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Andrews, Molly

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Abstract:	<p>This article opens with a problematisation of how one can meaningfully discuss the concept of quality in a methodology as notoriously 'murky' as narrative research. Unlike other kinds of qualitative approaches, there is a lack of consensus of what constitutes narrative, much less a clearly prescribed protocol for ascertaining evaluation. It then proceeds by outlining three features of narrative research (the importance of stories, the 'messy' nature of the data, and the attention to temporality), and then provides a close reading of an extract of an interview with a political activist who describes how she made her decision to break the law. Finally, drawing on the previous</p>

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Quality Indicators in Narrative Research

This article will address the complicated question of how quality is assessed in narrative research.ⁱ Unlike some other areas of qualitative research which are defined by a clear and transparent procedure, narrative research is notoriously a murky field. What the term ‘narrative’ means, and how one does it, are questions which evade consensus even amongst those who have been ‘doing it’ for a long time. In the opening lines of our book *Doing Narrative Research*, we write:

Unlike many qualitative frameworks, narrative research offers no automatic starting or finishing points. Since the definition of ‘narrative’ itself is in dispute, there are no self-evident categories on which to focus, as there are with content-based thematic approaches, or with analyses of specific elements of language. Clear accounts of how to analyse the data, as found for instance in grounded theory and in Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, are rare. There are few well-defined debates on conflicting approaches within the field and how to balance them, as there are, for example, in the highly epistemologically-contested field of discourse analysis. In addition, unlike other qualitative research perspectives, narrative research offers no overall rules about suitable materials or modes of investigation, or the best level at which to study stories. It does not tell us whether to look for stories in recorded everyday speech, interviews, diaries, tv programmes or newspaper articles; whether to aim for objectivity or researcher and participant involvement; whether to analyse stories’ particularity or generality; or what epistemological significance to attach to narratives (Andrews, Squire and Tamboukou 2013:1).

Given that that is the case, how can we meaningfully talk about quality in narrative research? What is it exactly that we look to narrative lens to provide us with? Although much of this article will refer to my interview-based work, the discussion has a wider application for narrative scholarship which is characterized by a particular epistemological perspective. This ‘way of knowing’ is fundamentally dialogical, and is built on ground which is forever changing. With this in mind, there are three aspects of narrative research which I will now discuss.

The importance of the story

First, and most obviously, there is a fundamental belief in narrative research that stories mean something, and that they are a rich resource for trying to understand people and the world around us. Speaking from my own experience as an interviewer, narratives rest nestled in the midst of long conversations, amongst all sorts of information and non-storied communications; thus stories emerge and recede, and re-emerge, much like waves upon the shore. They are part of an interview, but they are not the whole of it.

Plummer describes “a narrative self“ that “leads us to ‘the other’ we are not alone... real breathing and emotional people act toward stories through others: they draw upon the stories given them in the wider culture; the listen to them, make sense of them, and use these ideas in the social life.” Drawing on the work of Arthur Frank, Plummer tells us that narratives serve as ‘companions’

“sheltering us from the storms, throughout our lives we recall tales of our birth and childhood, our youth and adulthood, our ageing and dying” (Plummer 2019:54). Stories are a cornerstone of our lives, both lived and imagined (Andrews 2014).

Some have questioned the ‘truth’ of the stories people tell. Here I would caution a word: what is it precisely that one hopes to learn when listening to the tales of others? If it is an historical reconstruction of an event, then it is critical that external sources be consulted. Without this, how can one assess the veracity of the account? While I have always dedicated substantial time to acquainting myself with the verifiable information relevant to the lives of those with whom speak, I do not regard my work as that of an historian. Rather, it is guided by a belief that for the most part people tell stories about their lives which are imbued with a truth that is real to them. It is this subjective dimension which I have always tried to access: what has life looked like from this person’s point of view? Familiarising oneself with the context of a story is critical to the challenge of understanding, but it is only the first step of a complex journey.

Still, with that said, it has been my experience that people do in fact tend to be truthful when they talk about their lives. I mean this in both an objective and subjective manner. As an example, take the story that Rose Kerrigan told me about her early political engagement. At the time that we spoke, Rose was nearing 90 years old. She was a participant in my study of lifetime commitment to working for social change (Andrews 1990). Recalling a time nearly 8 decades earlier, she tells me:

I remember as early as being 7 or 8 years of age and thinking that it was very odd that there were so many people who could afford to be dressed up. You see, we lived around the corner from the Royal Theatre... they used to wear offspreys in their hair with this band round here and long flowing robes. And we used to go down and watch them go in to the theatre from taxis and wonder... here we could hardly buy our own shoes. That made me feel that there was something wrong, somewhere. Why did these people not share their money with us? ... I never felt anger and I never felt envy, I just felt it was wrong somehow. ...at 12 years old I took part in the 1915 rents strike in Glasgow. [when Rose tried to convince her mother to withhold the extra rent] she said ‘we’ll run into debt and we’ll never be able to get out of it. I said to her ‘you give the extra money to me and I’ll bank it.’ Then when I saw I couldn’t convince her by myself I went up the whole close which was 16 tenants and got them all agreed to withhold the rent and we never ever paid that increase. When the rent-man came for the rent, we paid the rent but we never paid the increase.... The result was the 1915 Rent Restriction Act which lasted till 1957. There weren’t increased rents.

Looking at the opening lines of this extract, Rose draws my attention to the internal life of her seven year old self. Referring to the vast discrepancy between the modest circumstances of her own family and the refined theatre goers, she tells me “I remember thinking that it was very odd.” Realistically, there is no way for me to ascertain whether or not she really did have those thoughts as a seven year old child. And yet the description she offers is very compelling. One can almost see the feathered hats and flowing robes, and young children peering out at the taxis coming and going. She then elaborates on her moral sensibilities at that time: “I never felt anger and I never felt envy, I just felt it was wrong somehow.” Did she actually feel that at the time? How would I know? Indeed, how would she know, eight decades after the events being recalled. And yet the account rings true, there is no reason for me to doubt what she is saying, even though I realise that it may not in reality be factual.

The second part of this extract fast forwards five years. Now Rose is 12. The sense of injustice which she experienced by witnessing vast economic disparity as a younger child is still very much alive in her, and in this second story the listener encounters Rose the young activist. Her mother does not want to withhold the rent for fear of running in debt, but Rose strikes a deal with her based on the fundamentals of trade unionism. She manages to convince others in the close to withhold their money and together they are successful at resisting the increased rent. “The result” she says with great pride, “was the 1915 Rent Restriction Act which lasted till 1957. There weren’t increased rents.” Before hearing Rose’s story, I had never heard of the 1915 Rent Restriction Act. But following our interview, I looked it up, and sure enough, this had happened. It might be that her role as a 12 year old organiser was not quite as central as it is conveyed in this story, but it also might have been. Either way, I do not doubt her story in its basic message. She has told me something of her own subjective truth (being a seven year old endowed with a strong sense of right and wrong), coupled with a later event in which she is an effective political actor. This second story is framed in a larger story, that of the Glasgow Rent Act, which is objectively verifiable.

As Rose’s story illuminates, however, stories are not straightforward. Rather, as the listener to this account, I have to ask myself why she is telling this particular story, why to me, and why now? As we are often reminded, stories ‘do things’, and as listeners, we must always interrogate levels of meaning. Rose’s story is important because it tells me something about how she views her very young self – or at the very least how she would like me to view that self: the clarity of her sense of injustice, and her determination to fight it. In this example, the relationship between different levels of stories, a co-mingling of the biographical with the social and political, is evident. Stories always sit in relation to other stories, and personal storytelling in particular can highlight the powerful linkage between the micro and the macro. Rose’s story is memorable because of its portrayal of a highly agentic child, an evocative counter-story of a world in which children were proverbially meant ‘to be seen and not heard.’

Dynamic and messy nature of ‘the data’

The ‘messy’ nature of narrative research means that it is not always clear what does and does not constitute ‘data.’ If one takes seriously the idea that our interpretations are, and should be, informed by life around us, then it stands to reason that we are forever in the midst of unfolding stimuli which might substantiate (or indeed contradict) earlier foundational premises upon which we have built our research. “Data are everywhere” as Mark Freeman once said, and indeed that is true. Generally in the case of interviews, data are considered to be the words which are recorded, then transcribed, and ultimately analysed. But how much of the ‘mess’ - the world which swirls around outside of the recording device- can be built into our more formal construction of that which constitutes our data?

Even were we to close the doors on unconventional ‘data’, were we to argue that our data consists of only those words uttered while the recording device was turned on, and to discount all else, still the world would turn, and the meaning of the words, now written on the page and hidden away in an archive, would still be unstable. Meaning is always a construction, and it is forever in flux. In the setting of an interview, meaning is negotiated – co-constructed, contested, and resisted - between the speaker and the listener. That movement does not cease once the recording has ended, although the particulars of its dynamics do change. Meaning cannot be made to ‘stand still’ and this is perhaps one of the most challenging aspects of conducting narrative research.

These epistemological assumptions are built into the narrative interview (Andrews 2012). People answer questions they believe they have been asked, and similarly, responses of interviewers are at

least partially built upon what they think their respondent has told them. We are trained to check back with those with whom we speak, to see if we have properly understood what we have heard. But ultimately the whole process is imperfect – at best an approximation of intended meaning – as with all human communication. We do the best we can, trying to open ourselves up to hearing things we had not anticipated and considering an existence which might be wholly different to that which we have known ourselves. And yet, there is no failsafe way to assure that the same words are understood in the same way by any two people, nor even by the same person from one moment in time to another. We stick with it, because that is the best we can do. We do not hide behind a veil of proclaimed objectivity, but rather know that despite our best efforts, our understandings of one another are always and only provisional.

Temporal framing

One of the most central components of narrative research is its dynamic temporal framing. Time and story are integrally bound to one another, and this is evident throughout the research process. To illustrate this central feature of narrative, I will briefly discuss one example here, acknowledging that there is a vast literature on this important topic.

It is evident to anyone who thinks about it that where a story begins and where it ends are central to the story being told. In interpersonal relations, one knows that one of the most critical flashpoints of arguments is an agreement on when the dispute began. A child tells her parents that her sibling hit her. The accused child justifies her actions with an explanation that she only did so in response to a certain provocation. The first child continues, situating that offending action as itself having been provoked by a preceding comment or event. And so the cycle continues. Many parents will know how difficult it is to resolve such disputes, which pivot around the question ‘where does the story begin?’. Dissolutions of many human relationships are characterized by a similar lack of consensus regarding starting points. When and how stories end are equally contentious questions and pregnant with ascription of meaning.

The story of any particular political dispute is framed by where it begins and ends. One example of this is the construction of attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11th, 2001.

Oral histories of that day typically begin the chronicle with accounts of bystanders observing the planes travelling unusually low in Manhattan, as they made their way towards the towers. This is one kind of story, and it focuses on the terrible human tragedy of that day. As devastating as the horror of that day was, this story still leaves unanswered the question ‘why?’. But the extreme drama which was played out on television sets across the globe demanded an explanation. (Andrews 2008:108).

On September 20th, in Bush’s address to the Joint Session of Congress, he offered this:

Americans are asking, ‘Why do they hate us?’ They hate what we see right here in this chamber – a democratically elected government. Their leaders are self-appointed. They hate our freedoms – our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other (Falk 2003, quoted in Andrews 2008:).

This explanation for the assault on America – quite literally an attack which comes out of the clear blue sky - is entirely devoid of any self-reflection. As Richard Falk remarks: “Such an attempted deflection of Islamic resentment is profoundly misleading, entirely exempting the United States from self-scrutiny, and acknowledgement of past policy errors” (2003: 57). How one understands

what happened on the morning of September 11th, 2001, depends critically upon where one begins that story, and that understanding in turn creates a receptivity for the playing out of certain responses.

A very different explanation can be found in Chalmers Johnson's theory of blowback, published in 2000, a full year before the attacks.

'Blowback' is shorthand for saying that a nation reaps what it sows, even if it does not fully know or understand what it has sown. Given its wealth and power, the United States will be a prime recipient in the foreseeable future of all of the more expectable forms of blowback, particularly terrorist attacks against Americans in and out of the armed forces anywhere on earth, including within the United States (Johnson 2000:223).

As I have written previously about this case,

Such a statement foreshadows with chilling accuracy the events of September 11th. But one of the real accomplishments of the Bush administration was to derail versions of the story of 9/11 which had such a broad narrative boundary. According to this version of events, the attacks had no provocation and belonged in no particular context. Rather, they were motivated by a desire to dismantle abstract principles: if Americans were being 'paid back' for anything, it was for our love of freedom and democracy. In this sense, the events of 9/11 were ahistorical (Andrews 2008: 107).

One can see in this example the profound implications of the temporal framing of a story. Stories are told for a purpose, they 'do' things, and are often employed strategically.

Example: Elizabeth's Retrospective Account of Making a Critical Decision

Having discussed some of the key elements of narrative research, I will now examine more closely one extended extract of an interview, demonstrating how some of these principles can be applied in data analysis.

The extract comes from an interview I conducted with Elizabeth Wilson nearly thirty years ago. Elizabeth was one of the fifteen participants in my doctoral study of persons who had been committed to working for social change for fifty years or longer (the same study in which Rose was a participant). Elizabeth was one of the people who helped to form the Huddersfield Famine Relief Committee, a similar local organization to the one formed in Oxford, which later became known as Oxfam. These organisations were created throughout the country during the Second World War to put pressure on the government to allow food for children and nursing mothers into occupied countries. After the war, she joined the Oxfam Executive Committee, and in this capacity visited India and the Far East. Elizabeth was also very active in the early Aldermaston and Weathersfield marches, protesting against nuclear proliferation. Elizabeth was the mother of four children.

This meeting between us was to be the first of many which we had in her home over several years. At this point in the interview, we have been speaking for over an hour, during which she had made a reference to the fact that she had spent two weeks in a maximum security prison in Scotland as a result of participating in a political protest. I decided to ask her about this.

MA: How about your decision to actually break the law, was that a difficult decision for you, or did you feel very convinced that what you were doing was right? How did you think about that decision at the time?

EW: Yes, I took a lot of thinking about it. Because I had been on [a similar protest] the year before, but I hadn't [broken the law] because of family affairs and so on. The next year I was going again, and there was nobody else from [her town], and I thought well, I wouldn't go. I mean, nobody's going this year. I went and sat in the garden and then I felt such a heel. The fact that nobody was going, it was all the more important for me to go, wasn't it? And if there's only a few of you going, it's all the more important that if you do go, you make a stand. But I mean it was such a silly idea to think that just because nobody else was going, well I wouldn't go. And of course it is more difficult, because things are laid on from your own town to get there... it's a lot easier. I did talk it over with my husband first, and so on, needless to say. Then I wondered if I ought to go. You know how it is – and you're aware, and it's, you know, 'am I being just an exhibitionist, and showing off?' ... And I think I dreamed – whatever was the dream? Very often when I'd got a problem like that, and I'm turning it over in my mind, a dream makes it clear. Oh, I know, I dreamed there was a tray and my hands were underneath holding the tray and I was doing a lot, what with the family and the famine relief and one thing and another. I was doing a lot, and more and more things were piled on this tray, and I said 'Oh Lord, don't put on any more. I can't hold it.' And then when I looked under the tray, it wasn't my hands that were holding it, it was sort of symbolic hands, large, thick hands that you get on Henry Moore sculptures. And I knew that it wasn't really me – that if what I was doing was right, one was upheld in another dimension somehow. In here it was right, and it was go ahead. And somehow that made it clear to me, anyway. Somebody else might have interpreted it another way, but from my interpretation, it was that I should go ahead, which I did. And it was trying and difficult, but a very rewarding experience, really.

I will break down the discussion of this long passage into the following component parts: 1) the question posed; 2) the storyline; 3) truth and verifiability; 4) temporality and interpretation; and 5) the point of the story.

The question: There is much to critique in the way I construct this question. The word 'actually' stands out in the first phrase, indicating an emphasis on the illegality of the action contemplated. But more importantly than that, after asking about her thoughts about the decision, I then suggest two different responses she might give: the first, that 'it was a difficult decision', and the second, that she felt 'very convinced that what she was doing was right.' These two possibilities are linked together by the word 'or', suggesting a non-compatibility between the two options I have offered. I then follow this double-barreled question with yet another, this time adding the phrase 'at the time' into the mix. This phrase highlights the distance between the 'then' of the story and the 'now' of the recounting – this is mild recognition that I am asking her to tell me about her thoughts as she (then) currently recalls them, about a decision she made more than thirty years earlier. It is important to remember that I am motivated to ask this question about a story – her two-week imprisonment - whose ending I already know. I want her to tell me about the beginning, her thoughts before committing the action which led to her internment. Judging from the response which this sequence of questions prompts, one can say that even with its shortcomings, the question nonetheless works at some level. While the phrasing could have been improved, the tone is informal and clearly links to a conversation which we had

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2
3 already begun. Elizabeth seems to understand what I am ‘getting at’ and indeed is very
4 forthcoming with her elaborate description of the thought process she underwent.
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7 *The storyline:* The story of what ‘really happened’ is rather straightforward. No one from
8 Elizabeth’s town was going to a protest, although they had all gone together the previous
9 year. Elizabeth discusses the situation with her husband (and in a subsequent conversation, I
10 learn she also spoke with her children). She decides to go to the protest. When she is there,
11 she commits civil disobedience, is arrested, and spends two weeks in a maximum security
12 prison hundreds of miles away.
13

14
15 But, critically, this story contains another story within it. When she doesn’t know what to
16 do, Elizabeth has a dream.
17

18 I dreamed there was a tray and my hands were underneath holding the tray and I was
19 doing a lot, what with the family and the famine relief and one thing and another. I
20 was doing a lot, and more and more things were piled on this tray, and I said ‘Oh
21 Lord, don’t put on any more. I can’t hold it.’ And then when I looked under the tray,
22 it wasn’t my hands that were holding it, it was sort of symbolic hands, large, thick
23 hands that you get on Henry Moore sculptures.
24
25

26 This dream is important in terms of helping the listener to understand how she made the
27 decision she did (‘in real life’) to go to the demonstration. We learn much about how much
28 she felt she was balancing, her anxiety about taking on any more, and her ultimate sense that
29 “if what I was doing was right, one was upheld in another dimension somehow.’ The story
30 within the story illuminates much for the listener.
31
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33
34 *Truth and verifiability* As discussed earlier in this article, it is often difficult to ascertain the
35 facticity of most accounts which one hears in the course of interviewing people about their
36 lives. Some times events are on the public record – we know, for instance, that the Glasgow
37 Rent Strike really did happen – and when one interviews public figures, as I have from time
38 to time, often much of their lives are already documented. But this is not the case most of
39 the time. With Elizabeth, most of her story recounts a dream which helped her to decide to
40 break the law at a protest and thus to risk imprisonment. As her audience, I have no way
41 whatsoever to know if she really did have this dream. Indeed, it would be unusual for
42 someone to recall a dream in such detail thirty years after having had it. I am not willing to
43 say that she did not have this dream, but neither can I say that her claim to having had this
44 dream is true. Rather I see it as truthful. It communicates a truth which is not based on fact
45 but on more opaque threads of understanding. Personally I believe that the story which
46 Elizabeth offers me provides much insight into how she views important decisions she made
47 which had negative consequences for her and her family.
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52 *Temporality and interpretation:* There are numerous levels of temporality operating in this
53 account and in my interpretation of it. First, there is the time of my actual interview with
54 Elizabeth, in the mid-1980s. Then there is the time in the story, in the mid-1950s. And then
55 there is the present time, the 2020s, some seventy years after the event at the centre of the
56 story. All of these temporal dimensions feed into any interpretation that one might offer of
57 this passage. For instance, at the time of the interview, I was a young PhD student, and
58 Elizabeth was nearly fifty years my senior. She was speaking with me because I had asked
59 her to do so, to participate in my doctoral study. She and I were both clear that we were
60

documenting her life in order for me to be able to analyse it and present it as an example of sustained political commitment over half a century or longer. The fundamental message of the story – about being upheld in one's work, even when one is exhausted and afraid of breaking, if what one is doing is 'right' – was an important contribution to the question which guided my research. And now, all these years after our conversation, and long after Elizabeth died, I am writing about our encounter, not as a PhD student but as a professor who has been asked to share some expertise which I am presumed to have.

The point of the story: Elizabeth is quite clear about the story she wishes to tell: while initially it was difficult for her to decide to go to the demonstration and break the law, if what she was doing was morally right, then it was not only right for her to go ahead, but something which she 'should do.' Her evaluation of this decision and the consequences which followed in its wake was that "it was trying and difficult, but a very rewarding experience, really." The point of the story, therefore, is that one is not always aware of one's own inner strength – one is 'upheld in another dimension' – and that answers to difficult decisions lie within us; if we follow what is 'right,' then we will be sustained. Finally, Elizabeth tells us that even experiences which are 'trying and difficult' can be 'rewarding.'

Finally, and critically, it is important to note that I as the writer have framed this particular story. It only 'stands alone' because that is how I have presented it. This account was delivered in the middle of a very long conversation – a conversation which itself sat within a bed of many other conversations, over 3 years - and did not have any natural demarcation of a beginning and an end. Aristotle has written that 'the end is everywhere the chief thing' (cited in Cronon 1992: 1367) and Paul Ricoeur that "the pole of attraction of the entire development" (cited in McQuillan 2000:259). But it is I, and not Elizabeth, who has provided the end for this story, with its very clear moral framing.

Indicators of Quality of Narrative Research

In the last section, it was my intention to show by example what I hold to be some of the most important quality indicators of narrative research. As already stated, much narrative research is very unusual in its eschewing of formal measures of quality. It is not a method which is well-suited for those who find comfort in definitive answers; indeed, far from being a method which offers much comfort at all, it can often have the reverse effect, unsettling some of our basic ideas of how we come to know the world. And yet I would argue that the 'messiness' is entirely appropriate to the endeavour: human beings trying to understand other human beings is not a clear-cut business, and the tools which we use to carve our work should not have a sharp edge.

How, then, can one assess the quality of a piece of narrative research? Here I have created a checklist which is not meant to be exhaustive, but which does include what I consider to be important aspects of narrative scholarship. These indicators are not unique to this methodology, although how they are played out might vary accordingly. The indicators are not listed in any particular order, and there is invariably some overlap between them.

1. *Truthfulness.* As discussed above, truth claims are often difficult to make in narrative research. While there are exceptions to this, eg the personal accounts of public figures describing their engagement in well-documented events, generally this is not the case. Nonetheless, the pursuit of truth must be a central driver of scholarship. What is meant here is captured in Bakhtin's description of the word truth: "Truth is not born, nor is it to found,

inside the head of an individual person. It is born between people, collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction (Bakhtin 1984:10). So in this sense, truth is not necessarily verifiable or objective, though it may be one or both of these. To distinguish what is meant here from a claim which can sustain factual scrutiny, I use the term 'truthfulness.'

2. *Trustworthiness* The reader must have a sense that they are in trustworthy hands. Catherine Riessman has used the term 'persuasiveness' in a similar way, arguing that interpretations of data should be "plausible, reasonable, and convincing." This is not achieved by championing uncritical certainty. Rather, "persuasiveness is strengthened when the investigator's theoretical claims are supported with evidence from informants' accounts, negative cases are included, and alternative interpretations considered" (Riessman 2008:191).
3. *Critical reflexivity* In order for a guide to be considered trustworthy, it is important to know something about who they are. While it is important not to become overly engaged in a personal confessional, scholars should indicate the positioning of their own situated knowledge. This includes some discussion of who one is, and who one is not, in relation to the subject of the investigation. Acknowledgment of situatedness of knowledge challenges some of the dogma of more traditional research methods such as the concepts of validity and universalizability.
4. *Scholarship and Accessibility* Research outputs should be both scholarly and accessible. This can be a difficult balance to strike. While it is important to demonstrate theoretical engagement, this should not be at the expense of being understandable. Part of this is a question of audience: who does one see oneself writing to? What is the purpose of the research? If, for instance, research participants are not able to understand what is being written about them, then at the very least this disjuncture needs to be acknowledged and addressed.
5. *Ethical sensitivity* Although most scholarship proceeds only with the ethical clearance of universities, often the concerns which are identified are rather circumscribed, eg focusing on data storage, anonymisation, etc. Yet questions of the negotiation of power permeate all stages of the research, from research design to data gathering and analysis to publication.
6. *Co-construction of meaning* Narrative research rests on the principle that meaning does not exist in any pure form but rather is something which is created, recreated, contested and resisted throughout the research process. Thus in narrative research, meaning is remade by the speaker, listener, transcriber, interpreter and reading audience.
7. *Attention to the untold* Narrative scholars must beware not to limit the scope of their interest to the stories which they hear. This starts with the research design: who is and is not part of the research, and what does this mean for what kind of stories are given fertile ground to emerge? Attention must also be paid during data gathering: what stories are told, and what remains unsaid? Mark Freeman (2004) has used the phrase "the presence of what is missing" to indicate the lacuna that might have an important though unarticulated and unspecified effect on the data which is produced. Scholarship on 'untold stories' needs to develop more nuanced ways to attend to this absence, while avoiding imposing unwarranted interpretation on such blank spaces.
8. *Awareness of temporal fluidity* As demonstrated throughout this article, narrative research is built upon shifting ground; narrative scholars must approach their work with a profound realisation that life does not stand still. Les Back has commented that "Making the social world hold still for its portrait can seem like gross violence, reducing its mutable flow to frozen moments preserved in the hoarfrost of realist description." Narrative research should confront the limitations of such 'frozen moment' analysis, while paying close attention to the particulars of the data gathered.

9. *Multilayered stories* Even the most intimate of stories bears a relationship to the external world. Narrative research should investigate the coexistence of different levels of storytelling, investigating the interconnectedness between the micro and macro. Stories always exist in relation to other stories, which may be identified but which are often (and most powerfully) unnamed, and they are situated in particular ways vis a vis dominant, expected storylines.
10. *Contextualisation of the research* Stories are produced in a specific context, at a particular moment in history, for an audience - some known, some unknown and/or anticipated- with some kind of purpose. Narrative scholars must consider this broader terrain in their analysis of the materials they collect.

Concluding Thoughts

This article began with a problematisation of how one can meaningfully discuss the concept of quality in a methodology as notoriously ‘murky’ as narrative research. Unlike other kinds of qualitative approaches, there is a lack of consensus of what constitutes narrative, much less a clearly prescribed protocol for ascertaining evaluation. I have proceeded by outlining three features of narrative research (the importance of stories, the ‘messy’ nature of the data, and the attention to temporality), and then provided a close reading of an extract of an interview with a political activist who describes how she made her decision to break the law. Finally, and drawing on the previous discussion, I have endeavoured to compile a checklist of quality indicators for narrative research. The list is not meant to be exhaustive but rather is built on my experience as a researcher, a teacher and supervisor, and someone who has been on numerous editorial boards of journals.

Narrative researchers should regard their work as something akin to cave explorers, adopting a posture of openness to the unexpected, tracing an unknown terrain. Burkard Bilger, describes the journey of extreme caver, Marcin Gala: he had travelled “over stalagmites and boulder fields, cave-ins and vaulting galleries. He’d spidered down waterfalls, inched along crumbling ledges, and bellied through tunnels so tight that his back touched the roof with every breath.” (Bilger 2014). Thus should be the experience of a narrative scholar as she delves into the meaning-making system of another’s world. Quality narrative scholarship requires a sense of adventure, skill, caution, flexibility and a willingness to dig deep.

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ⁱ For an overview of narrative research in the Social Sciences, see Squire, Andrews and Tamboukou,(2019) "Narrative Research" *Sage Encyclopedia of Research Methods* <https://methods.sagepub.com/foundations/narrative-research> and Squire et al *What is Narrative Research* (Bloomsbury 2014) and Andrews, Squire and Tamboukou, eds *Doing Narrative Research* (Sage 2014).