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Narrative Gerontology: Research-Informed Practice

This chapter explores the origins of risk and resilience theory, which is rooted in research that examines people's capacity to overcome stress associated with adverse events. A research study is used to illustrate that resilience can be understood as people's propensity to naturally respond to difficult life situations. The chapter also describes how narrative research methods and narrative social work practice techniques mirror and inform each other, helping you to translate research into practice.

What we know about risk and resilience is, in large part, a function of research into how people in risk-laden circumstances overcome adversity. In 1999, Fraser, Richman, and Galinsky contended that "if we can understand what helps some people to function well in the context of high adversity, we may be able to incorporate this knowledge into new practice strategies" (p. 136). Decades later, their prediction that the resilience concept can serve as a framework for social work practice has proven true as research studies increasingly inform practice.

There is a growing consensus that resilience is a positive reaction to overcoming stress or the perceived strain that stems from demanding, risk-laden circumstances. This is congruent with the definition of resilience emphasized here, which focuses on the process of how older people deal with chronic daily stressors while still attaining many of their goals of daily living (Greene, 2014). These goals are said to rest on the balance they achieve between risk factors that could bring about negative functional outcomes and protective factors that shield them from the harmful effects of adversity (Galea, 2014). The goals also are achieved as older people envision choices for a positive future.

Narrative Gerontology

Telling and listening to stories is as old as humankind and is a means of retaining cultural and historical accounts. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, researchers developed an interest in stories as a means of scientific inquiry. Since that time, use of the narrative has become widespread, and it is currently used as a communication tool in fields such as educational gerontology (Kenyon & Randall, 2001), geriatric medicine, care management, and long-term care (Langer & Ribarich, 2008; McDonald, 2018). Narrative is increasingly being used in social work practice to conduct a client assessment and is at the core of the RESM methodology presented throughout this text (Milner, Myers, & O'Byrne, 2015). That is, narratives can be used to collect research data or to cocreate practice information.

Narrative Gerontology Defined

Narrative gerontology is the study of stories of aging as told by those who have experienced life and are growing older (Birren, 2001). The social science discipline comes from a postmodern school of thought that considers the story a source of locally and socially constructed data or ideas and a means of individualizing the lives of study participants (see chapter 3). Most important, multiple contexts and social and cultural conditions come to life through the creation of a narrative (Gubrium, 1993). In essence, narrative gerontology is a methodology that embraces Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological approach to human development, expanding research and clinical foci to the series of interlocking social systems—micro to macro level—in which people interact (see chapter 2).

Narrative Gerontological Research

This chapter introduces readers to the narrative gerontological research method as a means of preparing you to apply the RESM of social work practice. The narrative research interview as outlined in this chapter is a major vehicle for making risk and resilience theory a practice reality, helping the social worker understand people's critical life events. To plan for a narrative interview with an older adult, consider the following questions:

- How will you make the purpose of your interview transparent? For example, you could say, "Thank you for helping me with my class assignment to interview you about your important life events."

- What will you say or do to indicate to that you are taking a learning stance? Maybe you could say, "I'm anxious to learn what you have to say!"

- What prompts or questions will you take with you? Compile a tentative list.

- Are you ready to listen for story strands or themes? For example, was growing up in a particular neighborhood an important theme?

- Do you think that you can give positive feedback by reflecting on the meaning of the events from the older person's perspective? If you don't know, ask another question, such as "What did that mean when you were growing up?" or "What did that mean to you?" (See RESM Toolbox Exercise 1.1. on page 16)

The Project: Older Adults Who Overcame Oppression

In 2006, the Older Adults Who Overcame Oppression project used a narrative research qualitative approach to study the phenomenon of resilience. The research was designed to better understand how 40 ethnically diverse participants maintained a balance between risk (namely, discrimination and oppression) and protective factors (particularly family and teachers) and became resilient, competent adults, many of whom were leaders in advocating for social and economic justice in their communities (Cohen, Greene, Lee, Gonzalez, & Evans, 2006). As you read portions of the study participants' transcripts, think about how you might use the conversation to understand their natural propensity to respond positively to stress, that is, their resilience.

Project researchers interviewed older adults who were referred to the project because they were known to be exemplars of resilience. Their narratives consisted of critical life events involving discrimination during the Jim Crow era in the United States and revealed the impact that these experiences had on individual, family, sociocultural, and societal resilience. Their stories also offered insight into the historical context of the time and the issues of "difference" that limited their equal participation in society (Greene, Cohen, Gonzalez, & Lee, 2009). (See chapter 5.)

Case studies from the project are described here to illustrate how the narrative research method allows social workers to obtain information about resilience that informs practice. The interviews presented were conducted during the project.

Project Section 1: An Individual Narrative Interview

Simply put, a narrative is a storyteller relating life events to others (Birren, 2001). That is, a narrative is an account of a person's interconnected life events that are configured and reconfigured (put together) over time by the storyteller. The story told does not necessarily have to be conveyed in a specific chronological order nor does it have to be considered absolute fact. Rather, it is accepted at face value as unique and idiosyncratic to the person telling the story (see section 2 for a discussion of collective narratives).

The purpose of the narrative should be clear to the person telling it. The person hearing the story may want to interpret it for a specific purpose or may ask questions derived from a particular framework. For example, the home health care social worker may use a narrative approach to learn about a client's health history and may ask questions to obtain additional information relevant to the needs of the health care agency and to the desires of the patient.

Learning the Narrative Method

Project researchers began their work by giving research participants an explanation of the purpose of the research study. This transparency is required by the institutional review board of the university that approves research projects and is essential to the saliency of narrative method and RESM.

As a qualitative approach, narrative gerontology is used to understand how older adults made meaning of their experiences, in this case discrimination and oppression. As seen below, analysis of the research focused on the meaning of events over the participants' life course and provided an understanding of how participants used their natural capacity to grow and transform (Rossiter, 1999).

Meanings expressed in narratives can be interpreted to derive research findings as well as to inform clinical interventions. Narratives can deal with "the vicissitudes of human intentions" (Bruner, 1986, p. 16). Thus, the stories allow us to hear the "truth" of these older adults' experiences of discrimination, how they have made meaning of them and how they have mustered their personal and environmental resources to deal with overwhelming demands (Gutheil & Congress, 2000). The delineation of this meaning is ascribed by the researcher during data analysis. However, when the narrative interview is used in social work practice, meaning is cocreated by the client and the social worker (see chapter 3). RESM Toolbox Exercise 1.2 (see page 18) at the end of this chapter provides an opportunity for learning how to code the interview.

   In Research Example 1.1, a portion of the transcript of an interview with GS, a study participant, allows the reader to understand GS's resilient response to his environment. GS tells the researcher about his experiences growing up in a discriminatory environment.

RESEARCH EXAMPLE 1.1

GS's Memories

I grew up in a rural area of Texas at a time when as an African American I faced discrimination in many areas, including freedom, safety, privacy, an adequate standard of living, and equality in health care and education. My neighborhood was integrated, and I played with children who lived nearby. We would get into little fights from time to time, tell our parents, and go back to play.

   When I started school at the age of four, it was just a little unpainted building, all 18 to 20 students in the one-room schoolhouse. Because the bus couldn't or wouldn't carry me to school, my cousins and I rode the milk truck. For the most part, life was amicable. I first experienced discrimination when I entered the eighth grade. My family moved to a small town, so I could continue with my education. I soon learned that there was a "Mexican school, a White school, and a Black school." I intuitively knew about self-esteem. I had personally sensed that [family] love has been a bulwark against the challenges I had faced in dealing with racism, with oppression, with rejection. My response inwardly, before I could verbalize it, was, "If you could really know how beautiful I am, how important I am, how special, instead of running away from me, you'd be running toward me. Receiving care. Care is basic, and knowing the sky is the limit … it is that which helps one to be capable of maintaining hope."

Data Analysis

Project data analysis uses a process known as a *constant comparison analysis*, which involves "moving back and forth between concrete bits of data and abstract concepts, between inductive and deductive reasoning, between description and interpretation" (Merriam, 1998, p. 178) to make meaning of the information collected. Data are then coded and assigned to emerging categories (Creswell, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2009) that then form the basis for theme development. The social worker conducting an RESM narrative clinical interview also listens for themes and reflects upon them with the client. The mutual interpretations become the basis for deconstructing and reconstructing client narratives. Arriving at a new meaning of life events is considered the intervention. GS. exemplifies the capability of facing the challenges of racism with a story of hope.

Interpreting Narrative Data

Data analysis may also be thought of as exploring a transcript for intertwining narrative strands (Gergen, 2009). After the individual or personal concerns become apparent, the family is the first narrative environment that is revealed, and the client's culture comes to life (Bruner, 1986; Gubrium, 1993).

Narratives, particularly those involving adverse critical events, can be better understood by focusing on the interrelatedness among the developing individual, their family, and the changing sociocultural context (Diehl, 1998, 1999). As an individual's story unfolds, the listener can "uncover how life reflects cultural themes of the society, personal themes, institutional themes, and social histories" (Creswell, 1998, p. 49). In that way, the listener acquires an in-depth understanding of both an individual's life in context and the complexities of lives in communities (Cole & Knowles, 2001; Gubrium, 1993). This idea of how people link their individual and community lives is reflected in GS's memories.

Organizing frameworks are important in the interpretation of data. These may include "ecological systems" or the "four dimensions of the narrative."

A Collective Narrative of Quakertown

Another central part of the project on discrimination and resilience was to interview five descendants of Quakertown, a community once located in Southeast Denton, a suburb of Dallas, Texas. The Quakertown community was dismantled by the White leaders of Denton. Residents of Quakertown were forced to sell their homes or were forced to move them. Some homes were destroyed. Families and community members passed their story down to younger relatives by word of mouth. The story of Quakertown also can be understood as part of the grand U.S. narrative on overcoming discrimination. A summary is presented in Research Example 1.2.

RESEARCH EXAMPLE 1.2

The Story of Quakertown

The story of Quakertown began in 1875 when 27 families from Dallas moved to a new settlement, a community of well-built, wood-paneled houses dubbed "Quakertown," named after the Quakers of the Northeast who helped escaped slaves along the Underground Railroad.

The community functioned as a tight-knit and thriving town within a town. To address Jim Crow laws that limited Black residents' access to basic resources, Quakertown residents opened a multitude of businesses within their community,

allowing it to function as a self-supporting town. Within its borders, one could find a doctor's office, cafe, grocery store, funeral home, confectionary, school, churches, lodges, restaurants, and more.

When the board of trustees of Texas Women's University decided that they did not want their White daughters walking past the neighborhood where Blacks were living, a petition was submitted to the Denton city commission to hold a bond election, buy the Quakertown properties, and build a city park. The bond passed in 1922, and the city began to purchase homes and land in Quakertown, displacing residents. The residents were forced to sell their homes, or their homes were moved to Solomon Hill on the other side of the railroad tracks. The community of Quakertown was destroyed. The property adjacent to the campus of Texas Women's University is now the home of a city park.

Ecological Systems. When the researchers conducted narrative interviews with the five descendants of Quakertown, they learned that certain social systems stand out as central to the descendants' lifelong development of resilience. Project transcripts were then analyzed to examine how social systems—family, peers, schools, neighborhoods, and religious institutions—influenced participants' resilience.

A review of project participants' transcripts discovered repeated references to poor resources in segregated schools (risks) contrasting with strong, supportive Black teachers (protective factors). Descendent 1 said,

> Well, I guess the things that made a difference with me [growing up under segregation] was schools. We had our separate schools. When we went to other schools to give programs like choir, we saw the differences. We had only one heater and the wind just went through the hall. We had no school buses. We had secondhand football uniforms and won anyway! I do have to say, we had Black teachers. They took pride in what we learned. The teachers lived in the community. They knew the family background. They sometimes came to the home (if we did not do our homework).

Descendant 2 said, "I was told, 'Remember to treat your teacher like a mother.'" Descendant 3 claimed, "Education is something they can never take away from you!"

Four Dimensions of the Narrative. Similar to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems, narrative gerontologists have recognized that stories have four interrelated dimensions at multiple systems levels. According to Kenyon and Randall (2001), stories can be understood on personal, interpersonal, sociocultural, and societal levels. The *personal level* involves biological, psychological, sociological, and spiritual factors across a person's life span. The *interpersonal level* refers to nurturing and mentoring

between people and across generations. The *sociocultural level* includes societal mores, attitudes, and values. The *societal level* encompasses historical, social, and economic concerns, such as poverty, racism, and discrimination.

Project Section 2: Collective Narratives

Another way of thinking about the research project on discrimination and resilience is to consider compiling the data in aggregate form or thinking of the data as a collective narrative. From this perspective, personal stories are recognized as being "nested within a set of larger stories or 'macro' narratives that reflect shared history, values, beliefs, expectations, myths" (Webster, 2001, p. 170). The recall of past events can be considered a *community narrative*—a link from one's personal past to collective historical events (Andersen, Reznik, & Chen, 1997; Greene et al., 2009).

A Current-Day Narrative of Quakertown Activism

The descendants of Quakertown met with project researchers who wanted to understand the lives of people of color who grew up in the Denton area. Participants pointed out that when they were growing up, the state of Texas had 27 Jim Crow laws limiting, among other things, access to education, voting rights, marriage, and the use of public accommodations. They knew about harassment, threats, and fear of lynching firsthand (Greene et al., 2009).

At the same time, all descendants spoke with pride about their community activism. They described how in the mid-1990s they petitioned the city of Denton to allow them to open a senior center in their neighborhood so they wouldn't have to travel across town to another center. The city finally agreed to help restore an old American Legion building as a center to serve the residents of Southeast Denton and to open it to all seniors. The five descendants of Quakertown said the senior center (where they were interviewed) provided them with hope and opportunities for socialization and continued learning. It was a vehicle for contributing their time and energy and gave them a connection with their community.

The Project: Study Findings and Conclusions

This chapter illustrates how an understanding of resilience needs to be grounded in research that explores how survivors have overcome the stress of adversity. Researchers linked project study findings to resilience at the levels of the four dimensions of the narrative described above.

Personal resilience findings from the project were allied with maintaining one's dignity when oppressed, working for a better world, and exhibiting strengths, such as perseverance and determination. Interpersonal resilience was connected to participants forming activist groups and creating a safe and secure environment. Findings revealed that sociocultural resilience was associated with developing and advocating for a community vision and combating oppressive conditions. Societal resilience was linked to older adults' access to resources, such as housing, education, and health care. Also of importance was gaining economic security through equal employment and job opportunities and establishing and influencing institutional and community structures.

In addition, researchers discovered that the four dimensions of the narrative were related to resilience among the descendants of Quakertown:

1. At the personal level, descendant 4 spoke to researchers about her ability to maintain her dignity in the face of limited access to public accommodations. She is quoted as saying, "When we went to the town square for ice cream, other kids just went and sat at the ice cream counter. We had to go in the back door and eat out back … we enjoyed our ice cream just the same."
2. At the interpersonal level, descendant 5 recollected that that her aunt taught her that she could transcend racism. She told researchers that her aunt said, "We don't hate anyone."
3. At the sociocultural level, descendant 1 remembered that there was a sense of community. She gave this example to researchers to make her point: "If I just thought about 'running the streets,' word would get back to my parents instantaneously!"
4. At the societal level, descendant 2 recalled growing up at a time when the Ku Klux Klan marched down the street. He proved his point when he said, "African Americans had to be off the town square at sundown. There were young white boys who would chase you off. I found other places to be."

Conclusion

There is still is much to be examined throughout this text about how people's resilient lives can be disrupted and reintegrated (Richardson, 2002). However, GS and the descendants of Quakertown gave witness to how they overcame adverse experiences, self-actualized, and grew over the life course. For the descendants of Quakertown, their community activism planted a seed for restorative justice in Denton.

Chapter 1 – RESM Toolbox

Discussion Questions

1. What lessons about narrative interviewing did you learn from the project that you will take forward to the social work practice interview?
2. What do you think contributed to the activism of the Quakertown 5?

Theory-to-Practice Grid

Theoretical Assumption	Practice or Action Steps
Narratives reveal critical life events involving discrimination during the Jim Crow era in the United States.	Stories translate research into insights about the historical context of the time and the issues of "difference."
Narratives are used as a communication tool.	Narratives are used to collect research data or to cocreate practice information.
Narratives are a means of individualizing lives.	Narratives make multiple contexts and social and cultural conditions come to life.
An analysis of research focuses on the meaning of critical events.	Meaning is cocreated by the participant and the researcher.
Coded data form the basis of theme development.	Themes inform the subject matter under study.
Grand narratives provide a community account of sociocultural events.	Collective histories can be a source of advocacy information.

RESM Toolbox Exercise 1.1

Getting Ready to Interview

Narrative research is a descriptive, fluid approach to exploring a phenomenon. Its aim is to capture a picture of a person's lived experiences, rather than to obtain specific verifiable facts that can be generalized across a population. The researcher is interested

in a unique story, rather than one that is considered universal. With this in mind, the following ideas should not be considered a step-by-step protocol but are meant to walk you through the process of obtaining a narrative of an older adult.

Pre-Engagement

- Choose an older adult you want to interview.
- Have a general script available to explain why you want to meet.
- Begin by identifying the phenomenon you want to learn about. In this case, you as the student researcher want to know more about the older adult's or interviewee's resilience.
- Before embarking on an interview, be clear about the definitions of terms to be used. For example, resilience is a person's natural capacity to overcome acute and chronic stress (especially adverse events).
- Decide on questions and prompts that can help you move the older adult through their story. Sometimes family photos are prompts (see chapter 3).

Story Collection in the Field

- When the interview begins, explain again why you want to meet. Assure the interviewee that what they say will be kept anonymous and confidential (as per the NASW [2017] *Code of Ethics*).
- Let the interviewee know that you are there to learn (you are taking a "not-knowing" stance).
- If the interviewee seems to get stuck during the conversation, try a prompt.
- Before ending the interview, you may want to give feedback about what you think you have learned. For example, "It seems that you were able to do many of the things you wanted to in life? Am I right?"

Analyzing or Writing Up Your Report

- Choose an analytic framework for your report, such as the ecological systems or the four levels of the narrative.
- Summarize the findings. At the same time, be sure that you describe the complexity and richness of the interviewee's life. Is their voice heard?

RESM Toolbox Exercise 1.2

Coding Quotes from a Narrative Interview

The excerpt from GS's interview can help you understand resilience at the four dimensions of a narrative. Use GS's quote in the chapter above to code these levels, placing one quote for each level of resilience below:

1 = the *personal* level of resilience, which involves biological, psychological, sociological, and spiritual factors across a person's life span.

2 = the *interpersonal* level refers to nurturing and mentoring between people and across generations.

3 = the *sociocultural* level includes societal mores, attitudes, and values.

4 = the *societal* level encompasses historical and social and economic concerns, such as poverty, racism, and discrimination.

Insert your quotes here:

1. _____

   _____

2. _____

   _____

3. _____

   _____

4. _____

   _____