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# Inquiry into Issues of Trustworthiness and Quality in Narrative Studies: A Perspective

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## Inquiry into Issues of Trustworthiness and Quality in Narrative Studies: A Perspective

### **Abstract**

Many narrative studies subscribe to the criterion of verisimilitude as a form of quality check. However, such a criterion does not fully nor explicitly address the issue of quality or rigour. This paper examines a possible set of necessary criteria for evaluating narrative studies. It draws on the quality literature from the broader qualitative research field as well as the narrative research field. Specifically, it deals with the need to have a list of considerations to refer to in order to ensure acceptability and recognition of narrative studies' rigour. This paper posits that issues of trustworthiness, narrative truth, verisimilitude and utility need to be attended to for any narrative study to ensure its quality.

### **Keywords**

Narrative Study, Quality, Trustworthiness, Criteria, Rigour

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## Inquiry into Issues of Trustworthiness and Quality in Narrative Studies: A Perspective

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### Introduction

In any research study, the questions of quality, namely validity, reliability and generalisability crop up. Such discussions have a tendency to descend into a series of convoluted arguments which essentially is not particularly productive since each research study is derived from different epistemological and ontological paradigms. Seemingly, this debate about the research quality is akin to that of “micropolitics” – “those strategies by which individuals and groups in organizational contexts seek to use their resources of power and influence to further their interests” (Hoyle, 1982, p. 88). Smith and Hodkinson (2008) attest to this analogy. They state in no uncertain terms that “academics strive explicitly and implicitly to influence those criteria (or lists of characteristics) that determine research quality as well as to perform well against them;” in other words, “academics are micropolitical” (p. 422).

For researchers who are operating from the non-traditional research paradigms (which is essentially non-positivist or non-postpositivist), that is, they are perceived to be pushing the boundaries of the established *doxa* which Bourdieu (1990) defines as:

the coincidence of the objective structures and the internalized structures which provides the illusion of immediate understanding, characteristic of practical experience of the familiar universe, and which at the same time excludes from that experience any inquiry as to its own conditions of possibility. (p. 20)

Essentially, *doxa* is a way of doing things, and a way of understanding. *Doxa* is commonly found in all communities, as communities create a set of practices and conceptual understanding that has become familiar and comfortable, and that will be disseminated and transmitted within those communities. In such a scenario, “the dominant classes have an interest in defending the integrity of *doxa*” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 169). The *doxa* must be perpetuated, and hence the mavericks must be sidelined or transformed; resistance shall not go unchallenged. An excellent example of this reality was when Donmoyer (1996) spoke of his role as a “gatekeeping” editor of *Educational Researcher*, a highly esteemed journal in

education. Donmoyer (1996) stated that “(g)atekeepers cannot normally widen the gates they monitor; they simply get to decide which sorts of people can walk through them” (p. 20). Even more telling was when he declared that “if I decide to publish non-traditional manuscripts, there will be less space for traditional scholarly work” (p. 20).

Similarly, Smith and Hodkinson (2008) listed the Shavelson and Towne’s (2002) report in the United States and the Spencer, Ritchie, Lewis, and Dillon’s (2003) Cabinet Office’s report in the United Kingdom as examples of strong government pressures for “measured and supposedly objective performance criteria for research” (p. 431) in the two countries. Thus, many who embark on qualitative research in the form of narrative study, which is situated within the interpretive-constructivist paradigm, are regularly queried for its rigour and its quality.

Within such a background, it is thus vital for a narrative researcher to ask the following:

How valid is this narrative approach? How valid is the analysis of the data?  
 How valid and reliable is the collection of these “stories,” and how can a story be valid as an analysis? If the data is collected through the participants’ telling of their “storied experiences,” how do I know if they are being truthful? What if they made up a story or embellish the retelling? Will the research be valid then?

As I pondered over these questions of quality in my narrative study of beginning teachers, I referred to the influential text on narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) for answers. However, these queries were not given a comprehensive, nor a conclusive response. What was said was that the criteria, “namely apparency, verisimilitude and transferability,” with which to assess the narrative inquiry’s quality, “continue to be developed and about which we encourage narrative inquirers to be thoughtful” (p. 188). To be “thoughtful?” How can I convince others that narrative inquiry is a useful approach in studying the phenomena of human experiences? If I am not able to ensure that there is quality and rigour to such an approach, then potential consumers of this study will not see it as relevant for their knowledge or understanding of a beginning teacher’s experiences, and certainly will not see it as useful for any educational change or reform.

One of the Deputy Directors from the Ministry of Education, in one of the research meetings with the education researchers recently (2012), pointed out that “stories” might be interesting to listen to, but what do they ultimately prove? He questioned the relevancy of stories in the formulation of the ministry’s policies.

In the most up-to-date update on Narrative Inquiry in the latest fourth edition of Denzin and Lincoln (2013)’s *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials*, Chase merely spent two paragraphs on the issue of “validity” in her section on Methodological issues (which consists of seven paragraphs) faced by Narrative Inquiry – a mere two paragraphs out of a total of 73 paragraphs in the entire chapter; less than a page out of 22 pages (excluding Notes and References). This tellingly reveals the amount of emphasis placed on trustworthiness issues in this field.

In addition, Chase cited the examples found in Clandinin and Murphy (2007)’s conversations with two of the foremost narrative academics, Amia Lieblich and Elliot Mishler. The former noted that her graduate students had trouble finding support for narrative research, and she hence encouraged them to “do a combination study” (p. 639); in addition, she personally feels that it will be difficult for her students to find jobs or get promoted if they were to pursue narrative research alone. The latter, Elliot Mishler, observed that established narrative researchers often felt “like outsiders in their department of psychology

or sociology *or whatever*” (p. 641; emphasis added). If both beginning and experienced narrative researchers encounter such a lack of support in their research work, then this begs the question of *Why*. Trustworthiness of research is such an important methodological issue that Lincoln and Guba (1985) had to spend quite a bit of space in their influential *Naturalistic Inquiry* addressing the issue. If the research cannot be perceived as trustworthy by others in the broad field of qualitative research, how much less it is perceived by those in the other fields, namely the quantitative field. This is an issue that has been raised many a time by the prominent researchers in the field of qualitative research. Their intent is not to dismiss the value of Narrative Inquiry as a whole, but more to ensure that Narrative Inquiry can stand up to scrutiny by others and hold its head up high.

If Connelly and Clandinin (1990)’s article is taken as the start in the field of *Narrative Inquiry*, and 1995 is taken as the year when the field was elaborated (Mishler, 1995; Polkinghorne, 1995), then surely after almost two decades, this trustworthiness issue should not be such a prominent issue raised time and again by others in the field of qualitative research. But this issue refuses to rest, because the issue has not been addressed fully and directly. This paper’s goal is to address this issue fully and directly, and makes a suggestion that narrative inquiry should adhere to the trustworthiness criteria found in the broader qualitative field, *in addition* to their own. Torrance (2013) provided an excellent treatise on qualitative research and its pressures to find relevance in the face of mounting budgeting pressures from the policy makers, particularly for those in the UK and USA<sup>1</sup>. He gives an overview of the history of this mounting pressures in both settings, and then lays out the main reason for this continual debate and discussion – “Educational research, and especially, qualitative approaches to educational research, *has not provided a sufficiently cumulative and robust evidence base* for the development of educational policy and practice, ...” (p. 357; emphasis added). He elaborates from his analysis of the debate that “educational research is too often conceived and conducted as a “cottage industry:” producing too many small-scale, disconnected, non-cumulative studies that do not provide convincing explanations of educational phenomena or how best to develop teaching and learning” (p. 357). This is the similar charge laid at the more general social research.

In the conclusion of his analysis, even though he does feel that standards and checklists “*cannot* substitute for informed judgment” (Torrance, 2013, p. 365; emphasis original), and that it is a matter of judgment to ascertain the quality and trustworthiness of qualitative research, he acknowledges the need to “acknowledge and discuss the imperfections” of qualitative research and “enact the deliberative process of academic quality assurance” (p. 373). If the broader field of qualitative research requires such an entire enterprise, what more the narrower field of narrative research? Narrative inquiry needs to first acknowledge the lack of acceptability of its trustworthiness within the qualitative field, and then move to discuss this issue, so as to ensure that its research is acknowledged to be acceptable to other qualitative researchers<sup>2</sup>.

I shall first look at this perennial issue of trustworthiness in narrative research, then the issue of narrative truth and the issues of verisimilitude and utility, before concluding with an exhortation to narrative researchers to embrace the rigour of using a set of quality criteria that is widely recognized and accepted in the broader field of qualitative research.

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<sup>1</sup> Even though Torrance (2013) alludes to other countries such as Australia, New Zealand and the European Union (p. 357); and leaves out the research settings of those in Asia, Africa and South America), the focus of his analysis is on the pressures faced in the two most dominant settings in the (Anglo-American) social-educational research arena.

<sup>2</sup> Only when that is accomplished, and only then, can it be found to be more acceptable to the funding bodies and policy makers.

### Issue of Trustworthiness

The search for quality, or specifically the criteria with which to ensure quality, which traditionally in positivist or postpositivist paradigms meant the criteria of validity, reliability and generalisability, is essential for the research to be accepted into the pantheon of knowledge and to be received as suitable for use in various means and ways. As Smith (1990) noted, “the problem of criteria seems to me one of the most difficult and important problems facing social and educational research” (p. 167).

Why are the criteria by which to evaluate the quality of this narrative study important? Why is there a need to even have a set of criteria with which to evaluate? Garratt and Hodkinson (1998) suggest that “(a)ny prespecification of universal criteria is in danger of foisting on research artificial categories of judgment, and a framework of a priori conditions that may be impossible or inappropriate to meet ...” (p. 533). So, then if this is the case, why should a list of criteria be searched for and applied in my narrative study?

If this present narrative study is to be acknowledged as making a “distinctive contribution to the development of knowledge in a discipline” (Dunleavy, 2003, p. 27) and be accepted to be of worth, then this list of criteria is needed. Elliott, Fisher, and Rennie (1999) acknowledged that even though a list of criteria may be fundamentally be at odds with the spirit of qualitative research, they concluded that “some form of widely-recognized evaluative guidelines for qualitative research are necessary in order to win wider recognition and acceptability for qualitative approaches” (p. 225). Hammersley (2008) too admits that such “guiding principles and lists of relevant considerations” (p. 160) are important in helping to assess one’s own and others’ research quality.

Over the past three decades, since the mid-1980s, which Denzin and Lincoln (1994) term as the fourth moment<sup>3</sup> or the crisis of representation and legitimation, there has been a plethora of works attempting to articulate and list the criteria that describes the characteristics of what constitutes good qualitative research (see Altheide & Johnson, 1994; Creswell, 2009; Creswell & Miller, 2000; Eisner, 1998; Elliott et al., 1999; Ely, Anzul, Friedman, Garner, & Steinmatz, 1991; Gibbs, 2007; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Kvale & Brinkman, 2009; Lincoln, 1995; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2005, 2009; Merriam, 2009; Mishler, 1990; Packer & Addison, 1989; Patton, 2002; Polkinghorne, 2007; Seale, 1999, 2002; Sparkes, 1998; Whittemore, Chase & Mandle, 2001; Yin, 2011). Of note is the highly influential and much-cited classic work of Lincoln and Guba (1985), *Naturalistic Inquiry*. It is a work that set out what naturalistic inquiry is, the paradigm it is situated in, and the moves to make to ensure “trustworthiness,” their alternative term to replace the positivistic terms of validity, reliability and generalisability, for those qualitative work residing within the constructivist paradigm.

As this work is highly regarded and much referred to by many of the works cited in the quality (or criteria) literature, it has in a way obtained a “recognized” status with regard to its suggested quality, or in their terms, trustworthiness, guidelines. As Polkinghorne (2007) puts it, “validity is a function of intersubjective judgements” and thus depends on “a consensus within a community” (p. 474). Since there needs to be intersubjective judgement, and a consensus needs to be reached within the community, then only this work by Lincoln and Guba has obtained the required status. Few works in the quality literature within qualitative research world has reached such a state of being accepted and constantly being cited.

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<sup>3</sup> Atkinson, Coffey, and Delamont (1999) vigorously contend that Denzin and Lincoln’s “developmental model” of “moments” is too “neat;” instead, they prefer to view the various periods of qualitative research “in terms of continuing tensions” (p. 470). But as most qualitative research texts utilize Denzin and Lincoln’s (1994, 2008) model of “moments of qualitative research,” I shall adhere to it.

Albeit there are some (notably Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Silverman, 2006; Silverman & Marvasti, 2008) who disagree with the Lincoln and Guba's (1985) trustworthiness criteria and even choose not to make mention of the work; yet, they cite Seale's (1999) work as an example of "an excellent overall treatment of the issues discussed in this chapter (i.e., *Quality in qualitative research*)" (Silverman & Marvasti, 2008, p. 274). But in this same work, Seale (1999) recommends the procedures outlined by Lincoln and Guba as "useful for qualitative researchers to know about and to *incorporate into their work* where relevant" (pp. 45-46; emphasis added). Thus, Seale accepts the consensus reached by the community and accords importance to the influential work by Lincoln and Guba (1985). There may be some disagreement over Lincoln and Guba's (1985) trustworthiness criteria as the yardstick with which to assess and ensure quality, but the larger qualitative research community as listed earlier does acknowledge their work as critical and highly influential. There is consensus within the larger qualitative research community, and hence to this work of trustworthiness will I turn, to evaluate and establish quality in this narrative study.

Table 1 lists Lincoln and Guba's trustworthiness criteria and summarises the techniques for achieving them:

Table 1. Lincoln & Guba's (1985) trustworthiness criteria & techniques for establishing them

Criteria	Techniques	
Credibility (internal validity)	1) Prolonged engagement 2) Persistent observation 3) Triangulation (sources, methods, investigators) 4) Peer debriefing 5) Negative case analysis 6) Referential adequacy (archiving of data) 7) Member checks	(pp. 301-304) (pp. 304-305) (pp. 305-307) (pp. 308-309) (pp. 309-313) (pp. 313-314) (pp. 314-316)
Transferability (external validity)	8) Thick description	(p. 316)
Dependability (reliability)	9) Overlap methods (Triangulation of methods) 10) Dependability audit - examining the process of the inquiry (how data was collected; how data was kept; accuracy of data)	(p. 317) (pp. 317-318)
Confirmability (objectivity)	11) Confirmability audit - examines the product to attest that the findings, interpretations & recommendations are supported by data	(pp. 318-327)
All 4 criteria	12) Reflexive journal (about self & method)	(p. 327)

These techniques to establish the trustworthiness of the study are recommended by Lincoln and Guba to "guide the field activities and to impose checks to be certain that the proposed procedures are in fact being followed" (p. 330). Having suggested the list of criteria and techniques, Lincoln and Guba also provided a practical caveat: "(i)t is dubious whether 'perfect' criteria will ever emerge" (p. 331). This is aligned to the constructivist paradigm in that all knowledge is constructed; constructed knowledge is never "perfect." Thus, the constructivist nature of the criteria and the techniques are implied. As such, this list (in Table 2) is merely to be used as a guide – a map of sorts to aid the constructivist researcher to navigate the terrain of understanding and ensuring the study's quality and hence acceptance by the research community.

At this juncture, it is prudent to enquire about the consensus of the research community with regard to the trustworthiness criteria. To do so, I have referred to and compared with the qualitative research methods literature, situated in the constructivist paradigm, in the past decade. The criteria and techniques of consensus are found in Table 2.

As Sparkes (2002) suggests, such criteria lists "are not closed; they can be added to and subtracted from as the form and purposes of inquiries change" (p. 211). Thus, from the

survey of trustworthiness techniques found in the various standard qualitative research methods texts (i.e., Table 3), a narrative study, for a start, could and should select from the consensus list the criteria that are appropriate for establishing trustworthiness. However, there is a need to clarify what I mean by member checking, as it is slightly different from what was originally meant by Lincoln and Guba.

### **Member Checking**

Member checking is a process whereby “the final report or specific description or themes” are taken back to the participants (Creswell, 2009, p. 191) to offer them “an opportunity to provide context and an alternative interpretation” (Patton, 2002, p. 561). Since they are the ones in the actual experience studied, they would have detailed information about the context in which the experiences occurred, their personal reasons for the occurrence and their responses to it. There have been critiques of member checking over the years, namely by Fielding and Fielding (1986), Bloor (2001), and Silverman (2006). Their critiques center on the fact that there are “many reasons and interests which can lead members to misreport to the researcher, and it must be borne in mind at all times that they have different purposes from the researcher’s” (Fielding & Fielding, 1986, p. 43).

I do fully agree that the participants’ purposes may be different from mine. They may have an agenda or indeed they may want to create a more positive self-image when they refute or disagree with my interpretations. Thus, member *checking*, and therefore not member *validation*, is used as a form of follow-up data collection, to create “an occasion for extending and elaborating the researcher’s analysis” (Bloor, 2001, p. 393). The information garnered from the feedback given by the participants is included in the analysis and interpretation of the experiences. This was what Fielding and Fielding (1986) had in mind when they suggested that member checking be “another valuable source of data and insight” (p. 43). This is in part also alluded to by Lincoln and Guba (1985): “Clearly the investigator is not bound to honor all the criticisms that are mounted (in member checking), but he or she is bound to hear them and weigh their meaningfulness” (p. 315). It is ethical to allow the participants to have a look at their data and the interpretations derived from it, and offer their views regarding them.

And so, with this in mind, I propose to add two sub-categories within member-checking to aid in the establishment of trustworthiness of the interpretation – that of peer and audience validation.

#### ***Peer Validation***

My interpretation of the data may “go beyond the subjects’ self-understanding – what they themselves feel and think about a topic” (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009, p. 253). In the beginning teacher study, I am looking at it not just as a former teacher who was, like the participants, a beginning teacher, but I am also looking at the data through a researcher’s lens with the purpose of understanding the experiences, aided by the research and theoretical literature. Furthermore, I am also looking at it from a teacher educator perspective. Since the participants would be seeing the experience from a “common sense understanding” (Kvale, 2007, p.125), it might be useful to seek validation from “scholars familiar with the interview themes and with the theories applied to the interview texts” (p. 125). After all, peers in the similar field, or working within a similar branch of research, would have some familiarity with the relevant research literature, research methods, and would have engaged in similar research work; thus, they would be able to provide some sort of corroboration with regard to the interpretation of the data.



In my study of the beginning teachers, this was done with two peers who are familiar with teacher education and teacher research in Singapore. The interpretation in both narrative analysis and the thematic analysis of narratives (Polkinghorne, 1995) were both sent to them as a form of check, and in return, they provided their views on what they agreed with and what they thought I might want to re-look and re-analyse.

### *Audience Validation*

In addition to peer validation, I also suggest the use of “audience validation” (Kvale, 2007). It is validation from the “primary intended users and readers” of the study (Patton, 2002, p. 561), and, I would add, from those whom the study is about – beginning teachers. As this study is on beginning teachers, and how beginning teachers experience school life in the critical first two years, other teachers would have had the relevant experience to assess whether the interpretation makes sense, whether the interpretation is reasonable and whether the interpretation connects to how beginning teachers understand the world within the school. The interpretation was given to two beginning teachers (one in his second year and one in her first year), an ex-teacher who was a former Head of Department, and a principal. Their views were solicited to assess if the interpretation made sense and “ring true.”

Their responses, as well as the two peers and the participants were used to refine the stories and interpretations. Member checking is important for establishing trustworthiness because the views from those in the field, participants, other teachers and researchers, allow for a fuller and rounder understanding of what is happening in the field. It thus helps to keep my biases in check when I interpret the data.

As a narrative researcher, I seek to learn not of facts, but of *interpretation* of the facts. Thus, I would agree with Riessman (2008) that “a narrative is not simply a factual report of events, but instead one articulation told from a point of view that seeks to persuade others to see the events in a single way” (p. 187). It is the personal meaning of the experiences that this study and I seek (Atkinson, 2002; Mishler, 1990; Polkinghorne, 2007; Riessman, 2008). As Atkinson (2002) succinctly puts across, “(h)istorical reconstruction may not be the primary concern in life stories; rather, it may be how the individuals see themselves at given points in their lives, and how they want others to see them” (p. 127). To learn of their realities, to learn of their emotional and mental responses to those realities, the meanings and interpretations the participants ascribe to these realities are “the best evidence available to researchers about the realm of people’s experience” (Polkinghorne, 2007, p. 479).

This study does not seek to verify facts (i.e., historical truth). This is not what a narrative study is about. Rather, this study seeks to learn the *meaning* made of these historical truths by the participants. As Polkinghorne (2007) instructs:

Storied evidence is gathered not to determine if events actually happened *but about the meaning* experienced by people whether or not the events are accurately described .... Storied texts serve as evidence for personal meaning, not for the factual occurrence of the events reported in the stories. (p. 479; emphasis mine)

This is attested to by Atkinson, Coffey, and Delamont (2003). The research enterprise is to utilise an “analytic mentality” so as to “explore the complexities of the context” (p. 139); it is to seek to understand the various contexts and perspectives that construct the reality for the participants. Hence, the imperative for the researcher is to ensure that there is a “principled analysis” of the storied data.

Table 2. Consensus of techniques in establishing trustworthiness

<b>Lincoln &amp; Guba (1985)</b>	<b>Creswell &amp; Miller (2000)</b>	<b>Patton (2002)</b>	<b>Maxwell (2005)</b>	<b>Maxwell (2009)</b>	<b>Merriam (2009)</b>	<b>Creswell (2009)</b>	<b>Yin (2011)</b>
1) Prolonged engagement	pp. 127-128	-	p. 110	p. 244	p. 219	p. 192	p. 79
2) Persistent observation	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
3) Triangulation (sources, methods, investigators)	pp. 126-127	pp. 555-560	pp. 112-113	p. 245	pp. 215-216	p. 191	pp. 81-82
4) Peer debriefing	p. 129	p. 562	-	-	p. 220	p. 192	-
5) Negative case analysis	p. 127	pp. 553-554	p. 112	pp. 244-245	-	p. 192	pp. 80-81
6) Referential adequacy	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
7) Member checks	p. 127	pp. 560-561	p. 111	p. 244	pp. 217-219	p. 191	p. 79
8) Thick description	pp. 128-129	-	pp. 110-111	p. 244	pp. 244-227	pp. 191-192	p. 79
9) Overlap methods	-	pp. 556-559	-	-	-	-	-
10) Dependability audit	Audit trail (p. 128)	Expert audit review (p. 562)	-	-	Audit trail (pp. 222-223)	External auditor (p. 192)	-
11) Confirmability audit			-	-			-
12) Reflexive journal	Researcher reflexivity (p. 127)	Investigator effects (pp. 567-570)	Researcher bias (pp. 108-109)	Researcher bias (p. 243)	Researcher bias (pp. 219-220)	Researcher bias (p. 192)	-

Yet, having said this, there is a nagging doubt and question: How do we know that this is the perceived interpretation of their reality? This is a question that can be addressed by using Mishler's (1990) concept of "text sampling procedure" (p. 427). Multiple interviews with the same participant (i.e., triangulation of data sources), with "repeated listenings to taped interviews and readings of transcripts," and focused analysis of the critical "episodes" are used. This is to verify "internal consistency" (p. 427). Internal consistency is used as a measure to ascertain that what a participant says "in one part of the narrative should not contradict what he or she says in another part" (Atkinson, 2002, p. 134). This is used as a form of quality check by the interviewer, to verify the participant's personal interpretation of his or her reality. It can also be used to "clarify earlier comments with recent insights if they appear to be different" (pp. 134-135).

Still, another question crops up: What if the participants choose to lie to us? What then? Won't the narratives then paint a wrong picture of the situation narrative researchers are studying? Sjoden, Granhag, Ost, & Roos af Hjelmsater's (2009) study is of help for this issue. They investigated the claims of people of having seen a non-existent footage of a major event by prompting them for more details. One of their hypotheses was that the narrative details elicited from the participants would help to distinguish the false "reports" from the false "memories." When the participants had to furnish explicit details of the event, many retracted their initial claims. Sjoden et al. (2009) posit that it is only when the full narrative is elicited will the researcher(s) know if the event / claim indeed contains an element of truth. In addition, Porter, Yuille, and Lehman (1999) found that participants' details of the reported real events were more coherent than fabricated events, and that participants were more willing to admit the lack of memory. Sporer's (1997) study of the verbal cues in deception detection revealed that self-experienced stories "showed more signs of contextual embedding and more superfluous details than invented accounts" (p. 382). Pezdek and Taylor (2000) posit that fabricated accounts are distinctly different from true accounts; true accounts have both schematic and episodic details, whereas fabricated tend to contain mainly schematic details. From these studies, it shows then that the truth is in the details, and narrative researchers need to seek the specific details in the narrative conversations / interviews.

### **Issues of Verisimilitude and Utility**

If a narrative study is about the participant's particularized meaning-making interpretations, then how can it be of any relevance or use to the consumers of this study? If the study is not of use, then what is the *raison d'être* of the study? There are two issues to be addressed here – the first is that of verisimilitude, and the second is that of utility.

#### **Verisimilitude**

Verisimilitude is defined by the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2005) as "the quality of seeming to be true or real" (p. 1698). Similarly, in the research literature, it is defined as "a criterion for a good literary study, in which the writing seems 'real' and 'alive,' transporting the reader directly into the world of the study" (Creswell, 2007, p. 250). Verisimilitude is cited by Connelly and Clandinin (1990) and Connelly and Clandinin (2000) in both their influential works as an important criterion with which to judge the value of narrative inquiries.

Since narrative studies look at the interpretations of personal realities, it is important that these studies meet the criterion of verisimilitude. For the study to have trustworthiness, it must also achieve verisimilitude; it must "ring true;" it must have believability – where "audiences must experience a congruence with their own experiences of similar, parallel, or

analogous situations” (Blumenfeld-Jones, 1995, p. 31). This quality of verisimilitude is important because it allows others to have a vicarious experience of being in the similar situation and thereby being able to understand the decisions made and the emotions felt by the participants in the study.

Verisimilitude thus “makes it possible for others to have access not only to our lives when our stories are about them but also to the lives of others” (Eisner, 1997, p. 264). When the narratives are well crafted, it permits insights, deepen empathy and sympathy, and aids in the understanding of the subjective world of the participants (Eisner, 1997; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber., 1998; Sparkes, 2002; Webster & Mertova, 2007). Therefore, in order to establish verisimilitude in a narrative study, the study must “resonate” and seem plausible to the consumers of the study. Hence, the trustworthiness technique of member checking, specifically peer validation and audience validation, are essential.

## Utility

The second part to addressing the relevance of a study that looks at narrative truths is that of utility. Is this study useful? Is it relevant for use by members of the research community or by members of the teaching community? This is what Riessman (2008) considers as the “ultimate test” – does a piece of narrative research become a basis for others’ work (p. 193)? This criterion is also alluded to by Hammersley (2004). In his view, “research should be aimed at producing knowledge that contributes to the problem-solving capacities of some group of people” (p. 244). This makes good sense. If a study is so particular to only an individual or a group of individuals, what worth can it be for the community at large? It must have its use, its relevance, its utility (Packer & Addison, 1989; Eisner, 1998, 2001; Elliott et al., 1999; Patton, 2002; Riessman, 2008).

Eisner (1998) provides a list of three criteria to test a study’s usefulness – its “instrumental utility:”

1. Comprehension: can help us understand a situation that would otherwise be enigmatic or confusing;
2. Anticipation: provides descriptions and interpretations that go beyond the information given about them;
3. Guide / map: highlights, explains, provides directions the reader can take into account; deepens and broadens our experience and helps us understand what we are looking at. (pp. 58-59)

Again, to assess this criteria, the use of the trustworthiness technique of member checking, specifically the peer validator and audience validator, is essential. The members in the research community and in the audience, specifically beginning teachers, can attest whether the study is of use to them as researchers in teacher-related fields in the former, and as beginning teachers or student teachers in the form of a guide in the latter. In addition, the trustworthiness technique of “Thick Description” can also contribute in establishing this criteria of utility, since it is only by the detailed description of the context and the actions situated within that context can the answers raised and meanings made be transferred to a different and yet similar context. As Barone (2000) exhorts:

If all discourse is culturally contextual, how do we decide which deserves our attention and respect? The pragmatists offer the criterion of usefulness for this purpose.... An idea, like a tool, has no intrinsic value and is “true” only in its capacity to perform a desired service for its handler within a given situation.

When the criterion of usefulness is applied to context-bound, historically situated transactions between itself and a text, it helps us to judge which textual experiences are to be valued.... The gates are opened for textual encounters, in any inquiry, genre or tradition, that serve to fulfill an important human purpose. (pp. 169-170)

### Conclusion

Silverman and Marvasti (2008, p. 295) posit that research is of good quality when it satisfies the following criteria:

- It thinks theoretically through and with data
- It develops empirically sound, reliable, and valid findings.
- It uses methods that are demonstrably appropriate to the research problem.
- Where possible, it contributes to practice and policy.

Narrative research cannot reject such criteria if it aims to be of influence in practice and policy. To do so would weaken the impact and outreach of narrative studies. In the update to their influential chapter, “Criteria for assessing interpretive validity in qualitative research” (Altheide & Johnson, 1994), Altheide and Johnson (2013) reviewed how various qualitative researchers addressed the validity issues within their own approaches. They found this development to “create more trustworthy knowledge” (p. 383) be heartening. In their review of these approaches, they found that two main commonalities that cut across the methodological approaches: the “ethical obligation to make public their claims, to show the reader, audience, or consumer why they should be trusted as faithful accounts of some phenomenon” and the “pragmatic utility of validity as ‘good for our present intents and purposes’” (p. 389). In concluding their overview of the validity issues in the field currently, Altheide and Johnson (2013) suggest that any set of standards or criteria need to consider the perspectives from all parties involved in the process and product of the research – the researcher, the subjects, its utility and the audience. Narrative research traditionally addresses the perspectives of both the researcher(s) and the researched; however, by not seriously addressing the issue of trustworthiness of its analysis and findings, it does not seem to be fully addressing the perspectives of its utility and audience.

Many in positions of authority and funding have yet to unequivocally accept narrative studies and its findings as valid basis for policy reformation and implementation. In order for narrative studies to gain a greater level of acceptance, these issues of trustworthiness and quality should and must be addressed. This paper seems to treat narrative methodology as monolithic, whereas there are many different approaches taken and not all narrative researchers would be happy to be lumped together in “the constructivist paradigm;” yet, it must be noted that many of the influential narrative researchers (Lieblich et al., 1998; Polkinghorne, 1988; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Gubrium & Holstein, 2009; Riessman, 2008; Speedy, 2008) situate narrative research within this paradigm, and hence there is a tendency for the beginning narrative researcher to follow suit. In addition, even though there are different approaches to a narrative research, it is imperative that any narrative research approach is seen to be rigorous and stand up to scrutiny.

As Atkinson, Coffey and Delamont (2001) advised, researchers should not be “so seduced by our collective success or by the radical chic of new strategies of social research as to neglect the need for methodological rigour” (p. 5). It is the rigour of the research that permits it to be acceptable and therefore gain the necessary weight to affect changes. In order to do so, narrative researchers need to demonstrate to its readers the procedures used to ensure

that its methods are reliable and that its findings are valid (Silverman & Marvasti, 2008); in other words, the study is trustworthy. Appeals to its verisimilitude or to the fact that its quality criteria vary accordingly to each individual study do not lend itself to the development of trustworthiness in the eyes of the research recipients. Even Polkinghorne (2007), one of the foremost advocates of narrative research, admits that it is “the readers who make the judgment about the plausibility of a knowledge claim based on the evidence and argument for the claim reported by the researcher” (p. 484). Hence, in order to convince the readers of the knowledge claims in narrative studies, this paper posits that narrative researchers should pay heed to and utilise quality procedures that has consensus among the research community at large: Looking to and choosing from the techniques in establishing trustworthiness (in Table 2), analysing the narratives for its various contexts and from its various perspectives (i.e. “truths”), and ensuring that it resonates (i.e. verisimilitude) with and has use (i.e. utility) for the potential consumers of the study will be a good start. As Hammersley (2008) has put it:

There are serious differences in perspective, but some means needs to be found to at least reduce them, so as to increase the level of agreement across social researchers’ judgements about what is and is not good quality work. Clarifying standards of assessment and considerations relevant to them may serve a useful function in this. (p.177)

Continued appeals to and insistence that narrative research has varied approaches and hence cannot be assessed by a criteria list, even though the list has widespread consensus within the larger qualitative research community, do not help narrative research to gain wider acceptance. It may appeal to those who are already interested in “stories,” but it does not gain credence for those who are not. Aren’t the goals of any research to build knowledge and disseminate that knowledge? If that knowledge is not accepted, then those goals cannot be met.

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