Theoretical reflections on narrative in action research

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Abstract

Narrative is an important tool for developing and writing up action research experiences. Its power lies in the fact that narrative construction and narrative recounting are fundamental human communication practices. Narratives are also knowledge producing devices, since they make sense of personal experiences and share that sense-giving with others. However, the twinned duality of narrative knowing (sense making) and narrative telling (communicating that sense) has often made its role as methodological approach be disregarded or misunderstood. Our objective is to reflect on how we can best use the narrative method in action research by paying due attention to these issues. We consider ontologies, epistemologies and key characteristics. We argue that what has been seen as a weakness in narrative method, its deep subjectivity, can actually be employed as an analytical strength in action research. We show how examining the explanations of context, inherent in narrative processes, can provide rich insights into the meanings of phenomenon.

Keywords: action research; narrative method; narrative knowing; narrative telling; qualitative research.

Introduction

Action research is becoming known for opening new avenues to the way we approach our investigations. Whilst the interest in action research has started to be evidenced only recently (Greenwood & Levin, 2007), it has a long tradition that goes back to some of the philosophical and educational works of John Dewey. Indeed, action research is concerned with developing practical knowledge from a wide variety of fields, and their approaches can even be found in the Catholic Action movement as well as in liberation theology (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, & Maguire, 2003).

Efforts to explore the history of action research have shed light on its multiple origins (Boog, 2003; Hockley, Froggatt, & Heimerl, 2013; Masters, 1995; Stokols, 2006). But there is no one unique coherent tale on which to focus. Many researchers acknowledge Kurt Lewin as a key pioneer in the development of action research. To him is given credit for advocating democratic and collaborative ways of working with community practitioners in order to ameliorate societal problems (Adelman, 1993; Burnes, 2004; Schein, 1996). Others also see the origins of action research in the works of Jacob Moreno (Gunz, 1996; Greenwood, 2015). His endeavours for stimulating the integration of theory, research and practice are praised, as much as his perception of the role of the investigator as “co-operator”, and the researched as “co-actors” (Gunz, 1996). Yet, there are other names (e.g., Gregory Bateson, John Collier), but what we mainly see in all of them is a twofold concern: first, the fact that theory cannot be separated from practice, so that action research takes place in context (Rauch et al., 2014; Somekh, 2006); second, it implies a participative approach to knowledge creation in order to influence the social change (McTaggart, 1994; Bradbury, 2015; Reason & Torbert, 2001).

In social sciences, the interest for action research is growing, in great part, because of its sheer participative and democratic power. It is seen as a way to revitalize our studies

in this field, by taking into account, in a collaborative way, the changes that happen around our lives and the world around us (Grant & Ken, 2016; Pettit, 2010). In fact, the point in action research is that change is not just an abstract construct. Rather, it is a primary purpose among the "co-actors" of the investigation, so that what is important is how real participants acted, learned, hoped or despaired, and, most important, changed (Walker, 2007). As connected protagonists, along with the researcher, participants such as organizational members, stakeholders or communities come together in search of understanding, improvement, and practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to them (Greenwood & Levin, 2007; Reason & Bradbury, 2001).

Because action research involves collaborative problem analysis, narratives occupy a central place in action research practices (Pushar & Clandinin, 2009; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015; Walker, 2007). Gergen and Gergen (1988) argue that narrative is a major means by which we make ourselves intelligible to each other. Indeed, Fisher (1984) describes "man" as *homo narrus;* similarly, MacIntyre (1981) recognizes that, "man is in his actions, as well as his fictions, essentially a story telling animal" (p. 201), whilst Hardy (1986) tells us that we dream, remember, hope, despair and even love and hate in narratives (p. 6). Then, without narrative, it would be almost impossible to work collaboratively.

The fact that narratives are common tools that human beings employ in their daily interactions has made that their role as methodological approach be often disregarded. Most conventional social scientists have considered narratives as incomprehensible, uncontrollable, trivial, and probably just a little scary (Greenwood & Levin, 2007). Yet as this fundamental form of human communication, narratives are exceptional in how they both "know and tell". As a way of knowing, and as a way of telling, they uniquely frame purpose and content in a familiar form. Indeed the very word, *narrative* derives

from the Indo-European root "gna" which means both "to know" and "to tell" (Hinchman & Hinchman, 1997). Thus the narrative concept relates the meaning-making and translation process of people's knowledge into an understandable telling (White, 1980). This is important because knowledge is often implicit and enclosed in everyday existence; but narratives help to explain that knowledge by relating people´s experiences in common social contexts (Bruner, 1991). Narratives thus carry contextualised meanings. In action research, narrative is unique because it provides a fundamental method of linking individual human actions and events with interrelated aspects to gain an understanding of outcomes. This means that narrative has the capacity to present the relatedness between interdependencies. So narrative offers both a method and a meaning system that operates relationally. Nonetheless, as a method, narrative remains somewhat contentious (Boje, 2011; Czarniawska, 2007; Grobstein, 2005) with concerns about their practical application (Andrews, Squire, & Tamboukou, 2008). It is this methodological application that presents the research problem that we address in this paper.

Our objective is to reflect on how we can best use the narrative method in action research by paying due attention to the main issues in the process of narrative knowing (making) and narrative telling (communicating). Although our conceptual point of departure is narrative as "method", we remain mindful of narrative as a natural human activity and "phenomenon" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1991). As Barthes (1977) puts it, there has never been "a people" without narrative, but the ubiquity, the sheer commonplaceness of narrative, masks a complexity. For research, we need to reach below the surface to examine the duality of knowing and telling. If narratives are to be understood and employed as methods in action research, we need to be able understand form and function. This paper addresses these issues.

We begin by considering frames that can affect the methodological use of narratives, in particular, their ontological and epistemological status. We then describe the key aspects, which characterise narrative as a method and link, in some manner, with the action research approach. We review narrative strengths and weaknesses by comparing with traditional research methodology. We conclude by discussing how the potential of narratives as method can be realised in action research through the co-creation of new knowledge as well as its power for facilitating an understanding of our social relationships and of ourselves.

The epistemological and ontological status of narrative

Because narrative method locates personal experiences at the heart of research, the epistemology is knowledge about experience. Narrative epistemology can thus be viewed as the way in which humans enact and represent their meanings and understandings of their life world, through that person's experiences (past, on-going or future). This knowing about their personal worlds also presents their different assumptions about ontology (Muncey, 2010), which can help us to develop a better understanding of the different applications of the narrative method. A narrative perspective is underpinned by a belief that realities are multiple and constructed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) but the ontological question is whether this reality is internal or external to the individual. Moreover, the duality of narrative as both a form of understanding –knowing– and a form of discourse –telling– raises some interesting points. However, whilst narrative telling –writing– has been clearly acknowledged as a natural way of providing action research reports (Attard, 2012; Bolton, 2006), there are some aspects of narrative knowing that deserve special attention; for example, the sheer versatility of narrative use in language while getting experiential knowledge. Yet, an analysis of the relationship between

language and cognition at a more general level stay outside the scope of this article. Our main concern then, is to focus, especially, on discussions that can help us to illuminate the strengths of the narrative approach in action research.

Seen from this perspective, we can begin to discern how narrative as a meaning making process –narrative knowing– engages a constructionist view of reality. The broad shift from the empirical object of representation ("the facts") to the vehicle of representation (narrative) defines the constructionist paradigm. In this view, the social world evokes a continuous process, created afresh in each encounter of everyday life as individuals impose themselves on their world to establish a realm of meaningful definition. A constructionist social reality is embedded in the nature and use of modes of symbolic action (Morgan & Smircich, 1980). The realm of social affairs thus, has no concrete status of any kind; it is a symbolic construction. Symbolic modes of being in the world, such as those forms through which some believers experience their relationship with God, may result in the development of shared and multiple realities (Swidler, 1986).

Conversely, if we shift from narrative as meaning making to the communication process through which the meanings are shared –narrative telling– the core ontology changes toward reality as symbolic discourse. This is because meanings become shared in the process and a consequent shift to bring milieu and context into closer focus. Morgan (1980) explains, the social world becomes a pattern of symbolic relationships and meanings sustained through a process of human action and interaction. Moreover, this process is always open to reaffirmation or change through the interpretations and actions of individual members. Consequently, the fundamental character of the social world is embedded in the network of subjective meanings that sustain the rule-like actions that lend it enduring form (Morgan & Smircich, 1980).

Further, when one adopts a complete view of narrative, that is, as both narrative making and narrative telling processes, it is possible to employ a different ontology based on a critical relational constructionism. Figure 1 shows this reconciliation.

"Insert Figure 1 about here"

A central theme in this approach is the particular emphasis on appreciation and openness. This facilitates the creation of a persuasive connectedness between researchers and key informants. Then, understanding the ontology of narrative from a critical relational constructionism can make narrative one of the most promising vehicles to action research for two reasons. Firstly, as a pragmatic ontology of experiences, it synthesises the representative aspect of narratives with an ontology of being, where narratives create the sense of being in relation, giving relevance to a participatory worldview. Secondly, and related to this, as a critical relational constructionism ontology, narrative centres on the assumption that constructions of persons, worlds, and their relations, are relational realities (Hosking, 2004). Relations then, become significant not just as the instrumental means to achieving some rational ends or world views, but for their moment-by-moment openness to, and appreciation of, other possible selves and worlds (Harding, 1986). Centred in the construction processes means that researchers and informants or practitioners, self and others, are viewed as reciprocal co-constructions that participate in on-going processes of research in action. Thus narratives would be founded in relational processes, always co-created and rarely complete. But understanding what

narratives are, opens the question of how they work to fulfil the tasks described. We will see this deeper in the following section.

The substance of the narrative as process and method: critical elements

One way to begin to understand the workings on narratives in action research is looking at narrative substance (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015). In narrative literature, the critical elements are argued to consist of the reflexive creation of meanings of experiences in specific times and places, and its communication in cooperative relationships through language (Bernstein, 1997; Brockmeir, 2000; Massey, 2010; Ricoeur, 1984). But what deserves to be highlighted is that, in essence, these elements are in close connection with what has been acknowledged as general principles for validating narratives in action research (Heikkinen, Huttunen, & Syrjälä, 2007; Heikkinen, Huttunen, Syrjälä, & Pesonen, 2012).

Reflexiveness

Reflexiveness is the practical thinking that emerges from, or is produced by the dynamics of the process itself (Schön, 1983). Reflection entails mentally moving personal experiences back and forth in time to produce meanings and practical tales (Brockmeir, 2000). In reflecting, different elements of an experience are put together to create tentative patterns of meaning that may generate new knowledge and better understandings.

Reflection is consubstantial to narratives; even when the reflective process may remain unnoticed for us. Heron (1988) explains that using narratives in fact implies to carry out three levels of reflection. In the first place, he notes, there is always a descriptive reflection of events and our actions and reactions from our own perspective to these

events. Afterwards, an evaluative reflection takes place, in which we critique, judge and feel emotions about the lived experiences. Finally, a practical reflection is applied, which guides our future actions (Heron, 1988).

Because our future actions are based on reflection on previous experiences (Leitch & Day, 2000), reflexiveness also becomes a key activity-principle in action research (Heikkinen et al., 2007). Schön's (1983) work may serve us to acknowledge more clearly the importance of reflexivity not only in narrative, but also in action research. He distinctively popularised the image of the "reflective practitioner", and along with reflection-on-practice distinguished other two types of reflection: reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. By reflection-on-practice he means a reflection that includes surfacing and criticism tacit understandings that have grown up around repetitive experiences; reflection-in-action refers to reflection in the midst of an action without interrupting it, and reflection on-action to the reflection that has no direct connection to the present action, but is focused in past events.

Whilst reflexiveness may work in different ways, depending on the different levels or types mentioned above, there are some common features in the process that deserve to be stressed. Firstly, all reflections are concerned with the interpretation, analysis and contemplation of experiences (pasts, presents or futures) (Bray, Lee, Smith, & Yorks, 2000). Reflections consider the reasons for events and actions taking place rather than dealing strictly with their causes (Bruner, 1991). Secondly, since reflections entail an auto-reflexive process, all narrative processes develop, in some way, a self-narrative or autobiographic (Archer, 2003; Bochner, 2012; Bruner, 1991; Muncey, 2005, 2010). This sense of self as a reflexive object to ourselves –self-interaction in Mead's (1934) terms– helps us to perceive ourselves in a different manner by interacting and communicating with ourselves. Thirdly, all reflection processes evolve deliberating the

experiences of the self as a reflected light from other peoples' selves. Therefore, self and society (others) become a common whole within the reflexive element of narrative; but also within the reflective practice in action research, since the action researchers' methodical reflection on shared narratives is what can generate knowledge for change and improvement (Cardiff, 2012; Leitch & Day, 2000). Thus integrity and goodwill for understanding each one to others turns out to be vital, so others become a key issue for both approaches. This integrity for working with others forms the basis upon which the next key element can be built: cooperation.

Cooperation

Another of the defining elements of narrative is its essence as a socialised activity (Grobstein, 2005). Naturally, narrative method requires the cooperation of others; and it is from this idea of shared relational narrative that the connections to action research turn out to be sharper (Pushar & Clandinin, 2009). In fact, narrative becomes a joint action requiring the cooperation of a conversational partner(s) (Jamal, Bertotti, Lorenc, & Harden, 2015). The importance of the listener is well noted (Bray et al., 2000; Gubrium & Holstein, 1998; Mishler, 1986), so that researchers and the members involved in the study collaborate together to analyse and resolve problems of mutual interest (Greenwood & Levin, 2007). In this sense, it can be said that a researcher is both co-researcher, and co-subject, whilst the members implicated in the research become co-inquirers rather than simply informants (Heron, 1988).

Then, narrative research itself becomes a co-creation process in which personal accounts are iteratively shaped by the reflexion/explanation of other/others (Riessman, 2008). Through a team formed by speaker and listener, the narrative process is developed in a cooperative negotiation through repeated cycles of action (a personal explanation of

one person) and re-action (interpretation of what has been heard from others) (Bray et al., 2000; Pask, 1975) that allow for the creation of practical knowledge (Hopkinson, 2015).

Action researchers develop this idea as they consider the democratic response that their investigations should bring to the problems analysed. Heikkinen et al. (2007) refer to this as the principle of dialectics, which means that an investigator gives space to different voices and interpretations of the same events. Similarly, although more plainly, Bradbury (2015) points out that, "action research is a pragmatic co-creation of knowing with, not on, people" (p.1).

In short, cooperation makes the links between narrative method and action research clearly explicit. In both, people do not act individually, nor independently. Rather, they act jointly as a collective "we" (Shotter, 1984) in order to change their practice and organisation for the better. Narrative, in fact, allows them to become engaged in action research by expanding on the tensions and possibilities of reflecting on topics that, perhaps because of their uniqueness, were not envisaged when behaving as independent individuals at the start of the research (Kindon, Pain, & Kesby, 2007). Additionally, this co-operative process helps to validate and use the «informants»' narrative knowledge as a form of knowledge that can be transferred. That is why the narrative method requires, in some way, a giving up of self to become part of the other. Thus the social experience studied becomes a shared experience; one demanding empathy and listening by those who participate in the process of understanding; one, therefore, suitable for action research.

Language

Both narrative knowing and narrative telling are formed with and through language. Language is used to express meaning; but it is also a medium of thinking that influences how meaning is constructed as well as how it is expressed (Polkinghorne, 2005).

Clark and Dear (1984) claim that language is used to construct social reality. This is because words are not neutral. They carry with them a semantic field of potential meanings, which is partly governed by a social code and partly individualized by the unique features of whoever utters or interprets the word (Sholes, 1980). Thus language is more than a syntax and a lexicon. As Bruner (1991, p.14) put it, "language, after all, is contained within its uses".

Narrative uses language to make sense of subjective experiences. But as the experience is more complex than what can be articulated in a language-imposed structure, narrative itself becomes a figurative language that conveys more of felt meaning's complexity than do literal expressions (Bruner, 1985; Polkinghorne, 2007; Ricouer, 1984). Narrative then, expands the meanings contained in literal language to those that more closely indicate experienced meanings. Ricoeur (1984) recognizes that language expressions themselves –such as narratives– add to experience and serve to congeal and give differentiation to experiences. And this is made possible since narrative extends the understanding of an experience by contextualizing it.

How language is used, for what purposes, and who uses it within the narrative processes is also well explained by pragmatics (Labov, 1997; Massey, 2010). According to Verschueren (1999), the use of language involves processes of variability, negotiability and adaptability. For variability he refers to the range of language possibilities available; then, negotiability emphasizes that choices are not executed mechanically, algorithmically, but are used flexibly, whilst the process of adaptability gives sense to both by allowing for the negotiated use from a range of possibilities to meet particular

communicative needs. Moreover, because the success of the narrative depends on the fulfilment of its purpose in the creation and communication of understandable experiences, listeners and tellers become a key part in the use of language.

Accordingly, the language employed in narrative telling, in all its variability, negotiability and adaptability processes, is the result of a dynamic process of negotiation among listeners and tellers using language (Bernstein, 1997; Riessman, 2008). Similarly, the meaning of the words chosen becomes a result of a process of voluntary and friendly negotiation (Andrews, 2008), which requires a strong predisposition for empathising one with other. Habermas (1976) explains that words are all subject to specific interests, as Austin (1962) puts it, we engage in a performance with words, which are conditioned by the cultural approach to which the teller/listener has access (Brockmeier, 1995).

Clearly, for action researchers there is an important benefit in understanding the particularities of language in narrative. Because by being aware that the participant's meanings extracted from narratives are derivative of language use within relationships, the development of democratic forms of knowledge, with which action research is concerned, would have to consider the ways in which language is employed in the service of those who hold power to define reality (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001). Language, as was noted above, helps configure narrative meanings and generate new knowledge (Linde, 2001), but because of its collaborative use, it also plainly helps to change realities (Boje, 2011).

Time and Space

Time and space are important contextual dimensions in the narrative method (Brockmeier, 1995, 2000). Narratives give shape to personal experiences, placing, contextualising them in times and places in which they have been lived. Sequence and

order, space and place, offer both teller and listener a sensibility of a reality. Time and space not only are present in the narrative method, but are locational and sequencing devices for narrative making and telling (Baynham, 2003).

Time and narrative are so closely, even inextricably bound together, it is impossible to understand and communicate an experience without time being part of the experience (Brockmeier, 1995, 2000; Andrews, 2008; Polkinghorne, 1988; Ricoeur, 1984). For Bruner (1991) a narrative is an account of events occurring over time; it is irreducibly durative. Brockmeier (2000) notes that narrative time is time told, which entails experienced time, which is, in turn, time as human meaning construction. From a temporal perspective, what happens in applying the narrative method is an interplay of positioning alternative views of experiences and possible beginnings, with possible ends related to current or future moments (Brockmeier, 2000; Lloyd, 1993, Polkinghorne, 1988; Ricoeur, 1984). This temporal orientation can bring us back to Aristotle's (1996) poetics, in which the unfolding of events and actions over time was suggested as a typical feature of narratives (and stories) (see Greenhalgh, Russell, & Swinglehurst, 2005). However, narrative time is not just succession in time, but also change through time. Change encompasses and evokes a number of different forms and orders of time, creating a multi-layered weave of human temporality (Andrews, 2008). While the classic ordering in which a narrative is told "in time" entails the perception of time as a flow, a continuous line of chronological marks (Brockmeier, 2000), other models of time in the form of circle or cycle are possible. In this way, time becomes a narrative tool for shaping and re-shaping meanings in narrative (Boje, 2011; Brockmeier, 2000); and this notion provides us with a dynamic view of narrative that aligns with the developmental orientation of action research, always as work in progress (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003).

Like time, the narrative method works by using space and place to contextualise narrative construction and telling. The location of the narrative in a specific place not only allows us to frame its meaning, but also to highlight its singularity (Clandinin & Connelly, 1991). Experiences do not occur outside space but within space, places exist on a human scale of understanding. Place, then, becomes a marker, not only as a site of enactment, but as part of the experience itself which allows us to re-create the sensations felt within such experience. Thus both time and space are part of the configuration of narrative knowing and telling process and content.

Narrative's properties versus conventional social sciences methods

As Greenwood and Levin (2007) have put it, narrative is "an important and powerful tool to write up (in a systematic and deep manner) the experiences from activities in an action research project" (p. 111). But, as was noted before, that is not void of critics. Narrative, indeed, highlights the value of the subjectivity in each experience (White, 1980). Yet the rich subjectivity of recounted experiences brings problems in analysis. Because narrative is based on a subjective experience, the same phenomenon can suggest different things to different people. This strength of the socially situated understanding and telling, when it is compared to the conventional logic-positivist thinking, may be seen as a weakness in interpretation. The problem is well noted (Bruner 1991, 1994, Clandinin & Connelly, 1991, Freeman, 1997; Polkinghorne, 1988, 2005; Riessman, 1993) and lies in the quality of narrative as natural social phenomenon. This, in essence, makes it an alternative means of knowing; one that can be referred to as "science of the imagination" as opposed to "science of the concrete" (Bruner,1994).

As Bruner (1991) explains, the power inherent in the use of logic and logical propositions has helped us to learn about our experiences, by providing explanations

about how we come to construct and “explain” a world of nature in terms of causes, probabilities, space-time manifolds. He argues that, thought, so to speak, has been traditionally treated in social sciences as an instrument of reason. Good thought then, became the same that right reason, and its efficacy is measured against the laws of logic or induction (Bruner, 2004). This propositional knowing implies knowing “about” something in intellectual terms of ideas and theories. It is expressed in propositions, statements which use language to assert facts about the world, laws that make generalizations about facts and theories that organize the laws (Heron & Reason, 2008). But when our concern is with particular happenings, human interactions, personal life experiences, logical principles and laws cannot organize them; they cannot explain their richness (Polkinghorne, 2007).

We have noted so far that narrative practice, in both knowing and telling, illustrates and elaborates a unique perspective on the human condition, bringing subjective experience to the focus of research (Rhodes & Brown, 2005; White, 1980). As practice, narrative begins by self making sense of the experience and continues by giving sense of that same experience to others. This way of proceeding is so familiar and ubiquitous that it is easy to overlook it. Bruner (2004) recognizes that it is in this way how we organize our memories of human happenings. Unlike the constructions generated by logical procedures, narrative focuses on interpreting the subjective experiences, so that through interpretation we can grasp a better comprehension of them. However, the subjectivity inherent in the interpretation can be seen as a disadvantage against the heightened objectivity in social science. We next discuss further by highlighting how its appropriate employ can actually be seen as analytical strength; we consider the following contestant issues: narrative as merely representation; the incompleteness of narrative; the re- or the de-contextualizing of action and experience.

An incomplete picture of a phenomenon versus a better understanding of processes

Bruner (1991) argues that narratives focus on the study of a particular experience through the participants' perceptions, compared to the "objective" observation of many experiences has contributed to the "myth" about an incomplete and selective picture. This is seen as a weakness when using narratives as method (Elliot, 2005). But experiences are never complete, they are constantly reshaped, reconfigured to fit current circumstances. This is the "knowing", the adaptation and linking of past to better understand the present. Riessman (2004) explains that narratives do not mirror, but refract the past. The "telling", on the other hand, engages with imagination and strategic interests to influence how researchers and co-researchers as storytellers choose to connect events and actions to make them meaningful as well as understandable for others. Moreover, it is also recognized that *experiencing* involves the unfolding of a personal story about actions and events where perception and meaning change over time (Andrews et al., 2008). In this sense, rather than viewing social phenomena as something fixed and static that can be captured and explained once complete, the narrative method demonstrates with this incompleteness the complexities inherent in the processes of human relationships. In fact, this takes narrative beyond the descriptive or analytic and allows it to become part of the process of change. What is also significant here is that to grasp the essence of change, as well as to promote it, is a key point in action research, so that the narrative's nature becomes a means to provide connection between narrative method and action research (Heikkinen et al., 2012).

Seeing narrative method in this view, its problem may then not be one of incompleteness, but one of over-completeness. Moreover, although the argumentative structure of narrative reasoning may not be as logically compelling as arguments that

have more strict sylogistical forms, the narrative argument can still persuade at both a noncognitive (emotional, moral) and a cognitive (intellectual) level by bringing about understandings of evoked meanings, human truths, and significances that something can hold (Van Manen, 1994). This, in fact, points toward the principle of evocativeness that has been acknowledged as a sign of quality for action research processes and reports based on narratives (Heikkinen et al., 2007, 2012). It stresses the artistic and evocative aspects of research narratives, such as aesthetics, creativity, interpretive vitality and expressive voice (Heikkinen et al., 2007). Then, it offers us some analytical opportunity for method, since we may elect to look at "what" is being told, or we may choose to look at "how" it is told. Therefore, the dialogue between narrative knowing and telling, albeit as highly subjective, gives us considerable theoretical purchase on the meanings surrounding the phenomenon, as it builds bridges with the emergent and developmental processes of action research.

(De)contextualizing actions and events versus (re)contextualizing experiences

As mentioned earlier, context is a critical narrative framework. By framing experience in context we endow it with a particular meaning. Nonetheless, this indicates there are multiple ways in which such experiences can be told and analyzed, but each provides different meanings (Clandinin & Connelly, 1991; Mishler, 1986; Andrews, 2008). Whilst the ambivalence extant as subjective and contextual fluidity in narrative is often seen as a research problem, it may also become a positive feature, particularly when it is used in action research. This is because it provides us with clues about the nature of meanings and, more important, how they are developed. We can then use context to help explain meanings and how events and circumstances imbue meanings. This applies to both aspects of narratives, the making sense for the self –narrative knowing; and the narrative

telling, where sense is provided for others. In these ways we can see how knowledge and practical solutions are co-created from context and circumstances.

We might discover why one context, and not another, can become meaningful, and of course, most interestingly why and how. We can establish how time, as sequencing of events, provides a process account of cause and outcome. But also, how narrator and audience are involved in the context, and participate actively (re)contextualizing experiences in a new way and allowing the emergence of new knowledge. Rather than being merely situational variables, context, in this wider perspective, becomes part of the explanatory power in narrative. Thus rather than a problem, contextual framing and the ensuing narrative differences become a useful analytical tool in action research. This is because it is moving beyond a limited idea of context to the notion of a context always emergent and interactive that the participative orientation of action research is put into practice. An example can be found in the study of social entrepreneurship (Dey & Steyaert, 2010; Diochon & Anderson, 2011; Teasdale, 2011), especially when it is comparing developing and developed countries (Karanda & Toledano, 2012). It becomes clear that people who belong to different contexts hold quite different meanings about the nature of what it means to be a social entrepreneur and how they respond to these meanings. We have, nonetheless, in narrative analysis to be aware of the subjectivities inherent in our own role as narrative listener. In some manner, the researcher becomes part of the context of the narrative, so that s/he will also impact in the action research processes and results.

The relevance of an experience versus discovering the importance of (ir)relevant aspects of a phenomenon

If narrative method is used in action research to try to identify the critical, or the causal factor or event in a phenomenon, we encounter a problem in distinguishing which is important, or which is mere embellishment ensuing from the sense making and telling of an experience. Moreover, the extent of detail involved in any experience can be a disadvantage of the narrative method where tales have to be adapted to the limitations of space and time in analysis and publication (Czarniawska, 2007). This, indeed, is a problem to be found in most qualitative analysis; the dilemma of finding what we are looking for, coupled with the issue of what is included and what is left out. But it is also offers a strength to such work.

In comparison with a positivistic approach where "variables" are predetermined by the researcher, narrative is an invitation to the informant to select the aspects they consider important for their own understanding, and stories are framed to share that importance with others. This freedom in reflection has the advantage of identifying unanticipated explanatory elements, relationships or influences which can produce new grounded understanding and theories. In this way, narrative allows a redefinition and identification of the importance of any aspect, allowing any aspects, event or circumstance that initially didn't seem relevant, to become significant. This highlights a key strength of the narrative method in that it shows how the importance of the experiences is not only an issue in itself, but also in the way we think and talk to others about the experience. Events may only take on significance as they are analyzed and told in partnerships. In this sense, narrative method can be a warrant of the democratic process that characterizes action research. Moreover, establishing what is included and what is left out in a narrative is often useful (Andrews et al., 2008). Accordingly, in order to understand the message, the words not spoken in a narrative might have the same importance as those spoken.

Conclusions

We have focused on analyzing the narrative method to try to improve our understanding from a theoretical and practical point of view. In particular, we have centred on the ontological patterns, substantial elements and properties that characterize the use of narrative within the framework of social action research. With our epistemological reflections on doing narrative and our focus on critical elements we have tried to clarify some of the problems that narrative researchers can face. We argued that narrative method should recognise, and employ, the strengths of narratives as practice. We showed that an awareness of the phenomenon as practice, especially the duality of knowing and telling, can be useful tools in the narrative method as well as in action research.

From our reflection, we identified that a key point of narratives lies in their rhetorical power as a medium to provide understandable explanations of the experiences that individuals live in their relationships as members of a society. In this sense, it is important to stress that the understanding that comes from the narrative process is not found inside a person but in the interactions that they have with others. For this reason, we recognize that knowledge and understanding is always co-created. And with this acknowledgment, we want to stress two main aspects. On one hand, the fact that narrative method becomes a form in which people, cooperatively, co-create knowledge as better understandings of a phenomenon and, consequently, new social realities. Because of this, it becomes a powerful tool for action research, in the sense that facilitates to bringing about changes in knowledge, policy and practice (Pettit, 2010).

On the other, as a co-creative process, the application of the narrative method requires the construction of commitment among people in order to negotiate understandable meanings of their experiences in the social world. Such commitments,

from our point of view, are only possible from the empathic relationships established among individuals. In analysis and in practice, this means that each person involved in a narrative process should develop an ability to locate oneself in the place of others. This turns our attention to the issue that we are never alone in the narrative process; nor in any process of action research. Accordingly, if we want to make full use of narrative as a method of inquiry in action research, we must also attend to the relationships that we maintain with ourselves and others.

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Figure 1. Functions of narrative and core ontological assumptions about reality