Interpreting Narratives Within a Cross-National Interdisciplinary Study: A Case Study of a Collaborative Process

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This article presents a case study of a collaborative process for the analysis of a young girl’s narrative on becoming an adolescent in Shanghai. The purpose was to illuminate how interpretation of narratives can be strengthened with a diverse team of researchers.

Methods: Three different researchers, each representing a different discipline and lens for analyzing qualitative data, collaboratively analyzed and interpreted a 12-year-old girl’s narrative from Shanghai as part of the Global Early Adolescent Study. Each researcher first analyzed the narrative separately with a written summary that was then analyzed for differences and similarities across the research team, along with further cross-checks of the translations of the recording.

Results: Throughout the analysis, we argued that the narrative was a story about gender and power: the gendered nature of socializing a girl, the interpersonal process of a mother, at the behest of a father, to press a daughter to behave in a proper, modest fashion, and the daughter learning the appropriate and proper way for adult woman to comport herself. At the same time, by bridging our interpretations together, we also came to agree that it was a story of a Chinese girl’s loss of freedom and capitulation, evident in her resignation to comply with the gender norm that required that she refrain from displaying her body in a certain way at the dinner table.

Conclusions: Recording our collaborative analysis process enabled us to illuminate how researchers who work on cross-national studies can combine forces of perspectives and of methods—for a compelling approach that provides a more comprehensive analysis of the underlying meanings behind an interview narrative.

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IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTION

Qualitative methods are especially useful for understanding the human experience. In this case example, three researchers from different disciplines in a cross-national study illustrate how a collaborative approach to understanding a Chinese girl’s narrative of socialization into a gender norm produced a complex interpretation of the process and her experience.

Telling stories has been described as a fundamental part of the human experience; it is how we know and make meaning of our experiences [1]. The qualitative method of gathering narratives from individuals, groups, and communities through interviews to garner information and generate knowledge about experience has been widely adopted, in health research and beyond [2–6]. The vast majority of research on adolescent health employs descriptive and inferential statistical analyses to produce knowledge about constructs and variables reflected in demographics (race), scale scores (i.e., CES Depression Scale [7]),

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and survey items (i.e., Add Health Survey [8]). Such analyses provide evidence of associations or predict a proportion of variability in behavioral health outcomes. Qualitative methods in general (i.e., grounded theory [9]; participant observation [5]; and interpretive phenomenological analysis [10]), and the analysis of narratives in particular, enable adolescent health researchers to understand how youth experience processes and attribute meaning of such variables, as well as theoretically and empirically driven dimensions of those experiences, including the experiential dimensions of those very dependent and independent variables used in statistical analyses and the findings of those analyses. In particular, efforts to understand a phenomenon or process, such as gender socialization, are especially well-served by narrative methods, in which the levels of analysis provide insight and evidence both of content and, literally, participants’ narrations that reflect how they navigate larger “stories” or discourses that organize and shape social experiences [11]. That is, narrative methods can offer insights into mechanisms by which sexual health outcomes associated with this process happen; predictors of outcomes operate; and potential “entry points” for intervention [12]. This feature of narrative analysis is particularly relevant to girls’ navigation of gender norms; girls may not say directly that they are complying with them but, as we illuminate below, narrative analysis reveals how they are experiencing and managing gender socialization processes through analysis [13].

As part of the first phase of the Global Early Adolescent Study (GEAS), we gathered narratives through semistructured interviews from adolescents, aged 11–13 years, across 15 diverse cultural sites to understand what gender norms the early adolescents are being socialized into, how they are being manifested, and how adolescents are learning them (see the study by Mmari, in this supplement, for study design). While the strengths of working across cultures and disciplines are undeniable and yield much more robust findings [14,15], one key concern is how to develop strong interpretations given cultural differences [11]. This concern is acute when gender is understood as a social construct or a set of relations [16], and as a developmental process infused with distinct meanings [17], as in the GEAS.

We describe a way to address it in a case study of our collaborative process of developing an interpretation of a girl’s narrative about when she first realized she was no longer a child when her parents treated her differently. That is, this article is a twofold case study of how we worked as researchers and also a “snippet” of what an actual case study of this girl’s experience of gender socialization would look like, to serve as an exemplar of how a finding is developed, established, and reported using our method. It is therefore a partial case study by definition. The individual interview took place in a youth activity center in a small community within Shanghai in which the study was being done; it was conducted privately by a female interviewer. The participants were recommended by a key informant working in the study community, which had relatively low economic development and a high migrant proportion. Before the narrative interview, interviewers carried out a timeline group activity with several participants (3–6 on average). The timeline activity served as a warming-up exercise that made the young adolescents much easier to get into the topics the interviewers were going to talk individually. Moreover, this activity helped to build the rapport between the interviewers and the interviewees. We chose this particular interview and narrative because this girl [we will call her MeiMei] told an articulate, well-developed story that included a moment of transgression, providing a fissure through which to hear about a feminine gender norm, how her parents socialized her into it, and her experience of that process.

The team of researchers (C.Y., D.L.T., and K.M.) for this analysis included the primary qualitative researcher from the Shanghai site, trained in adolescent health and working with youth there for over 6 years, representing an “insider” cultural lens (C.Y.); a developmental psychologist with expertise in female adolescence, gender, sexuality, and qualitative methods (D.L.T.); and a medical anthropologist specializing in adolescent public health (K.M.). We report this example to illuminate how different qualitative analyses and disciplinary perspectives utilized in tandem can shape analysis and interpretation in a single project, as well as strengthen the analysis with interpretations that might fall by the wayside. Furthermore, this case study provides insights into the unique attributes of each perspective, especially in terms of (1) identifying and incorporating what was common across our initial interpretations and (2) identifying and “talking through” what was different to articulate a fuller understanding by incorporating our unique insights. While each of us had a specific lens for interpreting the girl’s narrative, it is the working through and weaving together of all three perspectives. We developed these summaries initially for a presentation on disciplinary differences in narrative analysis and the importance of cultural context in interpreting findings for the entire GEAS research team. Subsequently, these summaries became further developed from an integrated analysis via ongoing discussion through email and developing the written analysis iteratively that provided us with a comprehensive understanding about how the girl experienced being socialized into a local gender norm prevalent in Shanghai, which holds a mix of traditional and more progressive beliefs about gender and power in the family [18,19]. This confluence constituted one form of triangulation (There are many forms of triangulation, that is, comparing across other data in the corpus or other studies; here we are using the technique of multiple researchers discussing and building an agreed-upon interpretation [3],) while our distinct emphases, reflecting theoretical and disciplinary stances, offered more nuance and depth, as well as cultural accuracy.

For this article, we first provide the actual narrative told by a 12-year-old girl in response to the question: “Do you remember a situation when you realized you were no longer a child and that your mum/dad was treating you differently than before?” We then describe the analysis and how the team (C.Y., D.L.T., and K.M.) collaborated. We conclude with reflections on this approach to analyzing qualitative data in a cross-national study.

The Narrative

“When I was little, I was very active. I liked to put my feet on the table, and the table was very short, as high as a chair. At that time, my parents did not correct me. But when I grew up, my dad mentioned that. He said: “You should not put your feet on the table.” And he patted my feet….he wanted to move my feet onto the floor. But I have got used to putting my feet on the table. And you have grown up. You cannot be like this anymore.” Yes, don’t have manner, and she said that it would be bad if other people saw I was sitting like this. My mom also said that there was a Chinese old saying that sitting should be like a bell, standing like a pine tree…. She said like that everyday, which changed me…. I felt annoy[ed], haha… I just went back to my room. At that time, she was a little angry, if I talked back, she
would be mad. So I never challenged her bottom line, so I just went back to my room. [After that, I paid attention.] When we watched the news, she always sat beside me. She would pat on me if I put my feet on the table. [I:] ... do you think she would only ask that because you are a girl, or no matter girl or boy?... Especially girls should be like that, because... it’s not rude to put feet on the table, but it’s a bad manner... My mom said that it was a bad manner... She kept saying that every time when I put my feet on the table... [when girls put their feet on the table]. And she told me that I should never do it again. Sometimes I might forget, but she would remind me every time when she saw me doing it... For the first a few times, I felt annoyed, but later on, I thought she was right, because it was not good looking anyway, and she claimed last time that she would beat my feet down to the floor if I did it again...[t]hen I dared not to do it.

Analysis

The first step in the analytical process involved each of us conducting a preliminary analysis of the narrative separately by writing a summary of our interpretation and thoughts about the narrative. We each used the specific, standard qualitative approaches within our areas of expertise: thematic analysis (C.Y.) [20], thick description (K.M.) [21], and narrative analysis (D.L.T.) [17]. After reviewing each summary, we identified both overlaps and distinct contributions. In the following section, we explain how we worked collaboratively to clarify our understanding of MeiMei’s experience being socialized into a specific gender norm.

As we were developing the interpretation for this methodological article, C.Y. listened to the recording again, a common practice with qualitative interviews. Another team member in Shanghai had translated from Chinese to English; C.Y. wanted to ensure that the translations were accurate. Having seen D.L.T.’s interpretation of the narrative, C.Y. reviewed the narrative in its original Chinese and changed the translation: “it is not rude but bad manner;” to “girls should not do rude things like... split your thigh or cross your leg... it is not civilized...” Another translation C.Y. questioned was when the girl reported that her mother “claimed last time that she would beat my feet down to the floor if I did it again.” In Chinese, the words and the pronunciation “Pai Xia Lai” could indicate that the mother would actually take a photo of her with that gesture or beat her feet to the floor. For C.Y., the former interpretation seemed much more accurate given the context. These translation corrections were salient to provide more validity and nuance to D.L.T.’s understanding of the norm itself, the mother’s strategy to enforce MeiMei’s compliance, and MeiMei’s experience.

A narrative about growing up

The first part of our interpretations was similar, which was essentially a summary of the story. C.Y.’s statement was especially clear: The girl used to put her feet on the table when she was a child. One day, her father said she could not do that anymore, and her mother also convinced her that now she was an adolescent girl, it was inappropriate for her to do that. After being corrected many times by her mother, she finally learned this rule. K.M. emphasized a shift from childhood to adolescence, both the family process by which she was socialized into this norm and MeiMei’s narration of her experience, noting MeiMei’s annoyance at first to be reminded by her mother not to put her feet on the table. Then she left for her room, acknowledging that this was the most acceptable way to demonstrate her annoyance. K.M. thought that she did this since talking back seemed like it would be far worse for a child to do toward a parent. She eventually came to realize her mother was right. C.Y. further explained: MeiMei reports being told by her mother “You have grown up... You cannot be like this anymore.” C.Y. described that in China, most boys and girls are raised freely when they are little kids. But when they grow up, rules are expected to be learned quickly and obeyed. D.L.T. noted that her mother threatened her if she did this behavior again, signifying the importance of her compliance and that it is a violation worth having beaten out of her.

A narrative about gender socialization

Given that the question was a general one, we must establish that the participant is talking about a norm for being socialized into a woman/man and thus that the norm has a gendered meaning. In our analyses, we each addressed this fundamental question. Comparing and integrating our questions and observations enabled us to draw a confident conclusion that the story was about being socialized into womanhood. We come to this finding carefully. All of us raised the question of whether this norm is exclusive to girls or an overall norm for being an adult. As K.M. observed, while the narrative seems to highlight the importance of “good manners” for a female in Chinese culture, she is not sure if this is only the case for girls. D.L.T. has a similar question, noting that MeiMei draws on “an old Chinese saying” — “sitting like a bell... standing like a pine tree,”— which may or may not be about becoming a proper woman. Other evidence is needed.

The narrative itself is evidence that being socialized into feminine behaviors is significant; MeiMei chooses to tell a story about a gender norm when asked a general question. D.L.T. noted: “It seems like such a small thing, but the way she describes this change in how she moves and places her body (perhaps because having her feet up is immodest or suggests a kind of defiance or lack of proper comportment of her body in line with feminine norms) and its enforcement is memorable and a strong example.” This is a story not only about becoming an adult but also about becoming an appropriate, good woman. C.Y. raises the same question and has other evidence and understanding of the culture to strengthen the claim that this is particular to girls: “As an only child in her family she could not perceive whether doing so as a boy would be OK. Another adolescent female interviewee talked about a similar thing (she sat cross-legged in a rocking chair) in her family. These two narratives gave me an impression that society has more restrictions on women to perform as women.”

Becoming a woman: The work of gender socialization

We all observed how this process was initiated by the father and implemented by the mother and shared the interpretation that the process itself is gendered. C.Y. focused her analysis on this aspect of the story, articulating the ways in which this “work” was gendered labor [22]. She noted that the father sets the rules and the importance of his perception of this behavior, while the mom does the detailed work. She comments on how it is the father’s perception of inappropriate behavior that animates the mother’s actions. D.L.T. also
observed how the father initiates and the mother engages in the relational process with MeiMei to socialize her, as well as MeiMei’s account of how she thinks and feels. Now that she is “grown up,” she is under pressure to comply with this feminine norm and give up a comfort of her childhood. She gets the message from her mom, who says “it would be bad if other people saw I was sitting like this.”

**Becoming a woman: The experience of gender socialization**

In her observation, K.M. records that “the respondent knew this was especially true for females, reinforcing the gender norm about females always having “good manners.” The narrative is also about MeiMei’s new awareness of, and to her parents the salience of, a woman having “good manners” by complying with the gender norm. D.L.T. notes that she distinguishes this from being “rude,” which is about how she interacts with others; having a “bad manner” is a way of being, and possibly reflecting poor judgment, which may be a negative quality in a woman.

D.L.T. focused in particular on the behavior as a comportment change, the specific containment of her body that was required by and marked her status as a woman, which was signaled by the new importance of “manners” and interest in being “good looking.” MeiMei is learning that she must keep her body still. D.L.T. wondered if there might be a value to appearance embedding in this story, as well as one of morality, given the D.L.T. focused in particular on the behavior as a comportment change, the specific containment of her body that was required by and marked her status as a woman, which was signaled by the new importance of “manners” and interest in being “good looking.” MeiMei is learning that she must keep her body still. D.L.T. wondered if there might be a value to appearance embedding in this story, as well as one of morality, given the mother’s threat. In particular, D.L.T. also notes that as MeiMei gets older, she may be more concerned with what is “good looking,” perhaps that adolescent girls may need to “look good” to be of value and/or considered proper or worthy of respect or desirability. D.L.T. also notes that the mother’s threat to take a photo of MeiMei’s feet on the table could be used not necessarily to harm her but as a strategy to ensure that MeiMei complies; it may be that when a girl becomes a woman, she may be judged on how she appears and in particular on the “bad manner” of immodest comportment.

C.Y. also brings to our attention that MeiMei initially resists compliance with her mother’s insistent instructions by retreating to her room instead of talking back. C.Y. suggests that her subsequent silence is an expression of unhappiness particular to girls, noting that being silent is a stereotypical gender quality for women. C.Y. concludes that her mother is rather relentless about her learning not to “forget,” whereas D.L.T. suggests that maybe MeiMei did not forget so much as finding her own rationale for shifting into her mother’s perspective, indicated by saying “it is not good looking anyway.” Together, D.L.T. and C.Y. provide a similar yet layered interpretation to MeiMei’s silence—doing what her parents have asked to “be grown up,” ending her story with what sounds like resignation: “later on, I thought she was right” when her mother intensifies the pressure with the threat “that she would beat my feet down to the floor if I did it again, then I dared not to do it.” MeiMei’s description resonates with research documenting a silencing of the self as girls enter adolescence in the United States and other parts of the world [13].

D.L.T.’s interpretation about socialization into this feminine norm as constraining to freedom of movement, comportment, and this meaning of “split[ting] your thigh or cross[ing] your leg” was also supported by C.Y.’s inclusion of the cultural and historical underpinnings of MeiMei’s parents’ concern about her compliance with this gender norm:

In ancient China, there are many moral standards constraining women, one of them is the four virtues (morality, proper speech, modest manner, and diligent work). It came from The Book of Rites (approximately around 200 BC–8 AD). After imposing on Chinese women for centuries, it was criticized radically by the intellectuals since the May Fourth New Culture period (c.1915–37). Although the concept of four virtues is not advocated anymore, it still has influence as cultural merits. The Rites reflected the core concept of Confucian culture, which has influenced the Chinese society for thousands of years. In other words, for those who are influenced by traditional Confucian cultures, they would emphasize virtues when behaving themselves or raising their children.

That might explain why they consider the girl’s behavior as a manner that needs to be educated within culture context.

C.Y.’s contribution of the cultural underpinnings emphasized the long-standing value of the four virtues that women have traditionally been taught to embody, including “morality” and “modest manner.” The interviewer had noted that MeiMei’s parents were particularly traditional and that she also lived with her mother’s parents, which furthered the validity of this interpretation; despite her father being college educated, it was he who raised the need for MeiMei not to put her feet on the table.

**Discussion**

The goal of this case study was to illuminate how interpretation of narratives can be strengthened with a diverse team collaborating. We utilized an example from the GEAS project to illuminate how such collaboration was and can be done. We each brought a perspective or thread to the interpretation, a different standpoint of distinct value—without one being “more right” than another. We engaged in a dynamic process to develop our shared understanding of a girl’s narrative about gender socialization.

Throughout our analysis, we argued that it is also a story about gender and power: the gendered nature of socializing a girl, the interpersonal process of a mother, at the behest of a father, pressing a daughter to behave in a proper, modest fashion, and the daughter learning the appropriate and proper way for adult woman to comport herself. It is also a story of a Chinese girl’s loss of freedom, resistance, and resignation to complying with the gender norm that requires that she contain her body and that she remembers to do so. We all observed that the enforcement of this norm seems to exemplify both the process and meaning of gender socialization, perhaps a minor example of a major process in a Chinese girl’s experience of growing up, as MeiMei said, “it changed me,” from being a girl child into being an adolescent on her way to womanhood.

There are challenges and limitations to this analysis. Given the sensitive topic of the study, and the different meanings and implications for participants reporting their experience, there were challenges in collecting narrative data. Our analysis illuminated the importance of having a depth of cultural knowledge, of the vicissitudes of translation, which can also vary depending on the language. In what ways might asking a young person to tell this kind of story to an adult inform what and how a story is told? In the GEAS study, we considered and addressed the
cultural “regulations”—norms—for talking across age, perceived authority, and concerns about confidentiality that may be deepened by cultural norms. The point of this article was to illuminate how we conducted this analysis with a partial example, a snapshot. The next steps in the analysis would be to compare and contrast this analysis to other participants in this site and our other sites to identify patterns and, equally useful in qualitative research, exceptions in how young people are managing and experiencing gender socialization and how that informs their health.

MeiMei’s narrative is an especially good example of a young person telling a clear story about her experience of gender socialization. This collaborative, cross-cultural technique for narrative analysis is relatively lacking in adolescent health research. This method is not exclusive to gender socialization, as it enables a deep understanding of developmental processes and practices that shape adolescents’ health and well-being. It can and should be used for the study of the experiential aspects of adolescent health; while our example is about gender socialization and sex-differentiality that may be for talking across age, perceived authority, and concerns about confidentiality that may be deepened by cultural norms.

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