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**Humanistic Approaches, Narrative Analysis, and
Discourse Analysis in Field-Based Development Research**

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Analysis in Field-Based Development Research**

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Humanistic Approaches, Narrative Analysis, and Discourse Analysis in Field-Based Development Research

Abstract

Qualitative inquiry in development studies has undergone a profound epistemological shift; moving away from positivist paradigms emphasising measurement, generalisation, and prediction, towards interpretive and human-centred frameworks that privilege meaning, experience, and context. The objective of this paper is to introduce the possibilities of qualitative approaches, methods, tools, and their application to field-based development research. Three interconnected frameworks—humanistic approaches, narrative research, and discourse analysis—have become central to field-based development research. Each of these paradigms shares a commitment to understanding how people make sense of their lives and environments by bringing distinctive philosophical and methodological orientations. With a focus on meaning-making, these frameworks collectively embody a deeply interpretive, reflexive, and ethically engaged vision of development research by grasping social change through the lived experiences and voices of those who inhabit it.

1. Introduction

Over the past several decades, qualitative inquiry in development studies has undergone a profound epistemological shift. Scholars and practitioners alike have moved away from positivist paradigms emphasising measurement, generalisation, and prediction, towards interpretive and human-centered frameworks that privilege meaning, experience, and context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Denscombe, 2014; Neuman, 2014). This paradigm shift acknowledges that social phenomena—especially within development contexts—cannot be understood independently of the human beings who experience them. Development is not simply a process of policy implementation or economic transformation but a lived and contested reality shaped by culture, history, and power.

Within this interpretive turn, three interconnected frameworks—humanistic approaches, narrative research, and discourse analysis—have become central to field-based development research. Each of these paradigms shares a commitment to understanding how people make sense of their lives and environments. Yet they also bring distinctive philosophical and

methodological orientations: humanistic inquiry emphasises the ethical and experiential dimensions of human life; narrative research focuses on the storied and temporal character of experience; and discourse analysis investigates the ways language produces knowledge and power in social life.

Drawing upon Charmaz's (2011) constructivist grounded theory, Jørgensen and Phillips' (2002) discourse analytic theory, and Denzin and Lincoln's (2018) interpretive framework, this paper explores how these approaches function both theoretically and methodologically in field-based development research. It also engages Indigenous and decolonial epistemologies (Chilisa, 2012; Kovach, 2018), which extend these traditions by emphasizing relational ethics, reciprocity, and respect for community knowledge systems. The goal is to demonstrate that integrating humanistic, narrative, and discursive frameworks not only enriches qualitative methodology but also transforms how development itself is understood—as a dialogical, interpretive, and human process.

2. Humanistic Approaches in Field-Based Development Research

Humanistic inquiry begins with the conviction that human beings are meaning-making, purposive agents embedded in cultural, historical, and social worlds. Rejecting the positivist ideal of a detached, value-free science, the humanistic paradigm insists that all inquiry is situated and interpretive (Neuman, 2014). Knowledge emerges not from objective observation but through dialogue, empathy, and reflection. In development research, this philosophical stance resonates with long-standing critiques of modernisation theory and technocratic models of global development that privilege quantitative metrics over lived realities (Escobar, 1994; Peet & Hartwick, 2009).

A humanistic orientation challenges the reduction of human experience to variables or indicators. Instead, it seeks to understand people's subjective interpretations of development, agency, and change (Clark, 2006; Corbridge, 2007). As Denzin and Lincoln (2018) emphasise, qualitative inquiry aims to “make the world visible” through richly contextualised portrayals of human experience. In this sense, development research grounded in humanism recognises the human subject not merely as an object of study but as a co-constructor of knowledge. Charmaz's (2011) constructivist grounded theory provides a model for this, emphasising that theory emerges through dialogue between researcher and participant rather than being imposed from above.

In practice, humanistic approaches have significantly shaped ethnographic and participatory traditions within development studies. For instance, Mosse's (2005) *Cultivating Development* demonstrates how aid policies are reinterpreted and reshaped by actors on the ground, revealing development as a dynamic, negotiated process rather than a linear program. Similarly, Escobar (1999) critiques the "invention" of development as a Western discourse that objectifies the Global South and calls for locally grounded epistemologies rooted in lived experience. A key strength of the humanistic paradigm lies in its ethical orientation; by focusing on relationships, dignity, and empathy, it resonates with Indigenous and decolonial methodologies that value relationality and reciprocity rather than implementing an exploitative attitude towards 'mining' ethnographic data (Chilisa, 2012; Kovach, 2018). Humanistic perspectives insist that research must be conducted *with* rather than *on* communities and that participants are not data sources but knowledge holders. This shift transforms inquiry into a dialogical, emancipatory process that respects local voices and epistemologies unlike colonial approach to ethnography, which reduced communities to entities to be studied, rather than consider them as participants in the process of knowledge production on indigenous matters.

Furthermore, humanistic research draws upon traditions of existential and phenomenological thought that emphasise self-actualisation, authenticity, and the search for meaning. In development contexts, such inquiry explores how individuals negotiate identity and purpose amid displacement, modernisation, or policy interventions. As Charmaz (2011) suggests, this involves tracing how people reconstruct their "valued selves" in the face of disruption. Schwandt and Gates' (2018) case study methodology aligns with this orientation by emphasising thick description and contextual interpretation. Through triangulation—combining interviews, observations, and document analysis—humanistic inquiry produces layered accounts that are both empirically rich and ethically grounded. Ultimately, humanistic approaches remind us that development is not merely about outcomes or statistics; it is about people's lived struggles, aspirations, and capacities for meaning-making. They call for research that honors human complexity and situates knowledge within moral and relational contexts.

3. Narrative Research as Method and Epistemology

Narrative research arises from the recognition that human experience is fundamentally storied. People make sense of their lives by organising experiences into temporal, causal, and moral sequences—that is, by telling stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 2008). This approach assumes that identity, memory, and meaning are constructed narratively; experience

is not raw data but a form of interpretation. Knowledge, therefore, is co-created through the telling and retelling of stories between researcher and participant (Chase, 2011).

Narrative inquiry is rooted in two key philosophical traditions: hermeneutic phenomenology and social constructionism. From a hermeneutic perspective, stories are interpretive acts that help individuals understand their lives within historical and cultural horizons (Ricoeur, 1984). From a constructionist perspective, narratives are shaped by the social and linguistic resources available to storytellers; they are culturally situated and often reflect broader structures of power (Gergen & Gergen, 2006). These perspectives together allow narrative research to honour the subjectivity of personal experience while critically interrogating the social and discursive frameworks that shape it.

Theoretical contributions from Bruner (1990), Polkinghorne (1995), and Clandinin and Connelly (2000) have been foundational in conceptualising narrative inquiry. Bruner distinguishes the “narrative mode” of knowing—based on storytelling and meaning—from the “paradigmatic mode” of logic and analysis. Polkinghorne (1995) highlights the dual role of narrative as both data and method: researchers collect stories but also interpret them as structured representations of experience. Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) “three-dimensional narrative space”—comprising interaction (personal/social), continuity (past–present–future), and situation (place)—provides a framework for analysing how stories unfold across time, relationships, and settings. Ethics and positionality are crucial in narrative research, especially when engaging Indigenous or marginalised voices. Jacklin (2010) stresses the importance of cultural protocols, collaborative authorship, and shared interpretive authority. Stories are not inert texts but living expressions of identity and survival; analysing them demands humility and respect. In decolonial development research, narrative inquiry thus becomes a political act—challenging dominant development discourses and enabling communities to articulate alternative visions of well-being and progress (Chilisa, 2012; Smith, 2012).

Narrative research also offers a unique lens for understanding identity. People narrate their lives through temporal movement—“I was, I am, I will become.” These self-stories reveal how individuals experience development interventions as transformations of identity and agency. In certain field-based studies, narratives of displacement, adaptation, or empowerment can potentially expose the emotional and moral dimensions of change often overlooked by quantitative measures. For example, Sanjay Barbora’s book titled *Homeland Insecurities: Autonomy, Conflict, and Migration in Assam* (2022) brings forth the qualitative narratives of

the minority migrant population of Assam inhabiting regions bordering Bangladesh. While quantitative figures from national statistics assist an understanding of numerical majority and minority, the qualitative aspects of everyday struggles of the displaced migrants and the indigenous (Bodo, Assamese, Mising, etc.) population of Assam are captured and presented by Barbora using ethnography and narrative research. Methodologically, narrative inquiry employs tools such as biographical interviews, life histories, and oral histories. These approaches invite participants to share significant experiences, turning points, and meanings over time (Riessman, 2008). Narrative thematic analysis (Polkinghorne, 1995) identifies recurrent motifs across stories while maintaining each story's integrity. Dialogic and performative analyses (Riessman, 2008) further examine how narratives are performed—through voice, gesture, and affect—revealing how selfhood is enacted before an audience. By emphasising temporality, voice, and co-authorship, narrative inquiry reframes development as a lived, storied process. It transforms research from data collection into an act of listening and witnessing, generating knowledge that is both personal and political.

4. Discourse Analysis: Theoretical and Methodological Insights

Discourse analysis (DA) extends the interpretive project by examining how language constructs social reality. Rooted in social constructionism, it posits that meaning does not simply mirror reality but actively produces it (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Language, therefore, is not neutral—it organises knowledge, defines truth, and structures power (Foucault, 1972; Potter & Wetherell, 2011). DA encompasses several overlapping traditions, including Foucauldian discourse theory, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), and social psychological approaches. Despite their differences, these schools share an understanding that discourse shapes the possibilities for thought, action, and identity. Foucault's (1972) conception of discourse as a "system of representation" highlights how power and knowledge are intertwined. Fairclough's (1992) CDA builds on this insight by analysing the dialectical relationship between discourse and social structure, i.e. how linguistic practices reproduce or transform inequality.

In development research, DA enables scholars to interrogate how "development" itself is discursively produced. Escobar (1994, 1999) and Cornwall and Eade (2010) argue that development functions as a hegemonic discourse that categorises societies into "developed" and "underdeveloped," legitimising interventions through Western epistemological lenses. These discourses generate subjects such as "beneficiaries" or "stakeholders," defining who

counts as a participant and who remains invisible (Mosse, 2005; Peet & Hartwick, 2009). Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA) examines how such discourses create “regimes of truth” that determine what can be said and by whom (Foucault, 1972). Shaw et al. (2006) extend this to show how colonial and racialised hierarchies persist in development language. By analysing silence and omission—what is not said as much as what is—researchers uncover how discourses marginalise or exclude local epistemologies.

Methodologically, DA involves close textual and contextual analysis. Researchers examine how meaning is produced across different levels: words, sentences, narratives, and institutions. They analyse how texts draw upon and reproduce other texts (intertextuality), how subject positions are constructed, and how discourses shift across contexts (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Reflexivity is vital, as researchers themselves are embedded within the discursive systems they analyse (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). It demonstrates that development is not a neutral domain of policy but a contested field of discourse where knowledge and power continually interact.

5. Methodological Choice and Research Tools

Qualitative methods exist on a continuum from highly structured to unstructured. Structured methods rely on predetermined categories, while unstructured ones privilege open-ended exploration. In development research, the appropriate level of structure depends on the researcher’s familiarity with the setting and the sensitivity of the topic. When investigating complex or sensitive issues in unfamiliar contexts, unstructured or semi-structured methods are most suitable, allowing participants to guide the discussion and shape the meanings that emerge. Keeping the above discussed approaches in mind, the following sections elaborate on the tools offered by Humanistic Approaches, Narrative Research, and Discourse Analysis and how these can be practically applied to development research.

5.1 Humanistic Tools

Humanistic methodologies prioritise empathy, reflexivity, and depth of engagement. Phenomenological interviews allow participants to articulate experiences in their own words, while participant observation immerses the researcher in community life, fostering rapport and trust (Neuman, 2014). Reflexive field notes document evolving interpretations, making the research process transparent. Autoethnography and reflexive journaling (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) treat the researcher’s own experiences as legitimate data, linking personal insight with

cultural critique. Life histories and case studies (Schwandt & Gates, 2018) provide holistic portraits that reveal how individuals navigate structural constraints and moral choices.

5.2 Narrative Tools

Narrative research employs methods that foreground temporality, storytelling, and co-construction of meaning. Narrative interviews invite participants to recount significant life events (Riessman, 2008; Chase, 2011). Life story and oral history methods (Haag, 2008; Jacklin, 2010) are particularly valuable in Indigenous or rural contexts, where they preserve memory and collective identity. Analytical approaches such as narrative thematic analysis (Polkinghorne, 1995) and dialogic or performative analysis (Riessman, 2008) allow researchers to explore both what is said and how it is told.

5.3 Discourse Analytic Tools

Discourse-oriented methods examine how meaning is constructed through text and speech. Policy document analysis (Fairclough, 1992; Escobar, 1994) uncovers how institutions frame development subjects and goals. CDA (van Dijk, 1993) integrates textual, discursive, and social analysis to expose how language legitimises power. Conversation analysis (Potter & Wetherell, 2011) focuses on micro-level interactions, while multimodal and visual analyses (Rose, 2016) explore how images and digital media construct narratives of progress and empowerment.

6. Ethics, Reflexivity, and Quality in Qualitative Research

In development contexts—especially those involving marginalised or Indigenous communities—ethics and reflexivity are paramount (Chilisa, 2012). Researchers must be attentive to power asymmetries and ensure that communities retain agency in how knowledge is produced and represented. This involves respecting cultural protocols, engaging in collaborative design, and maintaining transparency about positionality.

Quality in qualitative research is judged not by statistical validity but by criteria such as credibility, authenticity, resonance, and coherence. Credibility is achieved through triangulation, prolonged engagement, and participant validation; transferability through thick description; and dependability through careful documentation of procedures. Reflexivity—acknowledging how the researcher’s identity and worldview shape the process—ensures interpretive rigour (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Ultimately, ethical qualitative research is relational. It transforms knowledge production into a shared act of meaning-making, enabling participants to see themselves not as subjects but as collaborators in inquiry.

7. Interpretation and Reporting

Interpretation in humanistic, narrative, and discourse research involves weaving together participants' voices, contextual analysis, and theoretical insight. Reporting must reflect reflexivity, transparency, and respect for voice. Narrative excerpts or quotes are not mere illustrations but dialogical sites where theory and experience meet. Researchers should balance interpretation with representation—allowing participants' meanings to speak while situating them within broader analytical frameworks.

Interpretive reporting often integrates reflexive commentary, linking field experiences to theoretical insights. For example, a traditional leader's narrative may be analysed both as a story of personal transformation and as a discursive text reflecting larger negotiations of power, identity, and governance. In this way, qualitative writing becomes both analytical and humanistic—a form of storytelling grounded in theory.

8. Conclusion

Humanistic, narrative, and discourse analytic frameworks collectively embody a deeply interpretive, reflexive, and ethically engaged vision of development research. They remind us that social change cannot be understood through numbers alone but must be grasped through the lived experiences and voices of those who inhabit it. Humanistic inquiry emphasises empathy, ethics, and meaning-making; narrative research reveals how identity and experience unfold through story; and discourse analysis exposes how power and knowledge are constituted through language. Together, they create a methodological synthesis capable of addressing both the personal and political dimensions of development.

In embracing these approaches, researchers not only document change but also participate in it—amplifying marginalised voices, decolonising epistemologies, and advancing a more relational understanding of knowledge. Ultimately, qualitative inquiry grounded in these frameworks reaffirms that development is not a technical process but a human one: a continual negotiation of meaning, identity, and hope within the unfolding story of social life.

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