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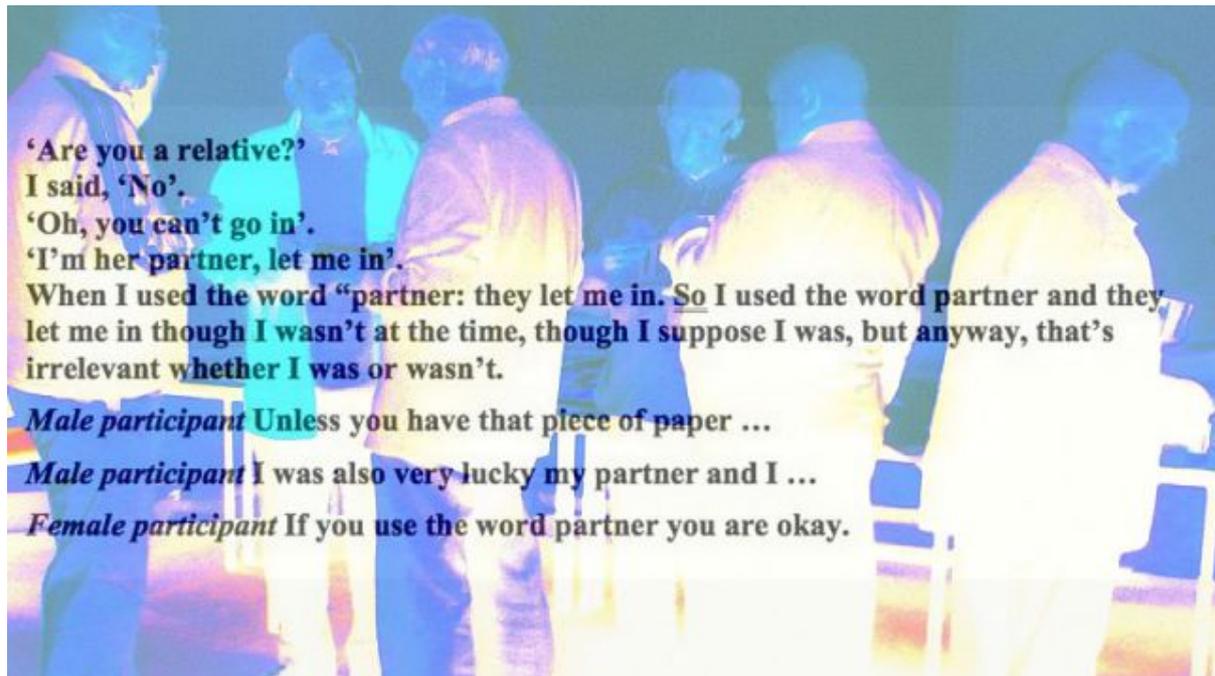
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I'm Her Partner, Let Me In!' Bringing the Narrative to Academic Papers

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My colleague at Bournemouth University, Lee-Ann Fenge, and I have collaborated on many qualitative projects over the years, several specifically arts-led, and have then contributed articles to academic journals about these endeavors. We are particularly attracted to the natural story-telling element of qualitative research or a “narrative approach,” and report on it often. Narrative methods contribute greatly to the advances made in qualitative research. In [a recent article](#) in *Creative Approaches to Research*, we suggest that a narrative style also can be promoted by the way that we present our data in academic journal publications.

A study on older LGBT citizens in rural Britain funded by Research Councils UK ([Fenge, Jones & Read 2011](#)) is highlighted by means of a report on one part of that study—a focus group, which provided an opportunity for participants to share a common history and identify individual experiences. The journal article reflecting this published in *Creative Approaches to Research* is entitled, [“Gifted Stories: How well do we retell the stories that research participants give us?”](#) (Jones & Fenge 2017)

In the process of reporting about this particular focus group we reached a specific frustration. Although Lee-Ann and I have produced several innovative outputs in disseminating our research (film, poetry, drama, and so forth), we still are often compelled to produce the more

traditional academic journal article as well. We passionately now believe, however, that as narrative researchers and storytellers we should be promoting narrative in the content and styles of our publications, too.

When we revert to a style of publication that is counter to this, we do a disservice to our commitments as narrativists. We can no longer afford to ignore the great advances made in representation of qualitative data. These have been overwhelmingly demonstrated by the successes achieved in auto-ethnography, poetic enquiry, ethno drama, film, performative social science ([Jones 2017](#)) and/or other arts-based efforts in research and dissemination (Leavy 2015).

Our frustration on this occasion, therefore, led us to try something new.

Suddenly, we thought, “Perhaps we can put aside a reporting system and a language that is imitative of quantitative reporting, strip off the lab coats of clichéd rigor and pseudo-analyses, and finally take up a unique language and style of publication that we can truly claim as our own.” We propose that the inspiration for this language and style is frequently found in the arts and humanities ([Jones 2012](#))

Lee-Ann and I produced a paper, therefore, that demonstrates two possible ways of writing up focus group material for publication. We began by reporting on the findings from the focus group transcript in the fashion that has by now become routine in qualitative interview reports, i.e., breaking up the responses into categorised data chunks. We extracted quotations from the initial conversations and then reorganised them in a very familiar way. We sorted responses by grouping them together with others that fit into similar niches. For those with a fondness for order, this is often justified as taking “messy” data and making it “neat”; in short, “data management.” We gave them our own particular interpretive “spin” by delineating a “category” for each grouping, often reformatting them within our own interpretive “bracketing.”

This is where our frustration took over. We asked ourselves, “How did this come about? Isn’t it time to shift our approach and report these experiences in a different way? Was this not a story of the interactions of strangers and a growing social group cohesion that was taking place on this very day by means of this research exercise? Where is that story?” Where are the storytellers’ “stories”? How did they unfold on this particular occasion? Are we missing the point that the real “interpretation”, the “action” if you will, was the interactions between the narrators themselves within the storytelling setting?

We then thought, “Let’s try something else, something perhaps even somewhat daring. We will present a large extract from the focus group transcript verbatim and at length, including nuances such as breaks, demonstrating how one person’s thoughts follows another’s, and the energy created when *several people talk at once*.” We did this without comment or interruption, in part to bring the reader closer to the group experience itself. By doing this, we hoped to give the reader a sense of how the gathered participants interacted with one another and the researcher and began to coalesce by forming a new group dynamic through the very focus group process itself. This also allows the reader to engage more directly with the participants’ stories and begin to make interpretations of her/his own—also becoming a participant in the dialogic. By honouring the (tran)script in its fullness, we reaffirm our positions as narrativists, dramaturgists and authors, as well as acknowledging potential readers as active audience members.

As narrative researchers, we are natural storytellers and need to keep this in the foreground when reporting studies, particularly in publications. As enlightened qualitative researchers, we must insist that qualitative research is always about story reporting and story making, and that narrative research (listening to and retelling stories) is a key democratising factor in social science research. Not only what research participants say, but also how they say it—both are equally important to report.

Adopting a narrative rather than an empirical mode of inquiry allows investigators to get closer to the phenomena studied in several ways. First, the narrative provides access to the specific rather than the abstract; secondly, narratives allow experience to unfold in a temporal way; thirdly, everyday language and its nuances are encouraged; finally, narrative permits dynamics to reveal themselves in the actions and relationships presented.

We strain to hear the story, almost whispered. We strain because, as human beings we love stories, particularly when they are told to us ...or narrated. There is a magical quality in listening to a story. We listen because we want to know how a life can be different from our own, or how it can be exactly the same. Stories compel us to compare. (Jones 2010)

“Gifted Stories ...” is available [here](#) and [here](#).

References

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