaches yet I wanted to come up with a methodology that "fit" and corresponded with the aesthetic nature of my project. Once again, the recurring themes of narrative metaphors and new epistemological approaches to clinical interaction emerged.

I began to explore alternate approaches, feeling a bit like Alice falling through a hole to Wonderland, a new and different place. I journeyed through journals and books outside the family therapy field in such areas as phenomenology, education, and anthropology. I interacted and reacted to the writings of Amedio Giorgi, Elliot Eisner, and Michael Agar, to name a just

few. It was exciting, overwhelming, and confusing all at once. I wrote to several clinicians and researchers, many of whom willingly shared their resources which engaged me in stimulating dialogue and motivated me to re-examine my assumptions.

I discovered that in an effort to capture the richness of human experience, many authors suggested a focus on process, discovery, and ambiguity to complement traditional scientific models (Atkinson, Heath, & Chenail, 1991; Chenail, 1992a, 1992b; Eisner & Peshkin, 1990; Guba, 1990; Hoshmand, 1989; Keeney & Morris, 1985a, 1985b; Leininger, 1985; Moon, Dillon & Sprenkle, 1990; Schon, 1983). In addition, some researchers specifically addressed the advantages of exploring literary works, music, and the arts as meaningful resources for clinical, research, and evaluation efforts (Chenail, 1992b; Chenail & Fortugno, 1991; Eisner, 1979, 1985; Greene, 1988; Guba, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1988; Ross, 1988; Schon, 1983). Aesthetic modes of research, such as narrative approaches, open-ended interviews, and thematic analysis, were being described separately. They seemed interrelated to me as I wove them together for a project-specific method.

Narrative Analysis

Narrative approaches have been designed by researchers as ways to comprehend how the complexities of human activities are created, organized, and constructed. Analysts regard such aesthetic forms as storytelling and narratives as aids in formulating compelling accounts of experiences and relationships (Bruner, 1986, 1987; Gergen & Gergen, 1986; Peshkin, 1988; Sarbin, 1986). It appeared to me that by representing my project's training experience in a narrative way, the oral and written descriptions about the trainees' experiences would enable such events to be analyzed and reflected upon.

Isomorphic to using literature to facilitate training, analogies have been made regarding the relationship between qualitative evaluation and literary theory and texts (Eisner, 1979, 1985; Eisner & Peshkin, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1988). Thus it made sense to present descriptive data about the project's participants in narrative form and to develop a narrative text of the training experience. As my research continued, open-ended narratives or a re-presentation (Fischer, 1980; Hopper, 1988) of each participant's story about the training experience evolved. This gave way to information that deepened and enlarged an understanding of the project rather than predicting and controlling the activity (Polkinghorne, 1988). Every participant's account, for different reasons, revealed that reading the Quartet's excerpts were meaningful for thinking about new epistemological concepts.

Interviews

My investigation of narrative approaches segued to an exploration of interview methodology. A logical extension of narrative analysis has been to modify such standard approaches to interview methods as attitude surveys, opinion polls, and questionnaires (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984).

Statistical evaluation of question and answer sequences has been redressed and interviews have been reconceptualized as discovery-oriented, collaborative conversations or textual narrative patterns that are co-constructed products of communication and meaning between interviewees

and interviewers (Guba, 1990; Hoshmand, 1989; Keeney & Morris, 1985a, 1985b; Mishler, 1986a; 1986b; van Maanen, 1983). The open-ended interview has been likened in format to a modern novel, using such literary devices as introspection and retrospection, with parts of the story out of sequence chronologically (Merton, Fiske, & Kendall, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1988).

By conducting collaborative interviews, I chose to make a conscious effort to be receptive to what was surprising, different, and challenging. I encouraged the participants to talk freely and to express their ideas about the training experience. I refrained from intervening when they strayed a bit off the subject at hand. I discovered that important stories emerged when they were permitted to express themselves in their idiosyncratic manner and to digress until they had completed their narratives (Mishler, 1986a, 1986b).

Thematic Analysis

Narrative formats of collaborative interviews have been described by analysts as leading to patterns for integrating experiences into emerging themes. Thematic or pattern analysis has been a natural and frequently used methodology for organizing raw data of interview contexts in a variety of such disciplines as educational research, anthropological investigations, and phenomenological inquiries. In these studies, intensive analysis of themes or patterns of experience and behavior have syncretized components of data into meaningful stories.

After the interviews, I decided to follow suggestions made by analysts regarding how to examine data for themes, including copious reading and re-reading of data, noting interpretations as the interview proceeds, listing tentative themes and patterns, and determining the participants' assumptions that affect their world view. A theme was defined as a concept, trend, or distinction that emerged from the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982) and the unit of themal analysis as a change of subject or nuance of change during the interview (Dapkus, 1983). By re-reading the text of the interviews numerous times as well as participating collaboratively in the sequence of interviews, unanticipated themal patterns emerged for comparison. I continued to weave a narrative strand into the analysis: "It is sometimes useful to develop a 'story-line' to guide analysis. The story-line is the analytical thread that unites and integrates the major themes in the data" (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984, p. 136).

Methodological Choice Points

Analyzing the Data

Explanations of methodology regarding narrative interpretation of thematic analysis were vague in terms of specifying the exact procedure to be utilized. Procedures were described were largely found in explanations of phenomenological research. Due to its specificity, I adapted Lynch-Sauer's (1985) phenomenological research design for analysis of interviews. Componential themes of the experiences for each participant were noted and described. Themes were compared across transcripts, enabling me to identify similarities, variations, and differences across transcripts. After the themes were organized and compared, a holistic synthesis of the data was created. Ground structures or clarifying conceptual categories were thereby constructed in a narrative summary.

Understanding the Didactic Learning Experience

Considerable discussion existed regarding thematic analysis in terms of curriculum evaluation and learning experiences (Marton, 1988; Ross, 1988). I decided to follow suit. In repeated studies, students reading excerpts from textbooks and literary works reported varied understanding of the same material (Marton, 1988). Researchers classified these understandings into a few definable categories or themes.

In my project, I thought I would give similar attention to how thematic analysis contributed to understanding trainees' experiences with the didactic module. I detailed their stories about the experience as well as the degree that a literary perspective had been helpful. Themal material commonly shared by all participants as well as the variations and unique differences in the text revealed how the use of literature individually facilitated or reinforced an understanding of new epistemological concepts. The narrative and thematic analysis of the interviews provided a descriptive text for understanding this particular training experience from the trainees' perspective as well as the implications of the module for the larger context of family therapy training and for future research studies.

Collaborating With Participants

Many researchers have raised the issue of the importance of engaging participants in the research process and have suggested co-constructing a story with them (Leininger, 1985; Mishler, 1986a, 1986b). I chose to share thematic findings from participants' earlier interviews during the final interview. These contexts for re-interviews enabled me to exchange ideas with the trainees and to elicit feedback as an integral, valuable factor in my process of data collection and analysis. This also corresponded with the notion of narrative as an interactive activity in which both narrator and listener contribute (Gulich & Quasthoff, 1986).

Verifying Data

Researchers have described different ways to arrive at data verification (Eisner & Peshkin, 1990; Keeney & Morris, 1985b). Once again, I followed recommendations to turn to the humanities and adopted their criteria of explanation for my project. I conceptualized reliability and validity in terms of convincing or connecting stories and aesthetic compelling accounts. Rather than presupposing what was to be investigated, I clarified the investigated training experience and its meaning for trainees, providing information regarding what they "think and do, not how many of them think and do it" (McCracken, 1988, p. 49).

Elaborate documentation of interview conversations, copious reading and re-reading of transcripts, and participant critiques of inquiry findings were included as viable ways to establish reliability and validity (Moon, Dillon, & Sprenkle, 1990) and were applied to this project.

Textual Threads to the Training Tales

The conversation that evolved during the interviews complemented the students' experience of reading the didactic module, enhancing their understanding of the material. The thematic

symmetry as well as the unique divergence of their views revealed interesting information about how graduate students assimilate new epistemological concepts according to their different learning styles. It also provided a means of imagining the rich possibilities of incorporating literature into family therapy graduate programs in order to foster an understanding of ecosystemic concepts.

Conceptualization of the module as a literary object encouraged an analysis that followed the form and content of aesthetic critique outlined by curriculum specialists and educators (Eisner, 1979, 1985; Ross, 1988). First, key elements of this project's design and related choices were disclosed. Second, the training experience was transformed by thematic and narrative descriptions. Third, judgments about what was discovered and useful about the project were revealed. These ideas addressed what was relevant to future family therapy training research regarding new epistemological concepts. Specific literary devices, including flashbacks, themal and narrative descriptions as well as different points of view (e.g., students and researcher) were integrated into the presentation of this project. In lieu of predetermined performance objectives, expressive outcomes (Eisner, 1979, 1985) tapped into the subtle similarities, variations, and differences of student-specific experiences within the interactional context of the project.

In the field of education, a recommendation has recently been made for Ph.D. dissertations to be written in the format of a novel (Eisner & Peshkin, 1990). It appears that literature as a paradigm for qualitative inquiry and evaluation can be useful in our field as well. My aspiration for this project is that it continues to be part of an ongoing narrative about aesthetic approaches to family therapy research and training. The patterns connecting theory and practice can heuristically be perceived in such a way, then, that "the lines between novels . . . and research [will] get blurred" (Rorty, 1982, p. 203), and "we shall be able to see the social sciences as continuous with literature--as interpreting other people to us, and thus enlarging and deepening our sense of community" (Rorty, 1982, p. 203).

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