

## **Problematizing Claims of Transformation in Narrative Research Through the Philosophy of Jacques Rancière**

Charlie Davis, Imene Kassous

University of Nottingham, Nottingham, United Kingdom

### **Research Domains**

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

### **Abstract**

Narrative research is frequently used in contexts focused on providing social groups characterised as marginalised with opportunities to voice their lived experiences. In some settings, narrative researchers position their work as emancipatory, transformative and community forming. However, we suggest that explicitly, or implicitly framing narrative research in such ways can be methodologically and ethically disingenuous. Reflecting on our own work as narrative researchers in areas of inclusive education, we question if all narrative research can be, or needs to be, framed as emancipatory, transformative or community forming. Using Jacques Rancière's concept of 'equality of intelligence', we invite participants to problematise the extent to which social groups can ever be truly emancipated if the emancipator frames what liberatory transformation looks like. Through this presentation, we seek to foster critical discussions which develop understandings of what ethical equality of intelligence might look like in narrative research contexts.

### **Full paper**

Narrative research is often framed as an emancipatory approach aimed at transforming the lives of participants identified as marginalised in some way (see Salter, 2021). The grounding of inquiry in participants' lived experience testimonies is seen as providing work with transformational potential (Anderson, 2019). The methodological logic follows that by dint of centralising participants' lives as sites of critique and analysis, it positions them as co-constructors of knowledge as opposed to having researchers speak for them (Ntinda, 2019). Therefore, this creates the

potential for more emancipatory and transformative experiences owing to an illusion to equity of experience between researcher and participant(s). However, it is not always clear how exactly such experiences are liberatory for participants, nor how their lives are transformed. Using a duoethnographic approach (Sawyer and Norris, 2015), we reflect on our recent work as narrative researchers in educational fields of inclusion to consider the extent to which narrative research can be positioned as emancipatory and transformative. In doing so, we invite audience members to engage with us to problematise the transformative possibilities of narrative research. We suggest that the transformative effects of narrative research may often be overstated. This in part is owing to research aims being aligned with idealised notions of emancipation to meet performative imaginings of inclusion and social justice. The conceptualisation of emancipation can become enacted primarily through the researchers' lenses and perspectives. In such contexts, we therefore, posit, that the extent to which work can address social injustices affecting participants' lives can be, at best, naively hopeful, and at worst, fantasy. This asks us to consider whether those positioned as requiring emancipation can ever truly be emancipated when the emancipated person must "remain eternally grateful to his or her emancipator for the "gift" of emancipation?" (Biesta, 2008, p172). In a narrative research context, where the inquiry focus and methodology is shaped by the researcher, the possibility of fostering such situations of dependency exists. In the case of Author A (2020; 2024), even though participants in their work reflected on ways it transformed their perspective of aspects of their lives, the extent to which is changed the social injustices they discussed experiencing at structural levels remains at best unknown and at worst negligible. For Author B, although they acknowledged their power when doing research with mothers, they reflect that their participants always mentioned their knowledge being limited in comparison to the Author's. It raises questions about who the knowledge holder is and who creates these dichotomies of knowing and not knowing. Reflecting on these examples, and others like them, we argue that narrative researchers should consider more critically with participants if they need to focus on making claims about the emancipatory and transformative possibilities of their work. To do this, we suggest working with Jacques Rancière's concept, "equality of intelligence" (1991). This conceptual framing positions the researcher as seeking to foster narrative inquiries which seek to learn from having shared conversations with participants, as opposed to changing their ways of thinking, whether intentional or not. In pursuing 'equality of intelligence', researchers should not position themselves in the place of the superior knower while the participants are assigned an inferior status (Ranciere, 1991, p39). Rather, 'equality of intelligence' between both parties should be promoted and acknowledged. Indeed, "[e]mancipation is about using one's intelligence under the assumption of the equality of intelligence" (Bingham and Biesta, 2010, p.43). By embracing Rancière's principle, everyone is seen as having intellectual capacities to shape the production of knowledge in a more equitable way. By framing our problematisation of the emancipatory potential of narrative

research as a pursuit of equality of intelligence, we invite audience participants to develop a collective understanding of how the relationships between researchers and participants affects the extent to which work can be framed as emancipatory and transformative. We seek to do this by asking: what is transformation in narrative research?; who, and/or what is transformed?; who decides what worthwhile transformation looks like, if it needs to be considered at all? and does narrative research have to be framed as transformative to have value? Through these discussions we aim to imagine forms of collective reflexivity that safeguard against the possibility of participant(s) being reliant on the researcher for deciding they need emancipating and what the conditions of their transformative emancipation will be. It is hoped that in doing so we can identify ways to reduce the potential for researchers to become reflexively stuck in a "morass of [their] own positioning" (Patai, 1994, p64).