

EDITORIAL FOREWORD

Narrative approach in qualitative research

Research in agricultural sciences seems to be quite dominated by study areas such as crop science, food science, soil science, livestock production and other closely related fields. A vast majority of manuscripts received by the Journal of Agricultural Sciences – Sri Lanka are from these study areas. The research that has built the foundation for these manuscripts have predominantly used quantitative methodological approaches using experiments as the research strategy. The conclusions of these research are quite strong and can be generalized to populations. We receive some manuscripts that fall into the research areas of agribusiness, agricultural economics or agricultural extension that have mostly used the survey strategy using quantitative methods. We receive a very few manuscripts based on research utilizing a qualitative approach or mixed methods. This paper emphasizes on qualitative research. Furthermore, it relies upon the narrative approach with the view to provide a general understanding and to encourage agribusiness, agricultural economics, agricultural extension and farmer behaviour researchers to embark on such approaches in qualitative research.

Narrative approach

Key research designs available for a social science researcher include qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods. The purpose of the research, the research questions and the type of answers sought are the key concerns when choosing an appropriate design (Patton, 1990). Qualitative methods are unique in the sense that they allow the researcher to study the issues in depth. They are able to capture various points of views, ideas, explanations, and arguments put forward by the respondents (Butina, 2015) or small groups. Furthermore, qualitative research offers a wide range of choices of approaches available for a researcher (Creswell, 2003). The narrative approach is a well-established and unique technique in the qualitative research arena. A social researcher often finds people and small groups telling stories to give a meaning to their lives and societies they live in. The narrative approach examines such stories told by people or groups to describe the human experience, perceptions and action. Therefore, the narrative approach can be used to inquire about how people construct the meanings of life experiences.

The narrative approach is different from other qualitative research approaches by its contemplation to the structure of narratives in their entirety. Many qualitative approaches fragment interview recordings or texts into themes during the process of observation and analysis. Narratives are typically collected through in-depth interviews however, other forms of qualitative data such as observations or documents can be used in narrative approach. Butina (2015) stated that the narrative approach also uses stories as raw data. The narrative approach uses larger units of analysis such as an in-depth interview as a whole, a respondent's biography as a whole or oral histories.

The narrative approach is popular with research in education, sports, physical education, anthropology or psychology. However, this approach is also appropriate for research in the areas of agricultural extension, development studies, farmer motivation and aspirations, or farmer entrepreneurship. Furthermore, its importance and applicability in these study areas are increasing.

The narrative approach and its uses

People have their experiences, identity and self-concept and they interact with their surroundings through their personality and perceptions. While the traditional scientific rationality and reasoning are useful in understanding chemistry or physics, its usefulness is very limited in studies of meaning and human action as in farmer behaviour, training, competency or livelihood studies. Whilst the former uses scientific reasoning and rationality, the latter may be better suited to use narrative thinking, reasoning and rationality. Robinson and Hawpe (1986) contended that both approaches are able to establish worthwhile relationships among variables. The self can only be studied as a whole through a narrative taking past, present, and future in combination.

Narrative inquiry can describe perspectives and can provide deep understanding of a situation. In doing so, it can provide a meaning to stories which were not regarded before in the same sense. Narrative inquiry documents the experiences of a person or a small group, to provide a meaning to such experiences. According to Bornat (2004), a narrative is the realization of the meaning of life experience of individuals and small groups. These experiences are captured as stories through interviews or documents and ordered into a chronological narrative or a temporal structure.

Narrative approach has its own advantages. First, it analyses stories told at the in-depth interviews as raw data. This approach keeps the researcher close to the sense made by the subject through their stories. Second, it conceptualizes stories and experiences in their entirety without fragmenting them into variables. Third, it allows moral and socio-political dimensions (Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2005) and perceptions into the analytical framework. Fourth, it can be used to complement and further support the findings of a quantitative inquiry. Last, people are naturally storytellers hence possibility to capture in-depth meaning as people usually reveal themselves in their stories. Narrative approach has its disadvantages too. First, in-depth interviews are one of its strongest data collection tools which may have the element of subjectivity as a philosophical issue. Second, some narratives that have elements of ambiguity of meaning and interpretation are not easily coded or organized into themes already established for particular inquiries. Last, this approach is time consuming as it focuses on careful analysis of meanings and interpretations.

A narrative and narrative analysis

A narrative can be defined in different ways depending on the purpose of the study, subject of the study or how it is to be studied. According to Robinson and Hawpe (1986) there is no rigid explanation of what constitutes a narrative. A narrative is a series of logically and chronologically connected events that are told by respondents or research subjects. However, Oliver (1998) explained that a narrative is more than just merely the merging of events into a linear sequence. Narratives require a narrator who attempts to construct a meaning through presenting events in a certain order and uses past and present understandings. A narrative contains a theme that has an opinion, fact, idea or a moral.

The terms 'story' and 'narrative' are often used interchangeably. However, they do not have exactly the same meaning. Bell (2003) explains the term 'story' as 'spoken or 'written' utterances of individual human beings and narrative as 'broader societal patterns of meaning, and the discursive context within which participants' stories were enmeshed'. Therefore, a narrative contains the real meaning or moral of a story told by a participant. She further explains the term storyline as 'conveying a sense of the plots-in-common that shaped the participants' engagements and pointed them towards desired outcomes'.

A narrative has few components that are closely knotted. A narrative provides a meaning as long as its components are intertwined. Bruner (1990), Connelly and Clandinin ((1990), and Polkinghorne (1995) identify the following main components, which must be grasped in order to obtain the true meaning of a narrative, to be understood. First, a narrative has a setting where the story or action takes place. A setting comprises of a physical environment (such as a farm business that uses inputs and resources); socio-cultural factors (such as norms, values, attitudes or beliefs of a respondent and his characteristics such as gender or social class); and a temporal location which provides the narrative a historical perspective. Second, a narrative has characters. Characters are the people who live in the story. Third, a narrative has a plot which is an overall structure. A plot enmeshes various events, happenings and actions into an integrative and a thematic whole. Past, present, and possible futures are integrated in the plot of a narrative. There may be several themes in a story. Since the plot is a cohesive whole, it provides a greater depth to the narrative.

Data collection for narratives

Narrative analysis is the configuration of a narrative or a story, drawn from multiple data sources, that provides insights into how people construct meanings of their experiences (Oliver, 1998). A narrative approach can draw evidence from multiple sources such as in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, surveys, journal entries, personal or official logs, letters, images, drawings, written stories, observations or recordings of oral history. However, in-depth interviews, participant observations and surveys are the most common data collection tools for narratives.

In-depth interviews should be narratively-oriented for the researcher to construct a good narrative. Protocols of these interviews are carefully prepared by a trained interviewer. These include opening a story, letting a natural flow of a self-presentation by the subject while abstaining from encouraging the continuation of the story, engagement with topics discussed in the story, introducing additional issues that may have been implied or omitted, subsequent narrative questions to elicit details. Bornat (2004) recommends a social relationship between the interviewer and interviewee.

Participant observations greatly complement interviews in which they help to reflect on the intricacies and complexities of stories. The researcher may carry a checklist while visiting the respondents. The checklist will include practices and conditions that can be observed such as waste management practices, agronomic practices, agrochemical storage, housing conditions, assets acquired etc. Surveys allow the researcher to look beyond a particular case in search of peripheral data and to identify idiosyncrasies and shared storylines. Surveys can be conducted with carefully developed open-ended questions to stimulate participants to feel free to tell stories and reveal about what they deemed significant and relevant to the narrative (Bell, 2003).

Types of narrative data analysis

Traditional qualitative data analysis typically fragments texts, coding small portions, and then collating them. Narrative analysis is different from other methods of qualitative data analysis by its emphasis on the structure of the narrative as a whole. There is a wide variety of approaches to data analysis in narrative methodologies. Polkinghorne (1995) identified two types of narrative data analyses as (paradigmatic) analysis of narrative and the narrative analysis. The paradigmatic analysis fits the

individual data or details into a larger pattern or a model. These are either coincided or compared with previously established theories and foundations, or new concepts and realities are inductively derived from the data or stories. The narrative analysis is the configuration of the data into a cohesive whole to explain how and why the events, happenings and actions occurred in the way they did, and how and why the research subjects acted in the way they did. There are also other methods available to analyse the narrative data.

In essence, the narrative approach explicitly integrates the moral dimension linked to patterns of futures that are relevant to the past and present happenings and actions, and the ability to choose how to act, into the perception of human experience.

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01st January, 2023

<http://doi.org/10.4038/jas.v18i1.10094>

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