

Book Review

Ahmed, Sairah, Feitosa de Almeida, Guilherme, Hargura, Halkano & Lee, Shelley

Received: 23 Apr 2025 / Revised: 27 May 2025 / Accepted: 30 Jun 2025

© 2025 Asian Qualitative Inquiry Association

Understanding Narrative Inquiry: The Crafting and Analysis of Stories as Research

Jeong-Hee Kim

Sage, 2016, ISBN 978-1452282787

Abstract

Understanding Narrative Inquiry by Jeong-Hee Kim presents a comprehensive text exploring narrative inquiry “embracing both the depth and breadth” of this form of research methodology (Kim, 2016, p. xvi). Kim thoughtfully addresses each stage of the research process, offering a range of strategies to validate findings and ensure analytical trustworthiness. *Understanding Narrative Inquiry* highlights narrative inquiry’s interdisciplinary context, philosophical and theoretical structure, research design, genre, data collection methods, analysis and interpretation, and coding techniques. Literary prose is used in each section of the text, drawing on the author’s own experiences to convey key tenets of narrative inquiry. Taking the reader into the world of narrative inquiry by appealing to the senses gives each section of the book some added texture. This unique style allows the reader to experience narrative inquiry as an insider to the machinations of this method and to envision themselves as qualitative researchers who are living and experiencing narrative inquiry.

Keywords

narrative inquiry, qualitative methods, literary theory, cross-cultural studies

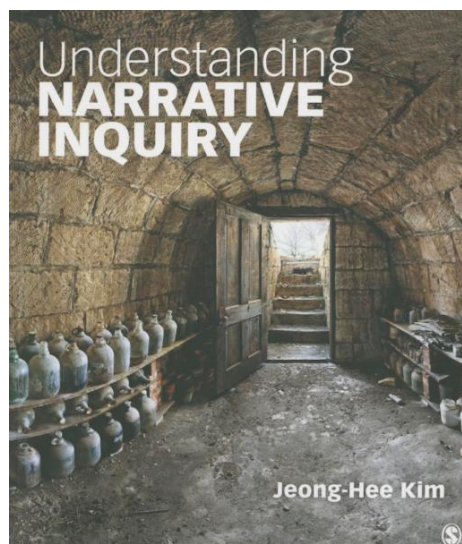


Figure 1. *Understanding narrative inquiry: The crafting and analysis of stories as research*

I was immediately drawn to narrative inquiry by its approachability, artistic quality, and non-pedantic nature that values stories of laypeople.

Jeong-Hee Kim

Understanding Narrative Inquiry by Jeong-Hee Kim presents a comprehensive text exploring narrative inquiry “embracing both the depth and breadth” of this form of research methodology (Kim, 2016, p. xvi). Kim thoughtfully addresses each stage of the research process, offering a range of strategies to validate findings and ensure analytical trustworthiness. Each chapter begins with personal reflections and experiences that serve as illustrative examples of how narrative inquiry can be applied. The text highlights the interdisciplinary context, philosophical and theoretical structure, research design, genre, data collection methods, analysis and interpretation, and coding techniques of narrative inquiry. Literary prose is used in each section of the text, drawing on the author’s own experiences to convey key tenets of narrative inquiry. Taking the reader into the world of narrative inquiry by appealing to the senses gives each section of the book some added texture. This unique style allows the reader to experience narrative inquiry as an insider to the machinations of this method and to envision themselves as qualitative researchers who are living and experiencing narrative inquiry. Kim views narrative inquiry as a qualitative research methodology that seeks “to improve the human condition through narrative” (p. 11), focusing on its distinctive ability to uncover the nuances of the everyday life experiences of its participants. While many qualitative methodologies aim to investigate the lived experiences of participants, narrative inquiry is distinct in its commitment to preserving the integrity and structure of the stories of those participants. Rather than fragmenting data into themes or codes, narrative inquiry presents stories more holistically, allowing both researcher and reader to engage with the meaning embedded in the narrative, revealing a connection between the ethnographic and the literary. Where other approaches might synthesize or reduce stories into conceptual categories, narrative inquiry seeks to honor the story in its chronological, affective, and personal contexts.

In chapter one, Kim introduces the importance of qualitative research by emphasizing its use of words to interpret and analyze complex issues that give insight into human action. Qualitative research makes its mark in scholarly research due to its natural and interpretive approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), which Kim asserts as a progressive and transformative turn from positivistic scientific knowledge by offering a more profound insight into the reasons behind a phenomenon. Using the ideas of Van Manen (1990), Kim posits that human experience is best understood through story. Utilizing literary genres as stylistic devices, narrative inquiry gives a glimpse into the lives of others that are storied and re-storied through a dynamic relationship between researcher and participant. Kim addresses the unique perspective of human experience expression through narrative, highlighting the role of interdisciplinary lenses in the construction of story. Human and social science research is embodied by the experiences of others and therefore gives narrative inquiry a strong presence in psychology, law, medicine, and educational research. In summarizing its significance in educational research, Kim references Dewey’s (1859–1952) theory of experience, which sets the stage to encapsulate the core of both student and teacher experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). The chapter ends with criticisms of narrative inquiry in scientific research. Often referred to as a romanticized theory (Munro, 1998), critics assert that its research moves away from true inquiry and is focused on the researcher’s interests (Barone, 2007).

The second chapter dives into philosophical, theoretical, and interpretive paradigms undergirding narrative inquiry. Kim discusses utilizing three levels of theory in research, (Macro-level theory is holistic, Meso-level theory is methodology, and Micro-level theory is content), supporting the idea that theory aids us in comprehending, examining, and assessing narratives (Bal, 1997). Kim addresses specific theories that are represented through narratives, including critical theories such as critical race theory (CRT), feminist theory, and phenomenology. In reference to CRT, Kim examines the history and characteristics of CRT scholarship. This critical theory calls attention to the unique experiences of people of color, while also questioning the common assumption that the experiences of whites are the standard. CRT’s importance in narrative inquiry research is counter-storytelling (Bell, 1987); Kim notes such stories do not often give us solutions to problems, but help “us engage in problem-finding, which is what a great storyteller does” (p. 47).

The significance of poststructuralism, postmodernism, and deconstruction are also examined with reference to philosophers like Foucault, Deleuze, and Derrida and their influence on the field. Kim also refers to Dewey’s theory of experience and Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1895–1975) novelization as dominant theories used in narrative inquiry because they provide depth and understanding to human experiences. These theoretical frameworks challenge traditional notions of truth and identity by offering new ways to understand how stories are constructed and interpreted. Kim provides a thorough analysis of theories to inspire readers “to be more inquisitive and creative in ways that expand and deepen the rigor and vigor of their research” (p. 77).

The preceding chapters highlight the principles of narrative inquiry by speaking to the journey of the researcher, as their unfolding stories reflect and evoke human experience. Chapter three establishes the philosophical foundation, positioning narrative inquiry within a constructivist paradigm, where knowledge is co-constructed through storytelling and lived experiences. Drawing from Dewey’s (1938) theory of experience, Kim highlights how narratives unfold over time, reinforcing Bruner’s (1991) notion of narrative knowing and Ricoeur’s (1984) argument that identity is shaped by the stories we tell.

Kim differentiates narrative inquiry from other qualitative methods, emphasizing its relational and context-dependent nature. Unlike grounded theory, which seeks to develop theory inductively (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), or phenomenology, which focuses on lived experiences (Van Manen, 1990), narrative inquiry requires deep engagement with participants to co-construct meaning (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This differentiation of narrative inquiry aligns with communal storytelling in many cultures, where meaning is collectively negotiated and reshaped over time. Consider these two examples: the stories and exchanges performed overtime between Japanese Americans in the 1960s through Taiko drumming (Ahlgren, 2018), and

the ethnographic short stories of Mahasweta Devi (Devi, 1998). Communal stories are co-created; narrative inquiry provides a framework to examine these phenomena.

Ethical considerations play a crucial role, particularly in handling sensitive experiences (Riessman, 2008). Kim stresses the importance of representing participants' voices ethically, respecting their agency, and being mindful of emotional impact. Reflexivity is key, as researchers must critically examine their biases and positionality. This transition from practitioner to researcher in the world of academia highlights the necessity of this awareness, as interpretations are shaped by personal backgrounds.

Chapter four shifts to the practical aspects of narrative inquiry, including participant selection, research questions, and data collection. Kim underscores the flexibility of this approach, allowing for adaptation as stories evolve. She advocates for multimodal narratives which are comprised of interviews, journals, letters, photographs, and digital storytelling to enhance authenticity (Clandinin, 2013). This aligns with how many communities preserve knowledge through oral, written, and now digital means. Reflexivity remains central, with Kim arguing that researchers are active participants in meaning-making. Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasize the need for researchers to acknowledge biases and employ strategies like member checking, a process that allows participants to validate how their narratives are interpreted, enhancing the trustworthiness of the research. While narrative inquiry's open-ended nature may feel overwhelming compared to structured methodologies like thematic coding in phenomenology (Van Manen, 1990) or constant comparative analysis in grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006), Kim asserts that this flexibility is a strength, fostering deeper engagement with lived experiences.

Chapter five explores the narrative interview process, guiding readers through key aspects such as logistics, consent, confidentiality, sample size, saturation, trust, and rapport. Kim differentiates the type of interview most suitable for narrative inquiry, cautioning against rigidly structured questions and instead advocating for a semi-structured or unstructured approach (Corbin & Morse, 2003; Fontana & Frey, 1998). Since narrative inquiry focuses on personal stories, it is essential to give the interviewee the freedom and opportunity to elaborate on their thoughts. Kim also suggests that multiple interview sessions may be necessary to help participants feel more comfortable, thereby deepening the storytelling process.

Kim discusses various ways researchers can structure interviews with participants beginning with the idea of life stories (Rosenthal, 1993) or biographical interviews. Kim also discusses the concept of narrative interview phases, the first being narration and the second being conversation. Kim emphasizes how interview questions can be helpful but not so confining that we are unable to capture the depth of the story. Beyond interviews, the text explores other methods of data collection in narrative research. The value of field observation is highlighted while acknowledging that people may alter their behavior when they are aware of observation. Additionally, Kim discusses how artifacts and visual data such as photographs, journals, and personal memorabilia can serve as powerful storytelling tools, enriching the research process with tangible representations of lived experiences.

Chapter six has a very catchy title, "Flirting with Data." The concept of *flirting* with data draws from Phillips (1994), describing the initial, exploratory phase of engaging with research findings. While Kim clarifies that this flirtation differs from romantic flirting, the metaphor remains useful because it emphasizes individuals' exploration of different connections in relationships, assessing qualities they appreciate or dislike. Researchers engage with their data in a similar way, examining patterns, testing interpretations, and refining their focus. Often, what we expect to find in our research does not align with the reality that unfolds, and this process of flirting allows for open-ended exploration before committing to a final analysis. Chapter six then begins with a broad overview of data analysis before diving into concepts of interpretation. After exploring various ways data can be interpreted, the chapter returns to methods of narrative data analysis, examining multiple approaches. At its core, qualitative data analysis can be distilled into four fundamental categories: codes, categories, patterns, and themes. However, beyond categorization, interpretation plays a crucial role in deciphering meaning from stories. One concept discussed is narrative smoothing, a term introduced by Spence (1986) which refers to the process by which storytellers, whether researchers or participants, construct a coherent and linear account by selectively emphasizing certain events while omitting or downplaying others. This is not necessarily done with the intent to deceive but to make sense of complex, and often messy, human experiences. Kim addresses the question: How do we approach interpretation? The text explores ideas dating back to the 1970s, particularly the balance between faith and suspicion (Josselson, 2004). Faith assumes stories are entirely true, while suspicion does not imply dishonesty but rather seeks hidden narratives within the story. Chapter six is extensive, offering a wealth of knowledge and practical examples to support various approaches within narrative inquiry.

Chapter seven addresses the necessary step of connecting with readership. Kim encourages researchers considering narrative inquiry to write with a strong imagination for their audience. Drawing from the Barthesian (Barthes, 1975) concept of the pleasure of the text, Kim posits that during the narrative coda process, the researcher must earn the trust and respect of the reader. Linking Bakhtin (1981) and Rawls (1999) to narrative inquiry, readership, and social justice, it is Kim's connection to Barthes that reveals narrative inquiry as a text of open-ended, multivalent practical dimensions. The labor of narrative as a method of inquiry allows presentation and analysis of data through storytelling. This is a skill that allows for continuation, reflection, and connection between data sources and audiences. Kim encourages researchers to resist an epic or final story, through a coda, and invites readership to continue the analytical and reflexive work that narrative inquiry produces.

Chapter eight produces an overview of reflexivity, bricolage (and bricoleur), "small stories," and performance as necessary measures and methods for production of knowledge. While considering Foucauldian reflexive *asksis*, Kim encourages a

commitment to ethics when examining the researcher's biases, perspectives, and affordances (McGushin, 2007). Kim examines bricolage in connection with the structural anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966), a process of weaving images and symbols that produces interdisciplinary qualitative research responding to the deficit of a single perspective.

Chapter nine gives the reader a glimpse of narrative inquiry in practice with practical applications. Kim structured this portion of the book showcasing six published studies, each a different narrative genre to provide the reader with an "opportunity to practice, question, adapt and create" (p. xix) narrative inquiry that addresses their narrative research goals. The guiding questions at the end of each example help the reader analyze and evaluate studies through a narrative lens; building on concepts presented in earlier chapters. The chapter ends with an emphasis on the central role of human behavior which is described as "the most fundamental means by which we human beings understand who we are" (p. 297).

The final chapter, an epilogue, encourages readers to embrace their research journeys which Kim acknowledges can be rocky at times. Narrative inquiry gives researchers the ability to explore unfamiliar concepts in academic research challenging traditional academic norms.

Storytelling is deeply rooted in many cultures, such as many Asian communities. This research methodology is pertinent to understand the traditions, languages, social norms, and cultural expectations that influence Asian identities. This is accomplished through narrative inquiry's ability to explore complexities of identity, cultural experiences, and social interactions that often promote social justice, as well as advance the knowledge of human experience. As a research methodology, narrative inquiry allows individuals to share everyday experiences related to topics that may be overlooked in traditional scientific research methodologies. Narrative inquiry is a unique research methodology because it reveals lived experiences through multiple perspectives through collaboration and reflexivity between the participants and researcher. Narrative research often challenges dominant narratives and informs policy and practice.

Narrative inquiry is a bridge between academia and oral traditions, both emphasizing storytelling in constructing knowledge and preserving identity. Narrative inquiry provides a means to explore human experiences, honoring diverse voices and histories. Personal stories uncover the deep meaning behind emotions and feelings that are representative of participants' experiences. Narrative inquiry allows researchers to become *bricoleurs* who represent multiple truths while also honoring different voices. Kim makes a call for devising theory through narrative inquiry as a process of synthesis of literary and critical analysis, ethnographic presence, and dialogue with readers. This idiosyncratic nature of narrative inquiry allows researchers to investigate and analyze the experiences of others by incorporating elements of reflexivity which capture not only the temporal, but also subjective essence of narrative. In *Understanding Narrative Inquiry*, Dr. Kim situates her experiences as a narrative inquirer to reveal how she "found herself falling in love with narrative inquiry" (p. 1) in the hope of convincing readers to continue her "love affair."

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on Contributors

Sairah Ahmed

I am a current doctoral student at Texas Tech University in the College of Education and am preparing for my dissertation research (a narrative inquiry) in Elementary literacy development, with an anticipated graduation date of June 2026. In 2023, I presented a quantitative study on state assessments and school performance ratings at the EGSO conference. In May 2025, I presented a narrative analysis of my journey in education at the 21st International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry. I graduated from Arizona State University with a bachelor's degree in Elementary Education and hold two Texas teaching certifications; EC-6 and ESL. In 2018, I completed my master's degree in Curriculum and Instruction from Texas A&M University. My professional background includes experience in curriculum design, K-12 teaching, as well as K-12 administration.

Email: saiahmed@ttu.edu, sairahahmed2680@gmail.com

Guilherme Feitosa de Almeida

I serve as Senior Lecturer in Musical Theatre at Baylor University in Waco, TX, USA and recently had the honor of receiving the 2025 Robert A. Schanke Research Award, from the Theatre History Symposium of the Mid-America Theatre Conference. While living between teaching, research, and learning, I am a doctoral candidate at Texas Tech (Lubbock, TX) pursuing a PhD in Fine Arts, Interdisciplinary Arts (Musicology and Theatre) with graduate certificates in Music Cognition and Cross-Cultural Studies. My dissertation deploys semiographical and semiological methodologies as framed by Roland Barthes to investigate the many resistances to the mythologies of coloniality present in Music and Theatre. I have written about the politics of sound and performance, post/decolonial theories, and symbolic interactionism. I have presented in conferences

and festivals globally (most recently Germany, India, and Switzerland) and have taught workshops on integrating the fine arts and social sciences (most recently USA, Republic of Georgia, and Brazil).

Email: guilhermefdalmeida@gmail.com

Halkano Hargura

I am a doctoral student in General Curriculum and Instruction at Texas Tech University. I hold a master's degree in leadership and management from Kenya and currently serve as the President of the Education Graduate Student Organization (EGSO) as well as a Graduate Senator at Texas Tech. As I prepare for my Qualifying Exam and dissertation proposal defense in Fall 2025, my research focuses on advancing educational equity through inclusive policies in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET). I aim to empower youth in marginalized communities by equipping them with skills relevant to the modern workforce. Narrative Inquiry serves as the foundation of my research methodology. My motivation for reviewing Kim's book on Understanding Narrative Inquiry stems from my deep interest in the power of personal and collective stories to drive meaningful educational change and inform inclusive policy development.

Email: hhargura@ttu.edu, mickycolly@gmail.com

Shelley Lee

I am currently a doctoral student at Texas Tech University pursuing a Ph.D. in Counselor Education. I am a Licensed Professional Counselor with 22 years of clinical experience. I am also an adjunct faculty member at Lubbock Christian University teaching in the department of behavioral and social sciences. I earned my master's degree in counseling from Oral Roberts University in 2001 and returned to academia in 2022 to begin my doctoral studies. This semester, I successfully completed and passed my qualifying exams and am hopeful to be admitted to doctoral candidacy. As part of my final semester of Ph.D. coursework, I enrolled in a Narrative Research course, where Understanding Narrative Research served as our primary textbook. I consider it a privilege to have the opportunity to write a review of this text.

Email: Shelleylpc@yahoo.com

Statement on AI Usage

Portions of the text were edited for clarity and grammar with the assistance of OpenAI's ChatGPT (May 13 version). The final content is the author's own.

ORCID

Sairah Ahmed: <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-1481-9294>

Guilherme Feitosa de Almeida <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8411-9858>

Halkano Hargura <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1744-4658>

Shelley Lee <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-0160-5018>

References

- Ahlgren, A. K. (2018). *Drumming Asian America: Taiko, Performance, and Cultural Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press. Retrieved from doi.org/10.1177/1077800406297667
- Bal, M. (1997). *Narratology: Introduction to the theory of narrative* (2nd ed). Toronto, Ontario, Canada: University of Toronto Press.
- Barone, T. (2007). A return to the gold standard? Questioning the future of narrative construction as educational research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 13(4), 454-470.
- Barthes, R. (1975). *The pleasure of the text* (R. Miller, Trans). New York, NY: Hill and Wang.
- Bakhtin, M. M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination: Four essays by M. M. Bakhtin*. Texas: University of Texas Press.
- Bell, D. (1987). *And we are not saved: The elusive quest for racial justice*. New York: Basic Books.
- Bruner, J. (1991). The narrative construction of reality. *Critical Inquiry*, 18(1), 1-21. Retrieved from doi.org/10.1086/448619
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis* London: Sage.
- Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. San Fransico: Jossey-Bass.
- Clandinin, D. J. (2013). *Engaging in narrative inquiry*. Routledge.

- Connelly, F.M., & Clandinin, D.J. (1990). Stories of experience and narrative inquiry. *Educational Researcher*, 19(4), 2014. Retrieved from doi.org/10.3102/0013189X01900500
- Corbin, J. & Morse, J. (2003). The unstructured interactive interview: Issues of reciprocity and risks when dealing with sensitive topics. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 9(3), 335-354. Retrieved from doi.org/10.1177/10778004030090030
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Denzin, N.K., & Lincoln, Y.S. (2011). Introduction: The discipline and practice of qualitative research. In N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (4th ed., pp. 1-20). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Devi, M. (1998). *Bitter soil*. (I. Chanda, Transl.). Calcutta, India: Seagull Books.
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. Macmillan.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Fontana, A., & Frey, J. (1998). Interviewing: The art of science. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.). *Collecting and interpreting qualitative materials* (pp. 47-78). Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Josselson, R. (2004). *The hermeneutics of faith and the hermeneutics of suspicion*. *Narrative Inquiry*, 14(1), 1-28. Retrieved from doi.org/10.1075/ni.14.1.01jos
- Levi-Strauss, C. (1966). *The savage mind*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Munro, P. (1998). *Subject to fiction: Women teachers' life history narratives and the cultural politics of resistance*. Philadelphia, PA: Open University Press.
- Phillips, A. (1994). *On flirtation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Rawls, J. (1999). *A theory of justice (Rev. Ed.)*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Ricoeur, P. (1984). *Time and narrative (Vol. 1)*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Riessman, C. K. (2008). *Narrative methods for the human sciences*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Rosenthal, G. (1993). *Reconstruction of life stories*. *The narrative Study of Lives*, 1(1), 59-91. Retrieved from https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ss0ar-59294
- Spence, D. P. (1986). Narrative smoothing and clinical wisdom. In T. R. Barbin (Ed.), *Narrative psychology: The storied nature of human conduct* (pp. 211-232). New York, NY: Praeger.
- Van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. Albany: State University of New York Press.