

Book reviews

Elliott, J. 2005: *Using narrative in social research: qualitative & quantitative approaches*. London: Sage Publications. 232 pp. £19.99 paper, £60 cloth.

Using narrative in social research is a welcome addition to the research methodology literature and fills a notable gap for researchers and postgraduate students. Whilst the idea of ‘narrative’ (in the sense of ‘stories’ that talk about a sequence of events in a meaningful way) has a long history in the social sciences in relation to qualitative research, as well as more specifically in respect of research conducted within the ethnographic tradition, there are few texts which take ‘narrative’ as their primary focus. Given the increased attention that life course approaches have received in the last decade, it is therefore timely for a book to emerge that places the concept of ‘narrative’ centre stage. Elliott’s book considers in detail how to conduct ‘good narrative research’ by exploring the research process from conceptual underpinnings, through to data collection, data analysis, and theorizing, within the context of both qualitative *and* quantitative research paradigms. The book also gives consideration to the issues of ethics, politics, and researcher reflexivity within narrative research. It thus covers considerable ground and synthesizes a diversity of complex material in one fairly concise textbook, which is written in an informative and scholarly style. It sets out to be ambitious and succeeds in this endeavour.

There are a number of particularly noteworthy aspects to this text. Firstly, this book makes a genuinely original contribution to the literature by bringing together qualitative *and* quantitative approaches to narrative. Chapters 2 and 3 consider the possibilities for narrative approaches in respect of qualitative research. Whilst this territory will be familiar to many researchers, together the chapters provide valuable information from the fields of socio-linguistics and literary studies on specific

tools and devices that can be used to help frame a narrative approach to the collection and analysis of data. This is valuable since it provides practical help to researchers who are less familiar with the field, as well as offering a critical appraisal of the tools and devices discussed. Chapters 4 and 5 on quantitative data collection and analysis reveal the possibilities for narrative approaches in cross-sectional and longitudinal survey study designs. It is these two chapters, together with elements of Chapter 6 which considers narrative and causality, that cover new ground in narrative approaches and will be less familiar to many researchers. Chapter 5 introduces, discusses and appraises a number of innovative techniques for the analysis of quantitative data, such as optimal matching analysis and event history modelling. Elliott is able to draw on her vast experience of quantitative survey research to explain coherently and with clarity some quite complex ideas. Given the nature of this chapter, it does not always make for easy reading for those with a less quantitative background. This is perhaps also true of Chapter 6 which focuses on processes for establishing causality. However, the difficulties here are perhaps conceptual rather than statistical, but the arguments developed are important in revealing both the possibilities for, and the limitations of, bringing narrative and causal explanations together in quantitative research in some innovative ways.

In Chapter 10 Elliott advances the debate about combining qualitative and quantitative methods in the study of narrative and gives some examples of how and when this can effectively be carried out, for example, in relation to causality. This chapter, and the book more generally, is a welcome tonic to the somewhat stagnant debate about the established divide between qualitative and quantitative methods and suggests that if researchers’ primary interest is narrative, then both quantitative and qualitative approaches have the potential to be revelatory.

The chapters on ethics, politics, reflexivity, and narrative and identity, perhaps worked less well given the particular focus of the book and covered more traditional ground albeit within the context of narrative research. Nonetheless, the chapter on ethics and politics is to be welcomed within the contemporary context of a necessary heightened awareness of research ethics and the obligations on researchers to ensure that their research is ethically sound.

The format of the book seems to have been designed with students in mind, particularly post-graduate students. The summaries at the end of each chapter are useful in pointing up the key learning points and help the reader to orientate to key issues. The further reading and reading for discussion sections, the latter with specified questions, and the practical exercises, are valuable teaching resources. These resources will help

lecturers introduce their students to recent primary research within the narrative field, as well as to primary data which can be used to explore approaches to analysis.

Overall, this is an excellent book which brings new insights to the subject of narrative at a time when life course approaches are being seen as an important research tool in respect of exploring a whole range of health and social issues. It is not always easy reading, and at times seems quite dense. However, for those with an interest in this field, it will be a valuable handbook, which can support those committed to conducting good narrative research.

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