Chapter 3

The researchers’ role in re-constructing patient narratives to present them as patient experiences

Janka Koschack and Wolfgang Himmel

Introduction

According to Arthur W. Frank (2013), illness is a call for stories. Indeed, there are many studies that underpin the power of storytelling as a way of ‘meaning making’ (not only) for ill people (Rosenthal, 1993). In medicine, there are several reasons where storytelling—or a narrative perspective—has become increasingly important.

Firstly, it can be useful for doctor–patient encounters. Narratives of illness provide a framework for approaching a patient’s problems holistically (Mansel, 2014). Narratives may uncover diagnostic and therapeutic options and offer a method for addressing existential qualities such as inner hurt, despair, hope, grief, and moral pain, which frequently accompany, and may even constitute, people’s illnesses (Greenhalgh, 1998; 1999). Patient narratives are no less important in medicine than evidence based on scientific research—for several reasons. To begin with, the evidence from randomized trials and cohort studies cannot be mechanistically applied to individual patients whose behaviour is contextual and idiosyncratic and who experience their illness in a unique way. Vice versa, ‘evidence-based’ clinicians recognize the value of case expertise, i.e., the stories of illness scripts and clinical anecdotes before they select a medical maxim for a clinical decision (Greenhalgh, 1999). A narrative perspective helps doctors in the consultation to focus on the patient, to strengthen professional curiosity, to relieve them from the pressure to issue too many prescriptions and referrals, all of which can improve clinical outcomes (Easton, 2017; Overcash, 2003). Narrative inquiries may enhance the assessment of care needs and narrative stories may be translated into plans for practice and service developments (Hsu and McCormack, 2012).

Secondly, meaning making can support healing when sufferers can tell a story to reflect and express their experiences and when these experiences are heard and acknowledged by others (Collie and Long, 2005). In this case, storytelling has the function of emotional processing, social integration of experiences, and re-establishing them to an organized
Illness Narratives in Practice

Potentials and Challenges of Using Narratives in Health-related Contexts

EDITED BY
Gabriele Lucius-Hoene, Christine Holmberg & Thorsten Meyer