



## **Narratives: Discovering the Social Dimensions of Disease**

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### **Authors' contributions**

*This work was carried out in collaboration between all authors. Authors BRAL, MLRN and LNF designed the study. Authors GPB and LPB managed the literature searches. Authors RFA, MRMA, ESC searched literature and reviewed the paper. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.*

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**Commentary**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Narrative research includes a variety of approaches that rely on the written or spoken word, or on the visual expressions of individuals. These approaches typically focus on individuals' lives from the lens of their own stories. The emphasis in such approaches is on the story, typically on the *what* and *how* of the narration. Indeed, narratives have become a catchword in the social sciences today; it promises to open up new fields of inquiry and in devising creative solutions to persistent problems.

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Since narratives are socially constructed and are influenced by culture, understandings of health are dynamic and specific to each culture as well. The individual as a social product absorbs the conditioning of their culture, thereby constructing their own perspectives on wellbeing [1]. Since these perspectives are an extension of social reality, the language we use in identifying them is based on individuals' positionalities, which create and help maintain social frameworks [2].

This language thus arises as a community's narrative; it molds individuals whose identities are constructed by it. In this way, people use tools such as language to construct their life stories that are linked to the concept of wellbeing [3]. Encountering disease is a deviation and an obstacle to an individual's self-understanding, which one is then compelled to readjust to [1]. This study aims to stimulate discussions about the importance of research narratives in approaches to patients' issues, reporting the most current and relevant accounts of the methods used in engaging with narratives and their influence on the diagnosis and treatment of diseases.

The employment of the narrative method by health practitioners can be an introductory tool in medical care and can help one address mental health issues by merely speaking and listening to patients, which can be therapeutic for them [4].

Through the narrative method, it is possible to understand individuals' assimilations of their subjectivities and the intricacies of health and cultural influences that construct the meanings things hold for them and the values they observe. This can also be crucial for relatives of mental health patients undergoing treatment in dealing with their loved ones "being ill," because the pain caused by one's ill-health depends on patients' reactions, the symptoms they display, and their inability to handle situations well [1-3].

This study observes treated patients' perceptions about the stages of their being sick, how each stage interferes in their fulfillment of social roles, and how such interferences affect their psychological health [5].

The perspectives that narrative research offers in mental health treatment not only aid in diagnosis, they also explore the lives of patients undergoing treatment in a much more effective manner.

As for the methods of qualitative analyses, the narrative approach in mental health is useful for health professionals to gain a better understanding of patients' personal accounts from a much more subjective perspective [6]. This is a qualitative research method wherein perceptions and experiences of those being researched must be investigated in detail by the researcher and where the technicalities of narratives must conform to appropriate criteria in terms of practice methods. It is also dependent on the confirmation of facts upon which different arguments can rest and must be backed by evidence, thereby capturing the treated patient's experiences accurately [7,8]. Qualitative analysis collects, analyzes, and provides interpretations of people's experiences. The research narrative method systematically searches for themes or other data as defined by the researcher in the research methodology; this sets it apart from a journalistic or creative writing endeavor. Qualitative analysis explores people's experiences beyond the boundaries of a questionnaire, providing insight into approaches to treatment, screening, and various health-related practices, which can provide guidance on how health services should be developed and provided [7,9].

As a tool, the narrative method explores the social nature of illnesses and seeks to understand the difficulties that patients and their family members undergo in dealing with their illness, diagnosis, and treatment/s. The extent of these difficulties differs according to a community's narratives about the illness. Taking this into consideration, public health policies should emphasize the role of narratives in making clinical and social care more effective and by doing away with the difficulties related to illnesses, such as the stereotypes, prejudices, and stigmas attached to many of them. Some narratives construct diseases as being symbols of pain, and decision-makers must ensure that mental health policies give importance to patients' perspectives, in order to make them more comfortable [10].

Therefore, subjectivities and individual experiences can be gathered through narratives; this could be challenging for health professionals' decision-making process because it also operates within a collective social space [9]. However, this can be addressed if researchers define and lay down guidelines for narrative methodology in applying and understanding gathered data in a contextualized

**Table 1. Crucial points for slimmer a narrative research**

<p><b>Scenarios in which the narrative approach is used</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• As an intervention method to treat patients with serious mental disorders [3];</li> <li>• As therapy for patients and their families in their dealing with the disease [7];</li> <li>• As a method of diagnosis of mental disorders [4].</li> </ul>
<p><b>Narrative approach used by health professionals (specialists in mental health)</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A qualitative approach for determining a specific aspect of a specific community [11];</li> <li>• A qualitative approach in the context of an individual [12].</li> </ul>
<p><b>How the study can be replicated to confirm its validity</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “The general notion of validity concerns the believability of a statement or knowledge claim. Validity is not inherent in a claim but is a characteristic given to a claim by the ones to whom the claim is addressed [8].”</li> </ul>

manner. Essentially, it must define parameters that allow for the replication of qualitative investigations, thus legitimizing it as a valid method of scientific analysis [7]. These parameters could be defined by applying the three crucial points mentioned below to narrative research methodology. (Table 1 above).

With this approach, the ability to replicate the technique in different situations to produce reliable results ensures that this is an organized method wherein narrative analyses forms a strong foundation upon which arguments can be made [7].

**CONCLUSION**

Therefore, narratives as a tool allows us to understand the social aspects of sickness better; it helps patients and their families deal with the difficulties of sickness, diagnoses, and treatments. It also calls for governments to lead the way in doing away with misconceptions, by making mental health policies more embracing of patients’ social realities and more in line with their lived experiences.

**CONSENT**

It is not applicable.

**ETHICAL APPROVAL**

It is not applicable.

**COMPETING INTERESTS**

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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