

Collaborative Research Narratives in Counselling

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Abstract

This paper examines the collaborative reflective process between the research supervisor and the student researcher. Using a descriptive analysis approach, we found that this process can involve critically thinking through the personal or client narrative that the student may want to plan to explore in research, then acting on this plan with participants to find common community narratives, using reflective practices to develop into appropriate themes for critical discussion in the research findings. This collaborative reflective process between student and research supervisor could be called collaborative research narratives. Thus, building upon co-operative inquiry principles of collaborative and reflective critical thinking, action research cycles, and narrative inquiry, we explore the concept of enhanced community narratives through the collaborative process of supervision for enriched social research. We contribute to the literature in three ways. First by examining existing literature on research supervision and the current landscape and knowledge in the field. Second, we align reflective process as a key element of supervisor and provide evidence of research outcomes consistent with reflective processes. Third, this paper proposes collaborative research narratives as pertinent to student supervision.

Keywords: collaborative research narratives, supervision, higher degree research, reflective practice, psychotherapy, counselling

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Introduction

Counselling supervision of research students, involves a collaborative reflective process, where the supervisor engages with the student to plan their research by finding a worthwhile issue of concern that resonates with their own identity narrative (McAdams, 1997, 2019) or narratives from their community work with clients, in order to explore with research participants, an enhanced collective narrative (Rappaport, 2000) that might benefit the community.

Using a descriptive analysis methodology, this paper identifies socially critical phenomena and, in doing so, answers questions about who, what, where and to what extent (Loeb et al., 2017). The method of analysis proposed is the descriptive narrative as the questions to be answered are transposed into this article to discuss research supervision (who) in counselling (what) in education settings (where) for student progression (to what extent).

Building upon co-operative inquiry principles of collaborative and reflective critical thinking, action research cycles, and narrative inquiry, we explore the concept of enhanced community narratives through the collaborative process of supervision for enriched social research.

We contribute to the literature in three ways. First by examining existing research on Higher Degree by Research (HDR) supervision and the current landscape and knowledge in the field. Second, we align reflective process as a key element of HDR supervisor and provide evidence of research outcomes consistent with reflective processes. Third, this paper proposes collaborative research narratives as pertinent to HDR supervision.

Research Supervision Overview

An overview of research supervision in counselling indicates that HDR supervision is multifaceted. For instance, Lee (2019) examined different conceptual approaches to supervising and teaching research students. Using a teaching and learning framework the author categorised research supervision into five stages:

1. **Functional:** Focusing on project management
2. **Enculturation:** Student focus is on joining a disciplinary community
3. **Critical thinking:** Here the student focus is analysing own work
4. **Emancipation:** The student has autonomy to self-develop and question their work
5. **Developing a quality relationship:** The relationship with the supervisor is nurtured, reciprocal and the student feels heard and cared for

However, Lee (2019, pp 33) critiqued her own framework describing it as “offering a tidy reconciliation of a process which is undeniably messy and individual”. Lee’s research provides an excellent but broad view of academic supervision. Although relevant to the current study, we find that there is potential for a more relatable framework for psychotherapy and counselling research supervision.

Similarly, Maxwell and Smyth (2010) argued for a research management matrix based on their work on three core themes in HDR supervision: learning and teaching process; developing the student; and producing the research project/outcome as a social practice. They theorised that a research management matrix provides opportunity to manage the research student’s time, milestones and relationships. However, although efficient, this framework

focuses on student completions. We suggest that in the field of counselling and psychotherapy a more collaborative and reflective framework may be considered.

Bager-Charleson et al. (2021) conducted psychotherapy and counselling research supervision using a range of approaches. These included survey, interviews and free response to collect data. The authors examined constructive and non-constructive HDR supervision within the counselling profession. Supervisors and supervisees reportedly reflected on what each had learned from the supervision experience. According to the supervisees, trust, knowledge and containment are important concepts within this process. Supervisors also shared similar views. Interestingly the researchers found that supervisees reportedly valued research experience, empathy and containment. They argued that a research supervision model for counselling psychotherapy programs should be relational in nature, based on containment, compassion and clarity (Bager-Charleson & McBeath, 2022).

de Kleijn et al. (2015) interviewed higher degree research supervisors, they were asked to consider students' characteristics and its alignment to specific needs, including research supervision strategies. This approach suggests that students are supported based on the supervisor's assessment of the supervisee. The authors argued that supervision strategies are "adapted" to specific students' needs. They concluded that the supervisors have a big part in gauging their student's capacity to complete the research thesis. This indicates that the role of the supervisor is quite broad and complex with an overarching requirement to remain adaptable.

Collaborative Reflective Supervision

The research process needs to be collaborative. A collaborative process between the research student and the supervisor, who plan and reflect the research together, to in turn, collaborate with participants in the research process to develop new understandings on the topic of interest.

Thus, the supervisor needs to provide a role model of a collaborative approach with the student, by engaging in reflective practices with the student, showing integrity and respect, as really a form of specialist teaching. Firth and Martens (2008) argue that supervision is a specialist form of "teaching" complete with its own institutional roles and responsibilities.

Supervision is a sophisticated, high-level teaching process in which learning is central. The model used, the supervisors' relationships and the experiences form the basis for reflection process connected to, among others, communication theory and social-psychological explanatory models. Emilsson and Johnsson (2007) argue that the five requirements of supervising research students, were: trust, theories, tools, training and time. Allen et al. (2020), also argued for the importance of supportive supervision describing this as proactive with a focus on increasing positive behaviours.

Other research within the field of medicine found that students expect their research supervisors to be knowledgeable, approachable, reasonable and supportive (Yousuf et al., 2019). Meanwhile, the supervisor will expect their research students to be able to: work autonomously, be critical thinkers, who are enthusiastic, motivated, sociable and have the mastery of purpose (Yousuf et al., 2019).

Adams (2017), emphasised the importance of the supervisor in the research process, to encourage cycles of planning and reflection, in his workshops which focussed on demystifying a research thesis.

Reflective Process

Supervision in counselling psychotherapy may occur using a reflective practice framework.

Schon's (1983) notion of reflective practice, entails thinking about our actions critically to help improve practice. The emphasis is on the need to move towards a more inquiring, social and reflective approach to problems. A reflective approach in HDR supervision ideally aligns with using reflective processes. The goal is to move towards a more inquiring, social and insightful approach to problems, using facets of theoretical approaches within reflective practice, such as framing and reframing.

Drawing on Schon's theory we outline three relevant steps. The first step is the development of the idea of "thinking before and while doing" (Parsons, 2009). This step introduces HDR supervisor and supervisee activities as well as giving support to individual research skills. The second stage encourages reflection through the lens of self and others (Brookfield, 1995). The final stage is the reflective process employed to assist all parties in the supervision process reach the desired outcome using critically reflective models (Thompson & Thompson, 2023).

In the first step the aim is to encourage the HDR candidate to approach their research as independent thinkers. Galea (2012) pointed out this approach may lead to autonomous learning.

Step two focuses on the role of the supervisor and the supervisee and the assessment of new approaches to improving the HDR training experience for all parties. Brookfield (1998) suggested that the reflective process include the use of specific lenses—those of learners, colleagues and researchers in addition to our own individual autobiographies—to form a critically review.

Within a reflective process the third stage focuses on the importance of the roles of peers, supervisors and autobiographical reports for the critically reflective practitioner (Knowles et al., 2007). Significantly, the review process may vary from institution to institution. However, the commonality is that all HDR candidature have to go through specific milestones and reviews for the tenure of their research program.

The emphasis of the reflective process is on the active reflection on action as they happen within this context the research student explores a suitable topic of interest with the supervisor, that is meaningful to the student and of some value to the broader community. The student and supervisor engage in a continuous reflective process, with each step of the research, in an active research cycle, of planning, acting and reflection. Thus, supervision is not a solitary endeavour, rather a social and collaborative process that takes place within dynamic and complex contexts.

Collaborative Action Research Cycle

A social research methods approach uses action research cycle, with spiral steps, first developed by Lewin (1946). The action research cycle involves continuous spirals of planning, action, and reflection. Hence, the supervisor supports the research student to plan the research, act to conduct an appropriate research method, and reflect on the findings to explore common themes, community narratives (Rappaport, 1995).

Bradbury and Reason (2003) have explored in depth, the underlying principles of action research as: grounded in lived experience; developed in partnership; addressing significant problems; working with, rather than simply studying, people; developing new ways of seeing/theorising the world and leaving infrastructure in its wake (Dick, 2023).

Collaborative Planning of Meaningful Narrative

The supervisor critically explores with the student a meaningful narrative of interest, with a critical thinking lens. The social research process is about being curious about your topic of interest, in conversation between the supervisor and student, with critical thinking, not just the banking of knowledge (Freire, 1970).

This collaborative process is a form of co-operative inquiry, according to Heron and Reason (2001), who describe the research process as working “with” rather than “on” people. We work with people who have similar concerns and interests to ourselves, in order to: understand your world, make sense of your life and develop new and creative ways of looking at things and learn how to act to change things you may want to change and find out how to do things better. Jackson (2001) proposes that the critical thinking model works through three stages: problematising; finding connections; and uncovering perceptions / the shape of the answer.

Firebaugh (2008) proposes seven rules of social research: there should be the possibility of surprise in social research; look for differences that make a difference, and report them; build reality checks into your research; replicate where possible; compare like with like; use panel data to study individual change and repeated cross-section data to study social change; and let method be the servant, not the master.

The supervisor encourages the student to develop a research topic around a personal narrative or phenomena from their own lived experience or from the personal narratives or case studies, from their clients or their own previous research. Discovering our own life narratives of self-identity is an important part of our own personal growth (McAdams, 1997, 2019).

Incidentally, this concept of people seeking to understand their life narratives, has also been developed into a strength-based counselling approach (White, 2007).

Social research is about exploring our own life narratives and the personal narratives of others, to develop a further understanding of our topic. Gair and van Luyn (2017) argue that the focus is on hearing and amplifying narratives.

Social research is undertaken to develop more meaningful understanding of our lives, our mental health and sense of wellbeing. According to Tracy (2010): high quality qualitative methodological research is marked by (a) worthy topic, (b) rich rigor, (c) sincerity, (d)

credibility, (e) resonance, (f) significant contribution, (g) ethics, and (h) meaningful coherence (Tracy, 2010, as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Denzin and Lincoln (2018) argued that qualitative research involves an interpretive and naturalistic approach leading to a process of “making meaning”.

Collaborative Action With Participants for Formation of Narratives

Social research can take particular forms to find the narratives or particular phenomena of interest for research. Creswell and Poth (2018) explore the philosophical underpinnings, history, and key elements of five qualitative inquiry approaches: narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography and case study.

Hermeneutic phenomenology, also known as interpretive phenomenology, originates from the work of Martin Heidegger (Neubauer et al., 2019) who explored the concept of human beings as actors (Lopez & Willis, 2004).

Hermeneutic phenomenology (Lavery, 2003; Reiners, 2012), then, seeks “to understand the deeper layers of human experience that lay obscured beneath surface awareness and how the individual’s lifeworld, or the world as he or she pre-reflectively experiences it, influences this experience” (Bynum & Varpio, 2018). Hermeneutic phenomenology studies individuals’ narratives to understand what those individuals experience in their daily lives, in their lifeworlds (Neubauer et al., 2019).

In sociology, and other social science disciplines (e.g., psychology, anthropology, communication, education), narrative inquiry was an outcome of social constructionism, developed by Berger and Luckmann (1966), which presented lived experience as a social epistemology stemming from shared meanings (Wolgemuth & Agosto, 2019). These shared narratives of meaning, that are researched and evaluated can be transformative (Mertens, 2009). Wolgemuth and Agosto (2019) stated that bringing these unheard stories to light is relevant to our work.

Mishler (1986) introduced narrative as a central mode of human cognition that offers insight into individual and collective identity and experience. The narrative turn signalled academics’ attunement to the importance of story and the belief that people’s lives are forged through stories.

Collaborating in supervision with the student for a research narrative cycle. Hence described as narratological devices of plot, point of view, authorial distance, and character, and examine how these concepts can be used when writing with qualitative data (Holley & Colyar, 2012).

In research supervision, we work with the student, planning and reflecting on a topic that relates to their own narrative or client work narratives or a community concern narrative, to find common community narratives to improve our counselling practices in the community. Connelly and Clandinin (1990), describe our lives as storied. Stories embody knowledge accumulated and experience gained over time. Narrative inquiry is one way of making sense of that knowledge and experience (Bruce et al., 2016). Nasheeda and colleagues explore the narrative analysis concept as important stories from our past and present leading to narrative analysis (Nasheeda et al., 2019).

Co-creating stories with study participants allows the researcher to live alongside the participant and listen to their stories (Nasheeda et al., 2019). Butina (2015) also defines the narrative research approach as collaborative in nature (Butina, 2015).

Collaborative Reflection for Community Narratives

In social research, there can be a collaboration with community member participants, to find common community narratives of concern, and perhaps explore ways to support community members with appropriate counselling, for ways forward. Rappaport (1995) developed the concepts of empowerment and community narratives, especially in his article on community narratives (Rappaport, 2000).

Harper et al. (2004) describe a theoretical framework of personal and social change initiated through the use of community narratives. Narrative theory and its components, including description and critical analysis of community and setting narratives, dominant cultural narratives, and personal stories are defined, and the art of storytelling in research is described (see also Bruce et al., 2016).

Short and Healy (2017) in writing about co-operative inquiry, speak of writing “with” research participants, not “about” them, and becoming immersed in the topic as a touchstone of co-operative inquiry methodology. That is, people are attentive to themselves, their beliefs, their own lens, their practice and their intuitions and actions, and engaging in a process of critically evaluating them (Heron & Reason, 2001).

Wadsworth (2011), has undertaken social research to find the community narratives, as described in her work. Wadsworth was one of the first to be involved with a team doing social research with mental health patients in Royal Park in the 80s, rather than previous researchers who only questioned the doctors and nurses, the caregivers. It was important to hear about the lived experience of the patients themselves. (Wadsworth & Epstein, 1998).

One of the authors’ Julie Morsillo, in her PhD research using community-based participatory action research (Duijs et al., 2019; Wallerstein, 2020), to explore with groups of vulnerable youth, ways for them to strengthen their positive identity narrative and find a voice in collaborating with local communities with creative projects to make meaningful connections (Morsillo, 2003, 2004; Morsillo & Fisher, 2007, 2009; Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007).

Thus, the importance of collaboration of the researcher with community members for rich qualitative research drawing out personal and community narratives, has been shown in research over the last few decades. So perhaps these concepts could be applied to the collaboration between the research supervisor and the research student, to: plan a personal narrative of importance for research; to then act together to explore the concept with research participants: in order to find and reflect upon the themes of common community narratives.

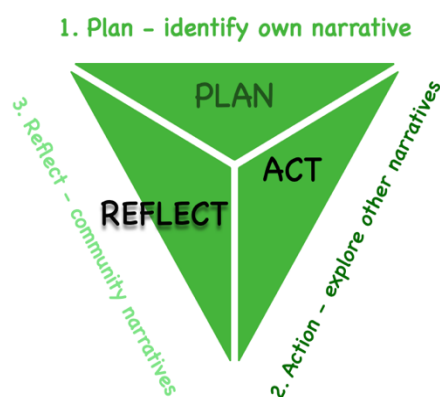
Narrative Research Cycle

This collaboration process or cycle, of the supervisor with the research student, to plan the personal narrative for research, and considering action together to explore with participants, and reflect upon common community narratives, could be framed as a narrative research cycle, of: plan, act and reflect (see Figure 1).

1. **PLAN a narrative** to explore collaboratively with the student for an inspiring narrative or **super vision** - a vision of a topic of interest and relevance to explore with appropriate participants.
2. **ACT of find more narratives**, where the student collaborates with participants to develop a comprehensive narrative with inter-views to inter-relate with relevant participants with lived experience or practitioners working with lived experience to explore different view-points.
3. **REFLECT to understand** the common **community narratives**, by exploring the themes with the student, to collate rich data from participants to find immersive appropriate themes, overall concerns or interests, and related or unrelated sub-themes that inter-relate to make sense of the data, to promote more knowledge and understandings of the issue.

Figure 1

Narrative Research Cycle



Conclusion

This paper has sought to show the importance of a collaborative reflective process between the research supervisor and the student researcher. This process can involve critically thinking through the personal or client narrative that the student may want to plan to explore in research, then acting on this plan with participants to find common community narratives, using reflective practices to develop into appropriate themes for critical discussion in the research findings.

This narrative research cycle can be a spiral of reflective cycles, when the student collaborates with the supervisor, to continually engage in planning the next phase of the research, followed by acting on that plan and then reflecting on the plan in that particular phase of the research. The phases of developing the topic, of working on the method, the ethics proposal, developing the findings themes, and writing up the paper. So the final cycle of writing the research paper, should have a clear informed meaningful topic narrative, with the method of action with participants to reflectively explore any common community narratives, and critically discuss these themes with a relevant conclusion.

This concept of research supervisor working reflectively and collaboratively with the student to find and explore the personal narrative to form common community narratives, in a narrative research cycle, based on the action research cycle, may be a helpful reflective way of viewing the research supervision process.

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