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Abstract

Just as even the most personal of our narratives can ultimately be traced back to our communal pasts, so they are worked up, told, and retold through complex chains of sharing: Situated utterances, partial hearings and fractured representations circulate meanings and interpretations through relays of retelling as social agents listen to and tell their own and each other's stories. Narrative political psychologists explore how the storied lives of political actors are both shaped by their historical and structured circumstances and reproduce their ongoing political agency. In such contexts, how do narrative political psychologists assess truth claims? Guided by a Critical Realist theoretical approach, the article sets out a series of considerations for the assessment of truth and facts. Three interrelated characteristics underpin the search for truth and meaning in political storytelling: Responsibility, Recognition and Representation, applied to the scientific community, research participants, and the broader polity, respectively. The article explores the ethical and practical implications of the three characteristics in the evaluation of truth claims across political narratives, highlighting both the quest for verifiable facts and the complexity and indeterminacy of the historical and cultural contexts in which truths emerge and are contested. Reference is made throughout to an empirical study of the narratives of members of a declining fraternal organization.

Keywords

Ethics, Morals, Critical realism, Master narrative, Personal narrative, Dominant narrative, Political narrative

Introduction

In the current political order of targeted propaganda, the cynical manipulation of facts,

motivated reasoning, confirmation bias, and toxic disinformation, the challenges of

evaluating truth claims are serious and pressing (Baron, 2018; Farkas and Schou, 2019; Redlawsk, 2006; Taber and Lodge, 2016; Waisbord, 2018). Lies, distortions, and propaganda are of course as old as politics itself. However, their insertion into the practices of political leadership at the highest levels and into the heart of official political discourse in liberal democratic western regimes and public spheres is new. Moreover, the current political order is associated with growing mistrust, alienation, and divisiveness. In such an emerging context - the so-called post-Truth order - how do political psychologists assess and evaluate truth claims? While there are few straightforward answers, narrative research has something to offer here. In a world in which varying truth claims compete for ascendancy and large numbers of people are convinced by deliberately misleading or false information, those political psychologists practiced in the interpretation of stories in their multi-perspectival diversity and across a range of social and historical contexts bring a range of analytical and ethical insights to the evaluation of accounts. This article offers a brief consideration of certain of those insights, making the case for a critical realist theoretical orientation that is able to combine both the ongoing quest for empirically verifiable facts and critical assessments of truth claims with an openness to the contingent, indeterminate, and always evolving settings of history and culture in which truths are generated.

The analysis begins in the shared and communal context in which stories emerge, are received, processed, and reworked against the backdrop of culturally available master narratives. Even the most personal of our narratives can ultimately be traced back to our communal pasts, and they are worked up, told, and retold through complex chains of sharing: Situated utterances, partial hearings and fractured representations circulate meanings and interpretations through relays of retelling as social agents listen to and tell their own and each other's stories. Narrative political psychologists explore how the storied lives of political actors are both shaped by the historical and structured circumstances of their origins and then reproduce their ongoing political agency through

practices of speaking and listening. Across these settings, a range of partial truths (Clifford, 1986) emerge as subjects encounter and respond to master narratives which weave in and out of their own emerging personal political narratives (Andrews, 2014; Hammack, 2011). Into this complex of interpretations and relays of truth claims enters the political narrative analyst, whose own perspectives on truth and facts add to the thick complexities (Geertz, 1973) of interpretations. The concept of thick description underscores the importance of paying close attention to context, communication, and culture in the deep interpretation of truths across socio-political settings, as well as the limitations of abstracted, universal, and superficial (thin) accounts of truth that ignore or downplay the lived experiences and understandings of those whose lives are being investigated (Wilson, 1977).

In the highly motivated ambits of political narratives circulating in the current era, emotional reasoning brings partial memories into contact with emerging political projects from a range of sources against the backdrop of available cultural schema and scripts. In such contexts, how do narrative political psychologists assess the various truth claims that emerge? The assessment of verifiable and demonstrable facts is a starting point, and the affirmation or correction of such facts and information is a necessary facet of the research process. In the contemporary historical settings of the generation of truth claims, this may necessitate the robust countering of so-called "alternative facts," deliberate disinformation, or misleading distortions. The establishment of demonstrable facts, through the standard scientific criteria of observation, measurement, and classification (Chiang, Jhangiani, and Price, 2015; Frankfort-Nachmias, Nachmias, and DeWaard, 2015), do not, however, complete the interpretive work of assessing truth claims. The critical realist approach counters the positivist approach toward factual verification and disavows the idea that demonstrable data simply speak for themselves. As Bhaskar (2008) states, while the experiential domain of the empirical or the observable is a necessary aspect of the scientific

research process, it is not sufficient. The "Empirical" domain in critical realism is always situated in both the socially produced interpretive or theoretical frameworks of human understanding that make observation possible (what critical realists refer to as "the Actual") and "an intransitive dimension, in which the object is the real structure or mechanism that exists and acts quite independently of men and the conditions which allow men access to it" (Bhaskar, 2008, p.17). This is "the Real" in critical realism. The domain of actuality incorporates a range of potentially related and empirically verifiable data that remain unperceived or undetected and whose operations might influence theoretical interpretations of those data that are perceived. Behind the empirically observed and the theoretically contextualized but unobserved domains of actuality, are underlying forces and relations that operate independent of human knowledge and understanding, generating outcomes that shape and condition the Actual and the Empirical even as they remain unrealized. Using a critical realist approach, narrative political psychologists confirm and disconfirm verifiable facts, but do so using thick descriptive techniques which account for the Real and the Actual as well as the Empirical in the assessment of truth claims encountered across a range of settings.

Given the open-endedness of the narrated political order across a range of temporal and spatial settings, there can be no once-and-for-all definitive response to the establishment of truth claims. However, using the critical realist approach, this does not entail the adoption of a purely relativist approach toward the truth, or a "postmodern" turn toward a purely constructivist approach to knowledge and truth claims. While there is no "view from nowhere" (Nagel, 1986) that permits a completely detached and objective perspective on the part of the researcher, there are criteria both for the assessment of facts and the critical evaluation of truth claims in socio-historical context. These criteria include principles of rationality, plausibility, authenticity, and sincerity. For the researcher to impute or attribute certain interpretations onto agents is ethically questionable, and the preferred practice is the meeting of standpoints and the

discernment of shared understandings together. In this process, both researchers and researched have a stake and have substantive knowledge, both emic and etic in basic anthropological terms.

Hermeneutic analysis is the coming together of deep structural and abstracted insights into the typical workings of narratives with the knowledge, wisdom, and understandings of those who invoke and repeat them in their daily lives, a blending of langue and parole (Giddens, 1984). Any agreed upon meanings and orientations are only ever contingently held and always open to challenge, change, and reinterpretation in the context of new insights. Andrews points out: "We are forever revisiting our pasts, in light of changing circumstances of the present, and in so doing, our vision for the future is reconstituted" (Andrews, 2014, p. 3), and Bruner writes: "I take the view that there is no such thing as a 'life as lived' to be referred to. On this view, a life is created or constructed by the act of autobiography. It is a way of construing experience – and of reconstruing and reconstructing it until our breath and our pen fails us" (Bruner in Sikes, 2017, p. 411).

In bringing ethical focus and purpose to the assessment of truth in political storytelling, I present three broad constituencies to be considered in the conduct of political psychological narrative research. First, the researcher and her or his scientific community; second, those research participants, often lay actors, whose stories are told or retold in academic representations; and, finally, the broader political community, nation, or people which is affected by acts of representation. The key terms of ethical action with regard to truth claims in the context of each of these three communities are: Responsibility (to oneself and the scientific community); Recognition (of the worth and dignity of research participants and the intrinsic value of both their practical knowledge and their theoretical understandings); and Representation (a practice of care as personal narratives and cultural accounts are rendered in shared public space, and stewardship of cultural integrity and the wellbeing of humanity).

Responsibility

Responsibility is the obligation of researchers toward their own research integrity and toward the scholarly or scientific community that surrounds the research. This goes beyond the standard prescriptive ethics of transparency and accountability, criteria that are set within predominantly positivist conceptions of evidence and verification. While important, such criteria can be readily bureaucratized and routinized in ways that evade personal responsibility. Moreover, they are decontextualized from their social structural and historical settings. A deeper normative commitment toward personal responsibility, along with the trust that is established among those members of networked communities who consistently demonstrate it, is a critical component of researcher responsibility.

When it comes to the assessment of truth claims and the reconciliation of accounts in political narratives, narratives can never be proven or disproven once and for all through empirical methods and logical procedures, but instead are subject to criteria of verisimilitude (Bruner, 1991, p. 4). In other words, they are considered more or less acceptable or reasonable through some form of intersubjective assessment. This raises the question as to who or what bodies govern the conventions of acceptability, plausibility, coherence, and triangulation (Blaufuss, 2007). Moreover, there are ethical issues surrounding who or what gets into the public domain of recirculated narratives. As we shall see, the matter of proprietorship and possession is critical when it comes to controlling the circulation of accounts, representations, and versions.

In a deeper sense, the very capacity and willingness to talk or record words as texts is conditioned by core human rights to free expression, but also the right to silence, and the obligation of the researcher to take silences seriously and attempt to delineate the connotations of resisting communication. Norrick refers to criteria of relevance, interest,

and propriety in introducing narratives into public space as "tellability" (Norrick, 2005). He addresses whether the narrative in question attains the floor level of significance, interest or uniqueness to warrant telling. Norrick further asks whether narratives break through a ceiling of contents that are too personal, controversial, obscene, terrifying, shameful, or controversial to be reported. In the processes of circulating narratives, there are multiple points of assessment and decision regarding tellability, from the original narrator, through the researcher or other source of relay/amplification, to the listener. The concept of tellability opens up the important insight that narratives are socially constructed and shared and that individuals engage in processes of self dialogue as they construct their own evolving narratives, reporting on their (earlier) selves and adding meta-analytic commentaries to their own narratives and, in so doing, assessing the current status of tellability. Tellability further raises the issues of the regulation of desire, disciplinary and governance considerations in the organization of both upper and lower thresholds and who gets to pass through them. According to Foucault, power is inherent in the discourses through which we come to be governed. Discourses are historically contingent symbolic practices that entail material effects through their constitution of structures that generate social forces and relations (Foucault, 1980, 1984). While our social agency is never entirely determined by dominant discourses, they exert profoundly powerful effects in shaping our knowledge, desire, ethical norms, and, importantly, governance of the self (Rose, 1990).

For the political psychologist of narratives, a deep knowledge and understanding of their own past practice and experience, in conjunction with their reading of the expectations of their peers, constitute guidelines as to how they actualize processes of assessing plausibility, coherence and verisimilitude (Hammack, 2011, p. 51). The key to this lies in the balance between recognition of the authenticity of the political narratives encountered and discovered in the research process – which I elaborate in the next section – and the responsibility of the researcher to bring a set of analytical and

experiential tools to the interpretive and representative process in a process of hermeneutic exchange – which extends out toward the entire polity, and which I develop further in the final section of the paper. Any research process will involve the bringing together of knowledges in a collaboration. The participant has a story, but the researcher is able to locate, challenge, interrogate and situate the narrative socially, psychologically, and historically (Goodson, 2017). In the process of exchange, the division of responsibility often regards the research participant as the repository of emic or common-sense understanding and what Giddens (1984) refers to as "practical consciousness", while the political analyst brings a theoretical and distanced etic frame and "discursive consciousness" (Giddens, 1984). This account of hermeneutic exchanges is not incorrect but is incomplete and tends to downplay both the discursive consciousnesses of ordinary people in their daily lives as well as the taken-for-granted in the assumptions and judgements of researchers. Depending on circumstances and perspective, each of us is our own theoretician and each of us also lives in the taken-for-granted orders of shared common sense. Pluralizing and decentering practical and discursive consciousnesses in this way generates opportunities to investigate the historical and structured circumstances of life passages that set limits, give direction and purpose to the creation of an autobiography, as well as to explore the openness of the many choices people make. Going further, the binary distinction between researchers and lay actors raises the question of how far researchers constitute a singular and unified community of scholarship. In fact, the layers of those who make a living through scholarship are stratified and differentiated in complex ways, and there are questions of gendered, racialized, and other precarious positionalities and identities that underscore the diversity of possible readings of both practical and discursive consciousness within such a community.

Among the critical tools of political psychological narrative analysis then when it comes to the discernment of veracity and the construction of truths is the capacity to

read narratives in their social and historical locations and contexts (Hammack, 2011, pp.15-19; Goodson, 2017, pp. 5/6). From the perspective of the narrative political psychologist, the data themselves evolve in meaning and relevance over time as changing circumstances and the growing interpretive frameworks available to researchers shed new light on existing transcripts. As Andrews notes: "In this way, old stories actually become new stories; quite simply, over time, we find new layers of meaning in them" (Andrews, 2007, p. 5). In ethical terms, the coming together of insight and understanding necessitates a deep and sincere openness toward the political narratives of research subjects. However, that should not entail an exaggerated self-abnegation on the part of the highly trained researcher, whose insertion into a community of scholarship has generated models, theories, frameworks, and modes of reasoning that are able to bring to bodies of knowledge a range of critical insights and perspectives including the verification of facts and the evaluation of competing truth claims. Noble attempts to sponsor the voice of the narrative agent in some pure and unmediated form may in fact result in the abdication of active research collaboration or useful interpretation on the part of the researcher who absents her/himself in an attempt to respect the research participant (Goodson, 2017, p. 4).

To illustrate the balances necessitated through the coming together of subjectivities and areas of knowledge and expertise, I refer to an extended interview, lasting between two and three hours, conducted as part of a series with mostly older conservative men in a study of a fraternal order (McAuley and Nesbitt-Larking, 2018). The interviewee, Roy (a pseudonym) was a loquacious and hospitable man in his early eighties, with an extensive knowledge of the history of his fraternal organization. The interview took place in a large meeting hall in which Roy served as custodian, repair man, booking agent, ritual keeper, ceremonial head, band leader, and occasional pastor. Roy was clearly pleased to be able to explain the historical importance of his organization, making reference to a range of notable individuals and historical contexts

through which he attempted to establish bridges of mutual recognition and memory with us regarding the importance and value of certain people, roles, and events. As the interview progressed, we stood up and walked around the property so that Roy could use the artifacts and furnishings to illustrate and expand upon his accounts. His narrative fragments were alternately personal and borrowed from others, including certain familiar metanarratives of his organization. His discourse vacillated from the official and formal in tone to the informal, irreverent and even puerile. As the interview progressed and Roy became more comfortable, more animated, and less formal, so his accounts and recollections began to strain and ultimately to break our credulity. There were a number of incidences of readily controvertible facts as well as statements that arguably exaggerated certain interpretations of people and events. Toward the end of the interview, without preparation or any further discussion, he made reference to having been the victim of a domestic fire bombing from members of an opposing fraternal order. Given what we knew of the structural, historical, and personal contexts, we found this to be difficult to accept at face value. We attempted to gently probe for further detail, but Roy offered nothing more and the moment passed. The interview and tour with Roy challenged our capacity to integrate his knowledge, experience, and insights into our growing understanding of his fraternal organization. Our pledge to each research participant was to assume personal integrity, to respect them and their commitments, and to present a critical account of their truths while striving to be fair, combining sincerity on our part with objectivity and balance. We listened attentively and openly to Roy and did not discount the sincerity and truth of his narrative accounts owing to a few demonstrably false statements, rhetorical flourishes, instances of overgeneralized gist memory, and even the intrusion of a heroic and dramatic scene that had been transposed into his own life story from a desired but distal place and time. In our consideration of Roy's transcripts, we took all this into account.

Interviewing Roy brings into relief the seriousness of critical and structural analysis

as we and those we are researching seek to understand and evaluate political narratives. The research methodology reminds us that the personal narratives of research participants are always and everywhere in dialogue with the master narratives/metanarratives and cultural lives of our times and places. Narratives are accomplished socially and interactively and the process of narrative construction is achieved in the context of critical dialogical exchange, with the ever-open possibilities of redefinitions, refutations, and counter narratives (Brockmeier, 2018, p. 179). Brockmeier's stress on the performative and interactive character of narrative construction identifies the dramaturgical context of our evolving selves as a collaborative process between actor and critical audience in which memories and identity constructions are better understood as living events in language and other semiotic systems than as abstracted mental categories and storage silos (Brockmeier, 2018, pp. 35, 51, 168).

   As I explore in the next section, it is possible to extend and develop practices of encouragement, encountering and responding to resistances, explaining and underscoring the positive elements of critique and to do so in such a way as to affirm the person and validate their political narratives even in the context of a critical reception. In the end, the bringing together of understandings in the assessment of facts and truths across political narratives necessitates an ongoing and highly sensitive interchange that respects the dignity and authenticity of the research subjects, the specialized knowledge and formation of the researcher, and the integrity of the research community in which the researcher has emerged. In this respect, political narrative interpretation is in itself a profoundly political act: A matter of balance, compromise, and mutual give and take.

Recognition

Recognition is the realisation in its fullness of the inherent worth and dignity of humanity and in the specific context of political research, the wellbeing and status of the research participant. The central obligation of the researcher is a duty of care and attention to the lived experiences of those persons whose lives are told and retold across various settings. In the first place, this reminds us to dignify the research participant with the coherence and meaning to themselves of their stories. This entails commitment to the rights of participants to retain silences as well as to share in the assessment of tellability (Norrick, 2005), that is the degree to which narrative elements are of relevance and warranting dissemination. Key considerations here are the ethics of depicting discomfort, embarrassment, shame, suffering, and pain (Dauphinée, 2007, p. 145).

People do not usually recall their pasts in full and accurate detail, and it is often challenging to separate the discrete factual data of recalled events from the unstable meaning constructions of memories (Brockmeier, 2018, p. 35). However, the usefulness of the narrative form for purposeful recollection means that people may well interpolate approximations and present them as autobiographical fact. This is the basis of what is referred to as gist memory (Siegel, 1995), the recollection of general aspects of past recollection, true but often lacking in precision and accuracy. When it comes to the experiential reconstruction of pasts in narrative forms, people over- and under-estimate, forget details, conflate settings, people, and events, and sometimes simply make things up. (Riessman, 1993, p. 22). The dynamic interpretations of narrative truths are situated both in the distal contexts of culture and history, as well as the more proximate settings in which they are related. The contexts of people's lives may be complexly gendered, racialized, and shaped by other structural and cultural factors. Being multi-varied and often multiple, they range in orientation toward hegemonic,

accommodational, and oppositional narratives, underscoring the deep immersion into the changing and often fragmented foundations of lived experiences. Narrative memories are in large part shared accomplishments that depend upon the interplay of those speaking and those paying attention (Brockmeier, 2018, pp. 168, 179). In other words, the reflexive recognition of our own acculturation and predisposition to respond in certain ways is more than an intellectual factor; it betokens a shared humanity with those whose narratives we are investigating.

Research participants should be treated with empathy and care. This should not and does not mean an uncritical approach, but it does mean close attentiveness to their needs and interests. This implies: Paying attention, including attending to silences, verbal and nonverbal cues, and taking into account the whole person; listening, being emotionally aware and making connections with others across the full range of their emotional expressivity; responding to the emotional cues of others and supporting them through their pain in particular, giving them the gift of space and silence where necessary (Ellis, 2017, pp. 432-433). An ethic of care goes beyond the deontological principles of equal justice and rights and incorporates attention to those factors which might support or enhance the wellbeing of research participants in a fuller sense. At a minimum this necessitates attentiveness and responsiveness. Those engaged in the practice of personal narrative interviews that are painful or stressful for the research participant should develop professional skills in how to listen and how to respond as well as how to react in the broader sense and take time and effort to bring comfort and dignity to the individuals involved. Such interactions go far beyond the precepts of equal treatment and basic rights.

Our research project on the conservative fraternal order generated a challenge in conveying the narrative accounts of the growth and health of the order itself. The broader context of understanding required us to pay attention to the optimistic metanarratives of possibility, growth, and flourishing, which were reflected in many of

the narrative fragments of the individual men (McAuley and Nesbitt-Larking, 2018, pp.80-82, 91-92). Such narratives emboldened and encouraged the hard work of sustaining the rituals and practices of the organization. In face-to-face encounters, we simply sought clarification and, if possible, data and information, and there was no need to contradict the claims. In fact, to do so would have been to risk cutting off the very rationales and accounts that we wanted to hear in order to understand how an organization "depends upon the service, creativity, and commitment of a declining number of aging men" (McAuley and Nesbitt-Larking, 2018, p. v). The stark numerical reality was, however, of an organization in numerical decline. Without disrespecting the narratives of hope and possibility and allowing for exaggeration and even some distortions, we made clear the broader context in which the data were set. Summarising these balances, and reflecting on the words of a research participant, we said: "Echoing these arguments and extending them into both an optimistic appraisal of the prognosis for growth and a strategy for recruitment and renewal of people searching for cultural meaning, family roots, and social anchoring, a blend of resignation, realism, and residual hope characterizes most contemporary Canadian Orangemen as they reflect on the future of the Orange Order" (McAuley and Nesbitt-Larking, 2018, p. 92).

The ethics of questioning others and representing them in various settings lies at the heart of the political narrative encounter. The political narrative research encounter is often extended, deep, and open to a range of plausible interpretations and judgements as to the content of the narrative. As a consequence of this, differences between the intentions of the research participant and the researcher on the meaning and implications of the narrative may arise, and this can be the cause of discomfort and conflict. Knowing when and how to record and relay sensitive and fragile information and perspective is a developed skill of the ethically prepared narrative researcher (Sikes, 2017, p. 412). Questions of proprietorship arise as to the authorship and possession of narratives (Smythe and Murray in Bolen and Adams, 2017, p. 622). Such

considerations apply even when the narrative materials are ostensibly in the public domain. Pointing out the need for great awareness of context and structure, Yazir Henri offers these reflections on his testimony to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission: "The fact that my testimony could be appropriated, interpreted, re-interpreted, re-told and sold was not what I expected….serious thought needs to be given to the ethics of appropriating testimony for poetic licence, media freedom, academic commentary and discourse analysis" (Henri, 2003, p. 266). Following Henri, we need to acknowledge the privileges of the researcher in the balanced judgments about how to represent political narratives and assess their logic, veracity, and truth. This implies listening to silences, paying great attention to context, acknowledging the advantages frequently possessed by the narrative researcher in literacy and research skills, experience in rendering human lives in talk and text, and access to a range of financial and institutional resources, including time to conduct research.

These are important considerations and pay particular attention to the care that researchers should demonstrate in relaying the stories of others. In this process, the details matter and the scope for potential misunderstanding and misrepresentation is broad. Narrative researchers should protect those research participants whose narratives are relayed; depict them respectfully; stay alert to the potential for misuse and authorial power; and work hard to stay close to the truth(s) of the research participants, avoiding "'violent' textual practices which shape and tame the lives that we use as 'data' in order to present and privilege a version that serves our purposes" (Sikes, 2017, p. 411).

The assessment of truth claims is related to matters concerning the ownership of the research and who is able to exert proprietorial rights over elements of it. Political narratives are realised in cultural context and interactively. The process of narrative encounter and the subsequent rendering and relaying of political narratives is considered to be a matter of collaboration and ongoing co-construction on the part of

narrative researchers (Brockmeier 2018; Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 175; van den Hoonaard, 2017, p. 587). It is possible to go to great lengths in the conduct of ethical sharing of responsibility and rights in the academic use of political narratives. However, these practices may occasionally go further than they need. There might even be some degree of onerousness or tediousness attached to insisting that a research participant checks and clears versions of their story every step of the way. It should not become an obligation as this ironically undermines the overall ethical principles of care underpinning the research enterprise (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 177). In this respect, researcher awareness of the needs and expectations of individual research participants is an integral aspect of the political narrative research process. A full account of the ethics of care in the political narrative research process with individual research participants places high emphasis on preparedness, professionalism, high levels of attentiveness to the needs and expectations of research participants, immediate and sensitive responsiveness, and genuine substantive follow up at each stage to assure the full implementation of agreed-upon steps and the fulfilment of promises made. In the process of interaction between political storyteller, researcher, scholarly community, and in the broader contexts of specific historical settings and structural forces and relations, there is ample room for ambiguity, contradiction, misunderstanding, omission, commission, and conflict. In the end, a fully watertight set of ethical procedures may be elusive, particularly because each specific setting of encounter around political narratives requires different responses in order to meet ethical requirements.

As in all social scientific field research, it is reasonable to draw a distinction between elite and lay participants. While most of the principles described in this section apply to public and elected officials and persons, and certainly apply to their families, there are normative expectations in certain jurisdictions that, owing to the substantial investment of trust in the character of those in leadership positions, public life carries with it the

expectation of a higher degree of scrutiny into private matters and, therefore, that the standards of openness and disclosure might vary somewhat. Moreover, the narratives of political leaders are matters of public reference and impact, and they are used in the service of strategic and tactical identity constructions that serve specific political purposes. In this context, questions of their verisimilitude, fact checking, and of available counter narratives are of critical public importance. The personal narratives of ordinary lay actors do not normally require such critical scrutiny in assessing the interplay of public influence and power.

Representation

When it comes to the ethics of discernment in political narrative research, representation is about a broader bond of connection and care for the concentric circles of belonging that surround the individual researcher, research participants, and the community of scholarship. This is a matter in the end of universal or cosmological care and concern. Academic talk and text are situated with certain privileges in the realm of public discourse, and therefore the dissemination of ideas and ideals carries with it the responsibility of the researcher and research community to that broader society. At the heart of our considerations here is narrative privilege, meaning who has the social, cultural, and economic capital to be able to plan, produce, and disseminate narratives (Bolen and Adams, 2017, p. 623). The privileges of narrative production are more than agentive on an individual level. They are integrated into the hegemonic structures of power and privilege in each society. As Goodson argues: "Since dominant interest groups control the narratives that are constructed; they can reposition narratives and 'truth' and thereby disassociate what people believe from empirical, validated reality and historical context" (Goodson, 2017, p. 4). The framing and propagation of dominant narratives consists of highly selective cultural attention, perception, and

recall. The political state can misuse and manipulate the narrative form to serve its own ends, thereby distorting the context and the situation of the story – oversimplifying or ignoring history and structure (Salmon, 2010).

At issue for narrative political psychologists are the challenging and concentric circles of responsibility around whose stories to tell and how far to challenge them. Our decision to investigate and report on the lives of mostly older white male members of a fraternal organization combined a range of considerations (McAuley and Nesbitt-Larking, 2018): Firstly, the opportunities for both etic and limited emic engagement with the lives of the research participants, grounded in our familiarity with their background, history, and circumstances; second, the opportunity to investigate in depth the paradoxical lives of a marginalized subgroup within communities generally understood to be privileged; third, the possibility of opening up the range of knowledges, affects, and understandings within and among the research participants and, in particular, their ideological and cultural doubts, uncertainties, disagreements and conflicts; and, finally, the search for answers to the challenging questions of how and why these mostly older men would commit themselves to an organization of declining relevance, socially and demographically. Grounded in these considerations, our responses to the political narratives of these men attempted to profile and understand their lived experiences as far as possible in their own terms and with attention paid to their dignity and integrity, but in the broader context of the historical and structural circumstances surrounding their existences. This led us to profile and accentuate certain points of contradiction and conflict, factual errors, doubts, ignorance, and uncertainties both within individuals and among the group of research participants.

Dominant narratives are by their nature open to scrutiny and contestation. Hegemony is always contingent and open to counter-hegemonic challenge (Laclau and Mouffe, 2014). The challenge for the researcher in this context of dominant narratives and counter narratives is how best to balance and lend support to the competing truths.

To begin with, simply because powerful organizations and the state can privilege certain narratives does not mean that they are necessarily false, distorted, or biased. In a well-functioning pluralist and diverse democracy in which the state represents the best possible resultant of the will of the people, the dominant narratives that emerge will generally serve the people. To argue that it is necessarily otherwise is to adopt a version of elite theory, the iron law of oligarchy, and to make the deterministic claim that it is hopeless for societies ever to achieve adequately representative states because a small group of men, acting conspiratorially, will inevitably run things (Parry, 2005; Milner, 2015). Good enough representation combines the personal integrity and political sensitivity of elected leaders with a degree of socio-demographic resemblance of the polity among the leadership, and broad but reasonably flexible attachments to mandates, platforms, and manifestoes. In reality, the dominant narratives of a society are likely to be more or less generative of the collective good of the society and so should be considered and scrutinized in detail on their merits. In this process, the critical analysis of narratives from all sources is itself a process that potentially expands our ethical reach in considering the wellbeing of others (Andrews, 2014, pp. 4-5; Schiff, 2014, p. 142).

In order to be able to increase our capacity to regard humanity through deep bonds of connection and emotional resonance, we need to develop empathetic imaginations. By paying close attention to narratives of suffering, evil, resistance, and redemption, we awaken new ways of seeing and understanding and deepen our connections to others. Narrative researchers in political psychology can contribute to this by profiling and relaying individual and master narratives that open up, explore, and criticize the past in the context of a determination to bring justice and compassion to the present and to lay the groundwork through such shared stories for a more solidaristic future for nations and the world community (Schiff, 2014, p. 143). As in all hegemonic work, the achievement of persuasion in fact depends on making experiential connections, and in

the case of political narratives this is through the rhetorical force, retrievable understandings, and resonances of political stories (Schudson, 1989). They need to be powerful, make sense to us personally, and be attached to things that matter, and when they connect in this way, they are highly persuasive (Bruner, 2004, p. 699).

While the ethical responsibilities of the narrative researcher in scanning, considering, and reproducing the voices and experiences of others is a balancing act that is always elusive in the context of changing conditions, challenges, and opportunities, the emergence and fading of dominant narratives is subject to forces and social relations far beyond the agency of the researcher. Stories, even personal narratives, are not and cannot be the exclusive possession of individuals (van den Hoonaard, 2017, p. 588). An exclusively individualistic approach denies the social investment of a dyad, a family, a community, or a people in the generation of the possible conditions, preferred habitus, and generated tendencies that history and structure give to the genesis and framing of that story. In important ways my story does not belong to me with respect to its working up and its initial conception/creation. Applying Bakhtinian dialogical self theory, the very constitution of personal narratives is always already a matter of social encounter, reasoning, dialogue, and argument within the self (Whooley, 2006, p. 296). Once told, once rendered in the public sphere, the narrative is even less a personal possession; it is a co-production of scholar, participant, and audiences. The story becomes a script and then acquires actors and directors so that it can be realized on the stage. The personal drama becomes the public theatre, and theatre is the most socialist of all the arts. Once the script is in process, it belongs to all and to nobody (Bolen and Adams, 2017, p. 625).

With reference to the circulation of publicly available political narratives, Gready points out that: "testimony is spoken, written, translated into visual images by the media; moves between the private and the public, memory and history, the personal and the political; between south and north, and different cultures; between an original

context of performance and subsequent (re-) performances" (Gready, 2008, p. 138). In such movements of meaning and intentionality, the researcher has a role to play in mitigating the impact of inequalities in the public sphere. The extent to which the originator of the political narrative is served through this process of relay and representation depends upon the extent to which the principles of control of the narrative have been established and are sincerely followed. The process of representation should ideally be dialogical (Gready, 2008, p. 147). In the end these processes entail an unavoidable burden of discrimination on the researcher, who must through a critical lens determine whose voices are heard and amplified and what will be the context of their subsequent reception and circulation. This requires a careful balancing of the political narrative research participants, the political psychological research community, and the broader political society (Blaufuss, 2007, p. 23).

Conclusion

I have attempted to address the challenges of rendering truths across the reporting of political narratives in political research. As I have argued, while there is recourse to fact and the possibility of verification, there is no view from nowhere and, in the end, there are only the most reflexive and professional practices of bringing standpoints together and aiming for the always distant fusion of horizons. Among the most important considerations is the dialectical interplay between history and social structure on the one hand, and the lived agency of the personal political autobiography on the other hand. The hermeneutic circle recognises both the theoretical understandings of the lay actor as well as the taken-for-granted in the assumptions and research practices of the political analyst. Critical realism affords a balanced approach between the exclusively experiential criteria of positivist verification and the epistemological relativism of an entirely social constructionist approach. On the basis of a critical realist appraisal and

contextualization of facts and partial truths, embedded in understandings of the Empirical, the Actual, and the Real, the ethical balances identified as necessary in the search for responsibility, recognition, and representation, are facilitated.

In making the case for a critical realist approach, I have presented three broad constituencies in the consideration of ethical responsibility in the gathering and transmission of political narratives. In the section on Responsibility, I laid stress on the importance of acknowledging the experience and expertise of the scientific community and in particular the field of vision that this enables as researchers critically engage with the range of political narratives, whether personal narratives or master narratives. This places stress on the evolving community of scholarship and its paradigms. These are easily lost in the context of anti-elite and anti-intellectual narratives and discourses that attend certain contemporary brands of populism. I then turned our attention to the recognition and care that should be accorded to each individual political narrator and considered how to balance the privileges and specialized knowledge of the political analyst with the detailed attention that should be accorded to the talk and text of the research participant. This implied avoiding either extreme of naive relativism in simply accepting the political narratives of lay actors at face value or the imposition or attribution of agency and will to them on the part of the researcher. Finally, I introduced the duty of care that we have toward the broader society and political community in bringing political narratives into the public sphere. On the basis of deep hermeneutical exchanges and (self) dialogical work through encounters between the narrative research community and those who are generating, interpreting, and reinterpreting personal and master narratives, it is possible to develop critical and constructive research practices, including decisions regarding the dissemination of new political narratives and responses to existing ones in circulation.

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