

Qualitative Research

<http://qrj.sagepub.com/>

Madness to the method? Using a narrative methodology to analyse large-scale complex social phenomena

Liz Stanley

Qualitative Research 2008 8: 435

DOI: 10.1177/1468794106093639

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://qrj.sagepub.com/content/8/3/435>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *Qualitative Research* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://qrj.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://qrj.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations: <http://qrj.sagepub.com/content/8/3/435.refs.html>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Jul 24, 2008

[What is This?](#)

Q

R

Madness to the method? Using a narrative methodology to analyse large-scale complex social phenomena

Qualitative Research
Copyright © 2008
SAGE Publications
(Los Angeles,
London, New Delhi
and Singapore)
vol. 8(3) 435–447

LIZ STANLEY
University of Edinburgh, UK

ABSTRACT Building on earlier research, two related narrative inquiry projects were conducted, concerned with Boer (later, Afrikaner) women's testimonies of their wartime and concentration camp experiences, and with commemoration of the people who died in these camps. Putting the design into practice, and the advantages and disadvantages of the approach, are both discussed. Overall, using a narrative inquiry approach for investigating large-scale complex social phenomena, in this case connected with the rise of proto-nationalism in South Africa and women's role in it, was methodologically and analytically problematic although interesting and instructive.

KEYWORDS: *commemoration, concentration camps, methodology, narrative, nationalism, testimony, South African War*

Introduction

For those favouring the narrative/biographical turn, a narrative inquiry approach is seen as a preferred way of exploring social phenomena, and there is often an unacknowledged associated assumption that narrative inquiry = small-scale qualitative research. Working long-term around ideas connected with theorizing the idea of auto/biography (Stanley, 1992, 2002), the particular research reported on here, from small-scale qualitative beginnings, became large scale and included quantitative and visual materials as well as archival, interview and other written texts. Trying to operationalize a narrative inquiry approach working at this level and with a large amount of data proved problematic, as later discussion shows.

In the late 1990s, building on some earlier research, I became interested in the part that Boer (later, Afrikaner) women played, from the South African War (1899–1902) up to the 1940s, in the development of proto-nationalism (Stanley, 2006). I was also interested in narrative inquiry as a means of engaging with

research data. These interests were brought together by designing two related narrative inquiry projects, one concerning Boer women's testimonies of their wartime and concentration camp experiences, the other concerning commemoration of the people who died in these camps.¹ While interesting and instructive on one level, the result of these projects can also be described as a failure to deliver. While various conference and seminar presentations were made, nothing was published *directly* from it until now (although there were indirect publications from it, outlined later). Putting these projects into practice brought to the surface issues concerning the utility of a narrative methodology for investigating complex large-scale social phenomena, rather than the more usual small number of interviews, a photograph and so on, and these are discussed in the conclusion.

Procedural basics: stories in a narrative frame

In response to the fundamental question of 'what is narrative?', first, this is sometimes so taken for granted that it is not explicitly spelled out or defined – well-known work by Tonkin (1992) and Chamberlain and Thompson (1998), for instance, define many terms but not narrative itself. Second, narrative is often defined in terms of what story is, with equally well-known work by Josselson and Lieblich (1993) and Miller (2000), for instance, doing this. And a third approach sees narrative in terms of inquiry or analysis, as what the researcher does, methodologically and analytically – thus Clandinin and Connelly (2000: 4) describe their approach as 'under the heading of *narrative inquiry* with a rough sense of narrative as both phenomena under study and method of study' and Riessman (1993: 1) proposes that 'Narrative analysis takes as its object of investigation the story itself...' Narrative inquiry provides a methodology, a set of broad procedural ideas and concepts, rather than a pre-set method or specified technique, and it encourages responsiveness to the dynamics of the research context. Consequently, in designing my narrative projects, I utilised my existing knowledge about proto-nationalism, memory and remembrance in South Africa 1899–1949, thinking through how narrative and story might be linked in this particular research context, doing so without collapsing narrative into story, and with Clandinin and Connelly's, and Riessman's particularly helpful comments in mind.

My working definition of narrative inquiry drew on the above, viewing it in terms of the analytical activities of the researcher in constructing a narrative frame by analysing stories that are linked together in life, involving the researcher's interpretational work in perceiving tacit connections across social phenomena. Narrative here is an analytical frame enabling small-scale stories to be located in relation to a wider (temporal, spatial) context of bigger stories, by perceiving connections, to one degree or another, between stories; and this is analytically most appropriate when such stories 'belong together' in the research context itself. The result is a meta-narrative, the interpretational overview produced by the researcher.

My working definition of a story saw this as an account of things that have happened (usually, to some people), which has a beginning, middle and end, although not necessarily in this order; which involves some form of emplotment so that the story develops or at least has an end; it is produced for an audience, whether implicitly or explicitly; and it is a motivated or moral account because it represents a particular point of view or encourages a measure of understanding or empathy from the audience; and it works by being metaphorically and/or analogically connected (tacitly or explicitly) with the lives of its audience. However, at the initial stage, I ignored the fact that narrative framing is frequently part of story-telling, that the researcher is not the only analytical and interpretational presence making sense across stories perceived as linked, a point I shall return to.

I then started to think about how to extend my then current research on the extensive records of the British-imposed concentration system of the South African War in ways which could be usefully explored using narrative means.² These records were produced largely *ad hoc* and *in situ*, by clerks employed in the approximately 41 white camps and approximately 20 black camps,³ who recorded incomings and outgoings of people, issued rationing cards, produced records of illness and death, dispatched these returns to administrative headquarters, and so on. Alongside official records,⁴ what in South Africa are popularly seen as *the facts* about the war and the camps have been massively influenced by published Boer women's testimonies (both single-authored and edited collections) of their wartime experiences (see Stanley, 2006, Chapter 5). Researching the records showed that various of the women who were designated as political troublemakers later authored, or edited, collections of testimonies. The testimonies overall were actively produced post-war through women's proto-nationalist organizations of various kinds.

Once the South African War ended, memorializing the white concentration camp dead commenced in the cemeteries for each of the white camps.⁵ This memorialization became an important part of Boer proto-nationalism, with commemoration in the camp cemeteries carried out in large part through women's proto-nationalist committees and organizations. Various of the testimony writers and editors were closely involved in this, and some of them subsequently became important figures in the wider nationalist project concerning the Afrikaner *volk*. In addition, over time, successive political changes and developments within proto-nationalism led to new versions of memorialization and commemoration de-facing or replacing earlier ones, resulting in different and sometimes competing stories of who died, for what, and with what meaning, co-existing in these memorial places and spaces (see Stanley, 2006, Chapters 8 and 9).

It was important to trace these interconnections across all the testimonies and concentration camp commemorative sites to gauge their extensiveness or otherwise. Moreover, the storied character of both the testimonies and the commemorative sites was clear, with each containing many smaller stories, with storied

links across these two representational genres. Consequently my analytical interest focused around stories told within both testimony and commemoration, whether and how these were interconnected, and the wider meta-narrative that, analytically speaking, they might interpretationally add up to.

Putting it into practice: narrative inquiry and narrative analysis

Two linked narrative inquiries were accordingly devised, on women’s testimonies, and on commemoration in the camp cemeteries. An initial pilot exercise was carried out, a detailed re-reading and analysis of the first testimony published by a Boer woman, Mrs Neethling’s (1903) *Should We Forget?*⁶ The results are shown in Figures 1 and 2, which summarize my re-readings of this written text and its accompanying photographs respectively (see Dampier, this issue, on re-reading).

In Figure 1, the storied motifs are derived directly from the text, while the meta-narrative is an analytical interpretation of what these add up to. In Figure 2, the primary narrative is directly derived from the captions given to the photographs and the opening words of the book’s closing peroration, the secondary narrative is formed by the visual image of the photographs or a textual description, and the meta-narrative components are, as in Figure 1, an analytical interpretation of what these add up to. Figure 2, then, provides more of the building blocks used in interpretation (in its first three columns) than Figure 1 does.

The building blocks of the re-readings that underlie Figure 1 are shown in Figure 3, which derives from re-reading the written texts and accompanying visual materials of all the approximately 150 published women’s testimonies. As Figure 3 suggests, my initial by definition separation of story and narrative was rapidly modified when confronted by research materials which complexly used elements of both and multiply crossed the borders between telling a story and interpreting a deeper meaning. The storied themes in the first column of Figure 3 are those which recur and can be directly traced across the testimonies, with the ‘narrative threads’ of its

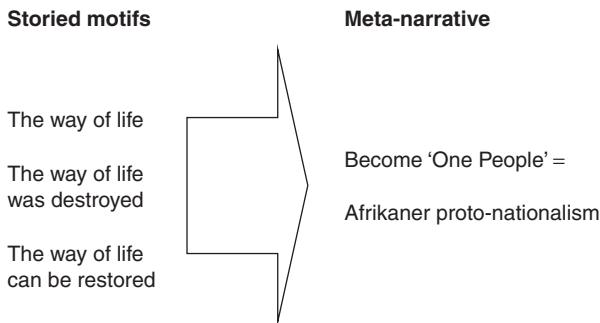


FIGURE 1 *Storied motifs and meta-narrative in Should We Forget?*

Title (primary narrative)	Image (secondary narrative)	Textual location	Storyed motifs (meta-narrative components)
'Our home as we left it'	Neat farmhouse with <i>stoep</i> , whites neatly dressed, semi-naked black boy	Frontispiece	Our home before the war (and its way of life)
'Our home as we found it'	Farmhouse blown up	Immediately before last chapter	Our home (and its way of life) destroyed
'... more than ever before, "One People"'	Word-image	Final peroration	The way of life will be restored through the Afrikaners of the Republics and Colonies becoming united

FIGURE 2 *Narrative structure of photographs and closing peroration in Should We Forget?*

STORIED THEMES	NARRATIVE THREADS	'SLANT-WISE' NARRATIVE THREADS
<p>Theme 1 The war was fought solely to preserve Boer independence and an Eden-like 'way of life' of harmony and plenitude. Boer people were being tested by God and at some point their sufferings would be recompensed and their enemies repaid with a vengeance, with this suffering actually a sign of favour because bringing them together as 'One People'.</p>	<p>Boer 'way of life' overturned as a testing by God</p>	<p>The way of life = a racial order</p>
<p>Theme 2 The farm burnings and removals have a meaning which transcends the brief time-period these occupied, with the sudden 'wolf on the fold' arrival of British soldiers, their contemptuous treatment of Boer people, making them vulnerable to ill-treatment by 'Kaffirs' or even treating them as though they were 'Kaffirs'. The strong concern is with disorder and the morally unaccountable 'topsy-turvy' nature of these events.</p>	<p>Being treated like Kaffirs overturned the protean moral order</p>	<p>Moral order = the racial order</p>
<p>Theme 3 The camps were 'murder camps'. One motif concerns the hospitals as places of punishment and death in which everyone died, including of poisoned 'medicines'. A related motif is that people were actively denied food and died of starvation. A third motif concerns the omnipresence of death: people die horribly, denied food and water, their relatives turned away. Nothing more ordinary ever happened. But Kaffirs are favoured and privileged.</p>	<p>The camps as murder of the volk while Kaffirs treated well</p>	<p>Murder of the volk = replaced by the Kaffirs</p>
<p>Theme 4 The 'worst thing of all' during removals to the camps was that Boer people were open to the gaze of 'Kaffirs', who mocked and jeered and contaminated their food and their children by touching them. They were even treated as though 'Kaffirs' themselves, because made to queue for food, do their own washing and have passes to move about. The end came when the 'Kaffirs' were not only armed, but 40,000 of them united.</p>	<p>The worst was being looked down on by Kaffirs and being treated like Kaffirs</p>	<p>Kaffirs out of place in the moral hierarchy = in authority and having power</p>

FIGURE 3 Themes, narrative threads and slant-wise narratives of women's testimonies

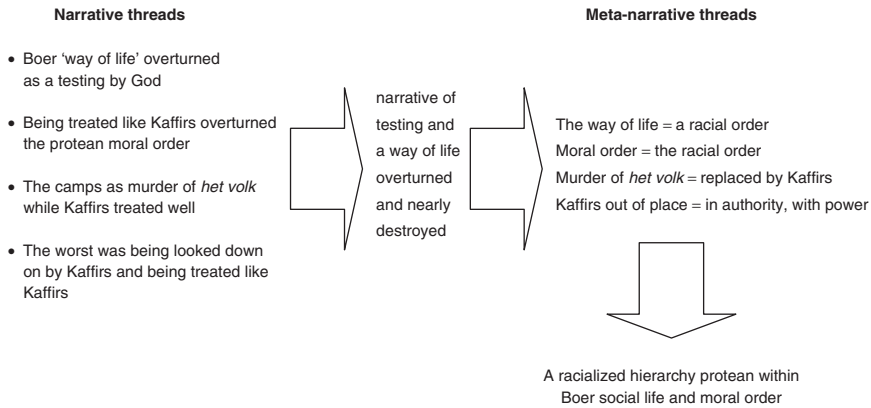


FIGURE 4 *The double narrative of women's testimonies*

second column both an analytical interpretation *implicitly* presented within the testimonies and one *explicitly* expressed in my analysis. The slant-wise narrative threads of its third column give expression to a very marked feature of the testimonies, that they have both a surface story and an implicit but nonetheless strongly marked slant-wise one concerning a hierarchical and assumed to be starkly binary racial order that was challenged or overturned through British intervention.

Figure 4 schematically summarizes the descriptive and analytical activity indicated in Figures 1, 2 and 3 (and readers should note that equivalents of Figures 1 and 2 exist for every published women's testimony, both single-authored and collections, and also each shorter testimony within the collections). As may be imagined, re-reading to this depth within and across around 150 testimonies, some several hundred pages long, was time-consuming. As was analysing back and forth, from the written and photographic texts to the analysis, and to other written and photographic texts and back again, to ensure the summaries and schematic representations produced closely followed the research materials worked on. Doing so, indeed, produced voluminous analytical materials which themselves then had to be summarized and generalized from, a meta-meta level of analytical work.

A parallel approach was adopted regarding commemoration in the white concentration camp cemeteries.⁷ Over an approximately three-year period, all these commemorative sites bar two, spread over a huge area, were videoed and photographed, a ground-plan was made with commemorative structures, memorials and inscriptions located on this, and all inscriptions fully transcribed. In addition, the records of the War Graves Board and the post-1994 South African Heritage Resources Association were worked on, as were records of the key architect firms involved when, from the 1950s on, a vast programme of building Gardens of Remembrance in around a third of the cemeteries was instituted.

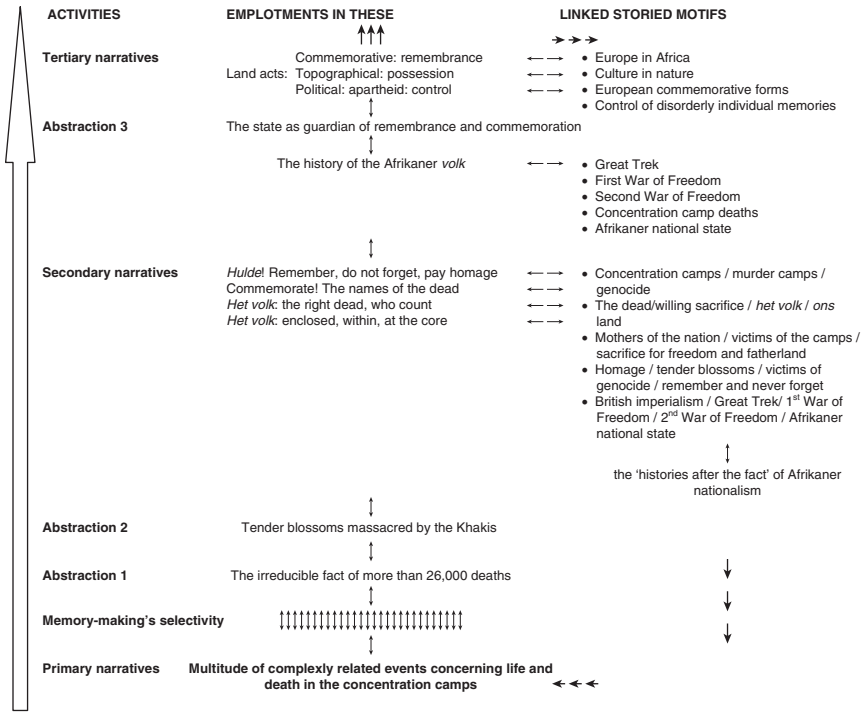


FIGURE 5 Narrative structures of the begraafplase and Gedenktoeue

The extensive research data which resulted were even more time-consuming to analyse than collect. Although there were fewer cases here (40+ commemorative sites compared with 150+ testimonies), these were incredibly complex because over-written many times in a hundred years of commemorative activities. This included many restorations, repairs and re-makings which were closely, if not exclusively, connected with the different incarnations of nationalism at different times. Each site was consequently a palimpsest, each layer of which required teasing out and earlier forms traced before any cross-site comparisons could be made. For each commemorative site, and for each traceable time-layer within it, equivalents to Figures 1 and 2 were produced. Following this, the kind of cross-case analyses shown in Figures 3 and 4 for the testimonies were produced for the commemorative sites, here too analysing from the research data to the analyses and back again, repeatedly, to ensure each analysis fully followed the research data worked on. However, commemorative sites are not the same as published testimonies and the differences are more than genre ones, so the analytical summaries produced were adapted to take account of this. This can be explained in relation to Figure 5, which is a parallel to Figures 1 to 3 for the testimonies.

The analysis of the commemorative sites engaged much more directly with the 'in life' processes of memory-making than had analysis of the testimonies.

This was in part because, while marked by time and memory, the testimonies do not foreground this, partly because they engage with the past in an apparently *as now* way, and partly because, once published, they were not re-written thereafter. In both respects the commemorative sites differ. These are rhetorically composed in an elegiac way that multiply harks back to past events, including the deaths, the events leading to these, and claimed foundational points even further back in time; and also all these sites bear the signs of literal re-composition, indeed multiple re-compositions. Figure 5 attempts to represent both the idea of originating events and facticity of these deaths, and also the layers of commemorative and sometimes counter-commemorative processes marked in these places. Five aspects of the methodological work summarized therein should be noted.

First, the primary narratives involve *both* the originating events *and* the accompanying at the time representations of life and death in the camps. These are referred to as narratives, not stories, recognizing the always already interpreted nature of stories, which in fact cannot be radically separated from narratives as my working definition had attempted. Second, the three levels of abstraction indicated could equally well be labelled as junctures at which meta-narratives are produced, because they point to the production in life of over-arching narrative frames that linked up things to extrapolate hidden meaning from them. Third, the secondary and tertiary narratives shown are recapitulations, or rather iterations, of different aspects of the story, concerning the meaning of commemoration, and regarding the wider political sphere of land acts that connected nationalism, political control (implicitly, raced) and apartheid. Fourth, the storied motifs concern specific elements present across the commemorative sites, including the components of the secondary narratives, third level of abstraction and tertiary narratives. These also show that rather different kinds of meanings and originating points are specified in these iterations, mostly temporally prior to the event of the deaths that the primary narratives articulated, suggesting the extent to which these

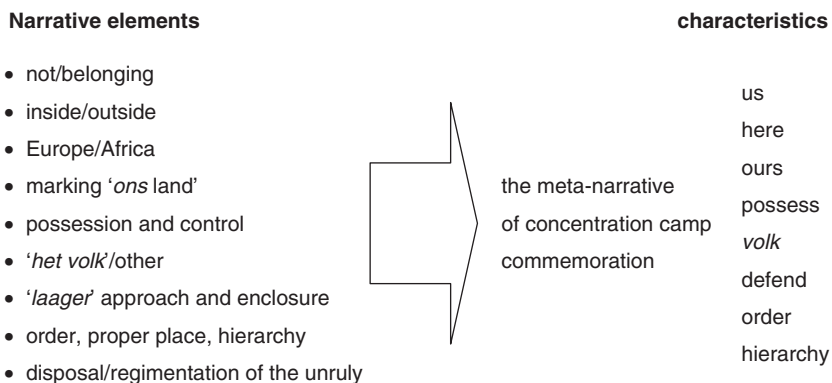


FIGURE 6 *The meta-narrative of concentration camp commemorative sites*

matters were captured by the nationalist project. And lastly, this is ongoing memory-making, as indicated by the sets of three uni-directional arrows at key transition points in Figure 5.

Figure 6 schematizes elements of the analysis of representation represented in Figure 5 and in doing so draws on all the within- as well as cross-site investigations and analyses; it is a research-generated interpretive meta-narrative of what it adds up to. Its nine composing narrative elements are those interpreted as constitutive, while the characteristics that these signal give further interpretational direction to the analysis of the meta-narrative of concentration camp commemoration provided.

Madness to the method? Methodological issues arising

These two linked inquiries used a narrative inquiry methodology to investigate, not just testimonies and commemoration, but each of the composing cases within each genre, the layers of stories and abstractions and narrativizing from these within each case, and also across cases and genres. The analysis was focused and nearly comprehensive of the relevant cases, and produced an extremely large amount of analytical materials tied to the particular stories, particular cases, cross-case comparisons, and cross-genre comparisons. However, what had worked reasonably well with one case, the pilot study of a fairly short book, became overwhelming when used to examine *many cases*, also *within cases*, then *all the cases* that composed the Boer women's testimonies and the concentration camp sites, then *across cases*, and also *across the genres*. Very quickly, it was the materials produced from the detailed analyses that were worked with, rather than the data, which was returned to only at particular points to check an analysis, and then usually by reference to particular cases rather than in its entirety. Ironically, this is a reversal of Elliott's (2005, this issue) argument about working on stories within large-scale numerical data – mine was a kind of secondary analysis, but one where there were so many individual stories that working in depth with each of them was not possible.

As noted earlier, soon after the research started I fully realized the impact of what I had always known about the story/narrative relationship. In life, there is no easy story/narrative divide because all stories are narrativized, abstracted from, and wider and deeper meanings are picked out; and therefore the complexities of the interrelationship cannot be bracketed by methodological fiat, as the research design had attempted. That is, while it is sensible – and indeed necessary – to keep separate the researcher's interpretations, and the interpretations that are 'in' the cases worked with, this cannot be done by bracketing and analytically ignoring the irremovable interpretational complexity of the 'in life' research data. Succinctly, a story/narrative separation cannot be maintained unless this complexity, the very thing that narrative approaches are concerned with, is ignored. Rejecting this as an option, a plethora of 'narrative' in the

unfolding analyses resulted, indicated by various of the figures provided here, as did something else momentous.

When the investigation and initial analysis phases of these linked inquiries were completed, and as I contemplated possible publication, the hugeness, the enormity, of the resulting analytical materials I was working with struck home. What to do with it all became preoccupying. Eventually, I concluded that the detailed cases and accompanying analytical material on each of them, the interconnections between the testimonies and the commemorative sites, links with the earlier research on the concentration camp records, and also how and in what ways post-war proto-nationalism was associated, via constructions and reconstructions of memory and history, with the later post-1949 institution of nationalism and apartheid, *could* all be brought together. But at a price.

The interpretational building blocks, as I have called them, were detailed and case-by-case; but also each of them was in itself elliptical, because requiring knowledge of prior interpretational work to make full sense. One example here – most readers contemplating Figure 5 need to take its detail on trust, not least because this is actually a radically schematized summary. The price of bringing all these things together to present something communicable and coherent was to put on one side all the detailed interpretational work just outlined and write a story, a theorized interpretation, of how it fitted together and what it meant. That is, I wrote the researcher's meta-narrative (Stanley, 2006),⁸ a strategy to ensure publication, which largely backgrounded the specific detail of these narrative inquiries and foregrounded broader ideas and arguments, of which this figure is one indication. To be clear: I am NOT, repeat *not*, proposing that this is relativist or just me.⁹ These interpretations are grounded in much precise verifiable detail. But the devil is in the detail here, in the sense that the narrative inquiry approach generated so much material on so many cases that it became difficult, indeed impossible, to tell it all.

There is a related issue too. This is that the figures herein (and the many more in my files) are elliptical. To unpack them, knowledge of a very large amount of detailed substantive information is needed. That is, these analytical summaries are in fact representations of analytical *conclusions* and not accounts of a research *process*. Process is not there in the same way it is not there in most so-called longitudinal data, which is actually a series of snapshots and not continuous data; the process lies in what is *between* these analytical snapshots, something very difficult to convey to readers in this style of working. The fact that these figures exist for each published testimony and each commemorative site, and often also for specific stories and themes within these, may lead readers to read in process, but process is not in fact there in the figures. What is, is a series of schematic snapshots of my conclusions about how it fitted together.

If I had worked on only one testimony or one commemorative site or one memorial, or picked out just one specific storied element and focused on this

across a few cases, the issues outlined here would not have become so clearly apparent. What I am suggesting is that methodological problematics are masked by the *keep it small, work on just one case* approach that many narrative inquiries are designed around. That is, it has been through working on a large scale, with many cases, and complex flows across the genres of testimony and commemoration, that has pointed up the issues just discussed. Overall, this was an interesting and instructive and not just time-consuming exercise, because focusing in precise analytical detail *was* in some respects useful. However, the conclusion I have come to is that similar methodological issues exist for all narrative inquiries but are hidden by the prototypically small scale of such research, and these really need to be thought about.

NOTES

1. Stanley (2006). These were very different from the later Nazi version and were a combination of refugee and detention camps.
2. This research was partly shared with Helen Dampier. The concentration system was composed by camps for Boer people displaced by war, camps for black people similarly displaced, and a system of extracting constrained labour from black men; see Stanley, 2006, Chapter 4.
3. Because of wartime conditions, camps came into and out of existence or were moved, depending on the fighting.
4. These records are a version and should not be privileged but treated as composed by complexly interconnected internal stories and existing in competition with other, nationalist-motivated versions.
5. See Stanley, 2006, Chapter 7, on black people and commemoration.
6. See Stanley 2006, Chapter 5, for a late version of this.
7. Unsurprisingly given the race politics of white-controlled South Africa, there was no commemoration of the black camps nor of black people in the so-called white camps.
8. There are also various journal articles, not referenced here.
9. See Stanley and Wise (1993, 2006), for the wider arguments.

REFERENCES

- Chamberlain, M. and Thompson, P. (eds) (1998) *Narrative and Genre*. London: Routledge.
- Clandinin, D.J. and Connelly, F.M. (2000) *Narrative Inquiry*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Elliott, J. (2005) *Using Narratives in Social Research*. London: Sage.
- Josselson, R. and Lieblich, A. (eds) (1993) *The Narrative Study of Lives* (Vol. 1). London: Sage.
- Miller, R. (2000) *Researching Life Stories and Family Histories*. London: Sage.
- Neethling, E. (n.d. but 1903) *Should We Forget?* Holland: AF Publishing Co., Hollandsch-Afrikaansche Uitgevers-Maatschappij (H.A.U.M.), and later Cape Town: Dusseau and Co.
- Riessman, C. (1993) *Narrative Analysis*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Stanley, L. (1992) *The Auto/Biographical I: The Theory and Practice of Feminist Auto/Biography*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

-
- Stanley, L. (2002) *Imperialism, Labour and the New Woman: Olive Schreiner's Social Theory*. Durham: Sociology Press.
- Stanley, L. (2006) *Mourning Becomes... Post/Memory, Commemoration and the Concentration Camps of the South African War*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Stanley, L. and Wise, S. (1993) *Breaking Out Again*. London: Routledge.
- Stanley, L. and Wise, S. (2006) 'Putting it into Practice: Using Feminist Fractured Foundationalism in Researching Children in the Concentration Camps of the South African War', *Sociological Research Online* 11, 1, URL: <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/11/1/stanley.html>
- Tonkin, E. (1992) *Narrating Our Pasts: The Social Construction of Oral History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

LIZ STANLEY is Professor of Sociology and Director of the Centre for Narrative and Auto/Biographical Studies, University of Edinburgh, UK. Current publication activities focus on analysing and theorizing the letters of the feminist writer and social theorist, Olive Schreiner. Her most recent book is *Mourning Becomes... Post/Memory, Commemoration and the Concentration Camps of the South African War* (Manchester University Press, 2006). Address: School of Social and Political Studies, University of Edinburgh, George Square, Edinburgh EH8 9LL, UK. [email: liz.stanley@ed.ac.uk]