

Reflections on Doing Narrative Inquiry Research: From the Lens of Interpretive Paradigm

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ABSTRACT

So far, there has been limited research work published regarding how narrative inquiry can be taken as a qualitative approach under the interpretive framework to investigate the experiences of professional women in their lives pertaining to their professional growth in a patriarchal society. This paper is a reflection on doing narrative inquiry research regarding the challenges that women educators face in a patriarchal society i.e. Bangladesh, for their professional growth. Various scholars have asserted that interpretive research, underpinned by philosophical approaches, is a major framework and method of social science research to understand social reality from diverse perspectives. With this backdrop in mind, this article draws upon the first-hand experience of the researcher while conducting a pilot study for a doctorate project to address how a novice researcher can position herself/himself within the interpretive research paradigm to do a narrative inquiry to address a specific research problem. Although somewhat subjective and based on the researcher's work experience, the understanding of the interpretivist paradigm is discussed within a local context with its limitations that have deep social and cultural foundations. The reflections are based on the researcher's subjective perspective to shed light on novice researchers who are considering using the narrative inquiry approach as a methodology for their research study. These reflections work as a guide for beginner scholars who are interested in narrative research to understand how to derive meaning from the context of lived experience using an interpretivist paradigm. It also highlights the importance of developing a methodological theoretical approach to address research problems arising from participant real-world experiences.

Keywords: Interpretivism; Qualitative method; Narrative inquiry; Epistemology

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INTRODUCTION

Narrative description of every individual person in society can create a gateway to the community they belong to including the semiotics of culture and language. Narrative inquiry is a research methodology that focuses on exploring and understanding the ways people construct meaning in their experiences in social contexts. Narrative inquiry (NI) as a method and phenomenon of study is used to explore the lived experiences of participants, through the use of oral, written, or multimodal narratives (Clandinin, 2007). NI provides an opportunity for participants to share their experiences and voices in a way that may not be possible with other research methodologies. This is particularly important in contexts such as Bangladesh, where women's voices are mostly unheard due to social and cultural barriers. The use of narrative inquiry is also valuable in Bangladesh's higher education context, where female educators' experiences can be explored through narrative inquiry to understand how women's innate power enables them to overcome obstacles and achieve success in both their personal and professional life.

The higher education system in Bangladesh includes both public and private universities, and they receive funding and administration from separate entities. Over 3 million students are enrolled in Bangladesh's 46 public and 103 private universities as of 2021 (UGC, 2020). The percentage of women educators in Bangladesh's private universities has risen dramatically in recent years. University Grants Commission (UGC) research shows that

between 2004 and 2019, the percentage of female faculty members at private universities rose from 14% to 31% (UGC, 2020). Despite this progress, women educators in Bangladeshi private universities still face many obstacles and struggle to advance in their careers.

Although there has been a surge in the number of women teaching at private universities in Bangladesh, they continue to face discrimination and other obstacles to advancement in their fields. Hera (2020) found that female faculty members in private universities are less likely to be considered for leadership roles and promotions. Several factors contribute to this, including cultural biases and gender norms that place a premium on male teachers. Moreover, women educators in Bangladesh frequently work overtime despite having inadequate childcare options (Ali, 2009; Hera, 2020). In a culture where women are supposed to put family above work, it can be challenging for female teachers to combine their professional and household commitments.

According to Ravenek and Laliberte Rudman (2013), narrative inquiry can be carried out using either an interpretative or a critical paradigmatic position, emphasizing the dialectic stance between the researcher and participants in reaching deep insights into participants' experiences. The dialectic stance between the researcher and participants involves an ongoing dialogue and interaction between them to reach a deeper understanding of the experiences being studied. This approach emphasizes the importance of collaboration and co-construction of meaning in the research process. Additionally, narrative inquiry can be used with sensitivity and reflexivity to offer new insights through the power of stories (Caine et al., 2021). In qualitative research, narrative can be both a method and the phenomenon of study, with a specific focus on the stories told by individuals.

For this research, I discuss how I situate myself in doing narrative inquiry within the interpretivist research paradigm. Guided by the philosophical positions of interpretive research, the conclusions are substantially founded on my own recollections throughout the pilot study of the Ph.D. project using the narrative inquiry method. As the goal of the research project was to explore the challenges that women educators face in a patriarchal society i.e., Bangladesh, for their professional growth, the research sought to shed light on the obstacles they experience in their personal and professional lives in this patriarchal societal structure. In particular, this narrative inquiry research is situated in the Bangladeshi context to explore and understand the unheard stories of female educators working in private universities in the patriarchal society of Bangladesh and how they construct meaning of their experiences in social contexts.

As a researcher pursuing the narrative inquiry approach, I went through different dilemmatic phases and spaces after generating stories from the participants. For example, how would I, as an investigator, situate the research study - the storylines as emerged from the narrators' experiences under interpretivist paradigm; in what ways I could justify the research study under this paradigm because apparently, there is no unique or specific method to acquire knowledge and construct meaning. As a novice researcher, my thoughts and reflections were poured into a dilemmatic situation where there were struggles to provide a straightforward solution to this issue. After reading literature for a few months, while I was simultaneously working on the trial (pilot) study, I came to the conclusion that there is no objective truth in the universe because our views are temporal, situational and geographical in nature and better understand the philosophical underpinnings of qualitative research. As a result, it is expected that I, as an investigator, will be deliberating my subjective perspectives on the value systems that the stories would be conveying.

Taking all of these into account, and based on my commonly held viewpoints, as an interpretative investigator, I tried to establish the worldview within a particular context to make a logical connection between the participants' stories and my voice. To begin, I have addressed how I positioned myself and my participants within the interpretivist approach, focusing on the epistemological and ontological assumptions. I also describe how I arrived at the conclusion that narrative inquiry was warranted for the study and how the narrative interviews are opted for as the data collection process.

Purpose of Research

Interpretive research is described as a research paradigm that is based on the assumption that social reality is shaped by human experiences and therefore it is not a singular or objective reality. Under the interpretive paradigm, narrative inquiry can be carried out as a methodology in which the researcher attempts to illuminate the meanings of personal stories and events aimed at generating knowledge (that researchers are interested in) by incorporating interpretive description into their study design. Taking narrative as the unit of analysis, this study seeks to reflect on: the experience of a novice inquirer embracing narrative inquiry (NI), as both an experience and a methodology, and who is able to situate both in an interpretive research framework. To do so, the pilot study of the challenges faced by Bangladeshi professional women in a patriarchal society is the backdrop that is used to explore initially and then reflect on my experience as a researcher in doing narrative inquiry research.

Based on this research objective, I chose the context and my participants, and situate myself as part of the narrative inquiry process. I have endeavoured to ensure sensitivity and reflexivity in the approach while exploring and understanding individuals' experiences in my chosen social context.

Positioning myself: Why?

Narrative inquiry is a particular theoretical and methodological framework within narrative research that seeks to understand how research participants construct stories and narratives from their own personal experiences (Clandinin, 2018). It involves analysing and interpreting stories or accounts of experiences that people share with researchers (Clandinin, 2023). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) highlight that although narrative inquiry has a long intellectual history both in and out of education, it is increasingly used in studies of educational experience. They argue that narrative inquiry provides a way to understand the complexity of educational experience by focusing on the stories and experiences of individuals involved in educational settings. In particular, narrative research is being increasingly used in medical education scholarship and in studying medical learners, but its application in investigating women's experiences in the overly restrictive patriarchal context has not been specifically discussed in the literature.

For example, Denzongpa and Nichols (2020) examined a Bhutanese refugee woman's journey through birth, double displacement, and resettlement in the United States through narrative inquiry (p.129); Person (2019) conducted a narrative study in an engineering department setting to understand how women there successfully navigated through the pipeline and identified strides towards success; Adams et. al (2016) 's work on cultural aspects of parents' experiences caring for preterm infants after discharge from four neonatal units in Ghana; Sweet (2020), who designed narrative research to examine female K–12 public educational leaders' personal reflections of events and experiences, and the meaning extracted from them, and Morillo (2017), who recorded the personal reflection of events of a female superintendent to find the challenges she experienced. While there is literature available on narrative research and narrative analysis, there is a gap in the literature regarding how Narrative Inquiry (NI) can be taken as a qualitative approach under the interpretive framework to investigate the challenges professional women experience in their lives for their professional growth within a patriarchal society. As such, there is a need for future research to explore this topic and shed light on the challenges professional women experience in their lives for their professional growth.

Interpretive Paradigm

This research was conducted using the interpretive approach based on the notion that assumes “truth and knowledge are subjective” due to our cultural and lived experiences (Ryan, 2018, p.9). This research further drew on the interpretivist approach as suggested by Berryman (2019) who argues that “social constructions, language, shared consciousness, and other social interactions” are essential means for the interpretivists to uncover facts (p. 273). Reaching that goal, Berryman (2019) posits that, for interpretivist researchers to find answers to qualitative questions, they need to frame their research questions in ways that are focused on understanding “the how and the why” (p.273).

The interpretive paradigm was appropriate for conducting the narrative study as the focus of the study was to explore individual life experiences. Through the analysis of the data, the aim of my Ph.D. research was to examine, interpret and discuss the following: a) how and to what extent each of the participants has become continuous learners for professional development; b) how have they overcome the sociocultural, economic, and other barriers to their professional development; and c) to what extent socio-economic and cultural forces have impacted on their professional growth. Weaver & Olson (2006) note that the interpretive stance helps the researcher to delve deeply into the social reality through the stories of the participants and “their lived situations”. I approached the data, which was collected through narrative interviews, as more or less subjective data. The participants narrated their accumulated experiences, beliefs, and perspectives within certain contexts and expressed how they were influenced by certain value systems in their culture and society. As such, the data was analysed as accounts of reality that were constructed uniquely by individuals but also shaped by competing values in society.

The personal experience of patriarchy and the journey of learning for professional development as experienced by me as a researcher offered a certain advantage in the form of knowledge, experience, and awareness about some of the issues faced by an aspiring professional woman in Bangladesh, (as well as that faced specifically by a professional in a tertiary institution). Ryan (2018) explains that researchers are never able to distance themselves from their inbuilt “values and beliefs” and that unavoidably impacts their data collection, interpretation, and analysis (p.9). As a researcher, I listened to the participants' responses during the interviews and after following

up, the data was analysed with critical and self-reflexive lenses. The data was interpreted by setting the details and the rhetorical constructions within the narratives against the larger context of society and culture.

As a narrative inquiry researcher, I was guided by the assumptions of the interpretive paradigm, wherein the epistemological, ontological and axiological stances of the research followed methodological guidelines offered by Given (2008), Grix (2002), Berryman (2019) and Guba and Lincoln (2000). Given (2008:2) notes that “Epistemology is a central area of philosophical study that deals with the method and basis of knowledge”. Given (2008) also outlines three basic questions of epistemology, “What is knowing? What is the known? What is knowledge?” (p.2). Grix (2002) further explains that it “is connected with the theory of knowledge, especially in regard to its methods, validation and possible ways of gaining knowledge of social reality” (p.177). On the other hand, ontology deals with the nature of existence through a set of perceptions and classifications displaying their properties and relations between them. According to Berryman (2019), ontology and epistemology provide the researcher with a deeper understanding of “what the researcher believes to be the nature of truth, the nature of the world, and ways of being in the world . . .” (p.273). As an interpretivist researcher, these epistemological and ontological principles were used to understand my own beliefs of the nature of truth, the nature of the world that I have lived in, and the ways I have positioned and placed myself in the world as compared to the experiences of the participants. Thus, in doing narrative inquiry research, as Berryman (2019) describes, we look for “multiple truths . . . explication, understanding, and meaning rather than cause and effect” (p.273).

Epistemologically speaking, this research aimed to explore how participants acquired knowledge about social reality, with a focus on their experiences as producers of knowledge. This aligns with Skeggs's (1997) argument that a woman's experiences contribute to her perception of social reality (p. 27). However, Skeggs (1997) also cautions that experiences alone cannot serve as a reliable foundation for knowledge, as they are subjectively constructed (p.28). However, the participants of this research were the producers of knowledge in this study because every human existence has both a direct and an indirect link with its community and its past (Howell, 2013). By uncovering the feelings of women educators towards the barriers they confronted in the past, this research aimed to interpret their perceptions of overcoming the individual social hurdles that each of them had gone through in the pursuit of their professional development.

Janesick (2000) argues that qualitative research is often “ideologically-driven” and is not “value-free or bias-free” (p.385). As this research has sought to understand the reality that was embedded in the narratives of the participants and to minimize biases, partiality, and other limitations from the narratives, all experiences are compiled and compared together to create a paradigm to reach the reality that affected women living within the hegemony of the patriarchy and fighting against the barriers of professional development. In the words of Marcoulatos (2003), the concept of social and cultural practices would always reside through aspects of subjectivity and reality, and through this notion, the perception that is developed from a socio-cultural context is explored and analysed (pp. 269-270). In line with what Marcoulatos (2003) stated, my focus of the study was developed through the subjective perception that is ingrained and deeply rooted in my society.

Researchers need to be aware that the meaning constructed from the context might not be a shared reality (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003) because each human being's experience of life is exclusive, which could be divulged through autobiographies, their own presumed position in the social hierarchy, the hurdles that they confront, and their personal experiences. The axiological standpoint for this study, as posed by Heron & Reason (1997, cited in Given, 2008, p.5) was how much the inquiry would encourage Bangladeshi women educators to develop their self-supportiveness in their journey of professional development. Lincoln and Guba (2000) explain that axiology itself contains principled tenets intrinsically which contour all research pursuits (p.169). As a result, the approach has a hidden principled tenet attached to the research as it aimed at finding the realities to explain the means and hurdles of Bangladeshi women in their struggle for professional development opportunities, and that happens to be the focused value of the research.

To sum up, the pilot research that was undertaken was based on the assumption that reality and truth are variable (not fixed). My ontological position is that reality is created by individuals in groups. Therefore, towards uncovering the deep-seated meanings of events, activities and behaviours, reality needed to be figured out first—which was the epistemological stance of this research. The assumptions that the researchers have about realism emanate from their own lived experiences and the experiences of others need to be also paralleled with them to find many intrinsic realities that prompt the responses. For example, my experience and assumptions of patriarchal barriers are developed from my professional journey and it is somewhat subjective, but it has significant social and cultural roots. This is where as a researcher, I intended to broaden my understanding of the participants of my study via a better understanding of my participants, although the reality of my assumptions varied because there could be differences between contexts, events and experiences.

Qualitative method

According to Creswell (2014) qualitative researchers are often puzzled when they decide to use the qualitative research approach as they have so many options before them to choose from. In fact, there are, as Creswell (2014) indicates, more than twenty different qualitative approaches according to their classifications. Out of twenty, five are traditionally practiced in qualitative research which are case studies, ethnography, grounded theory, narrative, and phenomenology (Creswell, 2014).

Patton (2002) recommends that in the selection of research strategy be it quantitative, qualitative or mixed, one needs to plan carefully on the objectives of the questions one asks and the response one really expects. Using open-ended questions for qualitative research the researchers get enough scope to review the responses exhaustively (Dudwick et al., 2006; Gopaldas, 2016). The method also benefits researchers enormously because the participants can answer the questions without being restricted by the encoded answers—open-ended question answers can open up new dimensions of investigation giving an opportunity to understand the issues even better (Strauss & Corbin, 2008; Levitt et al., 2017). This is an effective method because it allows the researcher to do in-depth study of the actual experiences that take place in a natural local setting (Creswell, 2009; Punch, 2013) which involves interpretive matters (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Lincoln, 2005) to make sense of people's perception (Gentles et al., 2015).

The Philosophical Underpinnings of Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is a form of research that is often used in social sciences and humanities. It is a broad term that refers to a range of research methods that are designed to explore the subjective experiences, beliefs, and attitudes of individuals or groups. The philosophical underpinnings of qualitative research are complex, and there is no one consensus regarding its role. According to Denzin, & Lincoln (2005) the philosophical assumptions that underlie qualitative research include the types of logics employed as well as the axiological, epistemological, and ontological assumptions that researchers make about the nature of reality, knowledge, and values. The axiological assumptions are related to the researcher's values and how they impact the research process. Epistemological assumptions are concerned with the nature of knowledge and how it is acquired, while ontological assumptions are related to the nature of reality and how it is constructed.

The novice narrative inquiry researcher has to realize that on a philosophical level, there is often a conflict between the quantitative and qualitative paradigms, as they have different underlying assumptions about the nature of knowledge and the role of the researcher (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, 2005). However, proponents of each paradigm need to recognize the existence of the other and the hybrid paradigms that are inevitably born of conflict. The role of theory in qualitative research is also complex, as there is no consensus regarding its role (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Many positivists believe that research is objective and think that theory should be an overlay of the study, while others argue that theory is essential to the research process.

The Philosophical Underpinnings of Narrative Inquiry

Guided by the interpretive paradigm and qualitative method, and considering the length and the investigative scope of the research topic, I realized that a narrative inquiry approach was the most pragmatic choice in terms of validating the research outcomes and meeting the timeframe. This study explored the self-images of women professionals and their appreciation through their stories as narrated. It also explored, given their set of difficult circumstances, how they overcame obstacles in their pursuit of learning for professional growth.

For this research, Denzin and Lincoln's (2004) tenet of people's bringing meanings with them was deeply correlated with Mitchell and Egudo's (2003) analysis that a narrative description is an augmentation of the interpretive methodologies in sociology and is essentially multi-disciplinary (p.2). Narrative description of every individual person in society can create a gateway to the community they belong to including the semiotics of culture and language. Narrative means of researching is meaningful because it provides considerable focus on interviewees' thought-process and their attachment to the stories they tell (Mitchell and Egudo, 2003, p.2). Human experiences are random and linked with a number of existing factors such as tradition, culture, socioeconomic standing and status which would make huge sense if they can be imposed on narrative constructs (Bell, 2002, p. 207). It is noted by Bell (2002) that researchers become selective about components of the experience of their participants and subsequently configure those in ways that reflect the stories available to them (p.207). Therefore, placing the varied content and the selected elements of the experiences in narrative structure allowed me to make meaning from past occurrences that complied with the research objectives as well as giving added perspectives to the already held notions.

Rice and Ezzy (1999) point out that interviewees while reconstructing their life experiences in their narratives mostly justify their decisions and actions on moral grounds (p.126). So, these narratives can sometimes be merely

supportive of “their interpretation of themselves”, shedding light on the “temporal notion of [their] experience”, meaning that their “understanding of people and events” might be, in reality, merely variable (Bell, 2002, p. 209). The usefulness of these processes implies that these stories can meaningfully uncover the realities that were previously suppressed (Chase, 2005), and to analyse such narratives, one has to carefully consider “the role of imagination” (Sarbin, 2004, p.2) vis-à-vis construction and interpretation of the narratives.

Narrative Inquiry as a View of Experience and as a Methodology

Narrative inquiry (NI) is a research methodology that involves the study of individuals' experiences and stories as told through their narratives (Clandinin, 2018), a way of understanding experience. The methodology involves the researcher being part of the stories being told, and as such, storied experiences are told (Clandinin, 2023). As a narrative inquiry (NI) researcher there are several lenses or approaches that researchers may use when conducting a narrative inquiry. Researchers using the structural analysis lens may look at how the formal elements of a narrative (such as plot, character, setting and theme) are arranged and how they contribute to the overall meaning of the story. Another approach is the feminist perspective which focuses on the gendered aspects of narratives, including how gender roles and expectations are represented and reinforced through storytelling. Ultimately, the choice of lens or approach will depend on the research question, the context, and the theoretical and methodological orientation of the researcher.

Based on my research purpose and objectives, I used the inquiry space of NI which is defined by three commonplaces, which are temporality, sociality, and place as my lens of analysis. These three commonplaces act as and specify dimensions of an inquiry space (McAlpine, 2016). According to one study, NI's three commonplaces of ‘temporality’, ‘sociality’ and ‘place’ formed the lens of analysis used to analyse individual narrative accounts co-composed with each participant (McAlpine, 2016). Using these three dimensions of the inquiry space, any particular inquiry is defined by this three-dimensional space. In addition to the three commonplaces of the inquiry space, NI involves a recursive, reflective and reflexive process conceptually (Caine et al., 2020; Caine et al., 2021). As proposed by Braun and Clarke (2020), thematic analysis was then used to identify overarching themes that resonate across narrative accounts.

The temporality dimension focuses on how time and history shape the experiences of individuals and groups within a particular context. In the case of women educators, I focused on exploring the historical and cultural factors that shaped the patriarchal structure of society and the experiences of women educators within it. As a researcher using this lens, I asked questions such as: How has the role of women in education changed over time? What historical events have shaped the current social structure? How have these events affected women educators?

The sociality dimension focuses on the social relationships and interactions that occur within a particular context. In the case of the challenges women educators face, this might involve exploring the social dynamics within society or profession, and how they affect women educators. Using this lens, I have asked questions such as: What are the social norms and expectations that govern the behaviour of educators? How do gendered power dynamics affect the experiences of women educators in their interactions with colleagues? What support systems are in place for women educators who face social or emotional challenges in the workplace?

The place dimension focuses on the physical and geographical context in which individuals and groups operate. In the case of the experiences of women educators, this might involve exploring the physical and geographical aspects of the education system and how they affect women educators. I, as a researcher, using this lens, asked questions such as: How do the physical characteristics of universities, such as their layout or design, affect the experiences of women educators? How do geographic factors, such as rural vs urban location, affect the experiences of women educators? What are the challenges faced by women educators who work in remote or isolated areas?

From the view of my experience, NI is an essential methodology for studying lived experiences, as it allows individuals' experiences to be examined and understood through the telling of their stories. The three commonplaces of temporality, sociality, and place to define the inquiry space, provided a robust framework for understanding individuals' experiences through their narratives.

The narrative process of inquiry of this study was mostly on ‘sociocultural’ and ‘naturalist’ methodological stances. The sociocultural stance forefronts “the broad cultural narratives that influence individual experience” (McAlpine, 2016, p.38). The sociocultural stance of inquiry was meaningful in the investigation of semiotics or particularly in relation to the research question such as ‘why and how’ patriarchal society works as a stumbling block in the way of a woman’s professional career enhancement. As a NI researcher, it was found that it was

necessary to take on a naturalist research strategy centred around interpreting the meaningful narratives of the people on concerns of special importance, which provide researchers the scope to look into the hidden impact of the narrators' experience and their significance to them in their life (McAlpine, 2016, p.38). This method facilitated analysis of significant issues of experiences from the participants' narratives and could provide in-depth answers that might have influenced them to take major progressive decisions in their life and given them the strength to get going, breaking the barriers of patriarchy and social taboos.

In order to fulfill the objectives of narrative inquiry research, it is necessary to study the narrators' experiences of present, past and future (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 339) in order to understand their experiences and how they made "sense of their experiences" (Riessman, 2008, p.11). As a researcher, it was understood that it was difficult to get trustworthy disclosure from such an inquiry but nevertheless, it was surely constructed on a foundation of viewing reality as a flow of experience of the present, past and future (Riessman, 2008, p. 6) in the long run.

As this research aspired to understand lived experiences by examining individuals' narratives from the past, present and future, the narrative inquiry of qualitative method allowed me to unfold the unheard stories of the journey of women educators in Bangladesh higher education through which it was able to discover the challenges they have faced in past, they are facing in present and the possible challenges they might face in future. Discovering and delving deeply into the challenges the women educators faced and how these women overcame the challenges in their professional lives allowed the researcher to explore a new possibility, a new hidden world that might work as a motivational force for giving voice to other women educators working in higher education sectors in South Asia, especially in Bangladesh. This narrative inquiry research is leaning toward critical ethnography aimed at promoting emancipation and reducing oppression.

Narrative Methodology: The Researcher's Reflexivity

In narrative inquiry, Etherington (2004, 2006) emphasized the importance of reflexivity in research. Specifically, she (2004) noted that researchers must reflect on their own biases and assumptions throughout the research process because reflexivity is not just about being self-aware, but also about using this self-awareness to inform research decisions and actions. Furthermore, as stated by her, reflexivity can be used to foster transparency and dialogue in ethical research relationships, particularly when researchers have prior relationships with participants (Etherington, 2004). While conducting the narrative interview and in the process of data analysis, Etherington, (2004, 2006) emphasizes the need for researchers to acknowledge and account for their subjectivity in order to produce meaningful and valid research by understanding the social and cultural contexts that shape both the researcher and the participants' narratives.

Etherington (2006) critically discusses the use of the researcher's personal experiences and subjective perceptions in narrative research. Following Etherington's (2004, 2006) notions on reflexivity, I developed a sense of awareness and examined my own biases and assumptions which was essential in conducting high-quality research that accurately represents the experiences and perspectives of the participants. Earlier, Etherington (2004) also discussed the use of the researcher's experiences themselves in research, stating that it must be essential to the argument and not just a decorative flourish. This approach can be considered reflexive if the researcher is actively reflecting on their own experiences and biases and using these reflections to inform the research process. In line with Etherington's (2004, 2006) work, I have emphasized the importance of self-reflection and awareness in research, particularly in terms of addressing biases and building ethical relationships with participants.

Population and Sample

In undertaking the narrative inquiry approach it is suggested that a small number of participants are preferable so that we can delve deeply into the stories and analysis in a detailed way (Aarikka-Stenroos, n.d.; Jovchelovitch & Bauer , 2000; Hunter, 2002; Butina 2015, Muylaert et al., 2014), and also to do purposeful sampling. Therefore, as a researcher, for the pilot study, two female teachers working at private higher education institutions in Bangladesh were purposely selected for individual narrative interviews. The number and characteristics (i.e., married female professionals and years of working experience) were chosen considering the manageability and scope of the research.

Data Collection Process of Narrative Interviews

The narrative interviews were conducted via Zoom and they were done in four phases.

Phase 1: Initiation

The first phase of Narrative Interview that was applied for the first interview, was the most crucial phase because as a researcher, I took enough time to go through the introductory phase. I introduced myself to develop a rapport

with my participants so that there could be trust between me and the narrator. This was important at the beginning phase of the Narrative Interview because developing unity and a certain kind of understanding was needed to let them open up to share their stories. In this sort of encounter, many participants may find narrative interviews difficult to reveal their stories, so I decided to follow Jovchelovitch and Bauer's (2000) suggestions to discuss the details of the Narrative Interview format first.

Phase 2: Main narration – beginning with an open-ended question

In this phase, I started with a single narrative-focused open-ended question that encouraged the participants to share their experiences without any hesitation. They were given the opportunity to be open and talk freely about whatever they wanted to. For example: Can you please tell me the challenges you have faced in your lives for professional development? I was silent and I refrained from interfering with their narratives by posing questions unless they required some kind of assistance in continuing to share their experiences. I also shared the prompts at the beginning of each interview. In addition to that, I also read them out and learned that the participants were triggered by the prompts which led them to share their stories in an effective way. I also revised my prompts and interview questions based on the suggestions I got from them so that the participants could clearly understand the prompts and share their stories.

Phase 3: Questioning phase – asking follow-up questions

Since a narrative interview may follow some chronologies of narration and relatable questioning (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000, n.p.), the participants were guided by some questions and probes which eventually led them to build the narratives in a rich way. When I found out that participants were having difficulties talking continuously, I started with some follow-up probes and questions that made them speak about their stories in small chunks. This was helpful for them because it was less monotonous. I was also careful when I was planning and drafting the probes and follow-up questions. My concern was if I were able to make the participants understand the probes and follow-up questions.

Phase 4: Concluding the interview

In this stage, I decided to ask any follow-up questions that might have developed from the other stages of interviews or that might have been missed out in the previous stages. As this is the concluding phase of the Narrative Interview protocol, I followed the suggestion by Jovchelovitch & Bauer (2000). They (2000) advised that the researcher should summarize the discussions developed from the narratives through "small talk" at the end of the interview (n.p.). This step is crucial because we could use this stage to bring out any important contextual information that might be needed for an in-depth analysis of the interview later. I had short chats and discussions with my participants to draw out any possible data that I thought would be important for the data analysis process. Moreover, I also discussed any probable and possible steps that might come later in the interview process as proposed by Anderson & Kirkpatrick (2015) to let the participants be aware of the upcoming steps of my study.

Samah (2018) suggests that one needs to consider reflexivity, which is about being self-aware and understanding how one's positionality, values, and biases may impact the research process. In this context, I considered my own positionality, including my gender and socio-economic class, and how this would influence how I engage with the participants. I wanted to make sure that participants felt comfortable sharing their stories by acknowledging my role in developing trust with them through actions like introducing myself and going over the interview manner. I also altered my interview prompts and questions in response to participant input, demonstrating my reflexivity in considering their comments and modifying the interview procedure accordingly. Reflexivity can also be incorporated by addressing the power relationship between the researcher and the participants because the researcher's position of power might affect the participant's willingness to reveal their tales and the narratives that come out of the interview process (Samah, 2018). I was aware of my situation and avoided incorporating my own interpretations into the participant's narratives. I was willing to consider the participants' criticisms and suggestions and included their viewpoints in the analysis process. In the final phase, I held brief conversations to elicit contextual data, exhibiting reflexivity in realizing its significance for analysis.

Analysis of Narrative Interviews

Narrative interviews can be unstructured (Given, 2008, 2012), or semi-structured (Anderson and Kirkpatrick, 2015) and there is no static pattern of questions, rather the emphasis is to concentrate on the emerging story that is being discovered (Kartch, 2018, p.3). To aid my understanding of the narratives given by the participants via interviews, I have considered the utilization of the framework entitled, 'the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space', as recommended by Clandinin and Connelly (2000). They have suggested that "any particular inquiry is defined by this three-dimensional space: studies have temporal dimensions and address temporal matters; they

focus on the personal and the social in a balance appropriate to the inquiry; and they occur in specific places or sequences of places” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p.54). The “simultaneous exploration” of this three-dimensional space [‘commonplaces’] (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006) guided me to understand my participants’ narratives intensely to answer my research questions (p.479). For instance, while planning to implement this framework, I decided to consider the inclusion of the temporal matters which is believed to enable educators to narrate their stories chronologically, as well as to include sociality which will reveal any possible interaction between participants and other people outside of the study when facing various patriarchal hurdles in a context specific to their socio-cultural norms as well as how they can be overcome. I have also decided to include spatiality to demonstrate how socio-cultural environmental factors can impact the participants’ pursuit for learning.

Following Wagner and Wodak (2006, p.392) I was convinced that narrative interviews should be able to reveal the subject’s “trajectory” through available “opportunities, choices, and individual coping strategies” in the pursuit of personal development. This approach was chosen because the research issue was developed from the personal lived experience which stimulated the researcher to explore how women’s self-built strength pushes them to cross the boundaries to succeed in their personal and professional life. Therefore, I wanted to look at other women’s life stories from the same context to develop the patterns and characters to develop themes to analyse my data. This resonates with Wagner and Wodak’s (2006) study of the stories of eight highly professional women. Their life stories “represent different life story patterns... in different stages of their lives and different discursive strategies of self-representation” in order to comprehend the lifestyle, women-led, appreciate and accomplish their goals (Wagner and Wodak, 2006, p.386).

As my own personal lived experience inspired me, I was conscious of my own prejudices and presumptions throughout this process, which could have affected the gathering and interpretation of the data. By acknowledging the limitations of my own perspective, I aimed to ensure that the research findings were based on the participants’ experiences rather than my own preconceptions. This reflexive approach allowed me to appreciate and understand women’s lifestyles, goals, and accomplishments on their own terms. Additionally, I recognized that each participant had unique life story patterns and different discursive strategies for self-representation, which I sought to capture in the data analysis process. Through this reflexive approach, I hope to provide a nuanced understanding of how women overcome obstacles and succeed in their personal and professional lives through their self-built strength.

The objectives of the first set of interviews were to get the participants’ tales told from their perspective, as experienced and owned by themselves. To elicit the story, the participants were through open-ended phrasing that invited the narrative (Kartch, 2018, p.3). According to Fehér (2011), the research employed interview questions in the form of “narrative follow-up” such as in the form of how, what and why, to prioritize participants’ views on social and cultural issues, aiming to understand their perceptions about managing patriarchal barriers in pursuing professional development. Thus, the narrative interview at this stage involved an almost comprehensive investigation to explore the complex pursuit of women’s professional development, rather than solely overcoming barriers. In order to delve into the complex pursuit of women’s professional development, a broader perspective was necessary as it provided a detailed understanding of the struggles and challenges presented in each individual’s story.

Participants’ narratives had a structure like a beginning, a middle, and an ending and they described an event from start to end with the objective of clarifying the meaning and significance of the actions (Aarikka-Stenroos, 2010, p. 5). Following that, I noted down the relevant topics and then I asked the participants to respond to the questions but the questions and their sequencing were not the same for each of the participants as the process of interviews depended on the responses obtained from them.

After three months, follow-up interviews were conducted for the narrative study which allowed the researcher to “delve deeply into social and personal matters” (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006, p. 315) by focusing on certain facts and events of the participants’ narratives (e.g. to trace the effects of patriarchy and the participants’ struggle to survive it). Questions were asked referring to the already narrated points in order to unfold any gap area that might have been overlooked or omitted by the interviewee.

According to Fehér (2011), follow-up interviews could be optional where non-narrative material is needed for the research, such as the childhood which the participants did not tell and is important (p.57). In the follow-up narrative interviews undertaken in semi-structured mode, questions were formed to gather the same intended data from the perspective of different interviewees, inviting them to discuss relevant information without being too dependent on the interviewees’ lexical proficiency (Scheibelhofer, 2008, p. 406).

The central objective of a narrative interview is to nudge a person to reveal an episode of their lives to illustrate “why and how certain events” in their stories were significant with the role of others in those events that were relevant (Wagner and Wodak, 2006: 392). Following Wagner and Wodak (2006), relevant sections were considered and brought out of their lived experiences in the narrative interview structures (p. 392). The intention was to discover their core beliefs and value systems, and the social context these values and beliefs stemmed from. I was convinced that unheard and unfamiliar stories needed a new outlook and an interpretation, because these stories may bear some in-depth meaningful impacts within them that needed to be read and interpreted contextually, and in relation to space and time that might have been taken for granted or overlooked because of our core beliefs and existing value systems. To mitigate the chances of interviewees trailing away from the main topic they wish to converse about (Kartch, 2018, p.3), in the follow-up narrative interviews, a list of common questions was adapted as the situation demanded.

Open-ended questions were asked followed by some targeted subsidiary questions that came up during the follow-up questioning sessions based on the research objectives. In a narrative follow-up interview, targeted probes may be pre-planned. Thus, as a novice researcher, I progressed with pre-planned follow-up interviews. The questions and techniques were honed over the period of research e.g. trailing the method. This was practiced by making dummy interviews using broad topic guides and with a few open-ended questions, followed by some probes prior to data collection.

Table 1 provides a clear and concise overview of the narrative interview method that I used, outlining each step in the process and its associated description. This can be a useful tool for novice researchers to ensure that they are following the necessary steps and procedures in their study.

Table 1: Overview of the Narrative Interview Method

Steps	Description
1: Select participants	Identify and select participants based on criteria such as their experiences, perspectives, or expertise related to the research topic.
2: Schedule interviews	Schedule a time and location for the interviews, and provide participants with information about the study and their rights as participants.
3: Conduct interviews	Conduct one-on-one interviews with participants, using open-ended questions to encourage them to share their experiences and perspectives.
4: Transcribe data	Transcribe the audio or video recordings of the interviews, using software or manual transcription methods.
5: Analyse data	Analyse the transcribed data, using techniques such as coding, categorizing, or theming to identify patterns or themes in the participants' responses.
6: Report findings	Report the findings of the study, using quotes or excerpts from the interviews to illustrate key themes or patterns.

As a researcher, I was aware of how important it was to incorporate reflexivity into both the planning and carrying out of my narrative study. The technique of data collection method made it possible to take a more individualized and adaptable approach, one that could take into account the diverse experiences and points of view held by each participant. I also took into consideration the findings of other researchers, such as Fehér (2011), who proposed that follow-up interviews might not be necessary for non-narrative material such as childhood experiences. As I moved forward with the research, I applied the techniques that Wagner and Wodak (2006) established to uncover the fundamental ideas and value systems held by the participants, as well as the social environment from which those views and value systems originated. I was of the opinion that the life experiences of each individual contain special lessons and significant lessons that may be missed due to pre-existing belief systems and value systems, so I developed a list of common questions to use as a guide which allowed me to avoid interviewees from deviating too far from the primary subject matter.

As a result of practicing my skills and learning from my mistakes in this trial study, I am now confident in my ability to conduct narrative interviews. In general, reflexivity played a crucial role in every phase of the study, ensuring that the participants' voices were heard and their stories were analysed contextually.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

From my first-hand experience as a narrative inquirer, it is evident that the stories of the participants are the perspectives and voices that are endorsed by the subjective notions of the researcher. The data derived from stories are always influenced by the place, time and location. However, Though the narrators' experiences are interpreted by the researcher, the researcher tries to be bias-free. This paper is expected to provide insights to beginner scholars who are interested in narrative research to make sense of meaning derived from the context of 'lived experience' under the umbrella of interpretivist paradigm. Moreover, a novice researcher may find it relevant when he/she intends to situate himself/herself into the narrative inquiry approach. To develop a methodological theoretical quandary for narrative research, a researcher should remember that there is no single method to justify the route of addressing a research problem that is developed from the lived experiences of participants' real world. The idea here is how we see it, how we do it, and how we develop the logical connection from a philosophical position.

As a novice narrative inquirer, my experience during my research journey, particularly when conducting narrative interviews and critical reflection on the narratives, did entail examining my personal assumptions and biases. My critical reflection on the journey of being a novice narrative inquirer provided me valuable insights for future research endeavours, such as how I would approach my participants and build trust while reflecting on the experiences and emotions without being biased. I struggled with identifying and selecting appropriate participants who could provide rich and detailed narratives. I also found that the interpretation of the narratives was complex and multifaceted, requiring careful attention and reflection. In addition, I recognised that my own biases, assumptions, and positionality could influence how I interpreted and analysed the participants' narratives. I had to be mindful of how my personal background, experiences, and beliefs could impact the research process and findings. I also realised that my positionality within the research context could lead to power imbalances or misunderstandings between myself and the participants.

To address these challenges and biases, I adopted a reflexive approach that involved reflecting on my own assumptions and biases and actively engaging in an ongoing dialogue with the participants. This helped to ensure that I was interpreting the narratives in a nuanced and insightful manner, while also acknowledging the influence of my own positionality on the research process. My transformation from being a novice narrative researcher required me to be open, work within, and engage with the narrative space- the physical space in which a story takes place to create a sense of place and context for the events of the story to unfold. With that in mind, I believe, novice researchers can learn from the experiences of others and reflect on their own assumptions and biases to conduct effective narrative research and make valuable contributions to their respective fields. Navigating the narrative space was a learning curve, but by reflecting on the challenges and biases encountered, I was able to improve the rigour and transparency of my research and contribute to the ongoing methodological discussions within the field of narrative inquiry. I believe my personal reflection provides insights into my experience in navigating the narrative space while aiming to provide insight for other novices to navigate their research journey successfully.

DECLARATION STATEMENT

We declare that this article is an original work, which has not been previously published, nor is it currently under consideration for publication in any other journal. All sources cited in this article have been appropriately acknowledged and referenced. Any materials used in this work that require permission for use have been obtained, and all ethical considerations have been taken into account. We confirm that all listed authors have contributed significantly to the development of this article, and all authors have reviewed and approved the final manuscript. By submitting this article for publication, we accept full responsibility for its content and any potential consequences arising from its publication.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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