

# **Innovative Approaches to Narratives in Health Communication**

Edited by  
**Laura Blount Carper, Ph.D.**  
Texas A&M University-Texarkana

**Critical Perspectives on Social Science**



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# **Innovative Approaches to Narratives in Health Communication**

*Innovative Approaches to Narratives in Health Communication* provides a collection of articles describing a wide variety of topics, applications, and methodologies in the use of narratives in health care. The book includes new, engaging, and emerging research in narratives in the field of health communication. Collectively, these chapters provide a useful framework to apply narratives in a variety of health care contexts. We hope that *Innovative Approaches* is a useful tool for a variety of readers, including students and seasoned researchers and medical professionals and loved ones.



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Her research has been supported by competitive grants dedicated to racial equity, community-driven health initiatives, and structural interventions designed to improve health outcomes. By bridging academic inquiry with real-world applications, her work informs the development of inclusive, culturally responsive health communication strategies that empower individuals and communities to make informed decisions about their well-being.

Dr. Francis earned a bachelor's degree from the University of the Virgin Islands, a dual master's degree from the London School of Economics and Political Science and the University of Southern California, and a PhD from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She is an Associate Professor of Communication Studies at Northeastern University, with dual appointments in the College of Arts, Media, and Design and Bouvé College of Health Sciences.

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After earning a bachelor's degree with a concentration in Journalism from Middle Tennessee State University and a master's in Television, Radio, and Film from Syracuse University, she spent several years in Hollywood working for companies including BET and Paramount Pictures. During that time, she co-founded Paramount's first committee to address health-related diversity among employees. Her first short film, *Ryan's Story* (a day-in-the-life documentary following a young boy with a rare health condition), premiered at the Chinese Theatre in Hollywood, California.

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In the chapter contribution to this book, Dr. Comello draws on a line of inquiry into gameplaying and well-being. She became interested in these topics when she began playing an online game with a friend who had been diagnosed with an illness. As they played, they observed that the game provided them with meaningful shared activity and new ways of thinking about and discussing health, illness, and other life challenges. This experience led to a survey among cancer survivors who play games. That data provided the basis for the chapter, as well as other works on (for example) the values of survivors and how gameplay may support those values.

Dr. Comello completed her master's degree at Colorado State University and her PhD at Ohio State University, with a specialization in health communication at both institutions. She is a Professor at the School of Journalism and Media at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where she teaches courses in health communication, persuasion, and research methods.

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# Introduction

Narratives are a powerful tool in many environments, but particularly in health communication. To help provide some background into the power of narratives, I want to share some details about my own personal history with narratives. I remember as a young girl being hospitalized and listening to all of the jargon-heavy discussions about my health and trying to figure them out. Being all six years old, I found it difficult to understand exactly what was going on, but I remember hearing the stories that my parents were discussing with providers and family members. As a young child, I was diagnosed with a muscle condition that impacts me to this day. I developed and began sharing many stories about perseverance and struggle. These experiences with medical narratives inspired me to focus on health communication. Though this is a small part of my overall health narratives, there is a great opportunity to include narratives in a wide variety of encounters. Whether in patient-provider, family, friends, social media, or many other contexts, narratives are being used in many innovative ways. Before describing the structure of *Innovative Approaches to Narratives in Health Communication (Innovative Approaches)*, a discussion of the importance of narratives, a brief theoretical discussion of narratives, and a concluding explanation of what constitutes narratives as “innovative” in terms of the general structure of the *Innovative Approaches* will be provided.

## Importance of Narratives

Narrative research has developed from the ways that humans make sense of the world around them, and, in turn, develop and create their own identities and relationships (Kellas, 2008). One important distinction needs to be made between storytelling and narratives. While the terms “stories” and “narratives” are sometimes used interchangeably, some researchers suggest they are two distinct ideas. Ochs (1997) defines a “story” as an individual discourse. For example, I remember having a nerve conduction test at Children’s Hospital in New Orleans, Louisiana, and the intense pain that I experienced. This is an example of a singular individual discourse. Ochs (1997) defines “narratives” as larger, broader ideas that encapsulate more than just individual stories but are rooted in larger societal issues. Furthermore, Dahlstrom (2014) describes how narratives follow a particular format that explains cause-and-effect relationships

between specific events, time, and people. Basically, narratives can be applied to a wide variety of contexts. Narratives are particularly important to the field of Health Communication. Research has indicated that people feel like they are “transported” into narratives, and then identify with the characters in the story (Green & Brock, 2000). When I was diagnosed with infertility, I found the success stories of in vitro fertilization (IVF) helpful when going through treatment. I sought out those narratives as I identified with being a part of that population, and consuming those stories gave me hope for the future. My example illustrates the importance of transportation and the dissemination of health-related information. Narrative research in the healthcare context has been a growing area of research in communication, with many studies applying narratives to different populations, diagnoses, environments, and contexts (Lee et al., 2016; Volkman, 2017; Frank et al., 2014). According to Dudley, Squires, Petroske, Dawson, and Brewer (2023), narratives can be used to create openness, encourage patient empowerment, improve patient engagement, impact overall positive health, and improve overall effectiveness in health encounters. Narratives are an important method that has a wide applicability to a variety of contexts. All the chapters in this book will highlight the importance and application of narratives in a wide range of methodological approaches, populations, and contexts.

### **Brief Theoretical Approach**

There are many theories in communication that relate to the use and application of narratives. Some of these theories and frameworks include Narrative Theory, Narratology, Rhetorical Narratology, Narrative Paradigm, and many others. To help provide a broader understanding of narrative theory, a brief description of some main areas is provided.

In terms of narratives research, there are four main areas: narrative as ontology, narrative as epistemology, narrative as individual construction, and narrative as a relational process. Narratives as ontology describe how a narrative is created by interacting with the world, social factors, and past history (Fisher, 1989; Bruner, 1990). Narratives as epistemology focus on how narratives can be used as a way to analyze (Orbuch, 1997). Narratives as individual constructions are connected to personal stories, family interactions, and relationships. Individual construction is focused on what we have learned from those stories. Lastly, narratives as a relational process focus on the use of individual stories and a specific person in the relationship; for example, discussing cancer stories with my cousin. In this book, readers will be provided

examples from all these different types of narratives research applied to a variety of methodological approaches, health communication topics, and contexts. While some chapters will include other theories relevant to the use of narratives, an in-depth explanation of the theory is beyond the scope of these research chapters. The purpose of the book is to provide broad perspectives and applicability of narratives in a variety of contexts.

### **Focus and Structure of Innovative Approaches**

According to Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.), innovation can be defined as “the creating and use of new ideas or methods.” The overall purpose of *Innovative Approaches* is to share cutting-edge research studies using a wide variety of methodological approaches and ideas. In addition, several chapters include suggestions of how to apply narratives in practice and offer some step-by-step plans to achieve better health outcomes. *Innovative Approaches* should be seen as a collection of chapters that share a common theme—the application of narratives in health communication—but offer different views of how narratives can be applied.

*Innovative Approaches* opens with “Distinguishing testimonials from narratives: Advocating for testimonial messages in health communication.” The chapter is about the different types of narrative research, entertainment education, narrative persuasion, and eudaimonic (meaningful) media to highlight connections between existing research and the power of narratives. This first chapter provides helpful definitions and discussions that frame subsequent chapters. After this chapter, the remaining chapters are separated into three broader sections: “Narratives and the Human Experience,” “Narratives in a Higher Education/University Context,” and “Narratives in the COVID-19 Pandemic.”

### **Section 1: Narratives and the Human Experience**

In this section, chapters highlight powerful and emotional topics. The four chapters highlight the use of narratives in more emotional contexts. First, “Using narrative to empower, educate, and make sense of reproductive loss” applies narratives to build empowerment and sensemaking in the larger context of reproductive loss. Next, “Your mother won’t leave this hospitalization: Narrative medicine in the ICU,” uses an autoethnography approach to discuss the impact of healthcare narratives on the family unit and end-of-life care in the ICU. Thirdly, “Discursive practices during the 2022 infant formula shortage,” provides literature on the shortage and analyzes online support

groups during the crisis. The first section concludes with, “Immersion and perceived narrative in recreational video games: Associations with well-being among cancer survivors,” a quantitative analysis of the use of narratives in online gaming and cancer survivors.

### **Section 2: Narratives in a Higher Education/University Context**

The second section will highlight how narratives can be applied to university/college-aged participants. The length of the section should not minimize the importance of these two chapters. First, “The importance of instructor social support for college students’ mental health” analyzes the narratives of fifteen college students’ mental health during college and the role that faculty can have in impacting their mental health. Second, “Narratives and risky behaviors among college students” discusses how narratives can be used to both promote and prevent risky behaviors in which college students engage. Both chapters are great examples of how narratives can be used to discuss topics that relate to health communication but, specifically with college students.

### **Section 3: Narratives in the COVID-19 Pandemic**

The third and final section comprises four chapters discussing the use of narratives during the COVID-19 pandemic. The section begins with “Coming of age in the age of COVID.” This chapter provides literature and research on emerging adulthood during the COVID-19 pandemic. Next, “Beyond COVID-19: Black media’s insights into health messaging for Black audiences,” is a powerful chapter analyzing the video expert panel narratives of traditional Black Media during the first three months of the pandemic. *Innovative Approaches* concludes with the chapter, “I hope people don’t forget about this time in history: A cross-case data analysis of retrospective stories from U.S. healthcare workers during COVID-19” analyzes narratives of frontline workers by discussing data from a qualitative study performed in the Midwestern United States.

Overall, the purpose of *Innovative Approaches* is to provide useful examples of new and innovative methods of analyzing narratives. *Innovative Approaches* includes in-depth research studies, literature reviews, and step-by-step instructions for a variety of health communication contexts to help improve the overall satisfaction and the empowerment of others in health encounters. We hope this book is a useful and educational tool for a wide variety of practitioners, researchers, students, and others.

## Conclusion

Our goal with *Innovative Approaches in Narratives and Health Communication* is to provide a variety of tools, perspectives, and research methodologies in the use of narratives in the ever-changing world. We are optimistic that *Innovative Approaches* is beneficial for at least the three following readers. First, the methodologies provided in this book can be used as a baseline and inspiration for current students and experienced communication scholars considering studying narratives. The methodologies provided can be used as a good first step for future scholars to research narratives for a wide variety of audiences or as an additional resource for more seasoned scholars. Second, the chapters provide a strong theoretical discussion of narratives and examples that could be useful in a variety of academic contexts. The chapters would be a great textbook for both a narratives course and a research methodology course. Finally, beyond academia, *Innovative Approaches* can be used in a diversity of health care settings to improve overall health communication outcomes. Several chapters include suggested frameworks and tips and tricks to apply with both medical providers, loved ones, and caretakers. The ultimate goal is that the chapters provided will assist a diverse pool of health communicators to improve overall communication in a variety of health contexts. We are optimistic that *Innovative Approaches* will serve as a tool to encourage the sharing of stories and the creation of powerful and empowering narratives.

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