

Using Narrative Inquiry to Explore Career Choice in Social Work: A Letter of Lived Experience

Until recently, researchers, academics and practitioners investigating why people choose to do social work have focused on causal/linear explanations. By way of contrast, for my Master's thesis, I adopted narrative inquiry (Clandinin and Connelly 2000) with its emphasis on 'experience as text' to explore students' career choice stories. Focusing on the social positioning (Riessman 2001) embedded in my participants' (John and Geraldine) and my own stories of lived experience, it was clear that not only were there a myriad of social and individual agendas associated with becoming a social worker, there were also others linked to my entrance into the research community. By way of a letter to my sister, I describe my experience to highlight the delights and challenges of adopting a narrative approach and the process of linking professional identity with the development of 'knowledge in context' (White 1997; Connelly and Clandinin 1999).

Prelude to the letter:

Having recognised that as a social work practitioner/educator I have always had a predilection for exploring the processes and impact of told stories of experience, it is of little surprise that as a researcher I chose a narrative approach to explore students' choice of social work as a career. Despite the fact that there has been a burgeoning of the application of narrative approaches in other disciplines (Kreiwirth 2000; Daiute and Lightfoot 2004), there was, and still is, little to suggest that this trend exists in social work (Shaw and Gould 2001; Riessman and Quinney 2005). Moreover, while narrative as an approach was being used, albeit to a limited degree, to explore career choice (Chen 1997; Cochran 1997; Mc Mahon and Tatham 2000), it is only recently that social work academics have begun to employ practitioner narratives (Le Croy 2002; Cree 2003) and fictional stories (Lehmann 2003) to engage readers in the process of understanding what draws people to social work and to explore what social workers do in practice (Lewis 2004). To date, I am yet to find a project that explores the narrative experience of students choosing social work as their preferred career.

In this paper then, I have chosen to describe the challenges and the delights of using a narrative approach to explore students' career choice stories. Drawing on the knowledge I gained from my Masters' project exploring Geraldine, John (two social work students) and my stories of lived experience, I note how applying Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional inquiry space and Riessman's (2001) understanding of social positioning alerted me to a myriad of social and individual agendas associated with my own entrance into the research community. Abbott states '(t)hinking about things narratively means thinking along cases rather than across them (Abbott 1990)'. Therefore, through the use of letter as a literary device, I also recount my research experience to highlight what I have learnt about narrative as a research method and to draw attention to the impact of gendered ways of knowing and important themes that emerge from past, present and future individual/familial, community and professional contexts.

White (1997) claims that the move into a professional culture usually results in people describing their lives in narrow terms often leaving out significant others and important events. Like my experience in other areas of my Masters' experience, my relationship with my sister Christine (who was pursuing her PhD studies at the time), proved pivotal in understanding the pros and cons of using narrative approaches to research. By incorporating noteworthy people and events in my letter to her, I hope to acknowledge the contribution of those important to me in my unfolding as a researcher (Connelly and Clandinin 1999). Linde (1993) states that the professional life story is a means of expressing a sense of self and group membership and as such, is subject to a number of culturally defined social demands. In the tradition of narrative inquiry (Clandinin and Connelly 2000:41) then, my purpose in writing this letter presents my research experience as both an object for review and as part of a process that invites you, the reader, to (re)visit and/or (re)create your own stories of methodological choice that contributes to the continuing development of 'knowledge in context'.

Dear Chris,

Yay! I think I am nearly finished my thesis, I didn't believe the day would ever come! Still, here I am reflecting on the lessons I have learnt and deciding on what things I would like to say to you about my experience. While I know this is an important part of the research process (Padgett 1998), I feel as if I am over the whole episode and would love to see the back of it. Nevertheless, here I am writing to you sharing another story of my lived experience.

As you know, I have learnt a lot about how John and Geraldine see their experience of choosing social work as a career. In particular, I am becoming more convinced that taking on a career in social work is quite a political act - not so much in the self serving sense that I often associate with politics, although that may be so, but more because it involves negotiating a lot of different agendas. Mind you, I don't think this is typical to social work alone. My experience of negotiating the different agendas associated with completing this degree makes me wonder if what I may actually be capturing in this inquiry is the negotiating experience typical of any aspiring professional recounting why they pursued their career, or degree, of choice (Linde 1993).

On occasions I have wondered whether I could have been a little savvier, as John and Geraldine have been, in dealing with the cultural imperatives associated with particular institutions when pursuing a higher degree. Having made a pragmatic decision to pursue postgraduate study to maintain my position at the University, I didn't spend much time in assessing possible degree options that I could pursue. I can't help but wonder if my experience mirrors that of social work students who also make equally pragmatic decisions to 'get a ticket' and find themselves confronted with a learning/research approach that may not suit their epistemological position. Still, if you didn't know and understand the characteristics and impacts of different methodological approaches, why would you look? Moreover, it seems to me that as part of the whole social positioning process in the career market and research

community, the dominant discourse leads many of us to believe that certain professions and approaches have a preferred place and culture that may not actually be real (Riessman 2001; Fook 2003).

While learning more about the experience of choosing social work has been informative, I have particularly enjoyed learning about narrative inquiry. In retrospect, I was somewhat naive about what would be involved by engaging in such an approach, but as usual I tend to jump in and deal with the consequences as I go. I guess that's why I am such a staunch advocate of experiential learning. Thank goodness Clandinin and Connelly (2000) state that narrative inquiry is best learnt from experience. However, as you know, I didn't actually come across their work until well after I had started the degree and that up until that point I had relied on Riessman's (1993) book. While that book was useful in starting my learning process and other parts of her work (Riessman 2001) became influential in the approach I ended up taking, I found Clandinin and Connelly's work particularly resonated with me because of their interest in research as an experience and as a process. Do you remember us finding that article by Ollerenshaw and Creswell (2002) and how I was particularly drawn to the three-dimensional process described while you, at that stage, preferred the problem-solving approach to narrative analysis. Haven't we come a long way since then?

It was a real struggle to move away from a linear, technique type approach and feel comfortable with the more protean attitude required of narrative inquirers (Connelly 2003). While for me it felt comfortable in its application because of my counselling background, the challenges came when I had to explain what I was trying to do to other researchers. At that point in my learning, it hit me that being able to use the language of the dominant discourse was really important. While the research process itself was not linear, the process of explaining how the project would unfold was. Of course, as you know, my belief in social justice (or oppositional nature) didn't help this process and I ended up in a few battles over accepted research approaches. Mind you, I wouldn't have had the opportunity to approach Michael (Connelly), who later

became a supervisor, to look at my work if I hadn't had those battles and I probably wouldn't have learnt as much as I have. Besides, as my friend Judy once said to me, 'everyone has their postgraduate story' and didn't Bruner (2002) say that obstacles are necessary for a story to be a good one?

So, what else have I learnt about narrative as a result of my foray into exploring students' experience of choosing social work as a career? Building on what I have already been saying, while narrative approaches are growing in popularity and are becoming more accepted in the research sector, narrative inquiry is still on the edge - particularly in social work (Riessman and Quinney 2005). As I know from my own experience, it is easy to be marginalised if you don't know the dominant discourse and play it right. Of course, as a social worker, I also know that unless the dominant discourse is challenged there is little opportunity for change. However, pushing for change is easier if you have the support of like-minded people (O' Connor et al. 2003). I remember writing in my journal when I attended the Narrative Matters conference in Canada that I felt like I had come home.

Saturday, 22/5/04

Well, I knew this conference was going to be profound, but boy, I do feel like I have come home. ... It was amazing to be in the room and to witness the profound effect these research stories had on the audience. I can't help but contrast these 'storytelling' sessions with what was presented by a social worker in the session yesterday. (Not her fault, but our training). The richness of the data and the 'experience' captured in today's session was quite profound – it was much more compelling than the dry old facts presented yesterday. It saddens me how we as social workers have deliberately stripped narrative of its richness to become a boring old text. I guess the medical/legal requirements of the job have meant the loss of the personal experience. ... I struggle with that!

As is often the case with research projects that take a long time, a lot more research has become available that reinforces much of what I was able to find out from Geraldine and John's career choice experiences. Even though I have often thought

‘there’s no point completing this project as everyone else has said what I have found’, I have realised that this approach has actually provided the holistic information (Lieblich et al. 1998) I was personally looking for. Even though other researchers have said a lot of what I have learnt, the information came from a number of sources rather than the one. On reflection, narrative inquiry gave it to me all in one. Still, my experience did also highlight an aspect of the research culture that I hadn’t understood. Jane (Maidment 2004), my other supervisor, pointed out to me that it was good others were beginning to say what I was as I could then quote them to verify my position. I must say I get very confused about all this. There’s a big part of me that wonders what the point is of reinventing the wheel the whole time, but then I am reminded that I learn best from experience so what may seem as ‘reinventing the wheel’ can also be considered essential as a learning tool (Dewey 1938/1981). And, while part of the research process is to build and support the development of different knowledges, for me, it was also about negotiating entrance into the research community.

In retrospect I can see how the resonance I feel with narrative inquiry as a method has become its greatest draw card for me. Narrative inquiry mirrors my belief that social work is much more of an art than a science, but here I fall into the trap of thinking in binaries. As you know, one of the ‘pluses’ that came from my insistence of pursuing a narrative approach was the opportunity to meet other researchers. One of the social work researchers I had contact with was Professor Mel Gray. Mel is an academic at Newcastle University, who like us, grew up in Africa. She, like me, is also involved in using an experiential learning approach to social work training and has done a lot of work in exploring social work as art. In a piece of her writing she gave me to read, she says:

... the art of social work embraces values and philosophical explanations, as well scientific ones; uses rules, techniques, principles, and established knowledge as well as intuition, practice wisdom, creativity, and non-linguistic forms of expression to connect with and help clients, and ultimately to improve the human condition. (Gray 2003)

So as I move away from thinking in binaries, I can see how Mel's quote can equally describe the value of narrative inquiry. While it seems a bit nebulous as an approach, it actually captures and involves many aspects of what Mel talks about.

Still, the practical processes involved with 'doing' narrative research are much more laborious than those used in other approaches, but like anything, because it captured my imagination, it didn't seem so. I guess that's where the art bit fits in – the aesthetic experience makes up for the process. But the time it takes does throw up some limitations. While the information I gathered from the two participants is comprehensive and provides a lot of material to be considered, there are other variables that may impact on career choice, such as age and cultural differences that I didn't have time to pursue. No doubt, one of the reasons that gender emerged as the dominant theme in our stories was because the study included a participant of each sex. I wonder what the focus of the study would have been if I had chosen two women of different ages, two men, or a participant from western origins and one from the east, instead. Mel (Gray 2003) said that in her PhD thesis she argued that 'our values influence the type of social worker we become'. Given Gilligan's (1982) work on the gender differences in moral development and approaches to the world, I feel that my inquiry has highlighted that gender and experience are important factors to consider when exploring the motivation of those entering this sector - and maybe those of us who take up narrative as a research approach.

I made the comment before that I thought I might have captured the processes of those negotiating their way into the course rather than the career choice experience itself. While this may be the case, I have wondered whether there are any other ways to explore career choice as an experience. Narrative inquiry requires an immersion of sorts over a considerable period of time and once someone has identified their interest in social work, they are already open to the influences that may impact on the career decision. Still, there have been many other studies that have examined unconscious motivation as well as conscious decision-making (e.g., Hanson and McCullagh, Rowe 1983; Rompf and Royse 1994; 1995; Parker and Merrylees 2002). Besides, although I

may have started out wanting to understand an underlying reason for choosing to join social work, as a result of my research experience, I am much more interested in the narrative processes aspiring social workers engage in to negotiate their entrance into the field. In fact, I now think that this is more important and helpful as it reveals much more subjective information about how the person perceives and conducts themselves in relation to others – be it individuals, groups, organisations or in relation to communities (Randall 2002).

Chris, as you're aware, one of the challenges for me throughout this research process has been learning to trust my own voice and the choices I had made. I remember one of the feedback emails I received from Michael (Connelly 2002 -2004) saying that it appeared as if I had used other people to help me think. This struck a chord, because, while in some ways I had, my experience of this was the other way round; that is, I had deliberately drawn on references to justify my point of view. Juxtaposing Jane's (Maidment 2004) words I mentioned earlier with those of Michael's, has left me wondering about the dominant research discourses that exist in the different professions and associated gendered expectations – after all, Michael is male and has a background in science and education and Jane a female and social worker. While Gilligan's (1982) book, and Belenky and her colleagues' (1997) work, has helped me think through this process in terms of women's ways of knowing, add to this social work's origins in the university sector and I shouldn't be surprised that as a social worker I draw on others work to justify my position. Scholars note that as part of establishing social work in the university sector in Australia, the profession subscribed to a scientific paradigm within a positivist/modernist view of the world (Camilleri 1996). As such, much of social work practice has and continues to be presented as being informed by objectified knowledge gathered via a linear and cumulative inquiry process (Fook 2002:33; Parton 2003).

Taking a different tack, I know that the whole notion of a gendered way of being has been a struggle for you too, especially with the recent need to look after Dan. We have had many long conversations about dominant community and family discourses

that dictate how you should behave as a wife, mother and now carer. The job of carer has been very hard and I know there have been times when you have reached the end of your tether. I guess like Geraldine says, it is a particularly hard job when there seems to be little recognition the wider community. I was reminded of the quote I read the other day that revisits the caretaking role of social work:

Recognising the capacity for toughness and tenderness, for clear reason and fluid intuition, for radical hope and dry-eyed reality brings us back to caretaking. But rather than discounting its demands and possibilities, the lesson of our first voice (women's focus on relationship) tells us to pay attention to every dimension it encompasses. Social work is social caretaking. It concerns itself with the everyday tribulations of human life met with consciousness and intent The key to unlocking the power of this knowledge is to lay claim directly and unselfconsciously to its centrality in social work. (Weick 2000:401)

Still, this is hard to do when there are strong agendas in the community that diminish caring and the caretaker role.

Jane recently directed me to an Australian edited book that explores women and violence (Thorpe and Irwin 1996). One of the concepts raised in the book is that of 'structural violence'. For the authors, structural violence is not only about obvious social arrangements that encumber women, but 'is also about a process that is exploitative – a way that one group can be disadvantaged and another advantaged by 'the system ' (Thorpe and Irwin 1996:10)'. Weeks, a contributor to the same book, claims that organisations in particular are 'powerful arenas for the gendering processes which recreate and perpetuate gender power (Weeks 1996:69)'. I can see how these same processes can relegate caring and narrative approaches invisible. Caring is considered a 'natural ability' of women, thereby concealing qualities required and leaving it as an unrecognised activity (Weeks 1996:79). Narrative research is seen to be 'embedded in the realm of history and literature' and not 'thought of as sharing the logical-scientific heritage of the natural sciences' (Elliot 2005:98) therefore, it too has been deemed a largely unrecognised activity in the social sciences.

As I said earlier, I can see now how gender and my social work identity have played a part in my choice of narrative inquiry and how it coloured my perceptions of the research endeavour. When I started this project, I was pretty adamant that I was not interested in the social positioning that I perceived to be attached to the role of researcher. I remember thinking it was elitist and believed that research didn't really have anything to do with supporting people or bringing about change – it was somewhat removed from the 'real' world. I think that's why I initially chose to take a narrative approach, I believed that it gave people a voice and offered me a chance to say something too. But as I have already noted, this can be pretty scary when it is not your tradition and finding the right language is not easy either. I had an email from Geraldine today who said that after reading John's story she realised that she wasn't interested in trying to find a voice that suited men anymore, but rather she wanted to find a space for her own. I wonder how that will impact on her practice and positioning in the future?

Thinking about Geraldine's comment and how I have changed over the years has reminded me of a recent incident that I wanted to share with you. I think it illustrates the difficulties and resistances we all face as we challenge and go against agendas, especially gendered ones, in our families and the wider community. On Aunt Mary's recent trip from Canada to visit Graham and I, we were once again confronted with the need to explain our household and work roles. As you know, Graham and I have reversed our gendered roles in recent years. Although we both found initially that it was quite hard to adjust to Graham looking after the house and having the meal on the table when I got home from work in the evening, we have become accustomed to the change. In fact, we now openly and deliberately 'play around' with the gendered expectations that have arisen since the change.

As you can imagine, Aunt Mary found our situation quite challenging and would often make comments to us both about Graham's domesticity and the good job he did.

While Graham does do a good job, she didn't comment on my going to work in the same way. In the end, when Aunt Mary made her comments about Graham, we pointed out to her that it would be unlikely for her to make the same remarks if it had been me at home doing the same tasks. While she agreed with us, it was difficult for her to adjust. I am reminded of the observation made by Cree (1996), that men are often noticed and praised for doing tasks regularly done by women and contrast that with how women were met with resistance when they first entered what was socially constructed as the male work domain.

While I haven't heard from John for a while, I imagine that he is enjoying a new found freedom that comes with completing his degree. The last time I talked to him, he mentioned that his youngest son had found it strange having him around to spend time with instead of rushing away to do some study. Balancing work and leisure seems to becoming more of a challenge, but maybe it only looks that way because of where I sit at the moment. I am certainly aware of how much I have been immersed in a world of text during the last few years. I suspect that the world of practice may have moved on. Like John, I am sure I will need to renegotiate a new social position when I return. Maybe you and I will have a chance to see each other more and talk about different things? I can hear you laugh as I have just realised that this too is a world of text and recognise another facet of my affinity with narrative as a research method.

Well, Chris, I know there are many other things that I could reflect on regarding my attraction to narrative as a research approach and as a phenomenon and what I have learnt about gender, career choice and social work as a profession. But at some point, like this letter, the story must come to an end. I am sure as soon as I fold it, seal the envelope and post this letter other thoughts will come to mind, but that will always be the case. Clandinin and Connelly (2000:166) state that 'the research text, like life, is a continual unfolding in which the narrative insights of today are the chronological events of tomorrow'. As such, my inquiry into why Geraldine, John and I chose social work as our preferred career is unlikely to end with this text. How this will evolve for

us I cannot say. However I am sure that there will be many other opportunities for us to attend to our professional quilt/story.

On that note I will end. Say hello to Dan and the kids for me.

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