

Kaja's story: The importance of narrative 'threads' as a qualitative analysis approach

Caroline Lenette, University of New South Wales Australia

Abstract

Young people's narratives can often be reduced to mere 'illustrative' purposes when reporting research findings. As a result, contributions can lose their richness and yield decontextualized accounts in discussions on integration. This article highlights how using narrative 'threads' (Lumsden, 2013; Spence, 1983) to convey a refugee young woman's story can value her contributions more fully, and offer contextual insights that might otherwise be missed. Her narrative emerged from a qualitative study where six refugee young people were interviewed about their experiences of international advocacy in Switzerland in 2016. Young people's inter-woven narrative threads can better inform meaningful youth integration initiatives.

Keywords

Refugee young people's perspectives; refugee woman's narrative; narrative 'threads'; qualitative analysis; identity.

Introduction

The core of people's identity is a narrative thread that gives meaning to life, provided that it is never broken. Part of the sense of self comes from being able to go backward and forward in time and to weave a story about who one is. If that is taken away, the individual is significantly less (Spence, 1983, p. 457)

Consulting young people is key to developing meaningful initiatives that benefit them (Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network, 2016). Refugee young people's narratives on resettlement (see Davy et al., 2014) are increasingly valued in consultative processes, and qualitative researchers can facilitate opportunities for participants to move from 'knowing' to 'telling' stories (Hyvärinen et al., 2008). In the production of reports or papers, we often subjectively select quotes that we feel best represent certain themes (due to pragmatic concerns like space and journal requirements) to present 'segments' of participants' narratives. Alexandra (2008) describes this relatively reductionist process as subtracting, translating, and defining people's stories, which may result in decontextualized qualitative analyses despite the extensive narratives shared. While rich results might still emerge, "the possibility of opening up a narrative to reveal multiple truths and more evocative, revelatory pathways for dialogue and understanding is often shut down" (Alexandra, 2008, p. 101). This article uses 'narrative threads' (Lumsden, 2013; Spence 1983) to render the context of a refugee young woman's experiences as an advocate. Narrative threads provide a useful way of making sense of a person's story in qualitative analysis, as they are "tightly connected with experiences" (Lumsden, 2013, p. 5) and "capture a certain kind of holism" (p. 6) that can serve to highlight coherent patterns. People tend to draw on particular narrative threads to make sense of their current circumstances as they convey their story, as in Kaja's narrative below.

The initiative

Methods

In 2016, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR] annual consultations with Non-Government Organizations [NGOs] in Geneva, Switzerland focussed specifically on young people's issues, offering a unique opportunity for young delegates from diverse backgrounds to engage in advocacy. My research involved documenting the experiences of four Australian refugee delegates (two young men and two young women from

different ethnic backgrounds) using qualitative methods (forthcoming) and so I was also part of the Australian NGO delegation. The University of New South Wales' Human Research Ethics Committee granted ethical approval for the project in February 2016.

Pre-departure and post-return semi-structured interviews with the youth delegates in Australia, paired with participant observations in Switzerland, provided in-depth accounts of the young people's experiences. Two other young refugee women (one living in a developed nation, and the other in a refugee camp in a developing country) were also invited to participate to offer comparative perspectives while in Geneva, and Kaja, whose narrative I focus on here, was one of them. All participants were aged between 20 and 25. Significantly, this event was the first experience of international advocacy for all of us.

Positionality

As a migrant woman, and a refugee scholar involved in participatory qualitative research and committed to social justice, I wished to convey the nuances of participants' narratives about this unique experience in as much detail and as widely as possible. I acknowledged my privileged position as a middle-class academic in a wealthy and developed nation, with access to resources and networks, and with the freedom to travel wherever I want. However, as someone considered as 'Other' in my country of adoption, I am also deeply aware of the damaging effect that being labelled and reduced to a single story can have. And so, I was determined to ensure I did not perpetuate such simplistic approaches in my analysis of the young people's experiences.

Kaja's narrative

Kaja was keen to answer questions on the consultations, but what she really wanted to share were the circumstances leading to her becoming a refugee youth advocate. She also wanted her real name to be used to own her story and exercise agency over the research process. Polkinghorne (1995, p. 7) describes 'plot' as 'the narrative structure through which people understand and describe the relationship among the events and choices of their lives'. Kaja wrote a 1500 word 'plot' and asked me to share it widely. I considered how to honor her request while keeping her narrative as 'whole' as possible. For pragmatic reasons, this proved difficult, and I found myself subtracting (to reduce the word count), translating (through subheadings), and defining her story (in academic terms). I wondered if this was the only way to convey Kaja's story.

I turned to the concept of 'narrative threads' to recount her journey, as appreciating stories as inter-woven 'threads' can reduce the likelihood of making erroneous assumptions about one's identity and experiences. As Spence (1983) outlines in the opening quote, narrative threads are at the core of one's identity and give meaning to a person's story. As such, a reductionist approach (to which qualitative analysis is not immune) may dilute the strong sense of identity associated with telling one's story. This is why narrative threads can offer a more holistic approach to qualitative analysis.

The five threads, presented here in the same order as in Kaja's original narrative, are: family life, loneliness, xenophobic attacks, caring for her mother, and hopes for the future. Longer quotes are used here to show Kaja's choice of narrative style to convey her story.

Family life

My name is Kaja, I am a Congolese from the Kasai tribe. I am the last-born and the only girl out of five children. I was born in Katanga Lubumbashi. In 1996, my family fled from Congo due to tribal conflicts between the Katangese and the Kasai people... to South Africa where we lived til 2008. Life was not so easy for me and my brothers; growing up, I felt like I had the best father in the whole world till I turned nine. In 2004, my father started drinking and smoking; first it was just at home then the late nights started. One night, dad came back home drunk,

he asked where mom was and started shouting and screaming at her. I was the only one awake; I never went to bed before I saw my daddy... I heard him tell her that he was going to kill her, I heard my mom ask him to, saying she was tired of seeing her children suffer when their father is able to provide for them yet he isn't.

Loneliness

Everyday I would go to school with a fake smile on my face just not to hurt my mom's feelings but break down when I saw my friends really smiling and playing. I didn't want to have any friends; I kept on pushing everyone away... every time I tried to speak, tears would just fall on my cheeks and every time someone said sorry, I felt that they were laughing at me instead... everyday I would go to school hungry, sad and angry. Angry at my dad, angry at my mom for leaving me, and at myself for being born. One day, my principal called me and gave me a food basket, it was so embarrassing I thought that everyone would know that I'm poor, laugh at me, so sometimes when I was called to the principal's office, I wouldn't go, I'd prefer to go hungry those few days than everyone seeing me with that bag every month. I hated every man and boy that I saw, saw them all as animals; that was how life was for me til 2008.

Xenophobic attacks

In August 2008, the xenophobic attacks started. My family moved into a camp that was set for us; from the camp we were taken to prison known as 'Lindela prison'. After being in there for a week, we were taken out on the streets. Mothers with day old babies, elderly, sick people; we all slept at the side of a freeway for 4 days then finally we were put into a shelter. All the men were arrested. Our first-born brother was arrested but the others managed to escape... on 27 August at around 3 am, me, my mother, and three brothers ran away and went to Zimbabwe. When we got there, I was sad that I couldn't see my other brother, and scared that I was around so many people that spoke languages I couldn't understand, but I was very happy that I was with my mom and she wouldn't be beaten again.

Caring for her mother

My mom had a spinal cord problem and she was paralyzed on the whole left side of her body. She couldn't talk properly... I had to dress my mother, feed her, I had to guess what she wanted at times cause she wasn't speaking clearly. My dad was there but he did nothing at all to help her...she blamed herself, she told me words that I will never forget. "Sorry for making you suffer like this". It wasn't her fault, that I knew. I blamed dad, I blamed the xenophobic attacks, I blamed life, I blamed God but mostly I blamed myself.

Hopes for the future

Most people just go to school to be great, but I want to go to school so that I make the whole world proud, and my mom proud, so that she sees that she didn't fail at all. I want her to be there and say that's my girl.

As for now, I'm just an ordinary girl working as an interpreter in a refugee camp in Zimbabwe trying to help look after myself and my family but tomorrow, I know I'm going to be an extraordinary girl not only looking after myself and my family but also after a great nation.

And my father that once gave up on me will be very, very proud of me.

Discussion

The use of narrative threads to analyse Kaja's story on the difficulties and complexities she experienced sheds light on two important factors that allow us to better appreciate her past experiences and the direction she is heading towards. Firstly, inter-woven threads are useful to acknowledge the odds she overcame and her journey towards becoming 'an extraordinary girl'. Taken out of context, the final quote on her hopes and dreams may not completely make sense, if we are unaware of the difficult events of her childhood and their significance in shaping Kaja's identity. The wish to make her father and mother proud has different meaning once we become cognizant of the reasons why this is particularly important for Kaja. Secondly, while still necessary to compress her narrative,

which is inevitably subjective, the intent was to maintain: (i) the order (ii) style and (iii) threads of the narrative. Kaja told her story not as a 'segment' related to the research topic, but as a broader, inter-woven narrative on her journey as a young woman and advocate. As described by Spence (1983, p. 457), Kaja went "backward and forward in time...to weave a story about who [she] is". For her, it was important to explain what mattered but also why. Each thread built on the previous one in a logical manner. Such subjective accounts reflect the motivations of many refugee young people; they offer insights into their aspirations, grounded in past experiences, to contribute to the socioeconomic wellbeing of a country, and to effect change as advocates.

Implications for youth integration

A holistic approach is transformative and can facilitate young people's integration and support their goals for a gratifying life (Davy et al., 2014). Inter-woven narrative threads are rich with significance and should be drawn on more extensively to inform youth integration initiatives because: (i) They not only value young people's contributions in all their complexity, but also provide more nuanced perspectives to inform initiatives effectively; and (ii) Rather than employ a reductionist analysis approach, narrative threads can preserve the initial intent of participants' contributions, which then makes meaningful engagement possible.

References

- Alexandra, D. (2008). Digital storytelling as transformative practice: Critical analysis and creative expression in the representation of migration in Ireland. *Journal of Media Practice*, 9(2), 101-112. doi:10.1386/jmpr.9.2.101/1
- Davy, C., Magalhães, L., Mandich, A., & Galheigo, S. (2014). Aspects of the resilience and settlement of refugee youth: A narrative study using body maps. *Cadernos de Terapia Ocupacional da UFSCar*, 22(2), 231-241.
- Hyvärinen, M., Mikkonen, K., & Mildorf, J (2008). Narrative knowing, living, telling. *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas*, 6(2), 225-231. doi:10.1353/pan.0.0021
- Lumsden, D. (2013). Whole life narratives and the self. *Philosophy, Psychiatry and Psychology*, 30(1), 1-10.
- Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network. (2016). National Youth Settlement Framework. Available at: <http://www.myan.org.au/>
- Polkinghorne, D. (1995). Narrative configuration in qualitative analysis. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 8(1), 5-23.
- Spence, D. P. (1983). Narrative persuasion. *Psychoanalysis & Contemporary Thought*, 6(3), 457-481.

Acknowledgements

Sincere thanks to UNSW's School of Social Sciences' Research Committee for funding to attend the UNHCR-NGOs consultations, and to the outstanding young people who participated in the study.

Contact information

c.lenette@unsw.edu.au