

# **NARRATIVE INQUIRY: GENERATING USEFUL DATA FOR RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

**Dr. Kathleen De Long  
University of Alberta**

**Working with  
Data about  
Professional  
Life  
Experiences:  
Time  
Challenge  
Change**

# BACKGROUND

## ■ Why Use Narrative?

Narrative inquiry is extremely useful as a methodology for collecting data around personal, professional and organizational experiences.

Both professional development and organizational development (OD) initiatives need evidence to accomplish their work. Data is collected, analyzed and shared with an individual or a group so that change can be initiated in cooperation with those affected.

# RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- **Career progression:** To identify the career progression of women directors of Canadian academic libraries.
- **Leadership development:** To identify how expectations, perceptions, experiences (opportunities and challenges) and adaptive capacity shaped the leadership development of the women directors.
- **Definition of leadership:** To identify the director's definition of leadership and change over time.

# METHODOLOGY

- The study sample consisted of four women academic library directors. The choice of study participants was based upon intensity sampling with participants selected because of their lived experiences and their knowledge and understanding of the path to becoming a woman academic library director in Canada.
- Data were collected using a highly qualitative narrative inquiry research methodology that included interviews and review of relevant documentation. Semi-structured, in-depth, interviews were conducted with study participants in order to explore their career paths and their development as leaders. This allowed study participants to focus on stories or events that were critical to them.

# METHODOLOGY

- Data were analyzed using a categorical-content perspective and taking two approaches: restorying and thematic analysis. With thematic analysis, the data were coded into categories or themes using an inductive approach that allowed themes to emerge as the interview texts were examined.
- Findings were presented thematically and supported by narrative excerpts and descriptions of critical incidents, which is another commonly used approach to framing qualitative research

# METHODOLOGY

- TIME - when
- CHALLENGE – what happened
- CHANGE – why it was important and how it affected me

Narrative research is not just about experience and making of meaning (what happened and why), it also encompasses the dynamics of the relationships and the plot or events that study participants believed were worth telling (why it happened and why it was important)

# CRITICAL INCIDENT

**Setting: 1980s; Academic library**

**Characters: Study Participant; Co-workers and Chief Librarian**

**Problem or Scene: Early Experiences – Hardships and Setbacks**

**Actions /Resolution: Study participant remembers a co-worker (female) resigning because she wanted a raise as Head of Reference. The Chief Librarian (male) refused to give it to her and changed her position from Head of Reference to Special Projects. There was a lot of anger about the demotion and resignation and also about how the study participant and co-workers thought they were similarly being treated. The incident inspired the Study Participant to work with the Faculty Association; it also resulted in a request for a management review.**

# CRITICAL INCIDENT

**Setting: Late 1980s; Academic library**

**Characters: Study Participant; Library Staff**

**Problem or Scene: Mid-career**

**Actions /Resolution: Study participant started a new job as director (first director position) and recognized that there was a major need for change in the organization (her predecessor had been there for more than 20 years and not a great deal of change had occurred). Study participant needed to set a different tone with senior staff. Senior staff were very powerful and union concerns were being ignored. She made change gradually, moving senior people out of positions. Some were supportive but others opposed the change. The study participant learned that not everyone was going to like her.**



# CRITICAL INCIDENT

**Setting: 2000s; Academic Library**

**Characters: Study Participant**

**Problem or Scene: Leadership Development – Learning from Narrative of Others**

**Actions /Resolution: Study participant describes changes that she was making in her library and reflects that when she heard the university president talk about setting the direction and the tone of the institution she understood that what she was trying to achieve was changing the tone of the library, namely how staff members worked together and how they communicated. Both teamwork and communication are important but tone makes a huge difference.**

# DATA QUALITY

- **Reliability**
- **Validity**

# DATA QUALITY

- Access
- Honesty
- Verisimilitude
- Familiarity
- Transferability
- Economy

# KEY FINDINGS

- Power of story and importance of narrative: narrative inquiry is extremely useful as a methodology for collecting data and understanding professional and organizational experiences.
- Time, challenge and change is a useful framework for exploring lived experience (use of critical incidents).
- Power of the bad example in life experience. All of the study participants mentioned incidents of bad leadership that they had observed: incompetent, rigid, intemperate behaviors.

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