Learn to Use Narrative Analysis to Analyze Written Narratives
Learn to Use Narrative Analysis to Analyze Written Narratives

Student Guide

Introduction

Narrative analysis is a broad term that encompasses many forms of inquiry focusing on data as stories, that is, as narratives organized by time and memory and exhibiting literary elements such as plot and genre. This approach has been influenced by literary analyses such as dramatism and motif analysis. By recognizing stories as central to how human beings communicate and reveal values, significance, and agency, researchers employing narrative analysis are attentive to elements such as plot, character, and genre. A common characteristic of narrative analysis is to consider the story itself as an event, not merely an account representing an event. Researchers working in this tradition are interested in why the story was told as it was, who the intended audience is, and what narrative strategies are employed.

What Is Narrative Analysis?

Qualitative research is often used to analyze events or phenomena, but narrative analysis takes as its “object of investigation the story itself” (Riessman, 1993, p. 1). That is, stories, or narratives, are viewed as events in themselves worthy of investigation. Researchers view narrative analysis both as an invaluable way of collecting data—given that human beings naturally tell stories—as well as an elucidating lens for analysis (Bernard, Wutich, & Ryan, 2017). Narrative inquiry can focus on autobiographical, biographical, or other textual, audio, or video data that exhibit literary structures such as inciting incidents, plots, and resolutions.
A narrative is an account of a connected succession of events; it organizes time and memory and segments happenings (Polkinghorne, 1988) and points to both referential meaning (content) and evaluative meaning (inflection) (Labov & Waletzky, 1997). Through it, it connects a teller to a social world and is performed for a particular audience. Narrative researchers such as Polkinghorne (1988) make a distinction between an analysis of narratives and narrative analysis. In an analysis of narratives, researchers collect stories and make sense of them thematically, whereas narrative analysis uses literary principles, such as plots and motifs, to make sense of data which may not in its raw form read like stories, data in which events may seem discontinuous or isolated but which can be interpreted with storytelling in mind. As researchers, we can activate stories in data collection, look for stories in data analysis—the stories that participants seem to inhabit—or do both. Narrative analysis writ large may focus on the internal as well as sociocultural constructions of self, such as stories about being a “top athlete.” These narratives can be personal, institutional, or collective—such as a story of migrant farmers through the eyes of a particular storyteller.

The variants of narrative analysis are wide-ranging, as are the texts that can be analyzed with a narrative lens, such as interviews, focus groups, or diaries. Stories move away from traditional, structured interview protocols that focus on opinions, attitudes, and semantic knowledge. Instead, they activate stories as a way of getting at these facets as well as attending to holistic elements of a story such as narrative trajectories (e.g., a shift from conflict to resolution or from chaos to order). A narrative analysis has a particular focus—on the meaning of the story, the structure of the story, or how it is performed. That is, researchers can analyze either the form or content of narrative data or examine how both of these elements serve the narrative and narrator. With this in mind, some researchers analyze the significance of narratives, the “implicit—evaluative—phase of meaning” (Dauite,
2014, p. 153). Evaluative phases hint at the “purpose of the story” (p. 155). The narrators’ evaluative language provides insight into how they make sense of the “social and physical worlds around them” and how they “make sense of who they are” (p. 155).

The narrative analyst may or may not use narrative data from numerous sources to construct a metastory, a weaving together of the participants’ accounts into a larger narrative—a story of stories—that goes beyond individual accounts to integrated meanings. In Goodman’s (2004) article on “Coping With Trauma and Hardship Among Unaccompanied Refugee Youths From Sudan,” the author identifies four thematic trajectories evident across all participants: collectivity and the communal self, suppression and distraction, making meaning, and emerging from hopelessness to hope. The metastory identifies themes addressing chronology and transformation—what is similar across narratives. This differs from an analysis that aims to contrast narrators and show how their evaluative “inflection” suggests different narrative functions.

Regardless of whether we are condensing respective stories into a meta-story or comparing their functions, narrative analysis can be used to analyze stories about a process, such as coming out as transgender, or accounts of an event, such as a destructive wildfire; the stories themselves are treated as “events” worthy of analysis. Analyzing the language of the narratives reveals values (what matters most to participants in their own words) as well as a central actor, or protagonist, and secondary or antagonistic characters. We might also be attentive to turning points in the story and the larger narrative arc, such as a shift from conflict to resolution or from chaos to order.

Elements of narrative analysis can include identifying purpose, plot, genre, character, setting, values, resolutions, and motifs, depending on the research questions and form of data (Daiute, 2014). Strategies for analysis include coding
for these elements and identifying patterns and relationships among the codes. Coding refers to applying condensed topics to textual units and then identifying patterns among the codes. Coding for purpose refers to identifying intended function such as a narrative’s apparent confessional, informational, or therapeutic objectives. Coding for values refers to identifying text segments that reveal which principles eclipse others (e.g., valuing a practical college degree over a less marketable one). Noticing which norms are foregrounded, backgrounded, and negotiated is part of coding for values. Identifying characters or roles requires looking at the “parts” that different individuals play in the story. We might code for the type of characters (e.g., tricksters, antagonists, leaders) as well as the actions and agency associated with them. Plot brings us to motivations, conflicts, resolutions, and transformations. Researchers can follow established coding techniques of researchers such as Labov (1972) who uses pre-determined codes such as abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution, and coda. (These are further explained below.) In addition to using predetermined coding in analysis, researchers might employ inductive topics to allow the stories to contribute new direction to the analysis.

Beyond coding, analysts can diagram plots and map out common elements across data. Matrices of plot elements, for example, might present characters on one axis and plot elements on the other (Daiute, 2014). Plot elements can include inciting actions, turning points, and the narrator stance, which points to the kind of protagonist the narrative suggests. Narrator stance is the “perspective or point of view crafted in the narrative by the author/speaker; created by the combination of plot elements, such as high point, resolution strategies, and coda” (Daiute, 2014, p. 140). These matrices might point to how particular characters are associated with certain actions.

Narrative analysis can also offer tools for coding observational data. Dramatism, for example, treats events, such as school board meetings, as mini-dramas. In
this approach, researchers see settings as stages and examine how actors use the stage to enact their drama. Hence, they code for act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose. Similarly, dramaturgical coding identifies participant objectives, obstacles, tactics, attitudes, emotions, and subtexts (Saldaña, 2016).

Illustrative Example: Written Narratives From the Survivors of Hurricane Floyd

This dataset example uses nine narratives written or typed by undergraduate students attending East Carolina University, North Carolina, United States, in 1999. As narrative analysts, we are interested in differences in how the narrators tell their stories and what these stories reveal about living through a hurricane and its aftermath.

Research Question: How do people who live through a natural disaster narrate their stories of survival?

The Data

The data were collected at East Carolina University, North Carolina, in a history class of undergraduate students who were asked to write about their experience of the hurricane. The advantage of this type of data collection is that each participant focused on what mattered most for them; they told their story on their own terms with no probing from the researchers. Some students chose to address a particular person as their reader and used an epistolary mode in narration. Others used dates to indicate how circumstances changed from day to day. In this approach, the researcher has less opportunity to impose an agenda onto the data collection. All narratives were entered into a text analysis software for coding and analysis. Software allows researchers to generate code reports (i.e., a list of all quotations coded to a code) as well as create tables showing which codes are most and least evident across data. The example that follows presents our
analysis strategy and preliminary findings based on the sample narratives.

Analyzing the Data

We begin analysis with these data by deciding on initial codes. Codes are condensed topics that are applied to textual units. This example uses several a priori codes from Labov’s (1972) approach to narrative analysis: abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution, and coda. These codes allow us to tap into elements of narratives that have a long-standing tradition in narrative analysis.

- **Abstract** refers to the summary of the narrative
- **Orientation** refers to the time and place
- **Complicating action** refers to a shift in the sequence of events
- **Evaluation** refers to the attitude of the narrator
- **Resolution** refers to what finally happened
- **Coda** refers to a return to the present time.

Here is an example of Labovian coding in one of the documents (Sherrick’s transcript). Please note that we use pseudonyms in this dataset.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I feel very lucky when I think about the flood. When I heard that hurricane wasn’t going to hit South Carolina first, I decided to go home to Fayetteville. My dad called me on Wednesday morning and told me I should come home.</th>
<th>Abstract</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I left about 10:30 and arrived in Fayetteville at 12:15. My dad and I made sure anything that could blow away was put in our garage. We then went to the grocery store and picked up some essential goods.</td>
<td>Orientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At about 9:00 that night our power went out. My dad is in the fire department and we heard over his radio that a tree had clipped the power lines. It wasn’t due to the wind though, but rain had wet the ground so much to loosen the roots. The wind didn’t pick up until 2:00 or 3:00 that night. I was awake all night and I heard a few trees fall around 3:30. The next morning when we got up, I walked outside to see if we suffered any damage. We had one crabapple tree that fell in our front yard and a few trees fell in the woods out back.</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Our power wasn’t on, so we hooked up a generator to give us some electricity. We then rode around looking to see if anyone was hit hard. Everyone seemed to be ok. **A few people had some down trees and limbs but that was it. Our power came back on around 7:00.** I heard from a friend that weekend classes were cancelled all week.

As far as the flooding across eastern North Carolina, I didn’t really hear anything until Monday or Tuesday. I called a friend of mine who was here in Greenville on Tuesday. He said they still did not have power. He told me a little bit of what went on, but he was on the opposite side of town that campus is on.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Orientation</th>
<th>It was the Wed. I came back to class that I heard about the flooding and people losing everything. I really felt bad for the people that had nowhere to go. I can't imagine having all of my possessions wiped out.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td>I think the most shocking thing to me about the whole event is peoples’ reactions. I can see guys in my classes that have lost everything and they are still positive. The whole community has been really supportive. Also the millions of dollars that have been raised from all over the state. I really think it is great to see people help out and pick up those who are down and out.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resolution</td>
<td>This is the best example of good in our society I have seen in a number of years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coda</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the first few sentences, Sherrick captures a summary of what is to follow. “I feel very lucky when I think about the flood.” It prepares us for the events that he is about to narrate. This will be a story about luck; hence, we think of it as the **abstract**. The **orientation**, in contrast, gives us contextual markers for the narrative; it places us in a certain time and setting, so that the action does not seem to happen in a vacuum. “I left about 10:30 and arrived in Fayetteville at 12:15.”

The **complicating action** refers to a shift in the sequence of events such as the following: “At about 9:00 that night our power went out.” The **evaluation** captures the narrator’s attitude and emotional reaction: “I really felt bad for the people that had nowhere to go. I can’t imagine having all of my possessions wiped out.” This code is applied whenever the narrator is not simply describing, but evaluating, the turn of events. The **resolution** is the story’s destination. It describes how things turned out: “I can see guys in my classes that have lost everything and they are still positive. The whole community has been really supportive.” The **coda**, at the end of the narrative, suggests a return to present time, a distancing from the past event: “This is the best example of good in our society I have seen in a number of
Because these codes were not adequate to fully address the research question, we also coded for codes that captured elements related to plot—characters (critical actors, friends) and actions (passive and active). We could have decided to focus on additional types of action such as the inciting action—what triggers the action of the story—but decide to simply distinguish between passive and active. The additional codes were as follows.

*Active action* refers to actions suggesting agency or physical action such as driving or helping others.

*Authority/“they said”* captures references to the weather and the reported damage that are accepted as fact. These include statements attributed to unidentified sources (“they said”).

*Collective “we”* is a code applied to references to the narrator and a second party, such as a roommate. “We went to my house.” This allows us to distinguish between narratives that are governed by self-mentions (“I” and “me”) versus those that have a collective “we” voice.

*Critical actors* was applied to text segments referencing someone who played a heroic role or who otherwise helped shape the narrator’s story.

*Friends/other survivors* references other characters in the story, such as friends or nameless survivors.

*Media* is applied to text segments regarding television, radio, and online reports on the weather and flooding.

*Metaphors* is applied to both metaphors and similes regarding the storm and flooding. It provides insight into how the hurricane takes on characteristics as an antagonist.

*Partner* refers to romantic partners.

*Passive action* refers to actions such as waiting and listening.

*Prolonged time* captures references to how time seems to slow down.
during the hurricane.

The additional codes allow us to actions (passive and active), time, and actors (we, friends, critical actors, others) as well as to authority and the media, which also play implied roles in the narrative.

The full list of codes is:

- abstract
- active action
- authority/"they said"
- coda
- collective “we”
- complicating action
- critical actors
- environment as actor
- evaluation
- friends/other survivors
- media
- metaphors
- orientation
- partner
- passive “action”
- prolonged time
- resolution

We structured these using the following hierarchy.

**Elements of storytelling**

- abstract
• orientation
• coda
• complicating action
• evaluation
• resolution

Actions

• active action
• passive “action”

Characters

• critical actors
• collective “we”
• family
• friends/other survivors
• partner
• authority/“they said”
• environment as actor
• media

Time

• prolonged time

Language

• metaphors

The following is an example of coding using both Labov’s elements of storytelling as well as our plot-related codes. These additional codes allow us to
identify characters who are referenced, such as romantic partners and friends, as well as narratives framed in terms of a collective protagonist, and those suggesting a more solitary one. Our additional codes also allow us to capture actions—passive actions as well as more active responses to the hurricane.

Coding Example: Hannah Excerpt

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thursday afternoon my friends and I wanted to ride our bikes around town to assess the damage. We went to my house to get the bikes and there dry land around it. I decided to spend one more night away from home in case the water rose anymore.</th>
<th>Collective “we”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Friday Greta and I went to our apartment but it was surrounded by water.</strong> We waded in water waist deep to get in and grab whatever would fit on top of our heads. Later that afternoon one of the most amazing things happened.</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Greta and I were sitting around feeling rather helpless.</strong> She said “I wish we could take a canoe to our apt.” I responded sarcastically “Who do we know with a canoe.”</td>
<td>Friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Then, the phone rang. My friend Chris called to ask if we wanted to use his canoe to get some things out. <strong>That was a miracle.</strong></td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Codes are applied to text segments—sentences and paragraphs—that demonstrate the topic. Coding systematically for a predetermined topic such as *complicating action* allows researchers to report on obstacles in the narratives—phone calls, a critical radio announcement, school cancellations, encroaching flooding—to make sense of the larger narrative theme of complicating events across all data.

In some cases, a text segment is coded with several codes. For example, if a paragraph contains references to the *media, authority, emotions, and prolonged time*, then it would be coded with all these topics. Codes were applied broadly (i.e., to a large text segment) in order to later assess co-occurrences of topics; broader application of codes makes it easier to later assess overlapping codes. If two codes tend to show up frequently in concert, that suggests a conceptual
relationship that we can further explore.

Presenting Results
Below is a brief analytical report on our coding and findings. We focus on analyses of plots and evaluations, but in a larger study, such as a dissertation or a book project, we would also more fully analyze orientations, complicating actions, codas, and the role played by critical actors beyond the narrator.

Plot Analysis: Actors and Actions
In this example, we have chosen to report on elements of plot and the cumulative narrator stance. Remember that the narrator stance refers to how narrators present themselves as protagonists and how they construct the plot of the hurricane and flooding. In plot analysis, we look to see how plot structures and protagonists differ across the narratives. We name these plots and describe, in a text or table, which narratives fit into which plot structure. We then consider how narrators evaluate the event and what kind of resolution is evident.

In reviewing text coded to active and passive “actions,” we are able to assess the narrator stance, how the narrators frame themselves as certain kinds of protagonists. The abstract and resolution/coda, as bookends of a sort, also help give us a sense of the narrative trajectory of the story. We see the summary at the beginning—an indication of why the narrator is telling the story and the resolution at the end, where the narrator has ended up, physically, socially, and emotionally. These all contribute to our understanding of plot and narrator stance.

Below is an example of storytelling elements for one document, Hannah.

Example of Plot Elements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plot element</th>
<th>Hannah</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Learn to Use Narrative Analysis to Analyze Written Narratives
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abstract</th>
<th>“I never expected Hurricane Floyd to hit Greenville.”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Orientation</td>
<td>In her apartment, September 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical actors</td>
<td>Chris, friend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td>Apartment is surrounded by water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turning point</td>
<td>Chris offers his canoe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resolution</td>
<td>“Greta and I have just moved into our new apartment”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>“What does not kill you can only make you stronger.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrator stance</td>
<td>Passive recipient</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Daiute (2014).

We could include other plot elements, such as initiating actions (her dad coming to the apartment), and the coda, if applicable, but decide to focus on the above.

In general, the narratives reveal actions that are passive, such as contemplation, or active, such as fixing a generator. Both active and passive actions can show up in a single narrative, but often one of these is more prevalent in how a narrator chooses to tell his or her story. We make this distinction because it shapes how we as readers experience the narrators. In some cases, narrators describe thinking first and then acting. In others, they act first and then contemplate later. Being “passive” can refer to receiving information, being unable or unwilling to help, or simply observing the effects of the hurricane. Sitting and thinking is associated with a lack of agency. “Greta and I were sitting around feeling rather helpless” (Hannah). Passive actions are also related to taking in the media. “When I watched the news later I was floored by the pictures I saw. I could not believe what was happening all around me” (Penny).

Narratives suggesting a passive protagonist include those framed in terms of
being trapped; these are narrators who watch and wait.

We love to sit at the living room window during hurricanes and watch the trees bend back-and-forth in the field across from our house. (Penny)

We regained power and were able to watch T.V. and communicate with the outside world. (Gil)

Receiving information and being grateful are also types of passive action.

In contrast to passive narratives, active narratives illustrate seeking out others, being physical, seeking information, helping others. Hence, these are intentional actions. In analyzing the code reports for complicating action, we identify active and passive verbs. For example, the verbs in Mitchell’s account capture actions: “worked,” “dropped,” “hurried,” “sorting,” “packing,” “turned,” “gathered,” “sent.” Hannah’s verbs, in contrast, capture her passivity: “waiting,” “took me under their wing,” “cooked dinner for me.” Luke’s, in contrast, show contemplation: “survey,” “drove,” “saw,” “see,” “was shocked,” “talked,” “made me appreciative.” In focusing more holistically on these three narratives—Mitchell’s, Hannah’s, and Luke’s—we discern different plots. We decided to initially focus on these three because they are clearly distinct from each other; they are identifiable types. Mitchell’s narrative represents the protagonist as active hero. He turns attention away from his own tasks to help out complete strangers. “I dropped what I was doing.” Hannah, in contrast, focuses on others who assist her; her friend calls out of the blue to offer a canoe. Friends take her “under their wing” and cook dinner for her on her birthday. She centers the plot around herself, not around other victims or the storm: “Friends from Carolina had no way to get in touch w/ me.” Luke’s narrative differs in its distant tone, which mirrors his newfound isolation; he offers money and donates food, but his plot is nonetheless passive. Here, the “action” takes place in his witnessing the damage and in gaining an awareness of what is unfolding. The outcome is more cognitive than it is physical. “Until I saw some
of the damage and talked to people who had suffered such great losses I had no concept of how bad things were.” Even though looking can lead to a revelation (“To see this with my own eyes shocked me”), we consider this different from active action.

In certain narratives, Floyd, an unpredictable environmental force, is cast as a character that acts upon the narrators’ world. In other narratives, such as Mitchell’s, the hurricane is treated as simply an event, not a character, suggesting his sense of agency. Mitchell’s narrative focuses on making order out of chaos; he is the agent for this shift. Luke also makes order out of chaos, but in his case, this happens rhetorically. He mentions people “working 48 to 72 hours as volunteers … I was so proud to be part of a community that … rallied to help each other.” His transition is cognitive when he realizes that “it takes a tragedy to reaffirm our faith in man.” Mitchell engages in reflection as well, but it is secondary to the action. Hannah’s narrative is one of displacement—waiting and adjusting to new circumstances. Even when she suggests action, it is condensed into statements such as “cleanup was a nightmare.” Rather than casting herself as an agent of change, she instead focuses on the “sentimental items I lost.” In contrast, Mitchell feels helpless because he cannot help more people. He is focused on their loss. Luke’s full narrative ends with a collective “we”: “It helps us to realize how much we can accomplish when we need to.”

The code complicating action provided an insight into conflicts and turning points in each document. A narrative turning point is a moment that spurs action and changes the direction of the story. For Mitchell, the turning point is when he hears a radio report asking for volunteers. It changes his actions as well as the nature of how his story is told. For Hannah, the turning point is when her friend Chris calls her to offer his canoe. This interrupts her “sitting around feeling rather helpless.” For Luke, the arguable turning point is his drive through Kinston, witnessing the devastation firsthand, seeing it “with my own eyes shocked me.” In each case,
the turning point is followed by the environment acting upon the actor or the actor acting upon the environment.

When we review all nine documents, we see larger patterns of how the narratives differ in narrative style and significance. Dana presents herself as the hero, along with her brother, as she describes helping others retrieve possessions and take them to boats, then trucks.

    We got everything we could—couches, beds, and electronics, toys, and clothes. Then we went next door and did the same. (Dana)

Others echo this heroic narrative.

    I dropped what I was doing and hurried over to help out. I arrived to find myself in the middle of a maze of bags. Myself and four other volunteers worked all day sorting and packing the goods to be hauled to affected areas in Eastern North Carolina. (Mitchell)

    Our power wasn’t on so we hooked up a generator to give us some electricity. We then rode around looking to see if anyone was hit hard. Everyone seemed to be ok. (Sherrick)

In contrast, Hannah is helped by others. Friends take her “under their wing” and cook dinner for her on her birthday while Gil is entirely dependent on his father.

    The next week and a half was spent waiting. Luckily I had the most wonderful friends who took me under their wing. (Hannah)

    I just handed him tools and did whatever he told me to do. (Gil)

Sylvia and Wilma tell stories of self-preservation, of escape (e.g., driving to Ohio), saving possessions, focusing on the environment, and reacting to requests, rather than being proactive.
We got what we could get out and put the rest as high as we could get it. There were never any signs of coast guard men or fire and rescue, but I heard later they came the next day. (Sylvia)

Luckily, I have an incredible boyfriend who had gas in his car and money—so we got in to the car and drove to Ohio! It was pretty fun! (Wilma)

A few narrators focus on observing the flood and its aftermath. In these narratives, the “action” is mostly cognitive, such as Luke’s decision to stay in North Carolina after witnessing the supportive community.

I saw trailers and homes wide open with all of their belongings and furniture out on the street, ruined. (Luke)

I finally reconciled that I and my family were blessed this time and not to trouble myself with feelings of guilt. (Penny)

The plot is, in part, inscribed in how the narrator tells the story. Paula mentions that she took care of 7 dogs and 10 cats, but she does not cast herself as the hero. Rather, her narrative is largely observational; her interest is in atmospherics more than people. Despite her kind act of caregiving, it does not resonate the way it might in a more action-based story.

Below is a table condensing our understanding of the different narrator stances across the data (Daiute, 2014, p. 140).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Narrator stance</th>
<th>Dana</th>
<th>Hannah</th>
<th>Sylvia</th>
<th>Penny</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Protagonist as active “Hero”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protagonist as recipient</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protagonist as self-preservation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protagonist as distant witness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For example, as heroes, Dana, Mitchell, and Sherrick rescue the possessions of others or join volunteer efforts. In contrast, protagonists such as Penny and Luke are more distant witnesses.

Analyzing Evaluations

Analyzing the attitude of three narrators, Mitchell, Hannah, and Luke, shows us that in all three cases, the significance of the hurricane is similar. All three narrators share an evaluative tone of feeling lucky, even though their situations were different. Mitchell says: “It really felt great to know I had been able to help out others who had not been as lucky as me and my family.” Similarly, Hannah says, “I never felt so lucky,” but notice that the evaluative tone of her statement is different. Mitchell’s evaluation (and feelings of luck) is couched in what he did to help, whereas Hannah’s is embedded in what she received. Mitchell’s statement places emphasis on being able to help while Hannah focuses on herself. In keeping with his more intellectualized tone, Luke expresses the same sentiment differently: “It made me very appreciative of how well I fared.” Here are excerpts from each account:

Excerpt: Mitchell

By the end of the day we had turned a mixed up maze of goods into an orderly sorted supply of ready to deliver boxes. That afternoon a load of supplies was gathered up and sent to Stokes, North Carolina, where flood shelters were in desperate need of supplies. **It really felt great to know I had been able to help out others who had not been as lucky as me and my family.**

Excerpt: Hannah
Greta and I salvaged a boat load of things but it is hard to figure out what belongs in a boat. The water was so deep that we ran over our mailbox in the boat. The next week and a half was spent waiting. **Luckily I had the most wonderful friends who took me under their wing.** Monday (September 20) was my birthday. My parents couldn’t come b/c Washington was an island. Friends from Carolina had no way to get in touch w/ me and all the restaurants in town were closed. The few friends still in town cooked dinner for me. **Even though I had so little on this birthday I never felt so lucky.**

*Excerpt: Luke*

As I drove through Kinston I saw side roads still blocked off because they were still flooded and water still up to door knobs on some buildings. I saw trailers and homes wide open with all of their belongings and furniture out on the street, ruined. To see this with my own eyes shocked me … until I saw some of the damage and talked to people who had suffered such great losses I had no concept of how bad things were. **It made me very appreciative of how well I fared and very humble concerning my damage, which in comparison was trivial.**

**(Bold text** signifies luck.)

The evaluation functions to establish the point of the story. By coding for evaluation and comparing the narratives, we see that the language of evaluation provides insight into the kind of narrators we are witnessing. They all conclude with luck but do so in different ways that reveal different kinds of stories and different storytellers.

When we review the other storytellers, we are able to discern patterns aside from the example of “luck” above. In assessing language of evaluation across the data,
we identify different types of final narrative evaluations: ideational, interpersonal, and self-referential. Notice that these are not codes that we applied to text. Rather, by analyzing the coded content for *evaluation*, we identify how evaluations in the final paragraph (or sentences) differ and why this is relevant to the overall plots and narrator stance.

For example, some accounts conclude with aphorisms such as “what does not kill you can only make you stronger” and “memories can never be taken away” and “it takes a tragedy to reaffirm our faith in man” suggesting the meaningful, abstract significance of the hurricane. We refer to this as “ideational,” suggesting going beyond the immediate physical implications to assess the moral or philosophical implications of the flood. Here are examples of ideational evaluations from several narrators.

- In situations like this you have to focus on the positive. What does not kill you can only make you stronger. (Hannah)
- The whole community has been really supportive. Also the millions of dollars that have been raised from all over the state. I really think it is great to see people help out and pick up those who are down and out. This is the best example of good in our society I have seen in a number of years. (Sherrick)
- I think we have all had a wakeup call to the extent that we must realize what our environment is like in Eastern North Carolina and how it can affect our lives in a tremendous way! (Gil)
- Although the flood was a great tragedy, I think it helps us to realize how much we can accomplish when we need to. (Luke)

In other cases, narrators conclude their accounts with a focus on friendships, bonding, and what it was like to help others. We refer to this as “interpersonal” to capture the attention to relationships; these accounts conclude with a sentiment
regarding relationships, not an ideational perspective. Here are examples:

- A wonderful feeling, people pulling together for strangers. I just wish I could have been there the help the others that lost everything. (Dana)
- I know the healing process will be very difficult and time-consuming, but I am certain that the people of this region will not give up and we will all get through this tough time together. (Mitchell)

A third kind of final evaluation is one indicating a more personal, practical significance. Here, narrators conclude with self-referential language, such as “the time off was pretty boring and I would have much rather been at school” or “it was great to finally make it to town.” Here are more specific examples:

- I was so fortunate in that I only has (sic) two inches of water to enter, but everything on the floor was covered in mold. It is now Oct. 13 and I marvel at the thought returning to live at Dockside in a couple of weeks! (Sylvia)
- Overall, the time off was pretty boring and I would have much rather been at school. (Wilma)
- I finally reconciled that I and my family were blessed this time and not to trouble myself with feelings of guilt but to get in there and do what I could best way I could to help someone in need. (Penny)

The following table summarizes these differences across the narratives.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Narrator</th>
<th>Evaluations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ideational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Example of “good in our society” (Sherrick)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Environmental “wakeup call” (Gil)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Aphorism: What does not kill you can only make you</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This table illustrates the different evaluative comments that conclude the narratives. In summary, the narratives have resolutions couched in ideational conclusions about community, life, and the environment; interpersonal relationships, such as bonding and forging friendships; and self-referential language, such as returning to one’s home. This typology helps us understand different kinds of narration and how storytellers keep their concluding accounts on a personal level or raise them to a more intangible level beyond the atmospherics of the flood. Our findings may be of interest to social scientists and clinicians alike. Social workers assisting hurricane survivors might benefit from understanding the different kind of “storytellers” they will encounter in the field. Social scientists, too, can benefit from recognizing how events have been converted to stories from which survivors draw meaning and reveal themselves as protagonists of a certain type.

Review

Narrative analysis refers to many variants of qualitative coding and analysis. These variants focus on data as a form of storytelling that provide insight into how individuals perceive the plots, characters, conflicts, and resolutions around a particular event or situation. After reading this module, you should be able to:

- Describe the objectives of narrative analysis
- Use narrative analysis coding
- Report on the results of narrative analysis coding

Reflective Questions

1. Consider the following document (Penny) from the hurricane study. Try
coding it using some of the codes used in this dataset.

The aftermath of the initial storm caught us all off guard. I have been through some storms in my life but never had I anticipated or witness such devastation. My worry about Floyd was no more or less different than my worries with any other typhoon or hurricane I had experienced. We loaded up on the usual provisions: water, soda, cookies, chips, a few can goods. My main concern was not to let my children drive me or themselves crazy. They have a tendency to want to do things they should not when it is best just to sit tight. We love to sit at the living room window during hurricanes and watch the trees bend back-and-forth in the field across from our house. I am normally the last one to go to sleep. I stay awake in anticipation of tornadoes that normally follow the storm. I went in to deep sleep when the storm passed. When I woke up, the power was still one and we still had our satellite dish. The cable was out. The softball field across the street has a small area dense with trees. During a storm, quite a few uproot and fall, so this was the normal picture. Uncharacteristic was that the softball field at both ends were swimming in water about ankle deep. I thought no more about it until I made my usual round of calls check up on friends. They all lost power as usual but informed me that their areas were under water and they were unable to leave. When I watched the news later I was floored by the pictures I saw. I could not believe what was happening all around me. I had joked with my friends as I always do during a storm because I never have lost power. (They had never had any major damage either.) The next day I was asked to come into work the whole day (I normally work 4 hours every other day) because all of the workers could not come to work because the roads were closed due to flooding. Because of the flooding, I was asked and able to work full time due to workers inability to get on the
base due to flooding of the roads or damage to their homes. I was happy for the hours but also feeling a sense of guilt because I was able to get to work and because I didn’t have the problems they had. I didn’t feel right but my husband stated as “life goes on and you have to go about living it.” I made a point of purchasing needed items for the relief effort that the base established. I also helped one of my co-workers in trying to get their belongings out of the house when the opportunity came. When the rains came the following week, I just knew something bad had to happen to my home or family. Tragedy, despair all around does bring strange feelings to the surface). I finally reconciled that I and my family were blessed this time and not to trouble myself with feelings of guilt but to get in there and do what I could best way I could to help someone in need.

2. What plot elements do you see in the Penny excerpt?
3. How would you describe Penny’s evaluation of the event?

References


