



Measure the Story: Methodological Considerations

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ABSTRACT

Story as an idea and instrument is prevailing in qualitative research. It is meanwhile the most problematic and challenged apparatus due to its unsystematic accountability to validate research outcomes. It is often perceived to be more subjective than objective in academic executions. This paper connects the instrument of story with its unseeingly related concept of measure to build a theoretical perspective on the methodological considerations and applications. The method of biographical narrative is used to illustrate the quality of data through a framework to discern the characteristics, e.g. the temporary dimension for analyzing the process of changes and explanations of meanings; while the narrative of the lived experience is perceived to be authentic when vigorously collected. Using such elements to measure story for research sees the objective prominence and the quality of real records that produce both truthful and meaningful outcomes.

MEASURE IN RESEARCH

When many qualitative researchers are wondering whether qualitative research has an element of measure in their research, if so, how does that work? Over years of teaching qualitative research methodology with a focus on biographical narrative, I have set this question in classroom discussions with postgraduate students from different subject backgrounds. Very often, we encountered long silence after the question was thrown out. It was not that we could not find it evident in qualitative research, but such kind of questions are not very often asked.

With some pointed way of thinking, we find the act of measure is identifiable and usually conducted through other terminologies. The widely used terms of qualitative or narrative measures are pervasive, such as subjectivity, objectivity, realness, meaning, morality, norms, and values etc. are all of conducts with measuring for judgment and validation. Thus, measure still seems a necessary way of looking at research itself and its outcomes in the qualitative paradigm. Such nonnumerical act of measure in research seems obvious, as Hegel's logic (1991) recognized, measure is the identity between quantity and quality, and it can be a basic way of thinking for qualitative research. Qualitative researchers do not have to ignore it or discard it.

Measure is often explicitly and conventionally identified in quantitative methods with characteristics of numeric quota, e.g. by ways of counting, marking, calculating, scaling, comparing and contrasting etc. Numbers are critical instruments and measures for all sorts of calculations and analysis, which bases the outcomes of quantitative research

and constitutes the nature of quantitative methodology. The identity of quantitative research is the certainty that numbers and its associated tools can provide for and from the measure as means and outcomes of research. The assumption underlies this type of measure is the researched could be measured with numbers directly or indirectly. Quantitative measure is the major research approach to natural and engineering sciences. It is also widely applied to studies of social sciences and humanities with the instrument of survey and statistical analysis. All the assumptions of measure reside in the objective quality inherent in the research conduct. In this article, I will not discuss about whether or how measure with numbers is objective or subjective, as the important question raised here is how could measure be possible in qualitative research, especially, when the researched is intangible or infinite, such as, spirit and meaning etc.? As qualitative research has been facing challenges as to finding and inventing instruments for scientific and trustworthy output, identifying the objective quality of qualitative research data produced by the basic instrument of story, may provide explicable and applicable power of story as a scientific tool.

THE IDEA AND INSTRUMENT OF STORY

In human sciences, when the research is to find out how people make quality and meaning of their lives, in a sense, the direct numeric measure finds its limit and loses its function in this kind of questions (Polkinghorne, 1988). Also, when the measure becomes immeasurable and measureless with mere numbers, for instance, when the researched is human meanings and/or cultural rituals, e.g. when the research is to find out how people make quality and meaning of their lives, in a sense, the direct numerical measure finds its limit



and loses its function in this kind of questions. This is where and when a story becomes necessary and comes into play in research with more direct access through narratives.

The use of story often characterizes research with qualitative approaches, and it features nonnumerical measure. The idea and act of measure however remains an important way of thinking and a perceivable behavior. For qualitative research to make sense, measure is more an implicit and the most powerful judgement, not with mere numbers, but with the instrument of language and the measure of cultural values and norms, mostly through the use of story. That is to say, in qualitative research, story becomes the methodological foundation as an idea and a tool (Sibierska, 2017). It still makes sense through measure for the story to provide research outcomes with certainty and scientific values, but mainly through shedding lights on meaning making of behaviors, narrative of rituals and account of hidden principles.

MEASURE THE STORY

The original life model of the use of story in research can be reflected metaphorically from the consumption of petrol. The commonsense is, the purer the petrol is, the utmost amount of energy it produces with minimum pollution of the environment, because of its capability of complete exhaustion of the fuel in consumption. It is called clean and green power. The analogy for research is the consumption of story as an idea and instrument for producing data thoroughly meaningful and research outcomes most understandable. The data closest to research subjects and most relevant to their reality produces most impactful and thoroughly consumable outcomes.

The idea of using story for research is no new solution to using suitable research tools. Yet, why and how to make story good and necessary instrument has been a methodological exploration (e.g. Polkinghorne, 1988; Denzin, 1989; Barrett, 2015). Likewise, the measure of story that offers narrative and observation of norms and values in researching about human beings, e.g. their society, identity or literature, is to calculate its purity for maximum of real dynamics with truth status for effective outcomes and meaningful applications to people, culture, knowledge and humanities. This kind of research is conducted by collecting narrative of facts and record of events from the reality or the lived experience of people.

The reason why story is irreplaceable by other instruments lies in its nature of accommodating multiple dimensions of reality and layers of meanings of data not only in truthful accounts, but also with meaningful accounts. In this sense, story is discerned to be more straight forward to the inner world of human beings and their reality by reaching to their memories than any other methods. In another word, the self and the world, mostly, the inner self is only directly accessible by story, e.g. the story of biography, or a biography told through a story. Surprisingly enough, there are no other

accessible ways, even the most advanced modern technology has to rely on the idea of the story in processing information thoroughly meaningful and reliable. Through this article, I further illustrate how and why the idea of story is positioned a necessary instrument for human sciences (e.g. Polkinghorne, 1988), and how to measure it for validation and application purposes.

THE LIVED EXPERIENCE AND BIOGRAPHY

I rely on two concepts to illustrate the above claims. One is the narrative of 'the lived experience' (e.g. Manen, 1990, p.4), the other is 'biography' (Denzin, 1989). Both analogize and rely on the instrument of story to bring up data for analysis.

Much academic writing has been produced with both concepts; yet little is related them to the idea of measure. The concept of 'the lived experience' usually suggests qualitative research data of more narrative methods, e.g. ethnography, case study or biographical narrative. The notion of the lived experience implies the narration brings out inner experience and present of people's past. Manen (1990, p.4) questions the secrets and intimacies of the world through reaching with the lived experience, as he said:

"...persons' or beings have 'consciousness' and they 'act purposefully' in and on the world by creating objects of 'meaning' that are 'expressions' of how human beings exist in the world."

Meanwhile, the idea of the lived experience bestows a number of characteristics of this type of qualitative data. The first is it is derived from real persons who live/lived in the real world. The realness of such narrative prerequisites the collected data with a status of truth. The truth status of the experiential narrative suggests that the data comes with perceivable validity. However, such inherent validity with the narrative data lies in the condition that the real data told via story by the research subject is genuine.

The qualitative data of the lived experience has its both objective and subjective qualities. The objective character is implied by the factual part of the narrative, including, for example, the periods of time and places of where and when the person lives or lived the life. For example, the context of childhood, the actions upon the life, such as the education spent from the primary to higher education, mostly factual and evident, which could be verified by the institutional record and memories. The objective facts are the foundation for people to acquire and produce their subjective accounts of understanding and meaning. Their accounts of what they learned for their personal growth and how they relate themselves to the actual world is both personal and social, most of which is known as the lived experience.

The data with the lived experience lives with all the dimensions of time and space, personal and social, as well as subjective and objective (Manen, 1990). Even within the dimension of time, it has two dimensions, i.e. diachronic and synchronic

when the subject is narrating of the past and related others as references at the present. Given the nature of multiple dimensions of the narrative for the lived experience, the data is difficult to pin down its meaning without referring to the subject's own interpretation, and thus it gets the analysis and interpretation an uneasy conduct.

The complicated character of data from the lived experience indeed allows the analysis for multiple interpretations which entail a great deal of intersubjectivity between the researcher and the narrator. That is why story is used as both instrument of data collection and a tool for analysis. In one way, the research relies on its capturing capability to hold the complicity of the human reality, in the other, it becomes difficult for measure, as the standard of each dimension would be very different. A simple example would be like this: when a subject is storytelling of their university education, the factual information with the period of time and the name of the institution would evoke a whole bunch of data, while his/her narrative of what is learned could be more personal as well as subjective. The norm of interpretation is not easy to set when the multiple dimensions are residing in the same collection of narrative. The integrity of narrative collected for analysis depends more on dialogical and concurrent negotiation than established criteria.

Given the situation that story is an important instrument in collecting such qualitative data, diverse in meanings as it is, also variant with persons' values, we understand why the idea of measure with mere numbers or quantifying instruments are not the best to apply to studying people and their reality, regardless of the biographical background or culture. If we turn to methods intimate to and best representing the life of human beings, such as biography or lifehistory, immediately we can find the best method for studying people and their lifeworld, and then measure the method (Denzin, 1989; Barrett, 2015). The exemplar method I turn to now is the one I am most familiar with – the narrative of biography or the biographical narrative as a story. I have claimed it perhaps the most direct and authentic way to study about people and the world they live in, producing valid research data (Denzin, 1989; Zhao and Poulson, 2006).

A framework for measuring the method of story through biographical narrative data is built below, as it is broadly recognized that biography is made up of storied discourse (e.g. Denzin, 1989). However, there has no claim directly made so far regarding whether biography a theory or not. I tend to claim here biography a theory, but not limited to its literary property, instead with its potential as a framework of data collection and analysis for researching people and humanities. It implies an inherent belief in the epistemological value of the biographical method, rather than questioning its limits (Saunders, 2017).

First of all, the biographical structure of data covers the temporary of a lifespan. Using biographical method collects data has potential meaningful explanatory resources of

human development, and discerning changes happened to a human subject and the society (Zhao and Poulson, 2006). Perhaps it is the very reasonable method most direct and relevant to a real person's life and their lived experience that represent a "diachronic reality" (Tatossian and Walker, 1987, p.99). The sense of time exists in the data entails the actual frame of interpretation and more objective markers, such as the incidents and events in sequences situated in the narrative of persons and their actions for any research to arrive at objective analysis and possible meaning-making, when the real time is considered for the data analysis, the data has its historical values and perceptual configurations. That's the reason why the idea with a frame of biography is interchangeably used with the method of life history (Zhao, 2008). The narrative facts from the diachronic span provide the foundation for potential accurate alignments and interpretations with reasons inherent in narratives with consistency (Denzin, 1989).

Any person's biography is a story (Tatossian and Walker, 1987, p.99). The story brings the life into examination with a sense of data in the academic contexts. When it is situated in the life context and an actual person, the data becomes meaningful forms. The two main elements of the story are the time line of the life process of the subject and the character in the narratives of his/her life events, both being objective or natural for story (Sibierska, 2017). The story provides the place to see how they make meanings of their lives, using Denzin's words (1989; Polkinghorne, 1988), the concrete meaning, as the subject offers meanings through the narrative in the form of data. The biographical story brings up data both truthful and meaningful.

The biography also contains the lived experience of real persons, the research subjects for the study of their selves and identities. "A story is first of all a combinative and much more than simply a representation of random chance." Itself is a frame of life only limited by the fact of its time and space, but always open for analysis and interpretations with actual meanings (Tatossian and Walker, 1987, p.99).

The biographical narratives contain inherent mechanism of analysis. The mechanism connects the turning points and the narrative insights. Denzin (1989) conceptualizes the insight that reveals the hidden joints of the critical incidents and turning points of lives or history to be epiphany. The epiphany from the critical turning points becomes the meaning revealing. It could be best represented through story. The analytical device brought by this mechanism recognizes subjective meanings attached to life facts. The story allows rhetorical acts, such as the metaphors the subject uses when they try to make sense of their lives and feelings; the interpretations and explanations of behaviors and actions offer gender, class and racial variances and cultural references to personal and social layers; the turning points as events that connects the subject with significant others and moments of lives both personally and socially relevant to qualitative studies. Diachronically and synchronically

situates the data to locate its meaning and truth status (Zhao, 2008). The story is a data collection instrument as well as an analysis tool, and thus the most important qualitative research device to hold the integrity of the result or reveal the complexity of matters, not available in other forms.

Most importantly, this framework potentially moves the qualitative research from the traditional pursuit of truth to the realm of meaning making through narrative acts for humanities and cultural analysis. Any purposeful endeavor of getting close to real persons and real worlds is for the research to represent as truthful reality as it can (Toma, 2000). Yet, it is not the utmost purpose of research but the starting point. Most research aims at truth finding, but the narrative with biography works with the real information from the beginning to meaning finding in the result. Most of the cases, research with this method deals with clustering materials for research purposes and reality applications. The far-reaching aim of such qualitative effort is in one way to search for methods of how to get close to reality of human beings and their living cultures, in other ways, it is to find the personal and cultural norms and values that govern human behaviors and human worlds.

With the above theoretical dimensions of the framework, it is not difficult for us to come up with a perspective on the idea of using biographical narrative for qualitative data. These measuring dimensions of the method are by no means indicators of simple and easy operations. In application to the practice of research, specifying some relevant techniques can be illuminative.

THE TECHNIQUES

Story often relies on the verbal act. Biographical narrative interview takes forms of purposeful conversations, a kind of unstructured interview. Such mode of interview requires frequent contact with subjects. The qualitative researchers usually make trips to the research field to be present in the field, this is what Denzin (1989) called as 'the metaphysics of presence' which also brings in the necessity of field observation. While research with surveys does not necessarily need the researcher to make trips to the field, and the new technologies also make the data collection possible by videos and have recordings made by others for the researcher. Yet, biographical narrative interviews usually take the forms of purposeful conversations to reach the reality of or from the subjects. The most common and basic way is the verbal part of narratives. It not only needs the researchers to make trips to the subject's community and world, but also needs to build up some relationship to capture their reality and their inner world, or to get the autonomy for the subject to come up with invitations for the researcher to get in their world and ceremonies in order to explain the meanings (Toma, 2000). Toma (2000, p.177) has revealed how strong relationship between researchers and the subjects is important to yield good data:

"Good data for subjective researchers is the product of just these strong connections between researchers and subjects. These connections allow for the rich description of contexts and experiences that are the essence of good qualitative data."

Such autonomy is probably the realest representation of their reality. These are all qualitative researchers' ideal ways of getting the best data.

Narratives and storytelling is not limited to the modality of linguistic resources. Sibierska (2017, p. 55) has pointed narrative to the nonlinguistic modality:

"the examples of existing non-verbal narratives that rely on different semiotic resources show that story-telling is not limited to language and not limited to one modality. It is possible, at least in the contemporary Western cultural tradition, to tell a story without 'the help of words', with gestures, facial expressions, movement, or pictures that portray those."

Story is not limited to linguistic acts. Qualitative researchers stay in the field for a prolonged time to catch the stories not told by linguistic resources through observations, the semiotics themselves are data also meaningful resources for interpretations in analysis. The only access to that part of existence is the researcher's presence in the moments and places in the field.

Thus, through biographical narrative method, story is found to be accountable for how the subjective endeavor is grounded in factual materials and authentic documents. It is in fact the most direct approach to studies about human beings and it is perhaps the most capable instrument to obtain data with as multiple dimensions as the lived experience and reality has.

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