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RESEARCH PAPER

Storying Research: Exploring the Benefits of Participatory Narrative Inquiry as a Methodology for Wellbeing Research

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Abstract

As the field of positive psychology matures, many have called for an expansion in epistemological and methodological approaches to enable a more complex study of wellbeing. This article addresses this call by examining the benefits of using storying methods in wellbeing research. We explore how this can address some of the limitations in the extant psychological literature. Participatory Narrative Inquiry (PNI) is introduced as an example of a storying methodology that can facilitate a democratised approach to studying complex phenomena. We outline the theoretical and meta-theoretical underpinnings of this approach and provide an overview of the essential and supplementary methods used within each phase of the methodology. The methodology is juxtaposed with other similar qualitative methods to support researchers in discerning what type of inquiries PNI may be best suited to. We argue that interdisciplinary methodologies such as PNI can support the development and refinement of contextually relevant theories and practices needed to progress the field of positive psychology as it enters its third wave of development.

Keywords Complexity · Storying · Interdisciplinary · Participatory · Mixed-methods

Interest in the science of wellbeing continues to gather momentum, with a broad array of disciplines, such as philosophy, psychology, economics, and population health, all exploring how to facilitate living a 'good life'. In particular, the field of positive psychology has made a significant contribution to this knowledge base, as evidenced by the substantial growth and impact of the literature over the last three decades (Donaldson et al., 2015; Rusk & Waters, 2013; Wang et al., 2023). Yet, several criticisms have been levelled at the field, many of which result from the dominance of research designed within a positivist epistemology (Diener et al., 2022;

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Kern et al., 2020; van Zyl et al., 2023). We contend that this result is an unfortunate unintended consequence of the desire in positive psychology to distinguish itself as a rigorous field of study with a limited definition of what constitutes research rigour.

Hayes and Hofmann (2021) argue that for a field to progress it needs to distinguish the strategies it uses from its core purpose, so limitations of the favoured approaches do not stunt progress. While their argument was aimed at how we address mental health in psychiatry and psychology, it could be equally applied to progressing our understanding of wellbeing in positive psychology. Wellbeing is a multi-faceted construct that has been conceptualised differently across disciplines, indeed, even within disciplines, as evidenced in the field of positive psychology (Alexandrova & Fabian, 2022; Lambert et al., 2015; Mead et al., 2021). While definitions may vary, it is now well-recognised that the experience of wellbeing emerges from the complex interplay of multiple contributory factors across the self as a system and within nested ecological systems (Mead et al., 2021; Roffey, 2015).

Unfortunately, the reductionistic methods required in experimental and correlational study designs, which have been the favoured approaches in positive psychology, limit the ability to explore complex dynamic patterns in context (Colla et al., 2022; Diener et al., 2022). There is no doubt that these methods have produced substantial knowledge about the factors to consider in wellbeing research and their relationship to desired outcomes. However, the overuse of these research strategies in the behavioural sciences, including positive psychology, has limited scientific progress in understanding the complex nature of wellbeing (Diener et al., 2022).

We are at a critical juncture in the development of the field where such limitations are raising questions that demand new approaches. Perhaps this marks the beginning of what Kuhn (1974) referred to as the 'revolutionary' phase of a scientific paradigm, where we begin to embrace new assumptions and perspectives. For example, these criticisms have led to a growing sophistication of research methods and intervention approaches (Ciarrochi et al., 2021; Kern et al., 2020). Indeed, there is discussion across a range of scholars of a 'third wave' of development that embraces complexity and the development of more contextually relevant theories (Kern et al., 2020; Lomas et al., 2021; Wissing, 2021). Employing more qualitative and mixed methods approaches has been argued as one of the first steps in facilitating such an endeavour, allowing a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of the complex dynamics that enable wellbeing to emerge in different contexts (Diener et al., 2022; Lomas et al., 2021; van Zyl et al., 2023). There are early advances in this endeavour, with a growing appreciation of the different perspectives and knowledge that can be created from qualitative and mixed-methods modes of research in positive psychology (Gergen et al., 2015; Hefferon et al., 2017; Rich, 2017).

The use of narrative and phenomenological approaches, for example, have made substantial contributions to our understanding of wellbeing. The benefits of narrative methods to understand how individuals make sense of their experience of wellbeing, particularly in clinical work, are well-established (Bright et al., 2022; Sagan, 2012; Tarragona, 2013). The use of other rigorous qualitative methods, such as interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), have also contributed to our understanding of the phenomenon of wellbeing, in areas such as positive psychology coaching (Fouracres & van Nieuwerburgh, 2020; Mills & Lomas, 2021), education (Clarke

& Platt, 2023), and the arts (Hefferon & Ollis, 2006). Such methods provide a deep and nuanced understanding of the idiographic experience of wellbeing but are predominantly interpreted through the researcher. Participatory research methods, by comparison, aim to engage participants in a collective process of understanding, addressing some of the power differentials in the creation of knowledge (Belone et al., 2016). This practice supports one of the core principles proposed by Kern et al. (2020) to embrace complexity in our research endeavours.

Wellbeing is a value-laden phenomenon, and thus definitions or theories of wellbeing will be simultaneously descriptive and evaluative in nature, which philosophers refer to as a 'thick concept' (Alexandrova & Fabian, 2022). When such concepts are defined and measured by a limited group (eg. academics), it poses challenges to our scientific understanding of some of the nuances of the experience of wellbeing. As a result, scholars have argued for a more democratised approach to understanding wellbeing in context, which can be driven by the co-production of knowledge with participants (Alexandrova & Fabian, 2022; Hayes et al., 2012; Henriques et al., 2014). While participatory research methods offer such an approach, they are underutilised in positive psychology and psychology more broadly (Levac et al., 2019; Rodriguez Espinosa & Verney, 2021).

As the field matures and we move towards embracing complexity in our research inquiries, the time is ripe to consider a broad spectrum of methodologies that can contribute to building a holistic perspective of wellbeing. In this paper, we take up this challenge by exploring how an interdisciplinary participatory methodology, Participatory Narrative Inquiry (PNI), may contribute to this aim. While PNI has had limited use as a methodology in psychology, it is grounded in storying methods that have a long and rich history. We explore the merits of this methodology for wellbeing research, critically analysing how it may address some of the limitations of other approaches. Our aim is to position this lesser-known methodology alongside well-established quantitative and qualitative approaches, demonstrating how it can help us broaden our understanding and progress the field of wellbeing forward in research methodology and practice.

1 The Power of Story/ing Methods for Complex Inquiries

PNI is a methodology that draws on narrative research traditions, and therefore, a discussion on the merits of storying methods for complex inquiries is warranted before examining the specifics of the approach. Stories are a natural process through which we make sense of the world and are part of our everyday language use (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007; Phillips & Bunda, 2018). Chawla (2011) suggests that "stories breathe their own breaths, they are organic in nature, and dynamic in process… As human beings, we are 'storying' beings." (p. 16). Such a natural source of data that is dynamic in nature can counteract some of the limitations of self-report or laboratory-based methods. For example, stories are inherently situated within context (Creswell, 2013), they track experience over time (McAdams, 2001), and they can provide insights into causal coherence and the factors that may lead to particular experiences (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Importantly, stories are

used ubiquitously across cultures, ages, and disciplines (Gottschall, 2012; Hutchens, 2015), which is particularly relevant in cross-cultural and interdisciplinary research. These features of stories help address some of the limitations of cross-sectional and factorial-based research designs that limit our exploration and understanding of contextual dynamics.

Stories or narratives can be considered a data source, a research method, and a way of theorising about the world (Carless & Douglas, 2017). Some researchers use the term 'narrative' to distinguish the inquiry and 'story' to indicate the phenomenon or data source (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990); however, the consistency of these terms across the literature is not this clean-cut. The way stories are used in research depends on ontological and epistemological assumptions. For example, qualitative researchers who use narrative techniques may see the world as being socially constructed, and thus stories are selected as a method to explore how a particular group make sense of a specific experience. From this perspective, stories provide the mechanism for illustrating and informing theory that seeks to understand and explain the nuances of experience – a process that Holman Jones (2016) describes as a "dance of collaborative engagement" (p. 229).

Phillips and Bunda (2018) align with this view and argue for a more holistic term: 'story/ing', defined as the "act of making and remaking meaning through stories" (p. 8), to refer to inquiry, theorising, and sharing of research. The verbification of the term story/ing is intentional, as they position the storying process throughout the research cycle: from conceptualising the investigation, collecting stories, analysing and theorising, and finally, in the research presentation. Thus, they argue that storying is axiological, ontological, and epistemological.

1.1 Tale as Old as Time: Learning from the Wisdom of Indigenous Cultures

While many disciplines have recently experienced a narrative turn, storying has long been a method of scientific knowledge development in many indigenous cultures (Phillips & Bunda, 2018). Some argue that the established approaches to tackling wicked problems, such as the lack of wellbeing across the globe, have typically been steeped in Western scientific methodologies that pursue knowledge in an analytical way (Goodchild, 2021). Indigenous knowledge systems, by comparison, are deeply steeped in complex systems' ways of knowing, reflecting the pursuit of 'wisdom in action' over 'wisdom in abstraction' (Aikenhead & Michell, 2011). Indeed, while the word 'system' in English is typically represented as a noun, in indigenous languages, such as the Anishinaabe First Nations people of North America, it is used to describe a process that reflects relationality (Goodchild, 2021).

Storying is a method that can foster a transformation in relational understanding, both in relationship with self, through self-reflection, and with others through sharing of experience in community (Cajete & Pueblo, 2010). Such a relational approach addresses some of the core principles of Systems Informed Positive Psychology (Kern et al., 2020) by aiding knowledge development in the context of the greater whole. It further encourages awareness of different perspectives and can bring to light the limits of our understanding, including our inherent biases (Cajete

& Pueblo, 2010). The underlying processes that facilitate the ancient practice of storying can now be explained by the neural coupling that occurs when people listen to others' stories, supporting social cognition that emerges from an interpersonal rather than personal space (Hasson et al., 2012). This relational approach, where meaning is co-constructed, distinguishes storying from narrative methods that prioritise the researcher's knowledge in the analysis.

We believe it is time to soften (not silence) the loud voices of Western science that dominate academia and pave the way for remembering the wisdom inherent in our indigenous knowledge systems, which have sustained thousands of generations. However, this requires us to find a way to braid together different epistemologies, and we must begin with the premise that both are equal *and* differentiated. Ermine (2007) encourages us to seek the space between epistemologies, what he calls the ethical space, bridging our ways of knowing between indigenous and non-indigenous knowledge systems. The ethical space is a place where we "detach from the cages of our mental worlds and we assume a position where human-to-human dialogue can occur" (p. 202). Deepening our understanding of different perspectives requires a relational mindset of connection rather than separation, characterised by respect, caring, compassion and empathy (Goodchild, 2021). These characteristics emerge from a place of wellbeing. Thus, by embodying wellbeing capabilities in our research practice, we can bridge different ways of knowing and lead research steeped in ethics and integrity. In doing so, we also have the potential to begin to decolonise our ways of knowing and doing research, and thus restore the historical imbalances between Western and Indigenous science (Ahenakew, 2017).

2 Origin Story: Theoretical and Methodological Origins of PNI

Against this backdrop, we would like to introduce PNI as a storying methodology that draws from a range of multi-disciplinary research techniques. PNI is not grounded in a single epistemological paradigm but instead braids different ways of knowing into a package that works (Kurtz, 2014). Combining principles and methods from various approaches is a trend that qualitative researchers increasingly use to address the limitations of a singular paradigm (Lal & Suto, 2012). However, in doing so, due consideration must be given to the rationale for combining approaches, ensuring the integrity of philosophical assumptions that underpin the integrated approach (Lal & Suto, 2012). In this section, we outline the rationale for blending methodologies that have informed the development of PNI to provide an understanding of the meta-theoretical construction of the approach.

We begin, however, by exploring its origin story, as this has influenced its development and use in the literature. The development of the methodology began in practice rather than academic research in 1999 with two parallel explorations of organisational narrative. In the Knowledge Socialization group at IBM Research, Cynthia Kurtz carried out research projects exploring stories in organisations. At IBM Global Services, Sharon Darwent and Dave Snowden worked with stories to support organisational change and decision support. While each independently developed aspects of what would become PNI in their parallel work, in 2001 they

began to work together, joining their emerging approaches. They tested and refined the methodology in research and consulting projects in the government, academic, for-profit, and non-profit sectors until 2009, when they began to move in different directions.

In 2008, Kurtz published the first edition of a foundational text, *Working with Stories in Your Community or Organization*, describing the theoretical and methodological background of the methodology. In 2010, while working on the third edition of the book, she named the approach Participatory Narrative Inquiry. It is worthy of note that other scholars have used this term to refer to narrative inquiry that is participatory in nature, including Hooley (2009) in the context of indigenous education, Parker (1996) in his dissertation on nurses' moral orientations and ways of knowing, and Lander (1999) in a paper that sought to address some of the contradictions between theory and practice that trouble qualitative research. This paper focuses specifically on the methodology described by Kurtz.

The primary theoretical origins of PNI are narrative inquiry and participatory action research, and as such, the methodology is grounded in a social constructionist philosophy. Narrative inquiry provides rich insights into psychological and social phenomena through participants' lived experiences (Creswell, 2013). However, one of the criticisms of the methodology is the blurring of interpretative boundaries between researcher and participant (Riley & Hawe, 2005), particularly as narrative inquiry has traditionally been driven by researchers, with limited participant involvement in analysis. PNI addresses this limitation by integrating fundamental principles from participatory action research (PAR), emphasising participation and collaboration with community members affected by the research inquiry (Baum et al., 2006).

Pursuing the ideals of democratising knowledge co-production espoused by Alexandrova and Fabian (2022) requires an expanded epistemological understanding of "what counts as knowledge and whose knowledge counts" (Phillips et al., 2022, p. 1). In the same way that the mental health recovery movement advocates for processes to support moving away from 'doing to' to 'doing with' participants (Slade et al., 2017), PNI integrates PAR and narrative inquiry principles to elevate the position of the participant to co-researcher, prioritising their expertise in interpreting their lived experience (Phillips et al., 2022). In doing so, PNI guards against a power relationship that positions researchers as privileged knowledge holders and the researched as disempowered sources of information (Borland, 1997; Calabria & Bailey, 2021). However, important ethical considerations must be incorporated to ensure that this is managed effectively, as will be discussed further.

The methodology also draws on influences from oral history, as the collaborative process between storytellers (interviewees) and narrators (researchers) can generate new insights through story sharing, reviewing, interpreting, and presenting new narratives (Thomson, 2003). Like PAR, oral history is situated within an interpretivist paradigm that draws on the lived experience of participants and is grounded in the social construction of knowledge (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). In larger PNI projects, this shared authority in knowledge development is sometimes supported using mixed-methods techniques that draw on the strategic use of both qualitative and quantitative data. Such approaches leverage the insights achieved by combining different epistemological paradigms, allowing complementary or contradictory

patterns to emerge (Saldaña, 2011). Exploring these patterns with participants can help explore how and why specific factors relate (or not) and thus provide a process to self-correct theories and deepen knowledge development through integrating different perspectives (van Zyl et al., 2023). Vaughn and Jacquez (2020) argue that such a collaborative approach can enhance research quality and rigour through the mutually reinforcing partnership formed by the participants' real-world knowledge and experience with the researchers' theoretical and methodological expertise.

Finally, PNI integrates ideas from anthropology, participatory theatre, folklore studies, complexity theory, and narrative therapy (Kurtz, 2014). This interdisciplinary approach builds a creative suite of tools tailored to the participants and inquiry at hand. In summary, the PNI approach weaves together a tapestry with rich and deep research origins, enabling the integration of other ways of knowing into a cohesive set of methods to explore complex phenomena. Importantly, it does so with a clear grounding in a social constructionist epistemology with a multi-ontological framework, ensuring that it does not fall into the common pitfall of combining approaches without anchoring in a clear epistemological or theoretical position (Caelli et al., 2003).

3 PNI Defining Features: the Essential and Extended

The inclusion of each of the words in PNI — *participatory, narrative, and inquiry* — reflects the defining features of the approach. *Participatory* distinguishes the approach from traditional narrative inquiry, highlighting the core component of involving participants in the interpretative process of the research (Kurtz, 2014). This is a foundational premise of participatory research that prioritises participants' voices and experiences in the research process (Abma et al., 2019). How participants are involved can vary at each research design stage, with decision points along a continuum that ranges from academic-led to shared decision-making between researchers and partners (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020). However, participant involvement in making sense of the stories and other data collected is pivotal to PNI.

The term *narrative* indicates the primacy of stories as the central data source in PNI. Personal stories of experience are sometimes supplemented with other data sources, such as reflective responses to stories, statistical analyses of trends in story data, and data visualisations. However, the centrality of narrative as the core source of data distinguishes PNI from the opinion gathering of more deliberative approaches (Evans & Kotchetkova, 2009).

Finally, the term *inquiry* emphasises the core purpose of PNI as a pathway to revealing new insights, possibilities, and potentials (Kurtz, 2014). This purpose distinguishes from approaches that use stories to persuade, teach, or connect. In the same way that the Appreciative Inquiry method uses the term 'inquiry' to indicate the systematic discovery of what gives life to a particular system, elevating the potentiality that exists within (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005), PNI uses the same term to denote the importance of collectively exploring the problems and potentialities that emerge from stories of lived experience.

3.1 Essential Phases: Story Collection, Sense-making, and Story Return

There are three essential phases to any PNI project, as outlined in Fig. 1 below. This section outlines these core phases, discussing the purpose, data collection and interpretation methods, as well as some of the trustworthiness safeguards. These points are summarised in Table 1 using a PNI inquiry into a theory of change underpinning the empowerment of women in an international development program in Niger to illustrate each phase (Zucchini et al., 2022).

A PNI project commences with the *collection* of stories around a particular point of inquiry. For example, stories of experiences of hope could be collected to explore what enables hope in particular contexts. There are various methods through which stories may be collected, either individually (such as in interviews, narrative incident reports, journaling, or surveys) or collectively (such as in group interviews or facilitated story sessions). The choice of story collection method can be informed by an analysis of the context and the relevant skills of the researcher, allowing the maximum opportunity to accurately represent participants' experiences (Kurtz, 2014; Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020). A critical component of the story collection phase is to include questions that explore what the story means to the participant who told it. While collective sense-making of the patterns across stories is covered in the next phase, this individual reflection is critical to understanding the underlying feelings and beliefs from the storyteller's perspective. PNI allows every participant's interpretation to be included, whether they participate in the sense-making process or not, creating a richer base of meaning in the story data (Kurtz, 2014).

When determining the number of stories that should be collected, Kurtz (2014) recommends the maximisation of 'narrative richness' in addressing the research inquiry. Narrative richness is a function of the stories' volume and utility. It is defined by how well the stories tap into a rich vein of experience and how well participant responses to interpretive questions tap into relevant interpretations. Therefore, maximising narrative richness may be achieved by choosing a story collection method that focuses on a smaller story set but facilitates deeper interpretive utility or by collecting a larger number of stories that allow pattern discovery across the dataset. The research questions and desired output drive decisions about volume and depth.

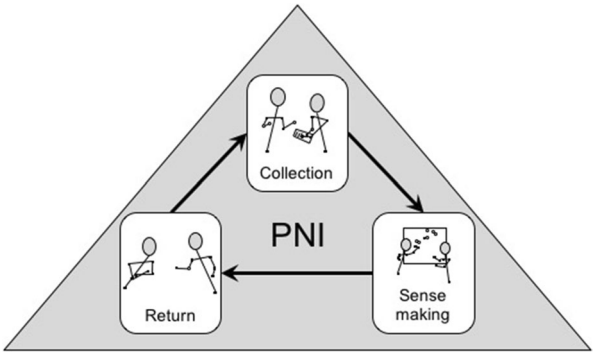

Fig. 1 Essential phases of Participatory Narrative Inquiry. Image used with permission from Kurtz (2014)

Table 1 Illustration of Participatory Narrative Inquiry essential phases, including underlying principles, data collection and interpretation methods

Phase	Underlying principles	Data collection methods	Data interpretation methods	Illustration (Zucchini et al., 2022)
Phase 1: Story Collection	This phase is designed to capture stories of lived experience around a particular point of inquiry. Stories can be collected individually or through group methods. An essential principle of this phase is to include methods that explore what the story means to the individual participant, identifying their underlying feelings, beliefs, and interpretations	Individual interviews Journals or diaries Surveys Narrative incident reports Group interviews Facilitated group story-sharing session	Questions are used to explore what the story means to the participant	*Inquiry*: How is women empowerment facilitated through an international development program? *Data Collection Method*: Individual interviews using computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI) techniques, collecting 563 stories of experience with participants' responses to 10 interpretative questions about that experience. These included exploring woman's feelings during the event, the importance of the story for her, the reaction of the men in the household, and the factors that influenced the conclusion of the story. These interpretative questions were used to group stories according to form, function, and phenomenon *Story elicitation*: The story prompt was designed to tap into 3 key elements of storying: participants' experience, how they felt, and their perspective of the experience. The story prompt was "Looking back at the last five years, do you remember a decision in your household that was important to you? How did it happen? What was the impact on your household?"

Table 1 (continued)

Phase	Underlying principles	Data collection methods	Data interpretation methods	Illustration (Zucchini et al., 2022)
Phase 2: Catalysis	This supplementary phase is designed to highlight patterns and trends across the storyset to catalyse participants' interpretations. One of the defining principles of this phase is that patterns are not presented as a researcher-led 'analysis' of results but rather used to enhance group sense-making with participants (co-researchers)	N/A	Mixed methods techniques are used to identify patterns across the story-set, which are presented to participants to guide sense-making	*Data Interpretation Method*: Given the size of the story set, the research team first engaged in a series of mixed-methods interpretations of the data to create catalysis for participants' sense-making. This included creating visual representations of some of the trends in the story set and self-interpretations
Phase 3: Sense-Making	The purpose of this phase is for the researcher to use a series of methods that foster iterative cycles of foraging and sense-making loops to uncover insights with participants. Methods are designed to familiarise participants with the storysets, research purpose, and each other to build a collaborative alliance between co-researchers. Processes are then designed to guide co-researchers through recursive interpretative methods of deconstruction, contemplation, construction, and convergence of new insights from the stories	Records and artefacts from facilitated sense-making workshops	Researchers and participants work with stories collected in Phase 1 in iterative sense-making processes, including: - deconstruction of story elements - iterative review of stories to discover underlying feelings, beliefs, values - contemplation of themes - construction of artefacts to represent an emerging understanding of themes - identification of convergence of data that supports new insights	*Data Collection Method*: Key informative interview (KII) with program stakeholders, focus groups with local experts and a sub-group of participants *Data Interpretation Method*: The trends identified in the catalysis phase were discussed with experts and groups of participants to kick off a re-reading and discussion of a selection of representative stories. This approach made it possible to deconstruct key elements in the stories, contemplating areas of impact. Hypotheses were discussed with participants which led to the construction of a theory of change based on the convergence of data illuminating the realities experienced by the targeted population group

Table 1 (continued)

Phase	Underlying principles	Data collection methods	Data interpretation methods	Illustration (Zucchini et al., 2022)
Phase 3: Return	The underlying principle of the final phase is to provide methods through which insights can be returned to the community for action. This may include recommendations to enhance theory and/or practice	N/A	Communication of central themes to guide future action or further inquiry	*Data Interpretation Method*: The researcher worked with participant analyses to create a theory of change (ToC) of the impact of the program on the empowerment of women, providing useful insights to guide future practice and theoretical frameworks

The second essential phase of PNI focuses on *making sense* of the collected stories. Kurtz (2014) draws on insights from a diverse range of disciplines to guide sense-making processes, enabling the adaptation of techniques from fields that have well-developed methods for identifying patterns in complex data to guide sense-making. Sense-making requires participants and researchers to move through iterative cycles of reflection and discussion on perspectives and interpretations of the stories. Sense-making begins with creating contact between the stories, inquiry purpose, and participants. The methods selected in this phase invite co-researchers to zoom in and out on the stories and responses as needed in a churning process or foraging loop for meaning-making. These methods may deconstruct aspects of the stories and responses to discover a deeper understanding of the internal feelings, beliefs, and values in the stories. In the churning phase, activities may include sorting or arranging stories in a landscape or timeline to help construct a coherent new understanding. The churning process allows a convergence of patterns and insights to emerge that can create a change in perspective. The entire sense-making process is outlined in Fig. 2 below.

The sense-making process in PNI includes the dual dimensions of examining individual perceptions and the interchange of multiple perspectives, known as intersubjectivity (Cooper-White, 2014). This feature differentiates PNI from IPA, which is distinguished by its commitment to the detailed analysis of personal experience such that each individual case is present in the reporting (Smith, 2017). PNI, by comparison, focuses more on shared sense-making of patterns *across* individual stories. Therefore, the methods selected are designed to facilitate dialogue and the creation of collectively constructed artefacts to develop a shared understanding of the problems and possibilities that emerge. It is through this process that the development of knowledge is socially constructed, as "it is in the hearing of others' stories that we can metaphorically lay our stories alongside another's, seeking resonances and reverberations that help us imagine who we might become" (Clandinin & Raymond, 2006,

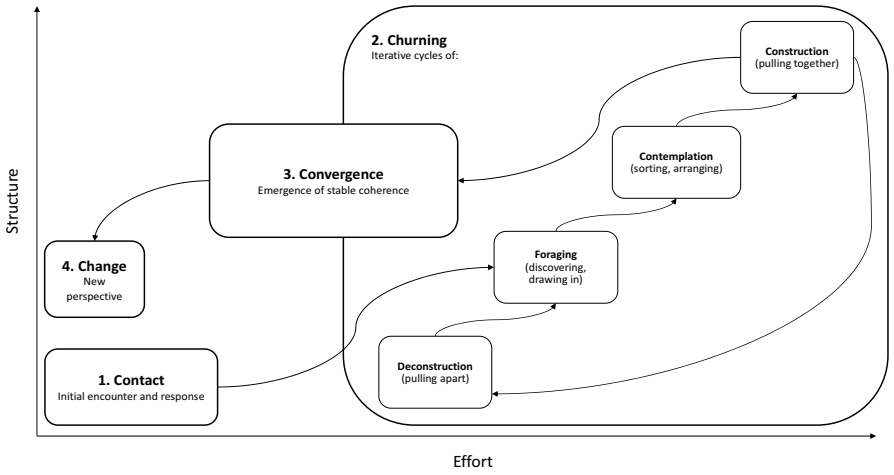

Fig. 2 Sense-making processes in Participatory Narrative Inquiry

p. 103). Holman Jones (2016) notes that stories provide a unique window into understanding the experiences of others, particularly those who are different from us. She positions story sharing as a doorway to understanding, demonstrating that creating a place for multiple stories to be heard allows a more nuanced and complex understanding than interpreting a single story.

The final essential phase of the PNI methodology is known as *return*, where the insights gathered from the project return to the community to expand collective discourse. Stories of the project will return to the community whether or not the return phase is supported; therefore, the focus of this phase is on nurturing the process to support future actions. The return process may be considered in how insights are storied for the community. For example, methods may range from an interactive presentation after the project, to more embodied practices that engage the community in further sense-making and story-sharing, such as a physical or virtual exhibition. The return phase can enhance the impact of a PNI project by creating a common language, providing space for people to process the project's outcomes, and protecting against the possible negative implications of an abrupt withdrawal of participation (Kurtz, 2014). The return phase can also gather feedback to enhance research practice and guide future projects.

3.2 Supplementary Phases: Planning, Catalysis, and Intervention

A PNI project may be supplemented by up to three additional phases: *planning*, *catalysis* and *intervention*. These are depicted in Fig. 3 below. These supplementary phases complement the core aspects of the methodology, enabling flexibility in the degree of complexity that can be addressed within the project scope and available resourcing.

The *planning* phase incorporates participants' voices in the project's design, for example, by piloting and refining the story collection process. The *catalysis* phase is instrumental when projects generate a large volume of stories, as mixed methods

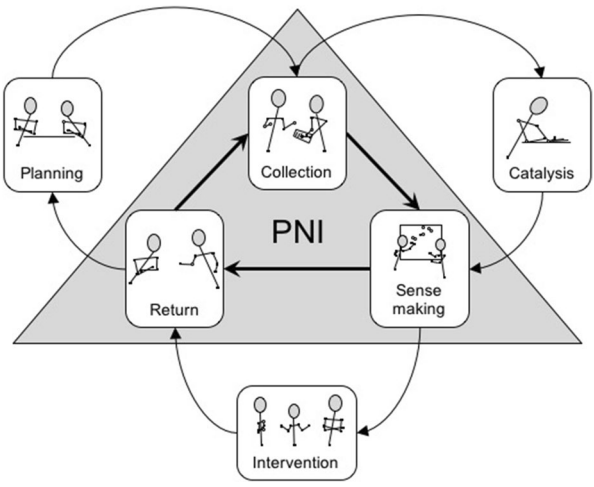

Fig. 3 Essential and optional phases of Participatory Narrative Inquiry. Image used with permission from Kurtz (2014)

may be used to highlight patterns and potential interpretations to aid participants in the sense-making process. The language used here is worthy of note to differentiate *catalysis* from *analysis*. That is, the methods used in this phase are designed to catalyse ideas and interpretations from the participants rather than provide a reductionistic analysis by the researcher. For example, a PNI researcher/facilitator provides multiple interpretations from different perspectives to provide food for thought in the sense-making process. Finally, a narrative *intervention,* using one of a variety of other story-work approaches, such as participatory theatre or narrative therapy, may aid in exploring collective dialogue to support the return phase.

4 Ethical Considerations and Implications

Although stories are used in everyday language and are a natural way in which we make sense of our experiences, some conditions influence how we share stories that can impact the trustworthiness of the data and participants' experience. Therefore, researchers must consider the environment they are co-creating, using reflexive processes to ensure they do no harm and facilitate a space of trust for participants to safely explore their experiences (Buchanan & Warwick, 2021). For example, providing transparency throughout the project empowers participants by allowing them to see and understand how their stories may be used. It is also essential to identify the boundaries of confidentiality, creating ethical expectations and ensuring that participants have informed consent and autonomy, not only over the stories they tell, but over the stories that are told about them. Careful attention must be paid to the power dynamics, with the researcher/facilitator considering how they create the conditions to mediate any potential imbalances. An invitational rather than directive approach can support this goal, demonstrating respectful curiosity about participants' expertise and experience.

It is also imperative to consider how to navigate the collaboration between participant and researcher interpretations. There have been critiques of deliberative methods in participatory research in which the traditional role of the qualitative researcher to support the synthesis and interpretation of data has been removed. For example, Evans and Kotchetkova (2009) have demonstrated the potential risks of loss of contribution to theoretical and empirical knowledge when researchers become overly preoccupied with the empowerment of participants to the exclusion of participating in the interpretative process. There is an inherent tension between empowering participants by prioritising their interpretations and helping participants deepen their explorations with help from knowledgeable subject matter experts. We believe it is the researcher's responsibility to create an environment that actively positions participants as co-researchers while ensuring that the researchers' complementary expertise neither sets up a power imbalance nor fails to provide useful support.

PNI has been used across a diverse range of peer-reviewed academic studies, demonstrating its applicability for a broad array of inquiries. These include topics such as teacher wellbeing and professional identity in a complex environment (Holley-Boen, 2018), evaluating international empowerment programs (Zucchini et al., 2022), barriers and enablers that support the realisation of rights of persons with disabilities (Olshanska et al., 2016), and exploring youth identities in Greek migrants

(Mallos, 2020). Several doctoral dissertations have also employed the methodology to explore complex topics such as contributors to the wellbeing of mental health workers working in indigenous communities (Seidlikoski Yurach, 2021), or the factors that enable white educators to thrive in diverse urban school settings (DeRemer, 2022). Further, in a study designed to examine the efficacy and feasibility of five different qualitative methods to explore the quality of care relationships in long-term care settings, PNI was rated as one of the best approaches for a variety of different patient groups (Scheffelaar et al., 2020), attesting to its relevance in exploring complex experiences.

As the field of positive psychology matures, we are at a crossroads. A diverse range of research methodologies are needed to ensure that growth can continue towards our core purpose of understanding the complex dynamics that enable individuals and communities to flourish. We argue that including methodologies such as PNI in the wellbeing research toolkit can support that growth, addressing limitations posed by the overemphasis on positivism to date. PNI provides a process through which experience can be explored in context, facilitating explorations that can advance the development of contextually relevant theories and practices. Positive psychology was founded on the belief that rigorous (translated as quantitative) methods were needed to advance the scientific discovery and development of theories of wellbeing. However, it could be argued that this narrow perspective of research rigour has limited theoretical development in the field, with generalisations that are built on acontextual, cross-sectional study designs, and a lack of process or appropriate methods to examine complex dynamics of human behaviour (Diener et al., 2022).

Some will argue that stories pose the same limitations as self-report data. However, self-report measures are typically de-contextualised, and thus are at risk of response biases due to a lack of grounding in culturally specific ways of knowing (Christopher, 2014). Stories, by comparison, are contextually bound by their very nature. In fact, it is the subjective nature of the story that illuminates its rich complexities, layered with the symbolic meaning of the individual, and provides relevant insights (Phillips & Bunda, 2018). The purpose of storying is not to uncover 'objective truth' but rather to discover 'locally situated truths' (Phillips & Bunda, 2018). Working with stories heeds the call to engage in more phenomenological work needed to advance the field (van Zyl et al., 2023), not as an alternative but as a complement to the current well-established approaches.

PNI complements other narrative and phenomenological methodologies that enable idiographic explorations of experience. However, it offers alternative benefits derived through the participatory and interdisciplinary underlying principles. The PNI methods deliberately and intentionally integrate different ways of knowing, and thus provide the potential to uncover generative insights that may not be possible from a mono-disciplinary perspective (Wissing, 2021). Empowering participants as co-researchers creates a more inclusive research culture, unlocking the benefits of co-creating meaning between scientists and the societies we seek to serve (van Breda & Swilling, 2018). These benefits are supported by three core elements of the PNI approach: 1) improved rigour and quality through combining participants' real-world knowledge and experience with researchers' expertise in facilitating

meaning-making; 2) methods that integrate different perspectives, allowing the development of unique insights; and 3) returning insights to the community for action or further investigation, creating the opportunity for a virtuous cycle of theory development. This shared leadership in research provides the opportunity for meaningful transformation in the scientific advancement of the field and in the individuals who contribute to this endeavour. In doing so, it creates a pathway for a more democratised perspective of wellbeing, as suggested by Alexandrova and Fabian (2022).

The social constructionist principles underpinning PNI create a process where a plurality of perspectives can be heard, allowing participants to gain new insights and see the relationship between their interests and others in a new way (Evans & Kotchetkova, 2009). Reason and Torbert (2001) suggest that such approaches provide the opportunity to "contribute directly to the flourishing of human persons, their communities, and the ecosystems of which they are part" (p. 6). Supporting this contention from a theoretical lens, the PNI approach may facilitate the basic nutriments for flourishing by supporting participants' basic psychological needs (Ryan & Deci, 2000). It does this by facilitating autonomy throughout the research cycle, enabling the development of competence through the sense-making process, and, perhaps most importantly, creating a sense of relatedness among participants, between participants and researchers, and among the entire community.

It is our hope that in expanding our research horizons to include methodologies such as PNI we may not only address some of the constraints inherent in the dominant positivist narrative so far, but we may also while creating the opportunity to build wellbeing whilst researching wellbeing. After all, what better way to advance the field of positive psychology than to apply our science to our scientific processes?

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Declarations

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