‘Making narrative portraits: a methodological approach to analysing qualitative data’

Abstract

This paper proposes the method of ‘narrative portraiture’, which, located within the wider field of narrative studies, offers an analytical tool to narrative data. Two research projects, one on disability and one on identity, are used to illustrate how the method can be applied. While the paper will focus on the methodological benefits and limitations of the approach, throughout the article we also highlight the ethical concern of representation. We suggest that through ‘narrative portraiture’ research findings can be contextualised in broader social narratives without losing sight of the unique personal qualities of the research encounter. Thus, we argue for the importance of bringing the participant and their everyday life experience into focus, highlighting that a portrayal of a sole story can be, not only a medium to understand a research phenomenon, but also a valuable research output in itself.

Keywords: Narrative, data analysis, qualitative, stories, ethics

Introduction

Many researchers who work with qualitative data end up with numerous pages of written material, which can make it difficult to know where to start. In this paper, we propose an analytical approach to working qualitatively with data emerging from interviews, focus groups, observations, or other sources that involve people’s narratives. The method, which we call ‘narrative portraiture’, can be complementary to thematic approaches as it helps researchers to engage with qualitative data at different stages of the analytic process. We suggest that it is a helpful technique to employ at the beginning of the analytic process, aiding the researcher to form an in-depth understanding of each participant’s or case’s story. Conversely, if the data analysis has concluded or is near to an end, it offers a means to enhance the presentation of research findings and honour participants’ stories.

Strengths of narrative approaches

Thematic approaches to data analysis have been criticised for ignoring context and differences between individual accounts (Ayres, Kavanaugh, & Knafl, 2003). While interview and text sequences are coded and recoded into smaller units, their meaning can be decontextualised because categories instead of process frame the analysis. Maxwell (2012) argues that in such 'similarity based' analysis, categories start to replace the original connected data structure. Thus, one of the dangers with categorical coding is that it threatens 'the local web of causality' (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 151). Narrative approaches, on the other hand, work closely with context. Maxwell (2012) identifies them as 'contiguity based'. While thematic approaches would look at abstract connections across people's lives, they risk losing the person's individual stories in the process. Contiguity based approaches stay with the same person or process throughout. Through the methodological approach we present in this paper, we attempt to understand individuals and specific processes. However, we suggest viewing thematic approaches and narrative approaches not as incompatible, but rather as complementary to one another. They are helpful to answer different questions during the research process and can feed from and into each other.

Whilst qualitative studies have been dominated by thematic approaches to data analysis (Mitchell and Egudo, 2003), narrative has always had theoretical relevance in social sciences (J. Bruner, 1991, 2004; Gottschall & Wilson, 2005; D. P. McAdams, 1997; Ricoeur, 1991) and recently it has become more popular within qualitative research from a methodological perspective in disciplines such as psychology and psychoanalysis (Seidman, 2006; Freeman, 2007), anthropology (Scutt and Hobson, 2013), sociology (Frank, 1995; Maines, 1993), and organizational science (Beech, 2000; Abma, 2000).

Narrative approaches explore how people make sense of their experiences (Riessman, 2008), as well as seeing stories as a powerful medium to communicate information (Mitchell and

Egudo, 2003, Gottschall & Wilson, 2005). Examples of narrative approaches concerned with meaning-making are, amongst others, narrative inquiry (D. McAdams, 2008; J. Speedy, 2005), narrative profiles (Seidman, 2006), narrative ethics (Frank, 2014), narrative analysis (Gee, 1986; Gee & Grosjean, 1984), and narratology (Todorov, 1971). Other approaches focus on stories as a powerful way to present and transform textual data such as writing as a method of inquiry (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005), autoethnography (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011), and poetic inquiry (Butler-Kisber, 2010).

Within the field of narrative, some approaches analyse discourse (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008; Georgakopoulou & Goutsos, 2004) and voice used (Gilligan, 2003; Woodcock, 2005), which leads to an abstract focus on knowledge construction. We argue that people´s narratives have ontological relevance in themselves and that there is value in attempting to write about and reflect 'the ordinary lives of people' (Shakespeare, 2014; p. 52) and in staying closely with the research experience. We turned to narrative as it helps researchers to embed social meaning in the concrete, particular doings of people (Erickson, 1977; Flyvbjerg, 2006). As Ken Plummer (1995) states, individuals tell stories, which are not only personal, but which form part of larger situational, organisational, cultural, and historical narratives. Narrative puts the personal and the social in the same space; in an overlapping, intricate relationship (Jane. Speedy, 2008). Narrative portraiture can add to the existing field of narrative research because, by staying close to the raw data, we bring the participants back to the centre of the research. Our approach aims to use narrative to build a bridge between participants, researchers, and audience by communicating people's experiences more directly.

In this paper we will illustrate how we used narrative portraiture in two separate research projects by discussing two examples of narrative portraits constructed from (i) in-depth interviews relating to individual participants; and (ii) data from case studies involving interviews, observations and documents. We will offer some guidelines for other researchers

to apply this approach to their own research. We also emphasise the need to pay attention to the inevitable ethical tensions that emerge when working with people's narratives and sensitive data.

We refer to 'narrative' as a more encompassing term that explores how people make sense of life through the act of narrating. Narratives can refer to personal, family, national, cultural, social, or historic domains (J. S. Bruner, 1986; D. P. McAdams, 1997). When using the term 'story', we mean a smaller unit (traditionally understood with a beginning, middle, and end) that can be contained within a greater cultural, social, or personal narrative (Georgakopoulou, 2007; Gottschall & Wilson, 2005; Plummer, 1995).

A proposition for narrative portraiture

Narrative portraiture acknowledges that researchers have certain knowledge of the phenomenon under investigation – which is informed by the literature and their scholarship – but we believe that there needs to be more space given to the actual stories people tell about their own lives. In doing so, narrative portraiture becomes a decolonial methodology because it disrupts the common research practice of privileging the researcher's interpretation and over-analysing people's narratives. As any other method, narrative portraiture still reflects the standpoint of the inquirer, but it aims to make transparent its process and present a product in which the participant is visible and cognisable. By selecting and rearranging extracts from interviews, observations, field notes, or documents, we create portraits that offer a glimpse into the subjects' lives. The portraits align with life story research (Etherington, 2009; D. McAdams, 2008), in-depth case study research (Flyvbjerg, 2006), narrative profiles (Seidman, 2006), structural narrative analysis (Labov & Waletzky, 2006) and, by doing so, the method captures rich material that often escapes the scope of other forms of analysis. Narrative portraits depict social phenomena through people´s stories of everyday life

experience. They are thus able to bridge the gap between individual and society. Furthermore, the use of portraits showed us that research findings, at least in the two research fields in which we were working, are often 'hidden' in areas of participants' lives that might not be associated with the main focus of our research questions. We suggest that our narrative approach helps to capture contextual nuances that are otherwise often overlooked.

We want to highlight that this method does not aim to produce accurate realities; instead, we present narrative portraiture as a methodological tool that aims to reflect, interpret, and communicate narrated experiences. We strive to respect voices by working only with the structure of the text – what comes first, what comes next, what comes after that – to allow the text to read fluently and easily. The depictions are therefore the participants' narratives but still our editorial work reflects a negotiation between their narrative identities (D. P. McAdams, 1997) – that is, how they see themselves and how they tell their stories – and more relational identities (Anderson, 2012b) – that is, what they decided to share with us, what they projected to us, and what we imposed onto them. With these negotiations in mind, we crafted our portraits by collating memorable passages of our data. We believe that a personal way of approaching people's narratives is not only important but also necessary, especially in cases where power has been disproportionately unbalanced and where voices have been silenced. Mignolo (2009) writes that in the politics of knowledge, 'bio-graphical configurations' determine who is and who is not allowed to create knowledge. He urges to call into question the principles and practices that maintain hierarchies of power in the production of knowledge. In this case, through narrative portraiture, we aim to leave participants' narratives mostly uninterpreted as an acknowledgement of their expertise on their own lives. The portraits are presented at length in an attempt to show that people's stories are worth listening to. This deliberate emphasis on moving away from abstract interpretations does not equate a lack of analysis. We believe that analysis can come in the

form of a detailed, systematic, and structural examination of people's narrative to then arrange it into what we call a narrative portrait: a rich and expressive first-person account in which participants voices prevail.

The process of making narrative portraits

Narrative portraiture is helpful in answering research questions that: (a) are concerned with context and relationality; and (b) aim to capture processes in detail. These qualities allow researchers to engage with crucial aspects of research, such as ambiguity and change, within personal narratives. We tailored our analysis method aided by a combination of Labov's and Waletzky's (Labov, 1972; Labov & Waletzky, 2006) structural approach to narratives; case study research (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2014); life story research (Riessman, 2008; Walmsley, 1995); and Dan McAdams' analytical devices for personal narratives (D. P. McAdams & Bowman, 2001; D. P. McAdams & Guo, 2014). We complemented these analytic approaches with a series of theory-driven analytical features that helped us to identify aspects that were specific to our research topics, in (author's name blanked for blind peer review) case these were (1) the erotic; (2) romantic relationships; and (3) their intertwinements with identity processes, whilst in (authors' name blanked for blind peer review) case these were the identification of key influences in decision-making processes from an ecological perspective. Table 1 shows this tailored method and the specific questions and key words that can be derived from them.

Using a narrative approach might appear to the outsider to involve little analytic know-how, being merely a representation of the data. But we believe that developing a coherent narrative from vast amounts of qualitative data requires skill and can be approached in a methodical manner.

The analytic strategy we propose fulfils two tasks: first, it offers a detailed description of the story, illustrating process and context (the 'how'); and, secondly, it provides an indication of underlying reasons and influences (the 'why').

The analytic steps suggested by us involve coding for: (1) Characters; (2) Time; (3) Space and Circumstances; (4) Key Events; and (5) Intersection of phenomena of interest. The following table can be used as a guide to start the analytic process.

Table 1 – analytic tools to aid the process of making narrative portraits

CODES	**RESEARCH QUESTION** *helps to illustrate	**KEY-WORDS:** What to look for
Characters	WHO – Important characters; Relationships between characters	Names, pronouns, the first person ("I"), experiences or events involving other people
Time	WHEN – Historic context; Sequence of story; Experience of time	Dates, Years, Conjunctions of time (after, before, when…), Time periods (weeks, months, days)
Space	WHERE – Geography; Political, cultural, social, economic context	Macro-geography (cities, countries, continents), Micro-space (across the road, in the kitchen, at the hospital), virtual spaces (online, state of mind, an emotional space)
Key-events	HOW/WHY – Connections and Relations; Interactions; Turning points; Wider influences	Strong emotions surrounding event, Link to important decision that is made, Change in narrative after event
Phenomena of interest	HOW/WHY – How is phenomena of interest narrated, conceptualised, experienced; Where is phenomena of interest located; Intersection of concepts and context	Pre-identified themes of interest e.g. ecological perspective, identity, disability …

An in-depth account of what happened when, where, and with whom might seem very descriptive. However, in the first instance, before interpreting and explaining the data, it is useful to write a holistic description, outlining the story or stories. The descriptive insight can then subsequently inform a deeper exploration of the data to explore questions of 'why' (Yin, 2014).

Application of narrative portraiture in two projects

In this section, our aim is to explain how this narrative analysis method looks in practice. Each author will draw on their PhD projects and describe their experiences of using the approach. Due to the sensitive data that was generated, the information we represent here has been crafted into composites that aim to illustrate the method rather than focus on personal details.

Narrative portraiture in a project on gay men's identities- [Name of author 1]

In my doctoral research, I explored the contributions that sexual, erotic, and romantic connections make to gay men's sense of identity (*reference blanked for blind peer review*). I was interested in understanding what these relationships mean to gay men. To conduct this study, I interviewed ten gay men of different ages and backgrounds living in the United Kingdom, each of whom provided narrative data during unstructured one-to-one, one-off interviews. Drawing upon a narrative structural analysis, I analysed my findings in two ways: first in the form of idiographic narratives and, secondly, as an overarching analysis with central themes identified across participants' narratives. One of my first thoughts while transcribing was to produce a summary of the participants' stories in order to reflect my impressions about them and introduce them to the reader by means of the third person voice. The use of the third person voice to describe and interpret participants' narratives made me realise that this practice was reproducing the dynamics that many of these participants had experienced throughout their lives: others have analysed, questioned, and determined the soundness, logic, and validity of their relationships, their identities, and their very own existence. As members of a population that has faced numerous challenges, many gay men have learnt to live in secret; to not disclose their identities at school, in the workplace; to conceal their erotic desires with friends, families; and some have concluded that their stories

belong at the margins of society. That realisation made me work on a method that would allow me to use participants' own words. The use of participants' own words started to show methodological potential in the sense that it was representing knowledgeable, empowered, dignified individuals who knew about their lives and were creating meanings around their experiences without much interpretation from my 'expert' researcher's view. This observation made me rethink the function of my data analysis and renegotiate the balance between interpreting participants' narratives and listening whilst trying to uphold the view that they are the experts on their own lives (Anderson, 2012a). This methodological attempt to balance the power between the researcher's role in interpreting the data and the participant's expertise in their lived experience is what I called 'narrative portraits'.

Narrative conversations in a project of transition processes in the lives of young people with severe intellectual disability – [*Name of author 2]*

As part of my PhD, I explored how decisions are made for and with young people with severe intellectual disability who are moving from education to adult services (*reference blanked for blind peer review*). I was interested in how those involved make their decisions, how external influences shape the transition process and how young people themselves were involved. I was looking for an approach to narrative that could illustrate people interacting within their social, cultural, and economic spheres. During the data collection process, I followed three young people with severe learning disabilities, their parents, and professionals involved through the journey from school to adult services. This involved interviews with parents and professionals at different points in time; spending time with young people; and reviewing relevant documents. When I came to the analysis I struggled to find a way to include the perspective of the young person. As all three young people were mostly non-verbal, I needed to think differently about including their 'voice'. This led me to narrative as a way to give a glimpse into the life of the person, a life that seemed largely dependent on

decisions made by others, organisational structures and resources available within local authorities. I decided to use my interviews with those that were close to the young person, my observations and own reflections to craft what I called 'narrative conversations' to give an in-depth account of the transition process and the everyday life experiences of the young people and their families. I had noticed how certain elements of my data seemed to be 'talking' to each other. In interviews, for example, people were referring to the same events and key decisions. I started by using timelines (Yin, 2014) and by mapping the decision-making process across time, before developing narrative conversations using participants' own words to reflect on key-events that I had identified in the timeline of each transition process, as well as using my observations to reflect on the involvement of the young person.

In the end, each case was introduced by a summary of the transition written from the perspective of the narrator (me). The summary was followed by the timeline and an introduction of key-actors, their roles and relationships. Figure 1 shows an example timeline and how interview extracts were connected to identify key-events during the analysis (for example, 'the respite transition'). The final write-up included a narrative that followed the timeline. I used the identified key-events as headings to introduce steps within the decision-process, followed by extracts from interviews, which illustrated different people's perspectives and reflections on the process. I weaved in my own narrative between interview extracts, including vignettes from my encounters with the young people and reflections on the processes from my observations and field notes. Being able to incorporate observations and interview extracts showed how young people were influencing the process to some extent through their behaviour in their immediate environments. The narrative conversations read like a play and this led me to record an audio play based on a composite case, which was made available to the public and shared by third sector organisations (insert link to audio play after blind peer-review). Narrative portraiture enabled me to communicate how the transition

experience is like for young people and their families and it challenged my own views of young people as merely passive within the process.

Having contextualised the two projects that originated this method, we will now look more closely at the five analytic steps that we propose as a guideline for the narrative portraiture.

1. Characters

For researchers interested in interpersonal or relational phenomena, it is crucial to identify the characters in participants' stories, as they will become an essential part of the data analysis. The first step in this method of 'narrative portraiture' consists of 'colour-marking' the text, which can be done with electronic or hard copies of the transcriptions. Using a colour that is consistent across all transcripts helps to have a quickly identifiable visual cue. As seen in figure 2, the text highlighted in blue indicates all the people who are present in the narration. Characters can be present in the story explicitly or implicitly. For example, in the research on gay men's identities, participants often talked about 'sexual experiences', which implies another person in addition to the teller. The 'sexual experience' is therefore colour-marked in blue, as it implies the presence of a 'hidden' character. This first step in the narrative portraiture method equates the location of characters in terms of Labov and Waletzki's (2006) guidelines. Further analysis will benefit from categorising the participant as the protagonist, and other characters as main, secondary, unfolding or incidental characters.

2. Time

The second analytic step we suggest is to take a linear approach to understanding process, although this is not the only possibility. Linear approaches can be problematic because a sequenced structure is applied to people's lives, when life can often be rather chaotic and formless (Frank, 1997; Freeman, 1998). When developing stories, researchers should try to

capture the way in which the stories were told to them and some narratives might not follow a linear pattern (Goldstein, 2012); McAdams, 2006). For examples of 'chaotic' narratives, see Frank, (1995). Additionally, when exploring processes involving different people and when trying to capture macro influences, timelines might need to have different layers. Timelines can thus be simple or complex, involving diverging paths and gaps. To develop timelines, interview transcripts, field notes or documents can be coded looking for references to time and identifying relevant events, actions or experiences. To create timelines, researchers might want to use visual displays using software such as Microsoft Excel or Adobe Illustrator.

(Insert figure 1)

The timescale can be as short as the immediate past (moments ago) to a longer scale (years ago). A sense of time is identifiable when participants state it overtly through sentences such as: *'I was 20'*, *'I haven't spoken to my mum in 15 years'*, or it can also be more implicit, *'when I was studying at Manchester University'*, which can only be put in a timeframe in the context of the narrative as a whole.

3. Orientation in Space and Circumstances

The next step in the narrative portraiture method invites researchers to identify the 'orientation signs' (Labov & Waletzky, 2006). To do this, we suggest colour-marking – green in figure 2 – all the sentences that orient the story in space and circumstances. 'Space' can be understood as macro-geography (cities, countries, continents), as micro-space (a bedroom, a desk, across the road), or it can be a virtual space (online, a state of mind, an emotional space). This part of the process constitutes a mapping process that can be very clear as in '*we came to Manchester'* or '*he lived 300 miles away*'. In the second sentence the implication of '300 miles away' gives us a different quality that needs to be analysed in the context of the

whole story.

4. Key events/Turning points

Going back to the storyline, we now suggest identifying key events and turning points. The storylines will include various events or actions but not all of them will stand out or help with understanding the 'why' within the research question. Key events might relate to important relationships, changes in people's lifestyle, inner and outer changes, and individual or external influences (such as the introduction of new legislation, economic or political change, an illness, a change in perspective, or losing a close friend). Within this process, it becomes important to keep an awareness on how internal and external influences interact; this will help with developing a holistic and in-depth understanding of the interdependence of individuals and their environments moving through time.

5. Intersection of phenomena

Often researchers in social science look for complex phenomena that involve three or more concepts, aspects, or factors. When working with complex narrative data, we suggest looking at this intertwinement of concepts by locating how they operate separately in the narrative and mapping them in the same way as the characters and orientation in space and circumstances. The task requires operationalising these concepts according to the theoretical framework of the research. For example, in the research on gay men's identities the three concepts that needed to be operationalised were 'identity', 'erotic' and 'romantic' relationships (*reference blanked for blind peer review*). In this case, the theoretical framework brought to light that 'identity' often comes across in the narrative when the individual is in crisis (Lawler, 2014), therefore, it was crucial to locate – and colour-mark – those episodes of crisis in the narration.

(Insert figure 2)

In figure 2, romantic moments have been identified as they are coloured in yellow, erotic moments have been highlighted in pink, and episodes of identity crises are identified with a stormy cloud. With these elements mapped out, the coloured and signalled text provides a visual indicator of the intersection of the three concepts. This intersection constitutes a core feature of the narrative portraiture method as it offers the opportunity to locate complex concepts that are often difficult to pin down. An example of a narrative portrait derived from this method can be seen in the following link, which presents the story of Gustav, a man whose narrative of 'not being properly gay' demonstrates the complexity of some people's narratives and the need to show those intricate qualities (insert link after blind peer review).

Discussion

Narrative portraiture offers a political shift towards focusing on people rather than on abstract results. Whilst a common understanding of the purpose of methodological approaches is to elucidate concepts, identify categories, or themes to understand certain phenomena, narrative portraiture brings the person to the fore and highlights that a portrayal of a sole story can be, not only a medium to understand a research phenomenon, but also a valuable research output in itself. Thus, in narrative portraiture the key 'finding' of a research project is the person's story. In communicating people´s stories and providing the context in which these stories happen, the method involves the audience and recognises them as able to understand the phenomena under investigation, ask questions, and draw their own conclusions. In this way, readers/listeners are more active in the construction of knowledge and become witnesses to the existence of people whose lives are largely hidden from mainstream society.

In both of our research projects, meeting with participants and listening to their experiences and views made strong impressions on us. This made us look for a method that

would allow us to acknowledge the research encounter when carrying out our analysis. We wanted to present findings that were contextualised in broader social spheres, while being able to evoke the impression of the people we had met. Some approaches to narrative analysis focus on short stories (Georgakopoulou, 2007) or on the conversational exchanges during the interview (Gee, 1986; Gee & Grosjean, 1984), but we aimed to see participants' narratives within the macro context in which these lives happen because we believe that life stories and identities are best interpreted holistically. As put by Catherine Riessman (1993), some people knit together a number of themes into coherent and extended accounts that make a categorisation process difficult and fragment what is an extended narrative. This narrative approach allowed us to map our data and visualise places where narrations addressed the intertwinement of individual and macro-social aspects.

Narrative portraits as an evocative method that builds a bridge between research and audiences

Depending on their data, researchers will be able to develop different kinds of portraits. In projects where the role of the researcher is more in the foreground, researchers might want to consider writing themselves into the story. Narrative portraits give space to researchers to include their own experiences and this might aid a more transparent reflection of the research process. By bringing their own reflections and experiences of the research process into the story, the role of the researcher is positioned and contextualised. We believe that this might lead to a more transparent account by making the situational conditions of the research process visible (that is, by explaining what it was like to be the researcher). Furthermore, the voice of the researcher can build a bridge between the reader and the participants' experiences as it can be used to offer reflections and pose questions. Similarly, because the developed stories stay embedded in the concrete actions and experiences of

people and offer a more vivid and sensory account (Stake, 1995), they draw the reader in and build a connection to the reader's own personal experiences as they get a sense of 'being there' (Vanwynsberghe & Khan, 2007).

Narrative portraiture to help structure and make sense of data

One of the dangers of qualitative research, particularly for novice researchers, is the amount of data that is collected and the danger that the researcher loses focus and gets lost (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2014). Narrative portraiture will help researchers to structure their data and understand complexity and ambiguity within narratives, without losing context, nor losing sight of individual accounts and perspectives. Within interviews, participants might express mixed views that could be seen as contradictory thoughts or feelings. However, this apparent contradiction does not invalidate potentially useful data; contradictions are often associated with the complexity of people's experiences that cannot be 'cleansed' to reflect neat findings. Contradictions might reflect changes in circumstances within participants' lives. Narrative portraiture is able to emphasise processes as they occur over time and therefore is able to illustrate complexity and ambiguities.

Narrative portraiture has the flexibility to be used across different data sources such as interview transcripts, observations, field notes, and documents. Researchers who use case studies or ethnography might find that the approach helps them to integrate their data. There is little literature on how to analyse data from different data sources and triangulation is often conceptualised as adding to research validity on the basis that different methods are thought to verify the same result. However, within our narrative approach, triangulation is not understood as a means to test for one single event or outcome. Instead, using different data sources resembles the process of piecing together a puzzle (Maxwell, 2012). The codes that we identified in table 1 can be used across data sources to help researchers illuminate

different aspects of their data and to look at it from different angles. For example, interviews can be coded using all five questions within table 1; documents might give the researcher information about when events took place and who was there; while observations and fieldnotes can bring in the perspective of the researcher to reflect on key-events and phenomena of interest.

Conclusion

Through narrative portraiture, we analysed and arranged the structure of the data for the sake of coherence and flow, but the content remained mostly entirely verbatim. We argue that when the participant's voice cannot be included or the portrait requires additional narration from the researcher, we are explicit about how our researcher's voice shapes/influences the narrative. This is a crucial move that aims to account for the 'epistemic privilege' (Pillow, 2015) that defines what counts as valid knowledge, especially when the research poses the risk of reproducing oppressive dynamics for participants who have been disadvantaged or have experienced oppression. In one of the examples that we used in this article, the narratives of gay men were analysed through this method and the final product was presented in their own words. This act seems essential in cases where groups have been deprived of the right to speak for themselves, such as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) people, whose lives have been medicalised, criminalised, debated, and treated as profane by medical, legal, academic, and religious authorities but little opportunity has been given for them to say what being LGBT means to them (Reference blinded for peer review). Thus, by focusing the analytic work on presenting a more complete and evocative narrative in their own words, narrative portraiture aims to minimise the common pitfall in which papers display a quotation of what a participant said and then the researcher 'explains' with their (our) authorial voice what they meant. Similarly, the second example used in this article followed young people with severe intellectual disability – on their transition from school to

adult services. Since young people were mostly non-verbal, the example shows an indirect portrait through the narratives of those involved in making decisions for them; parents, social workers, teachers, adult service staff, health professionals, and local authority management. The absence of these young people´s voices highlights the power that researchers – and other 'experts' – have in the portrayal of participants' realities and invokes researchers' reflexivity in creating methodologies that make transparent the research process and are accountable for the ethics of representation.

In the case of two of the themes we dealt with in our research projects, we are aware that these aspects interweave with, and are therefore inseparable from, many other areas of participants' lives. The narrative portraiture method allowed us to acknowledge and manage that complexity while simultaneously focus on the phenomenon under investigation. The narrative portraiture method as an analytical tool suggests that the emphasis on complex narratives is, not only comprehensive of the ways in which people experience their lives, but also reflects the experience of the research encounter and makes both participants' and the researcher's perceptions more visible. This reminds us as researchers that behind the research findings or outputs, there are people whose stories should be honoured.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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