

Encyclopedia of Evaluation

Narrative Analysis

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Policies and programs can be understood as *practices* constituted by narratives. Narratives serve psychological, cultural, social, and political functions. People tell stories to find out what happened and what this means for their role and (group or national) identity. Stories are directed to others and told to influence actions and social practices. Program participants will, for example, try to convince others of their point of view with the use of rhetorical devices, such as metaphors. This means that a practice is shaped by the communication between storytellers and their narratives. In this process, certain stories and voices will be taken seriously and lead to changes, and others will gain no hearing. As such, narrating is a political act.

Stories told and enacted in practice can be analyzed with the help of narrative analysis. Commonly, qualitative researchers and evaluators analyze narratives using a grounded theory approach or comparable type of analysis. These types of analysis have various shortcomings.

In the search for general and abstract theoretical concepts, the uniqueness and the ambiguity of personal experiences is ignored. With the focus on the content of narratives, no attention is paid to the meanings embedded in the form (language and structure). Furthermore, this type of analysis often lacks an interest in the larger interactive and discursive context. Narrative analyses serve as an alternative. In the context of evaluation, we identify the following types of narrative analysis:

An important and distinct characteristic in the emerging heuristic for narrative evaluation is communication and dialogue. Evaluators not only want to gain insight into the different stories of stakeholders (the story as a *source of information*), they also share an interest in the *social construction* of meaning through stories. They ask, “Why did this person tell that story at that particular moment, and what were the consequences?” This question will shed light on the misunderstandings, conflicts, and dynamics that flow from the differences and vertical asymmetry between personal stories and collective narratives or between personal and collective narratives. This social construction process can be analyzed from a more distanced position. Evaluators may also act as facilitators of storytelling processes and workshops to enhance mutual understandings between participants.

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Futher Reading

Abma, T. A. (Ed.). (1999) *Telling tales: On evaluation and narrative* . Stamford, CT: JAI.

Abma, T. A. Reflexive dialogues: A story about the development of inquiry prevention in two performing art schools *Evaluation* vol. 7 no. (2) pp. 238–252 (2001)