Qualitative Research Meets Narrative Therapy and Community Work:
A Confluence of Practice and Politics

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In the 1970s and 1980s, a dramatic development took place within the field of cultural anthropology, which in turn led to wide-ranging effects in a number of disciplines including therapy, community work, and qualitative research. It was known as the "interpretive turn" or the "crisis of representation" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. xv).

One of the most vivid ways to get a sense of what led to this crisis is to watch the film *Papua New Guinea: Anthropology on Trial* (Gullahorn-Holecek, 1983) in which Papua New Guineans in the early 1980s speak of their protests against anthropology and how these were linked to anticolonial struggle.

Utula Samana, Premier of the Morobe Province, explained:

> My personal opinion is that anthropological studies in the past has been part and parcel of the colonial forces [00:13] … It so happened that the West had the technology. The West had the written documents, or writing, so they went out to study the so-called "primitive cultures," and to write about them. So, in a way, it has not brought about the human understanding, but it has made one human being, or groups of human being, a subject of study by another. So that process has dehumanized rather than humanized relationships. (Gullahorn-Holecek, 1983, 16:05)

One of the other contributors to the film, Nahu Runi from Bunai, Papua New Guinea, declared that

> In the 1980s, we must stop anthropologists coming into the country. Secondly, we have our own academics, we have our own Papua New Guineans who now can become anthropologists themselves. (Gullahorn-Holecek, 1983, 00:01)

These protests by Papua New Guineans were in concert with the challenges that Palestinian American Edward Said was also making in his influential writings in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Said, 1978, 1983). We shall include an extended eloquent quote of Edward Said (2001) here:

> What we must eliminate are systems of representation that carry with them the kind of authority which, to my mind, has been repressive because it doesn't permit or make room for interventions on the part of those represented. This is one of the unresolvable problems of anthropology, which is constituted essentially as the discourse of representation of an Other epistemologically defined as radically inferior (whether labeled primitive, or backward or simply Other); the whole science of discourse of anthropology depends upon the silence of this Other. The alternative would be a representational system that was participatory and collaborative, noncoercive, rather than imposed, but as you know, this is not a simple matter … we must identify those social-cultural-political formations which would allow for a reduction of authority and increased participation in the production of representations, and proceed from there. (p. 42)

In response to these challenges, some cultural anthropologists of the Global North, including Barbara Myerhoff (1982), Clifford Geertz (1983), Renato Rosaldo (1992), Edward Bruner and Victor Turner (1986), questioned what had been widely accepted practices of anthropology. They articulated that it was impossible for anyone to have an objective view in their research and demonstrated the ways in which anthropologists shape their research and influence the communities in which they study. In doing so, they questioned the role of anthropologists interpreting events in a culture other than their own and stressed the importance of acknowledging how anthropologists' own ethnicity, culture, class, and gender influence their research.

As Edward Said (2001, p. 42) called for "participatory and collaborative" representational systems, these anthropologists during the interpretive turn proposed alternative forms of research in which the role of ethno-methodology was to privilege the meanings and interpretations of the people who are being studied. This new form of ethno-methodology involved inviting people of various cultures and communities to interpret and study their *own* lives and cultures. In this way, the people of the community being studied became research partners and interpretations, and representations became accountable to local people. This was a radical departure from previous traditions of anthropological research and has gone on to influence work in many fields including postcolonial studies, gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender studies, cultural studies, social activism, as well as family therapy and community work.

In developing what has come to be known as Narrative Therapy and Community Work, both David Epston and Michael White (see Epston, 1999; Epston & M. White, 1990) were significantly influenced by the "interpretive turn" or "crisis of representation" within cultural anthropology (see Chamberlain, 1990).

David Epston brought his experience as an anthropologist into his practice as a family therapist in Aotearoa New Zealand. In doing so, he brought the term co-research into the therapy realm. As he described it,

> I have always thought of myself as doing research, but on problems and the relationships that people have with problems, rather than on the people themselves. The structuring of narrative [therapy] questions and interviews allow me and others to co-research problems and the alternative knowledges that are developed to address them. (Epston, 2001, p. 180)

Much of Michael White's early work in Australia was in collaboration with people under the gaze of psychiatric evaluation within Western culture: those defined as "mentally unwell," "mad," and/or "schizophrenic." Whereas psychiatric interpretations represented such folks as, using Said's (2001, p. 42) words, "radically inferior," Narrative Therapy approaches challenged this and returned the gaze to psychiatric practices.

> Due to an extraordinary investment in the development of the discourses of pathology, we now have at our disposal a vast array of ways of speaking with and interacting with people that reproduce the subject/object dualism that is so pervasive in the structuring of relations in our culture.

> These ways of speaking and interacting with people puts them on the other side of knowledge, on the outside. These ways of speaking and acting make it possible for mental health professionals to construct people as the objects of psychiatric knowledge, to contribute to a sense of identity which has "otherness" as its central feature. The success of these discourses is beyond question, and I believe that this achievement represents one of the truly great marginalisations of contemporary culture. (M. White, 1995, pp. 112–113)

Just as Edward Said (2001) challenged anthropology to generate a "participatory and collaborative and noncoercive representational system to allow for a reduction of authority and increased participation in the production of representations" (p. 42), Michael White set out to do similarly in a different context.

> I think that we can assist people to challenge the hegemony of the psychiatric knowledges. We can work with them to identify the extent that their own lives are "knowledged." We can engage people in conversations that are honouring of their knowledges of life, and that trace the history of their knowledgeableness. We can join people in conversations that provide the opportunity for them to build on these knowledges, and that assist people to develop plans for applying this knowledgeableness to those experiences that they find troubling.

> We can make it our business to work collaboratively with people in identifying those ways of speaking about their lives that contribute to a sense of personal agency, and that contribute to the experience of being an authority on one's life … And we can join with people in challenging those relations of power that inform the subject/object dualism. (M. White, 1995, pp. 121–122)

The determination to increase "participation in the production of representations" extended to the realms of publication in the field of Narrative Therapy and Community Work. Cheryl White founded Dulwich Centre Publications in 1983 and, shaped by a feminist ethos and politics, prioritized participatory and collaborative representation.

We believe questions are being asked about the way writers have represented the experience of people whose lives and stories they are describing. Where people's actions are under discussion in the literature without their permission – no matter who they are and what is being said – these people are at the mercy of the writer's descriptions about their behaviour … As a result of these considerations, there is now a greater importance being placed on the accurate representation of people's experience in articles and presentations. A number of Australian and New Zealand papers are now being co-authored by the therapist and the persons with whom they met in therapy. There has been a move away from the practice of writers discussing clinical examples as if their own perspective was the "correct" one. (C. White & Kamsler, 1990, p. 23)

As narrative family therapists influenced by feminism and the interpretative turn were developing a range of practices to assist individuals, families, and communities to reclaim storytelling or representational rights (Denborough, 2014) and "re-author" their lives and identities (M. White, 2007), a number of other family therapists were embracing the potential and possibilities of qualitative research.

This journal, *The Qualitative Report* (*TQR*), founded by family therapist Ron Chenail, and continuing today with his family therapy colleagues Sally St. George and Dan Wulff, also gestated in the same culture of innovation that led to the field of Narrative Therapy and Community Work. Qualitative inquiry emerged in a professional climate that recognized the limitations of traditional forms of research to address real-world needs and expectations. The certainty of science did not align with our need and ability to appreciate the complexities of our lives. Rather than seek new or better "certainties," qualitative researchers saw the primary issue as being those very desires and attempts to corner single Truths. Qualitative inquirers sought varieties of explanations rather than single or normative ones and looked far and wide for persons and groups to provide such explanations. Not only were multiple perspectives sought, a larger range of approaches or methodologies were encouraged and developed.

TQR, from its origins, has looked to support qualitative researchers to pursue their inquiries in their own particular ways. The editorial process is founded on accepting all researchers while leaving room to critique and encourage development in their reports about their studies. The voices and decisions of the researchers, from the most novice to the most senior, are valued. The "interpretive turn" has meant that the positions and perspectives of local researchers and practitioners are privileged over generalized or normative knowledges. The traditional practice of professional journals serving a gatekeeping function over knowledge and its dissemination has been

altered at *TQR* to see the journal more as a learning community, building relationships to foster ever-widening applications of qualitative inquiry with more persons and groups included.

About This Special Issue

This special issue of TQR therefore represents a home-coming or re-union of sorts. Or perhaps the most appropriate metaphor is that of two rivers that started in the same place and then diverged through many different terrains now coming back together—a confluence of the two rivers of qualitative research and Narrative Therapy/community work.

This journal issue has been a collaboration between Sally St. George and Dan Wulff, Co-Editors-in-Chief of *The Qualitative Report*, and Claire Nettle and David Denborough of the Narrative Practice Research Network. It also represents a collaboration between Dulwich Centre Foundation, The University of Melbourne (Department of Social Work), and *TQR*. The Narrative Practice Research Network was originally suggested by John McLeod, so it is a great pleasure that John has written a reflective piece to conclude this special issue.

A rich and diverse collection of papers on Narrative Therapy and qualitative research will be released over the month of December 2024. The papers in this special collection are linked in connecting theory and practices developed in Narrative Therapy to the theory and practices of qualitative (and postqualitative) research.

A significant contribution of Narrative Therapy to both counseling and research is the development of innovative ways of translating poststructuralist critique into practical applications. The first set of papers demonstrate this through a focus on interview-based qualitative research. The authors challenge the notion of research interviews as taking place between a fixed and unchanging subject whose pre-existing knowledge can be extracted by an interviewer-expert whose stance is detached and objective. In its place, they offer a range of exciting possibilities for conducting interviews in which participants and researchers collaborate in generating new knowledge, understandings, and analyses. These contributions are relevant to research across questions and topics. Through reimagining the research interview as a generative space for collaborative meaning-making, the authors offer practical and theoretical possibilities to all those seeking to conduct interviews in ways that are congruent with a critical or poststructuralist approach and a commitment to ethical engagement in research.

In Section Two we feature studies by practitioners who have systematically examined their own practices using Narrative Therapy as a framework not only for their therapy work but for their researching methodology as well. In this way their therapy practices have influenced their inquiries and their inquiries have influenced their therapy practices, producing beautiful examples of reflexivity in their daily practices. Their work is an invitation to other practitioners to use their own "work" practices to ground their research and to center the ethics of doing so.

The authors in Section Three offer nuanced consideration of the complexities and affordances of conducting research with communities they are part of or subjects with which they have lived experience. Drawing on approaches developed in Narrative Therapy, the authors complicate assumptions about insider/outsider status and offer congruent ways of utilizing and representing researchers' lived experience. The themes of co-research and collaborative meaning-making continue in these papers, this time applied to speaking back to research practices that have pathologized participants or excluded people whose perspectives are key to understanding the research topic.

Just as Edward Said in the 1970s and Nahu Runi and Utula Samana in the 1980s challenged the cultural and representational domination of Western research, many other Indigenous and Southern writers, thinkers, and anticolonial activists have continued to question and to carve out alternative forms of practice and research (Akinyela, 2002; Chilisa, 2019a, 2019b; Futter-Puati & Maua-Hodges, 2019; Smith, 1999; Waldegrave et al., 2003).

Within the field of Narrative Therapy and Community Work, there now exists significant literature by First Nations narrative practitioners whose engagement with Indigenous philosophies and storywork (Archibald, 2008) is leading to significant innovations (Davis, 2017; Drahm-Butler, 2015; Dulwich Centre Publications, 2020; Newcastle, 2017; Wingard et al., 2015; Wingard & Lester, 2001).

Within realms of research, First Nations thinkers such as Botswanan Bagele Chilisa describe a contemporary "paradigm war." Where once a paradigm war was fought between qualitative and quantitative approaches, there is now a struggle for the acceptance of a third paradigm— Indigenous/decolonizing methodologies:

A long time ago, we used to talk about quantitative research and that was the only thing that was taught. Then there was debate and the paradigm war was between the quantitative and qualitative. Then it became normal that qualitative research should be taught and people should use it. Where I stand right now, I'm saying we are in another paradigm war at this time. There are now three paradigms that are fighting. (B. Chilisa, personal communication, July 22, 2024)

The last three papers in this special issue are from East Africa, First Nations Australia, and Samoan contexts and are shaped by decolonizing ethics and methodologies.

The challenges that led to the interpretive turn or crisis of representation are not over. The quest for what Edward Said (2001) described as "participatory, collaborative and noncoercive representation" systems continues in family therapy, in community practice, and in qualitative research. We hope this collection leads to more conversation and collaboration.

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