Squire, Corinne, Mark Davis, Cigdem Esin, Molly Andrews, Barbara Harrison, Lars-Christer Hydén, and Margareta Hydén. "Challenges in narrative research." *What is Narrative Research?*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014. 95–114. The 'What is?' Research Methods Series. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781472545220.ch-006>>.

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6 Challenges in narrative research

Throughout this book, we have seen that narrative research offers diverse and exciting approaches to social science or social inquiry. In this chapter, we are going to address some of the challenges of narrative research by focusing, first, on general questions about narrative research, and second, on a summary of 'how-to' issues around narrative research, related to what we have already seen of narrative research in operation. The first section of the chapter leads into the second. We move from issues of how to decide about your narrative research project, how to conduct it, how to do the analysis and convey its results, through issues of the ethics of narrative research, to the broader questions of the truth and value of narrative research.

We will deal with these issues through a series of questions, which we hope will help you to bring together some of your thoughts as you come to the end of this book.

A. Are there instructions for doing narrative research?

There are no strict instructions on how to do narrative research. Depending on the research questions and researchers' interpretation of what narrative is and how it is analysed, a researcher may focus on different aspects of narratives such as the structure, content, context and performance of narratives. As we have seen in this book, such flexibility has created a family of creative approaches to narrative research which utilize a wide range of narrative forms as data such as interviews, letters and visual material, and various analytical methods such as discursive ones.

As in other social science research, there are basic research steps that provide the researcher with a coherent framework to design and conduct their research. These are:

- i. Situating the epistemological approach
- ii. Selecting the analytical model or models

- iii. Collecting or co-constructing data to be analysed
- iv. Selecting or preparing narratives to be analysed
- v. Analysing narratives
- vi. Writing up and disseminating research.

We have already talked about or referred to many of these steps. Here, we summarize the procedure for each of them.

i. Situating the epistemological approach

This step is shaped by the epistemological approach of the researcher to the construction, function and analysis of stories. As we mentioned in Chapter 1, there are two key epistemological approaches to narrative analysis: that which naturalistically takes narratives as resources and the constructionist approach, within which narrative itself is a topic. The approaches differ from each other by the way they consider narratives in the process of analysis. While naturalist approaches understand narratives as a medium to analyse the lives of storytellers, constructionist approaches analyse narratives as means of social construction. Of course, we can try to treat narratives in both these ways. Many researchers do precisely this. And as we have seen, a modified constructionism is a common approach.

It is important to try to clarify our epistemological position, preferably before we do our research. For we make research-related decisions through the lens of epistemological approaches, even if we are not aware of them. For example, if we are interested in the life histories of a group of people who are members of a particular generation in order to tell the history of that generation, then our research could be situated within the naturalist approach. If we are interested in the connections between narrative performances and identity construction among young people, we would be more likely to position our research within the constructionist approach.

ii. Selecting the analytical approach or approaches

Narrative research focuses on stories. How stories are analysed is an important component of narrative research practice. We have discussed various examples conducted with different approaches to narrative analysis in Chapter 1 and have given many examples in Chapters 3 and 4. Depending on the aspects of narratives which they deal with, we can categorize these approaches under three categories: the approaches focusing on structure, the approaches focusing on content and the approaches focusing on

contexts in which narratives are produced and consumed (Squire, 2005; see also Mishler, 1995: 89–117). However, there is no predefined best way to do narrative research. Narrative researchers need to be open to what narratives themselves offer to researchers, and to pursue their own approaches to narrative research. For example, the research examples we discussed in Chapters 3 and 4 analyse the content of narratives to a certain extent while at the same time analysing the sociocultural (as in internet-related research, research on sexual narratives) and emotional (as in research on abuse and violence) contexts in which the personal narratives under analysis are constructed, in relation to other kinds of narratives.

iii. Collecting or co-constructing data

As we discussed in the section on ‘where to find narratives’ (Chapter 1, Section D), narratives can be discovered in many different places. Research interviews are usually where narratives are elicited in social science research, but interviews are not the only source. Researchers may look for narratives in materials that are written (books, letters, diaries, shopping lists, cv’s), visual (photos, still images) and audio-visual (videos, films) as well as other discursive spaces such as everyday conversations or internet exchanges, patterns of everyday activity and the networks of meaning that collect around objects like clothes, souvenirs and meals, that are important in people’s lives.

iv. Selecting or preparing narratives to be analysed

Selecting and preparing narratives for analysis is an important part of the analytical process. Both processes are related to the analytical approach you choose. For example, in the research on sexual narratives, considered in Chapter 4, Esin took the whole interview as the analytical unit, as a narrative of self and sexuality, and she transcribed all the interviews with the same level of detail. However, she selected particular excerpts to focus on in her analysis, in order to exemplify patterns seen throughout the interview, and to explore in detail interviewees’ positioning strategies. Some narrative researchers interested in positioning might go further and prepare much more detailed transcripts of exemplary speech segments for their analyses.

Rather differently, Davis treated all his interview material on online lives as the ‘database’, and looked for common story patterns across interviews, as did Harrison when dealing with her interviews on the place

of photography in people's lives. In such work, the excerpts presented in conference papers and journal articles tend to be the clearest and most typical examples of narrative categories. That is, they represent a large number of other narratives, similarly identified and analysed.

v. *Analysing narratives*

There are also some general questions which narrative researchers respond to while analysing stories. Sometimes this process of posing and responding to questions is done explicitly, sometimes not. We have tried during the book to make the process explicit because we think that approaching narrative analysis in a planned and thoughtful way, rather than just intuitively, is a good route to fuller and deeper analyses.

The answers to the questions about analysis differ, depending on the researcher's field as well as theoretical and methodological questions. These are as follows:

- How are the stories structured? The writers of this book do not spend a lot of time working on story structure. However, you will have seen that many of the stories we have looked at can be considered in this way. For instance, the very first story that we started with, Obama's Ashley story, moves from a campaign event to a story of the nation. The stories told by Esin's female Turkish research participants alternated between adherence and resistance to the dominant cultural narrative of a modern Turkish woman's life. The stories of domestic violence told by M. Hydén's informants made sense only if we read them as structured by the agency as well as the suffering of women and children.
- What are the content categories or themes that the stories focus on? Much of the work that we have examined throughout this book addresses narratives in this way. Chapters 3 and 4 present many examples, particularly in the sections on internet narratives and political narratives.
- Who produced the stories, and by what means (e.g. discursive, performative) are stories constructed? M. Hydén's research on responses to abuse, Harrison's research on family photos, Davis's research on social media and Andrews's work on political narrative are all good examples within this book (Chapters 3 and 4) of how such questions can be addressed.

- How are stories produced and how do they work in specific socio-historical contexts? Tamboukou's (2003) research drawing on diaries of women educators in the United Kingdom, Plummer's (1995) research on sexual stories and Esin's work (Chapter 4) provide good examples here.
- How are stories silenced and/or contested? Riessman's (1993) research on fertility and Squire's (2007, 2013a) research on narratives of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) are interesting examples within the literature. L.-C. Hydén's, M. Hydén's and Esin's work in this book (Chapters 3 and 4) are also good illustrations.

We want now to move on to some of the challenges that may face you when material seems particularly difficult to deal with analytically. It is worth looking specifically at this issue, to try to understand what makes data 'difficult', as well as what to do with such data.

B. How can I deal with 'difficult' narrative materials?

When people construct stories of themselves and others, their stories do not provide us with unmediated meanings. As we have seen, researchers as well as participants become part of a mediation process through co-constructing and interpreting narratives. This gives researchers a responsibility beyond consent and confidentiality while working with narratives. However, this must not mean that researchers should shy away from researching difficult and sensitive topics as this would entail avoiding social and political responsibility as a researcher.

For example, what we investigate in our research may have potentially threatening effects for participants when the participants' private experiences are under investigation and when the research is concerned with social control. Similarly, telling about their personal experiences of politics and oppression may have dangerous consequences for research participants who live in strict, anti-democratic political regimes or in conflict areas. Of course, topics and stories regarded as private and/or dangerous vary culturally and situationally, and this variation itself poses dilemmas for both participants and researchers.

In narrative research, there are blurred lines between what is said and unsaid, what is heard and not heard, what is analysed and not analysed. Researchers need to be very attentive listeners in all phases of research and

be careful not to cross these lines in ways that research participants do not know or want. Margareta Hydén's research on responses to abuse in Chapter 4 provides a good example of the need for sensitive researcher positioning. Stories of abuse are often stories which people do not want to tell but which have to be told. There is a fine distinction between listening to these stories and interfering in individuals' lives with an authoritative voice to tell them to take the 'right' action to stop the abuse. An attentive listening process enabled Hydén to understand the complexity of abuse cases in which there is no one 'right' position or action.

The integration of critical, systematic reflexivity into narrative analysis is a way for researchers to deal with difficult material (see Chapter 2, Section D). Reflexivity as a part of research practice means examining all research decisions: theoretical assumptions, selection of participants and/or material to analyse, interviewing/co-constructing data, analysing the data, presenting the analysis. Reflexivity also includes the deconstruction of power relations within and beyond the research, not only those involving the more or less powerful position of the researcher, but also those involving the social characteristics of the researcher and the researched. As we have discussed in Chapter 2, reflexivity is closely related to research ethics. It is considered as a political practice in certain research contexts, such as in feminist research. There is a long line of feminist arguments about reflexivity and the necessity of the systematic problematization of power relations between researchers, participants and audiences (Stanley, 1990).

C. Can I combine different kinds of data and analysis?

One of narrative research's strengths is that it provides ways of working across different kinds of data and enables different ways of examining the same data. Narrative researchers choose data sources of many kinds. Common data generation and collection strategies include interviews, sampling online materials and gathering examples of naturally occurring speech, letters and diaries, photographs and video. Also figuring among narrative research materials are public and private documents (birth certificates, newspaper reports, greetings cards, scrapbooks), court reports, literary works, drama, representational and abstract artwork, dance, music, souvenirs and mementoes, buildings and landscapes, and ethnographic records of patterns of action within everyday lives.

Some researchers might choose to work with different kinds of data in combination. For example, in research on medical diagnosis and disclosure, that is, on how medical identities are narrated into social life, Davis and Flowers have combined interviews about how people tell others of their diagnosis with online materials that perform the same function (2014). In research like this, it makes sense to work across different forms of disclosure narrative to understand disclosure as a cultural practice. The combination of these forms of data is also justified, methodologically, since they each bear traces of disclosure narrative and therefore can be analysed independently and together.

Choosing whether and how to combine data depends on where it is assumed narratives can be found (see Chapter 1, Section D). For example, in the social media narratives discussed in Chapter 3, Section C, interview-based narratives were articulated with more general, culturally sustained, narratives on the social media and social change found in newspapers. This approach therefore used narrative substantively and dialogically. Substantively, the research was oriented towards the content and shape of the stories constructed by the interviewees. Dialogically, the research explored the canonical social media narrative as represented in the news, which suggests that social media produce social change, in interaction with personal stories. Other researchers regard narrative as transmediated (Jenkins, 2006; Ryan, 2004). This term suggests that the same plot and characterizations can find expression in media as diverse as, for example, an online game, a film and a TV series. In such research, the analyst will choose what are literally different forms of data, or narrative 'mediations', and will analyse them together.

This diversity in the selection, combination and analysis of narrative data does not mean that anything goes, that any combination of narrative data sources is automatically useful and interesting. The choices made regarding data and how to analyse them remain dependent on the question guiding the research activity. The researcher might want to inquire into narrative because they are interested in it for its own sake and the data and analysis choices they make might be seemingly disparate. Such choices, however, will be predicated on their interest, that is, on how they have described and problematized narrative. Labov's psycholinguistic work on narratives, for example, addresses narratives across a number of domains such as fights, life-threatening events, the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and stories of the deaths of close relations, but it is always

interested in how memories of striking events are turned into effective stories with a common form. Others might want to address a very specific research problem through narrative, as is often done in research on social phenomena. In these cases, the choices made will be consistent with what it is the researchers are seeking to achieve in addressing the specific research problem. For example, Squire (2007) focused particularly on the interrelations between popular cultural, social and personal narratives of HIV in her research on the major South African HIV epidemic of the early 2000s, rather than simply on research participants' personal stories, because of the difficulty at that time, and in that context, in talking publicly about HIV, and the multiple, contested narratives in play around the South African epidemic.

D. How can I write about or otherwise communicate my narrative research findings, for a range of research users?

It can be challenging to write about or present your narrative research. The stories that people make of their lives or about life in general are often so compelling, the findings from one's analysis so complex and extensive, that it can be hard to decide how to edit stories, story extracts and analyses, so that they fit into the word limit and textual discipline of a journal article, book or conference paper. Such limits force researchers to decide how most effectively to present their work to an audience. These decisions take in issues about the ways in which it is best to demonstrate and substantiate researchers' arguments. They also shade into aesthetic questions of how to present the story to best advantage, and into ethical considerations of how someone's story, edited and contextualized, might be interpreted by others. A related concern can be balancing the presentation of data such as interview talk, textual materials or images, with their interpretation. Too much data or material, and the research narrative will literally have to speak for itself; this is difficult, since the reader may not share your interpretation. Too little data and the research material may be lost in the discourse of the researcher, possibly reducing the account's credibility and its closeness to the research itself.

Unfortunately, there are no prescriptive solutions to these communication problems. Consistent with how we have portrayed narrative in other parts of this book, narrative researchers vary in how they present their

analyses of the narratives they are interested in. Interview-based narrative researchers tend to provide fewer, longer pieces of talk and text than do other qualitative researchers, though there are examples of effective accounts of narrative research that contain short extracts from interviews. In research on HIV in South Africa, Squire (2007) used shorter interview extracts, discussed alongside each other, to establish and explore the importance of religious conversion narrative for people living with HIV. Jasmina Sermijn, writing about her narrative interviews with people with mental health problems and the difficulties of negotiating between participant, researcher and research supervisor voices, wrote and published a play to demonstrate the dialogue of these voices (Sermijn et al., 2010). Getting well away from the confines of the journal article or book, Sheila Cavanagh wrote and also staged a play, based on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersexual stories of public and domestic toilets. These stories revealed toilets to be queer spaces/practices found at the intersection of embodiment, sexuality and hygiene (see: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cLyKkLeGnyo>). The script reproduced interview extracts and historical documents but had its full research incarnation as a theatre performance, now archived in film form.

In addition, online database technologies, hyperlinking and multimedia interfaces present opportunities for presenting intact and searchable interview data, documents, images and video. Websites developed in this way allow browsers to read transcripts and view video of interviews, wholly, or in segments organized into themes (see: <http://www.healthtalkonline.org/> and <http://livingstories.org.uk/>). Such approaches are often justified in terms of narrative voice: that is, access to the whole interview coupled with video is said to get the reader closer to lived realities (see Chapter 5, Section A for a discussion of narrative voice).

Relatedly, internet-based narrative communication connects with the notion that reading or viewing someone else's story can bolster social solidarity, have political effects, or be therapeutic (see Chapter 5, Section D for a discussion of narrative's social effects). Non-researchers are already using social media like this, as they share personal testimonials, publish creative works, organize politically and provide support through blogs. So it makes sense to take accounts of narrative research online where their social effects may be enhanced. However, like narrative researchers preparing a journal article, book or conference paper, those using internet technologies face choices with regard to which data to present and how to

contextualize them. Like print, internet-based communication is similarly edited and contextualized and therefore not free of questions of scientificity, aesthetics and ethics.

As was noted in connection with combining a variety of narrative forms in research (see Section C in this chapter), perhaps the best rubric for presenting narrative research is 'do what needs to be done to construct a viable, robust and persuasive research story'.

One of the forms of research communication to which narrative researchers, with their awareness of the co-constructed, dialogic nature of their work, and the power relations inherent in it, are increasingly paying attention is communication with research participants themselves, not just during the course of obtaining research materials, but during and after the analysis and writing up, as well as before fieldwork commences in some participatory traditions of research.

E. What is the best way of feeding back research findings to participants?

People volunteer for research for many reasons. Sometimes, they get money or some other concrete reward for participating; they may want to please powerful research gatekeepers. As well or instead, they may participate because they sympathize with the researcher's aims; they see value in the research topic; they wish to assist others; they want to tell their story to a sympathetic listener; they are keen for 'their story' to be heard by that listener, or more broadly. These motivations imply that often, participants invest something of themselves in research and may therefore want to know of its outcomes. Partly for this reason, as well as to meet their own epistemological and practical goals (for instance, to allow for other interpretive voices or commentary, and to provide research results in a form that can directly impact participants' lives), researchers take steps to feed back their findings to participants, acknowledging their contribution and 'giving back'. These include:

preparing a plain language 'digest' of the research findings for publication in a practitioner journal or a popular publication; maintaining a website to publish conference papers and short reports on the research's progress; conducting a workshop with participants where findings from the research are presented and

discussed; providing participants with a transcript of their interview and discussing it with them; returning to participants after a period of time (in some instances, decades) and asking them to reflect on their lives since the first meeting and holding an informal meeting where participants and researchers can interact, chat about the research and 'close' the project.

How research findings should be fed back is an area for negotiation. The funder of the research and the research community usually expect publications in high-ranked journals and/or widely-read reports. The participants might not find that sufficient. The options suggested above all work best when they are chosen by participants in dialogue with researchers. All these ways of feeding research back are possible, but which is chosen is up for negotiation.

The problems that can occur when feeding back research results are connected to the power and status of knowledge in general and academically produced knowledge especially. Your research participants might not like the results and might think those results have the power to influence their lives in unfortunate ways if they are published. Of course participants are anonymous, but they may still dislike your final product. Or they may react in the opposite way, feeding what seems, to you as a researcher, too much hope into the capacity of the research to change their lives for the better. Both these expectations tend to exaggerate the powers of academic research. Most research projects do not reach the level of benefitting or harming people directly, by themselves. Their social impacts are small; there are usually many other more influential factors in play. However, narrative research's tendency to involve participants strongly through the extended and intense stories that they tell can mean that their sense of involvement with the research is powerful, and researchers need to address this involvement carefully.

These questions about the involvement of participants in the aftermath of the research also direct our attention to some broader issues about ethics in research, to which narrative researchers, with their often strong and sometimes long-term involvements with their participants, have paid particular attention.

F. How can I do ethical narrative research?

In Chapters 4 and 5, we saw how narrative research is viewed as an approach which is particularly well suited to representing the views of

marginalized members of society, to 'giving voice to the voiceless' and to exploring under-researched social phenomena. However, as already alluded to, this characterization is not without its critics. Sometimes narratives of or about the previously hidden or powerless can, rather than challenging the status quo, reinforce social exclusion. In this section, we will look more closely at ethical complexities such as these, which can arise in narrative research.

For more than two decades, there has been growing concern among many social scientists that doing ethical research is more complicated than had previously been posited. In 1993, Zygmunt Bauman published *Post-modern ethics*, whose key arguments are summarized by Plummer thus:

... the contemporary ethical position must recognize ambivalence, non-rationality, the aporetic, the non-universalizable, and the irrational ... contradictions and tensions cannot be overcome, they have to be lived with in struggle and disagreement (Plummer, 2001: 229).

Many people who did empirical social research no longer felt satisfied with the old rules of conduct. Recognizing that researchers not only document 'life out there' but that they critically help to construct knowledge, and indeed what is deemed knowledgeable, some scholars came to feel increasingly uncomfortable about their role in documenting the lives of others. Plummer discusses in detail some aspects of this dilemma in his classic book, *Documents of life 2: an invitation to critical humanism*. Scholars who document the life experiences of others must ask themselves 'by what right can an academic enter the subjective worlds of other human beings and report back to the wider world on them?' (Plummer, 2001: 206).

Other ethical questions about researching the lives of others include:

- Must our understanding of someone's life correspond with their understanding of their life? If they differ, what is the most responsible thing for us to do? Do our intellectual and ethical responsibilities pull us in different directions?
- Should we share our 'findings' with our research participants? In what circumstances would it not be desirable to do so?
- What is the effect of our probing presence?
- How universal are ethics?

While there are no answers to these questions to which everyone would subscribe, some answers are more persuasive than others. Moreover, research which does not take these problems into consideration is ultimately of a lesser quality than that which acknowledges the moral complexity of the task at hand.

Plummer identifies seven key issues with which researchers whose work is with and on real, living human beings have to contend. These are:

- Ownership and intellectual property rights: who *owns* the life being studied?
- Confidentiality: can this ever be really guaranteed?
- Honesty and the scandals of life stories
- Reception: how to present our research focus to those who we study
- Exploitation: what do our participants get out of participating in our research?
- Informed consent: do people really understand what they are agreeing to?
- Hurt and harm: the effects of misrepresentation for individuals and communities.

In addition to these issues, there are numerous others:

- Inequalities of the interview relationship
- The hierarchical nature of interpretation
- Control over representation
- Potential for exploitation
- Deconstructing assumptions of 'empowerment'
- Moving from the private to public sphere
- The broader impact and unintentional consequences of research

Because ethics is such a vital concern for all researchers, we can only advise readers to immerse themselves as thoroughly as possible in the emerging literature which grapples with some of these issues. Although, traditionally, researchers tended to be quiet about, or at least not publish about, their ethical concerns, this has begun to change. Increasingly, researchers are realizing that they are not prepared to grapple with the complexity of the ethical dilemmas with which they are confronted when doing social research. An excellent example of this is Catherine Riessman's writing on studying women's infertility in Kerala (2005). By openly acknowledging the complexity of the moral terrain of her research, she and others like her

have helped to initiate a new kind of conversation among some researchers, who find traditional ethical guidelines insufficient for grappling with moral issues in the real world. These stories 'from the field' explore issues such as:

- The implicit exploitation involved in the research enterprise (Coles, 1997)
- The unrealizability of informed consent (Gready, 2008)
- Questioning the questions (Andrews, 2007)
- The unanticipated emotional impact of research (Bloor et al., 2010)
- Negotiating interpretation (Borland, 1991)
- The difficulty of listening beyond one's experience (Greenspan, 1998)

The concerns which have been identified in this section are by no means unique to narrative research. While each methodological orientation might vary by the manner in which ethical issues present themselves, no one method is immune. The narrative scholar who is most likely to conduct ethically defensible research is the person who realizes the challenging terrain across which she/he travels, and yet who knows that it is possible to move forward, with caution, humility and sensitivity. Plummer summarizes the challenge of the modern researcher: '(E)thics have to be produced creatively in the concrete situation at hand. To live an ethical life is a process of decision making in situation, drawing from culture and history, and not a pattern of just "following rules"' (2001: 227). In the words of Aristotle (350 BC: 23), ethical knowledge stems from 'experience in the actions of life'. Ethical guidelines are not only useful but necessary. Nothing, however, can replace venturing out into the field of social research, getting your hands dirty (metaphorically) and reflecting on what you are doing at all times.

The ethics of narrative research matter, because both narrative researchers and research participants think that stories are important and that they can make a difference and be useful to people. We have already considered, in the previous chapter, some of the general uses of narrative research, in relation to less well-understood phenomena, the intricate nature of people's lives, patterns of thinking and the social fabrics within which lives are lived. What are the arguments about narratives' truth or truths, persuasiveness and usefulness that we need to make, in order to ground such work?

G. What is narratives' relation to truth?

A question which is often posed to narrative researchers is: how does one evaluate whether a narrative with which one is presented is true? At first glance, this seems a hard question to answer, for several reasons. First, what does 'truth' mean when the term is applied to descriptions of human experience? And second, does the issue of truth really matter, in this context? Finally, related to these two questions, there is a third question: how much truth is 'true enough'? Let us consider these questions in turn.

1. At the simplest level, when people ask about the truthfulness of an account, they want to know if it really happened. But even as one asks this question, it immediately begins to unravel. Any two people observing the same phenomenon will offer different accounts of their experience. One will emphasize one aspect, while the other might focus on something entirely different. Neither account is false, but each account is and can only ever be partial. There is, as Thomas Nagel (1989) famously asserted, no view from nowhere. That means even with the best of intentions, people will only ever be able to see what is within the boundaries of that which they are able and willing to take in. Those boundaries are porous, forever shifting not only between people, but within the same person. Perspectives are always situated in particular locations, and the closest a researcher can come to uncovering truth is to take full account of the positioning not only of others, but of themselves as well. In this way, knowledge is acknowledged as constructed, and as necessarily incomplete.
2. Does 'truth' really matter? Here, the answer depends on the purpose for which the account is being gathered. If a criminal activity has occurred, it would be glib indeed to say that objective, verifiable truth did not matter. Of course, it does, and the moral workings of society, as represented for instance by courtroom debate on evidence and proof, are built upon this premise. In the examples of domestic violence narratives, discussed earlier, from a legal perspective it matters very much if what is being claimed is objectively true, and thus the onus of proof is on the victim, which can have the effect of creating an additional burden for an already traumatized person. On the other hand, much narrative research does not have as its purpose the documentation of an objective truth. There are, too, other approaches to research which are probably better suited

to documenting such truths. Rather, narrative accounts provide an especially rich insight into subjective truths, the frameworks of meaning by which individuals live their lives. If one wishes to understand the 'truth' of how the world appears in the mindset of another, narrative research is an especially adept tool for this exploration (Andrews, 2014).

3. A corollary of these two points is that narrative truth is not an absolute. Rather, there are accounts which are more or less truthful, which correspond to greater or lesser degrees to events which verifiably did happen. But even 'truthful' accounts are fictionalized, in their identification and creation of characters and plot, for instance; and fictional accounts might well reveal a fundamental truth or truths. That remembering is as much a collective as an individual endeavour is a well-rehearsed argument; thus, even while individual accounts may not be objectively true, they may nonetheless resonate with the collective memory. The debate surrounding the discovery of the fictional basis of Benjamin Wilkomirski's supposedly first-hand account of growing up as a Jew during the Holocaust, *Fragments: memories of a childhood (1939–1948)*, testifies not only to the truth of fiction, but also to the level of investment we place in being told the truth.

H. Why not do something politically, socially or therapeutically useful, instead of just focusing on stories?

Some critics of narrative research emphasize the limitations of the place of stories in people's lives, and in the social and political world. Stories can be comforting fictions that people tell themselves; they may divert us from deeper, more intractable and more important concerns. Your stories about your life are not the same as the life you live. A coherent and well-shaped story can accompany a chaotic life. Moreover, stories may be associated with social change, but they do not make it, or make it happen, on their own; stories can be associated with regressive, as well as progressive, social change; and stories may also be associated with social conservatism, or with no discernable social effects.

Such questionings of the personal, social and political significance of narrative research often come, though, with an underestimation of the

power of stories. As we have discussed throughout this book, stories are never 'just' stories. Storytelling is a political action on many levels. Stories are part of ongoing socio-historical constructions. As well as emerging within these constructions, stories create the possibility of shifts in them, though of course those shifts are not reducible to the effects of stories.

Stories can help us to understand what is hidden, unnoticed, unrecorded, often seen as just 'personal', in mainstream history, and to analyse how networks of power position some narratives as dominant, while marginalizing others. Researching narratives, therefore, is a political decision for a researcher who is interested in inequalities in social and historical formations, in continuities and ruptures, in the multiple levels of political lives. Working with narratives allows researchers to acknowledge storytellers' own ways of creating meaning within power relations, rather than fitting stories into predetermined categories of meaning related to power, and to recognize the complexity and diversity of meaning-making processes, rather than considering them as natural and fixed.

Narrative analysis does not only function as a method through which researchers explore how people remember, structure and relate their experiences as stories. It is also a process which can guide researchers into understanding the complexities of human selves, lives and relations in collaboration with narratives. Focusing on stories is a route to understanding how we operate dialogically between the personal and the surrounding social worlds that produce, consume, silence and contest us. The willingness to listen to and understand this dialogue is an important step in doing politically, socially and personally useful research.

1. Is narrative everywhere, and can it solve all our problems?

Narrative's ubiquity is one of its fascinating properties. Narrative is said to be universal, to be common to different cultures and to have been present throughout history (Barthes and Dusi, 1975). The term is used pervasively: in everyday discourse, on the news, in university social science and humanities courses. As narrative researchers themselves (Bruner, 1990; Ricoeur, 1984) have pointed out, stories permeate and help to organize culture. Many of us recognize ourselves as having a story to tell, be it in the form of an official biography or simply through sharing snippets of the day's events with friends and family. Popular cultural forms such as TV soaps, social networking websites and pop music deploy narrative devices. It is not surprising then that so many researchers have, as we have seen in

this book, turned to narrative analysis, use narrative data or refer to narratives in their work.

This ubiquity of narrative is also, however, a ground for criticism. Because narratives pervade culture and because the term has a commonly understood meaning, some argue that narrative research has become trivial and simplistic, failing to recognize the philosophical debates that should prefigure narrative research and simply assuming that, because of narrative's apparent pervasiveness and supposedly universally understood meaning, it needs no further explication. Others suggest that too often, researchers romanticize narrative, assuming it to be the 'royal road' to understanding individual lives (Atkinson, 2009), or treating it as a kind of DNA-like key for gaining insight into social relations (see also Chapter 5, Section A, on narrative voice and its romanticization). To counteract such deficiencies, researchers need to look *beyond* narrative, rather than just assuming that narrative provides fundamental insights into social existence. Still others argue that narrative is inherently closed and simplifying, a form whose limitations social researchers need to be aware of, and suggest that important complexities of human lives inhere not in stories but in other forms of language or experience (Cowen, 2009; Craib, 2004; Frosh, 2002; Strawson, 2008).

Some narrative researchers would argue against these positions by saying that narrative can indeed be found everywhere, but that this does not mean that everything is narrative, or that narrative is uniquely powerful; and that narrative itself is able to contain many complexities (Frank, 1997; Seale, 2004; Squire, 2005). Narrative is not, as we have seen throughout this book, to be equated with the simple, closed forms, such as coherent stories with beginnings, middles and ends, and classical genres of tragedy and comedy, with which it has often been identified.

The common criticisms of narrative research appear also in relation to many other forms of social research. Many other methodologies – of both qualitative and quantitative kinds – are held up as exemplary, and as ends in themselves, when they are simply tools for knowing about the world. It does, however, seem to be that narrative's ubiquity and popularity as a research approach, the 'crossover' closeness between researcher and research participant concerns with stories, and stories' ubiquity in domains usually thought of as academic, political, policy and popular, public and private, make narrative research a flashpoint for a kind of epistemic anxiety about how social researchers gather and construct knowledge, and what

they know. This may be no bad thing. Acknowledging, digesting and taking account of criticisms can only strengthen narrative research.

The idea that narrative is too general to be of any use may, itself, be too sweeping and general. Close examination of narrative research shows that individual research projects are nuanced and specific, as we have aimed to demonstrate in this book. While narrative might be ubiquitous, narrative research is not. In Chapter 1, we defined narrative, broadly so that we did not exclude any forms or practices associated with narrative and so that we could take account of the major currents in narrative theory. We said that narratives can be defined by the ways in which they organize symbolic movement, including but not exclusive to events in time; by their contextualization and re-contextualization of meaning; and by their performing identity and its transformation. We also argued for narrative's historical and cultural specificity, suggesting that narratives have specific effects in specific circumstances with specific audiences. We noted that narrative analysis is not the same as interpreting narrative. An analogy might be the difference between an appreciation of narrative, compared with a systematic analysis for structure, content or context or some mixture of those. Narrative research appeared, here and throughout the book, as a complex, nuanced family of research practices, each with their own justifications and uses. Rather than being a generalizing, simplifying endeavour, narrative research has emerged as a project dedicated to understanding stories' particularities in depth, across many different fields of meaning.

Another way of responding to criticisms of narrative research is to take steps to problematize it as a research approach, as we have argued for throughout this book. This approach implies that the researcher should address themselves, in a self-reflexive way, to the research approach chosen, its justification, and the related framings of data collection and analysis. Some questions to ask might be:

- Why do narrative research? There are other research options, so how does narrative interest you specifically and/or why might it help you address your research questions/problem/area?
- What are narrative's particularities, in comparison with other modes of social inquiry? What are the commonalities? Is narrative special? If you want to make this claim, how will you justify it?
- Narrative is fascinating, but is this enough to justify your research? What does your deployment of narrative research add to social inquiry?

- How does your research question articulate with the various analytical options available? Does a focus on the structures of narrative advantage you? Is a content- or context-oriented approach warranted? Or is some combination of these useful?

Implied in these questions is a focus on the point of doing research in the first place, and the researcher's relation with that aim. Reflection on these dimensions of research practice can be a valuable exercise, particularly for defending the research in peer review. Also indicated here is that attention to the relation of the research aim with methodological considerations is important. Settling on a useful relation between them is a challenge that needs to be addressed. This is because a research aim that does not have an adequate articulation with methodological concerns may lead to problems regarding the credibility of the insights that the researcher may wish to put forward. Equally, though, having a methodology determine how a research question is posed and addressed may empty research of the possibility for originality and serendipity, stagnating inquiry prematurely. If you already think you know just what the stories in your research should sound like, and exactly how you will ask for and listen to them, then you are likely to find precisely what you expect, and no more. For most of us, though, narrative research is interesting, not because of what we think we know, but because of what we regularly hear, and expect to hear in the future, that is new and different.

Although this has been a book concerned primarily with the methods, with the 'how to' of narrative research, we hope you have also taken from reading it a sense of how connected this question is with the broader questions of how and why to do narrative research, and research in general. We have tried to introduce you to some of the 'family' of narrative research practices within social research. We have pointed out the value for research knowledge, understanding and impact that comes from a field that is in debate with itself, always troubling the very categories that seem to define it. And we have, we hope, shown you that to make these debates part of your own research practice, to find and define your own mode of practising narrative research, is an exciting and rewarding way to do research.