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Writing and Reading Qualitative Characters

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Abstract

This essay concerns the ways in which qualitative social science research characters are constructed, and in turn read, by others. The persuasiveness of narratives is based as much on the reader's response to the character—similar to the ways in which readers respond to literary characters—in emotional ways as it is on the rational presentation of evidence. This essay acknowledges the author's subjectivity in relation to this topic; reviews the notions of narrative perspective, fidelity, emplotment, and verisimilitude; explores the role of narrative in social science research reports; presents background on how readers respond to literary characters; and applies these understandings to make the case that reading the presentation of social science research characters shares much with the ways in which readers respond to the actions of literary characters. The essay concludes with an argument that the construction of social science research reports includes the selective construction of participants as actors in a drama that in turn has an emotional impact on readers and with a description of the implications of this phenomenon for writers and readers of qualitative social science research reports.

Keywords

qualitative research methods, ethics, reader-writer relationships, emotions, narrative research, emplotment, verisimilitude

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The narrative tradition has become well-established as a mode of inquiry and representation in social science research and a host of other fields (Czarniawska, 2004). Its role in social science research reports is complicated by the vastness of the subject, including the different ways in which narratives are defined, the many cultural genres through which narratives are presented, the paradigmatic differences in studying narrative form and process, and many other factors (Abbott, 2011; Hill, 1997; Stein & Trabasso, 1982). Narratives are constructed by authors based on more details than can possibly be included in the final version, making their depictions selective and limited. Readers interpret them through their biases, experiences, knowledge of textual genres, and other factors that create the lens through which a story is understood and responded to.

This reader-writer relationship is at the heart of the issues I explore in this paper, with a focus on narratives produced for social science research reports. I consider the question of how researchers who rely on participants' narratives and present the findings in narrative form engage in processes of selection and character construction when writing, and how the resulting text evokes responses—often personal, often emotional and empathic—in readers of the report. The tension between meeting the analytic standards for social science research reporting and depicting the humanness of research participants through stories is evident in Oliver Sacks's belief in the value of both in tandem. Upon reading Luria's (1987a) *The Mind of a Mnemonist*, he initially believed he was reading a novel. After realizing it was clinical narrative, he considered it to be "a wonderful case history with all the accuracy of science, but all the sensibility and structure of a novel" (in Cole, 2002a).

This literary appeal of narrative presentations of data enables authors to understand that the impact of the report may follow from both the evidentiary quality of the illustrations they provide to substantiate their points via argumentative warrants (Smagorinsky, 2019) and how readers feel when reading the stories that comprise this evidence. Sacks (2014) expands on the multifaceted nature of narratives of human life and in how authors report them, saying that "there is drama, there is intentionality, at every point. . . . Two modes of thought [paradigmatic and narrative per Bruner, 1987] must be completely intertwined, to produce a unity greater than either could alone" (p. 527).

These stories are found in studies that rely on qualitative research data collections in which interviews, observations, and other types of data produce narrative representations of experiences. I am not making the claim that all qualitative research is narrative in presentation; the field is way too broad for such a generalization (Okoko et al., 2023). Nor do I think that the reverse is always true, that social science methods may be applied to literature,

although such methods as deconstruction may critique an author's positionality or other facet of textual production that may account for the contents of a literary narrative. Finally, I am not equating social science research reports with literary fiction, a genre predicated on imaginary renditions of experiences that typically never actually happened as presented.

Rather, both fictional and social science narratives rely on character constructions, with the latter requiring fidelity to collected and analyzed data and the former liberated from the need to reproduce a literal truth. Yet each relies on storied representations whose verisimilitude, the ring of truth, may move readers in similar ways. Authors of social science narratives based on qualitative data who recognize that their narratives potentially invite more than analytical response may benefit from understanding the manner in which narrative and paradigmatic forces are at work as they craft their reports. Further, readers who are aware that more than their analytic acumen is at work in a narrative presentation may recognize the emotional impact of a story and accept that emotions are a critical part of responding to another person's experiences.

Although a subset of social science research narratives may be first-person accounts, as in autoethnographies, my focus here is on renderings by researchers of the experiences reported by participants in interviews or other elicitations, or descriptive of their actions based on observations. I argue that the narratives constructed for research reports rely on a range of qualities that serve to persuade readers of the author's points. This persuasiveness assumes that the story has ethical fidelity in relation to the data, making it incumbent on authors to get the story right even with constructivist processes at work. These points may be conveyed through the emotional tenor of the stories reported, a feature that may become especially important when readers are unfamiliar with the sorts of life experiences shared in the research.

To explore this phenomenon, I first provide my personal subjectivity in relation to these questions to establish my interest in this topic and to highlight some of the experiences that have led to this occasion. This positioning leads me to consider the roles of four critical features of constructing qualitative social science research narratives, especially as they contribute to the emotional impact potentially available from a well-rendered story. These factors are (1) a researcher-author's perspective on another person's life and the role of relationship development in promoting an empathic response to those experiences; (2) the challenge of selecting data from a large collection such that it is representative of the whole and thus ethical in claims to representation; (3) the phenomenon of emplotment that enables narratives to be configured from an assembly of possibilities, including those built upon the author's own storehouse of experiences; and (4) the consideration of fidelity when

authors selectively construct narratives from a larger collection, thus requiring an ethical stance, while also producing—when well-constructed narratives embedded in a narrative are engaged with by genre-savvy readers—the verisimilitude that enables readers to see a reality in the stories that resonates with their sense of the possible. Although I treat each consideration separately, they are interrelated and thus comprise a functional whole.

To illustrate how these factors are orchestrated into convincing research reports, I review three published studies that rely on narrative reports. My examples reveal how a researcher's emic identification with the participants can produce empathic renderings of experience. I am especially interested in how participants represent populations whose experiences and circumstances tend to be from outside the lived experiences of the sort shared by the relatively advantaged readers of scholarly journals, whom I presume to be those who tend to occupy the professoriate and those who aspire to join it. These limits of their socialization may shield them from the problems investigated in the research, particularly when the participants come from populations living under stressful circumstances from outside the purview of the privileged (myself included). I conclude by considering what authors of such narratives would benefit from knowing in order to produce narratives that have fidelity to the data, that include features that potentially provoke emotional responses to the characters depicted, that are ethical in their presentation of the characters and events, and that serve both the field and the participants portrayed in the narratives faithfully.

Author Subjectivity

I grew up in an academically oriented family. Both of my parents came from low-income urban working-class homes, but each earned an undergraduate degree, with my mother leaving her master's program to start her family, and with my father earning a doctorate and ultimately a Princeton University professorship. Each of their five children graduated from college four years after high school, with three going on to earn master's degrees and with me completing a doctorate. I was an avid and early reader, enough so for my parents to enroll me in school a year ahead of schedule, with fiction and outdoor adventure stories my favorite genres. This interest did not make me an especially good student of literature in school, where I struggled to explain what a novel meant, at least in academic terms, even as I often learned a lot about myself and my world from my engagement with the stories.

I was also raised in the patriarchal and segregated South (Smagorinsky, 2018a), and this environment impressed on me a masculine orientation that manifested itself in countless, unacknowledged ways. In spite of my personal

approach to reading literature, I was academically socialized to see literary education as a strictly analytical enterprise, undoubtedly a consequence of the masculine professoriate that dominated literary criticism and higher education in general in the era (Martin, 1997). I went to a small liberal arts college, Kenyon College, which the year before had begun admitting women, a change that did not affect the curriculum or diversify the predominantly male faculty during my enrollment. I ended up majoring in English literature, immersed in the formalist orientation that followed from the influence of Department of English professor John Crowe Ransom, retired during my enrollment but still present on campus, and his work in "New Criticism" (Ransom, 1941), that is, a study of a text's completed form and structure and the literary techniques used to construct it. This focus minimizes attention to extratextual factors and the reader's subjective or emotional experience (Brooks & Warren, 1938), even as it may include constructivist and subjective dimensions (Rejan, 2017), if not often in student papers written for formalist professors.

This sort of analysis was not congruent with why I liked reading fiction. When I read works of transcendentalism, I was much more likely to go for a walk in the woods than to read literary criticism about the genre. I graduated without great distinction as a literary scholar of the sort expected at the college. But I did take a lot of walks in the woods.

Within a few years of graduation, in spite of my pedestrian academic record, I was granted admission to the M.A.T. program at the University of Chicago to get credentialed to teach high school English. This degree required students to complete the master's requirements for the Department of English, whose literature faculty was guided by the formalist, neo-Aristotelian "Chicago School" of literary criticism (Crane, 1953). My early teaching bore the imprint of my formalist training, reinforced by my generally masculine perspective on the world, especially given the college prep curriculum I often taught. Before long, however, I returned to my original reasons for reading literature as a way to learn about life and about myself. I began to incorporate subjective, reader-oriented dimensions in my work with high school students. This stance became available through the rejuvenation of Rosenblatt's (1978, 1985) subjective, "aesthetic" conception of literary reading, in conjunction with the individualistic "growth model" of development (Dixon, 1975) championed by British theorists. I had to acknowledge that many of my teaching methods, even if acceptable academically, matched neither my personal reasons for reading nor the expanding influence of women in schools and universities that challenged the formalist status quo and opened up possibilities for readers to construct their own meanings for texts based on their experiences, cultural frameworks, idiosyncrasies, and other personal subjectivities.

I taught high school English from 1976-1990. During that time I completed a doctorate in English Education from the University of Chicago, where my social science program's bias was toward experimental studies that contrasted teaching methods. Cognitive psychology was the principal theoretical framework I used in my dissertation, in which I used protocol analysis to study how instruction affected the thinking of writers depending on how they'd been taught (Smagorinsky, 1991). Soon after getting my doctorate, I abandoned my training in cognitive psychology and experimental designs and, as part of a qualitative shift in the social sciences, became a sociocultural case study researcher relying on narratives for data and, ultimately, emotional effect. I also became primarily a reader of history more than literature, yet another seismic shift in my orientation to my approach to my work. Over time, I began to realize that I was responding to historical figures in ways similar to how I had previously projected my own experiences into those of the fictional characters of Faulkner, Dostoyevsky, and other novelists I'd read heavily in my twenties.

I lacked access to historians' processes for reporting on their figures, so can't say that I know how deliberately they produced their effects. But I knew as a reader that some histories came across as more vivid, more engaging, more moving, and more provocative than others. I knew that I preferred reading a lively and compelling history to a competent-but-drab history and at some point began to understand the value of research reports that people *wanted* to read through their resonance with the characters. This recognition came especially as my reports involved case studies focused on relatively few participants, leading to storied representations of their lives as they appeared in my data.

The case studies I conducted from qualitative data required a sort of persuasion that included both APA-style writing conventions to satisfy journal requirements, a practice that mapped onto my own proclivity for order, and what I came to recognize as narrative elements that included many of the features that literary stories rely on. These components became increasingly important as I began to see my work as developmental in nature, suggesting the importance of analyzing a case history over time, often with narrative, chronologically sequenced evidence driving the report (e.g., Smagorinsky & Long, 2024).

My own reading history, then, includes formalist literary study; reading literary narratives for personal reasons outside school and university classes through about age 30; teaching literature with attention to both form and readerly subjectivity in high schools; teaching writing in a variety of genres; reading historical accounts replete with narratives about characters and

events throughout my thirties and continuing through the present; and reading and writing social science research reports relying on the persuasiveness of narrative presentation of people's experiences. My career of engaging with the last of these items has led me at this point to reflect on how the construction of qualitative social science characters benefits from an understanding that the characters' experiences become emotional stimuli for readers' construction of meaning for the report. (I hope that my concerns for fidelity have kept me from overwriting the reports with a creative flair that would violate the integrity of what I have claimed to be social science research and its data-driven basis). I next review a series of factors that are germane to my perspective on the ethical construction of social science research characters, with particular interest in how they are read by consumers of narrative forms of scholarship.

Constructing Social Science Narratives

In this section, I review a set of related considerations in writing and reading social science research reports based on narrative accounts of participants' experiences. Although I treat each consideration separately, they are interrelated. I first address the challenge of selectivity, given that researchers in qualitative studies typically collect far more data than they have space to include in a report, even in book-length studies. They therefore must rely on subsets of data that are representative of the whole on which to base their portrayals, unless the intent is to focus on atypical or particular incidents (Bloome & Bailey, 1992) that reveal "the elegance of peculiarity" in which "God lies in the details," producing a search for truth that is realized through "a parti-colored mosaic of discrete pieces of our nature from which a coherent image might emerge" (Schama, 1996, p. 213).

This selectivity follows from the perspective a researcher takes on another person's life from the many competing possible ways to view another's experiences. This orientation relies on the sorts of relationships developed with participants in order to tell their stories with an understanding of their circumstances, since presenting their case from their point of view depends on an empathic understanding of and representation of their experiences. I then review the factor of narrative emplotment, the manner in which stories are configured from a great assembly of possibilities to a "synthesis of the heterogeneous" (Ricoeur, 1983, p. 66) such that a story provides a reader with "followability" (p. 67) of its events and its themes. The final issues I address concern fidelity to data, and the verisimilitude of a narrative that enables a reader to personally engage with the story.

Authors' Perspective, Relationship With Participants, and Selective Use of Data

The limited page allotments for research reports, including qualitative narratives, cannot capture the greatness of lives. Yet an author of a social science narrative needs to present a participant fully enough to be understood, while doing so economically enough to avoid a problem I've had with some of my studies: initially producing a draft of over 100 pages that must be reduced to about 35. Any person's abundant relationships involve situational and relational engagements with others (Guillemin et al., 2018; McCarthey, 1998; Philips, 1976), so the personae studied will emerge through the relationships and settings that produce the data. Labov (1972) demonstrated this likelihood when working with urban youth whose participation changed when he shifted the locale of their interactions to one that included more familiar surroundings and amenities like pizza. The partiality of all data collections, regardless of paradigm (Coulter & Smith, 2009), allows access only to what becomes available through the research method. Given the many decisions that go into a research design, data collections are inherently subjective, regardless of epistemology and associated method (Smagorinsky, 1995), and a narrator's subjectivity and perspective are critical factors in how their narrative unfolds (Coulter & Smith, 2009; Hahn et al., 2013).

Holley and Colyar (2012) argue that the construction of characters in narrative reports follows from authorial perspective and intent such that

> the author makes decisions about how to present specific events, characters, or situations that impact the plot development. . . . The author plays an active role in determining the relevant points of view to a particular story, as well as the perspective from which the story should be told. (p. 116)

Holley and Colyar (2012) describe the resulting text as an *author-saturated* text (per Geertz, 1988) such that the author's subjectivity is evident, which in turn signals how the text is a creation of the analysts and writers who sift through vast amounts of data in order to extricate and construct a narrative that makes a point. To Holley and Colyar (2009), authorial decisions involve trustworthiness and ethical commitment. These imperatives suggest the need to make "deliberate choices related to writing that position the text as an informed reflection of the participants' reality" such that the resulting narrative "reflect[s] social reality" (p. 680), a consequence that I will later characterize as commensurate with literary verisimilitude.

Holley and Colyar (2012) view these constructed characters as sharing much with literary characters, whose actions are designed to promote responses, often emotional, in readers. A social science researcher reporting

a study via narrative means is caught within an inevitable tension. On the one hand, being distant from the participant may produce a report that reads as if it lacks affiliation with and thus attachment to the participant. Yet this detachment might be insensitive to the person's particular life experiences and risk imposing the researcher's biases on the interpretation. On the other hand, a researcher's diligence in developing a relationship with the participant may help them construct a character for their narratives that is true to the participant's view of their experiences. Or it may produce a filter that elides relevant details that might leave a negative impression on readers.

The ethical quality of the report relies on the trustworthiness of how another person's experiences are rendered through the construction of narratives that a researcher produces to depict their lives. *Qualitative reflexivity* (Palaganas et al., 2017) refers to the need for qualitative researchers to work in relationship with participants, rather than viewing them as subjects of research. To Dodgson (2019), qualitative reflexivity obligates a researcher to "clearly [describe] the contextual intersecting relationships between the participants and themselves" (p. 220). This ethos is available in Luria's (1987b) "romantic science," which might be termed a "relational science" because it emphasizes the responsibilities of a researcher or diagnostician to the well-being of the participant or, in counseling or medicine, the client or patient. Cole (2002b) describes the relational ethos of Luria and of Sacks (1987), both of whom worked closely with the patients who consulted them:

> According to Sacks, central to romantic science is that it treats analytic science and the synthetic biography of the individual case as essentially complementary, "The dream of a novelist and a scientist combined" (Sacks, 1987, p. xii). Equally important in my view is the fact that both Luria and Sacks are therapists who engaged their patients as human beings over long periods of time and attempted to demonstrate through practical amelioration of suffering the truth of the basic premises of their theories. (p. 13)

This approach suggests the benefit of working interpersonally with small sets of participants to develop relationships with them that provide deeply contextualized understandings of their circumstances. Such an approach is fundamentally care-oriented, treating participants as fellow humans and not as research subjects or objects.

Emplotment

I adapt the notion of *narrative emplotment* from Ricoeur (1983), whose 3-volume exploration of time and narrative is too complex to elaborate here in detail. Ricoeur is concerned with both fictional and historical narratives.

My extrapolation to social science narratives relies on the assumption that reporting social science narratives requires authors to be faithful to data and to be judicious in how they assemble and configure it for narrative coherence, qualities that map well onto Ricoeur's account of emplotment.

Ricoeur (1983) outlines three interrelated functions of narrative emplotment that I believe are in play with social science narratives. The data selected as the basis of a narrative may be dispersed across the collection, and so must be woven together into a meaningful, coherent, plot-driven narrative. The story rendered needs to follow an established narrative structure whose genre features can be recognized and followed by readers who are enculturated to their form—the "followability" that I described earlier—qualities that figure into literary reading as well (Rabinowitz, 1987). This genre structure requires editing out what does not fit and configuring the salient events temporally. These decisions about what to include and what to exclude invite ethical quandaries. In Ricoeur's conception, narrative emplotment has a strong moral dimension that informs such decisions.

As described by Atkins (n.d.), "By bringing together heterogeneous factors into its syntactical order[,] emplotment creates a 'concordant discordance,' a tensive unity which functions as a redescription of a situation in which the internal coherence of the constitutive elements endows them with an explanatory role" (n.p.). When a researcher reports on another's narratives, these emplotments may become enmeshed in the author's own experiences and perspectives such that the interpreter's own life story may be incorporated into the representation of the research participant's story, and the third-party's role in data collection may be related in the story. Although these elements are important for the authors of social science research reports that employ a narrative approach, "they are also essential for the reader and the communication of the research story" (Holley & Colyar, 2012, p. 116).

A participant need not have a close, personal relationship with a researcher in order to confide with honesty and sincerity. In a study I did of a high school senior's writing (Smagorinsky 1997), the student said that he considered me to be a "third-party" listener (p. 71), one with whom he could share his thoughts without fear of betrayal, in the manner of a bartender or fellow passenger on a plane he'd never see again. What mattered was that, for whatever reasons, he trusted me enough to share a good bit about his personal life and his views of school and writing, and to carry a tape recorder around for several months to produce think-aloud accounts while writing.

As Nystrand (1986) has proposed, a text's quality is in part a function of an author's and reader's reciprocity, the degree to which readers are "in tune" with the text's construction, making the narrative's effect a function of the author's facility with the genre through which it is presented. At the same

time, as Clark and Ivanič (1997) argue, ideology can produce dogmatic presuppositions that become conventional wisdom and thus may appear natural and sensible, suggesting that this in-tune feature may represent a shared belief system that excludes other worldviews and thus other readers.

Fidelity and Verisimilitude

Traditionally, a deliberate fabrication would be considered by researchers who characterize their work as science—including the social sciences—unethical and a misrepresentation of what is being offered as an empirical account. This rule has been contested by arts-oriented educators who have advocated for data-infused novels to count as doctoral dissertations (Eisner in Saks, 1996) and by feminist scholars who have advocated for fabulism, that is, the breaking of traditional norms and inventiveness in storytelling (Tolliver, 2021). If reciprocity is a factor, a reader's understanding of the genre(s) the author employs is critical to how a reader approaches a social science narrative and engages with the followability of the story.

The social sciences have traditionally relied on analytic logic for the persuasiveness of texts, with warranted evidence substantiating their veracity. Yet the "social reality" identified by Holley and Colyar (2009) suggests that literary verisimilitude—that is, a fictional story's truth value—is equally important in qualitative research narratives. How a story relates such realities is often emotional at its heart. Other aspects of storytelling figure in as well, including how the story's setting is established: "Often the narrative is shaped not solely by the introduction of the primary research participants but by the locales in which they reside. These locales are articulated in a character role, affecting the thoughts and actions of the human narrative agents" (Holley & Colyar, 2009, p. 682). Contexts matter in research (Smagorinsky, 2018b), and the setting is where a research participant's experiences and narratives are situated and detailed. The locale might also help to shape the researcher's perspective (M.W. Smith, personal communication, January 19, 2024), especially if it provides emic understandings of a culture not shared by a subset of readers. But settings are vast, historical, and interconnected and must be reported selectively based on an author's construction of the situation.

Holley and Colyar (2009) identify a key feature in selection, *focalization* (Genette, 1972), that is, the constraints on a narrator's or character's perspective and thus the limitations of any point of view on a story due to the restriction of field:

> Focalization requires the researcher to determine through which character, actor, or event the story will be told. . . . Focalization may also shift between

> internal and external points of view, where the researcher allows participants to voice their own experiences or serves as the omniscient narrator of the tale. . . . [R]esearch questions in the text not only orient the reader to main ideas but also provide a key indication of the narrative plot. (pp. 682-683)

The confluence of the factors I have reviewed in this section suggests that constructing a narrative from a large qualitative collection requires authors to be aware of their own limits in knowing the extent of the participants' histories, deliberate in their construction of text within a narrative genre, attentive to the emotional impact of the stories they produce, alert to the role of their relationship with the participants in telling their stories, and clear on their purpose in using these narratives to make points. I next turn to the ways in which these narratives may affect readers who engage with them in scholarship.

Emotional Responses to Social Science Narratives

Holley and Colyar (2009) hint at the role of the reader of a research narrative, without detailing the process of their responses:

> When readers approach texts with these elements in mind, they are armed with key questions: What is the essential story presented in the text? Who and what are its central characters? In whose voice and perspective is the story told? How are characters, events, and understandings connected? (p. 683)

They position the reader as an analytic responder to formalist textual cues, one who reaches a state of comprehension through more complex understandings that follow from a systematic study of narrative elements. Yet there is more than a technical understanding involved in responding to such texts, in particular a reader's resonance with the characters and their situations through emotional, often empathic connections. Readers bring a host of experiences to their reading that enable them to instantiate meaning into narrative characters and events that depict archetypal or widely experienced themes. They may also lack essential life experiences to relate easily to narrative characters and their settings and experiences, especially when the research participants come from backgrounds that are unknown to them, and they find it necessary to make imaginative projections to understand those stories. Yet in relying on their own experiences to construct these projections, they may invoke inappropriate expectations and judgments about "the other."

In this sense, readers both *decode* texts based on their formal properties, as proffered by Holley and Colyar (2009) and as assumed in much scholarship

on reading comprehension (Samuelstuen & Bråten, 2005); and for more personal understandings, *encode* them by infusing them with images from their prior knowledge and experiences (Smagorinsky, 2001). A reader's construction of meaning in response to a research narrative draws on both personal and contextual factors that produce a subjective, active engagement with a text and its formal codification. This response may follow from the images that a reader generates from written text, which project their personal experiences into the textual characters and which form the basis of textual response that Rosenblatt (1978) calls an *evocation.* If it is true that "in mind and culture the serpent transcends the snake" (Wilson, 1998, p. 88)—that is, the cultural images matter more than the literal figure on which they are based—then the images that people generate become central to how they think. Those meanings may be cultural—snakes symbolize different things to different societies and their subgroups (Eason, 2008)—or personal, as a snakebitten person might attest. Beyond these latter individualized responses, the "personal" is often the "social" in that people are socialized beings who have been taught to engage with society and its texts in particular ways. Their responses, including their knowledge of how to approach texts (Gallas & Smagorinsky, 2002) and interpret codes (Rabinowitz, 1987), are always culturally grounded (Heath, 1983).

From this perspective, the reading of characters involves knowledge of textual forms and how they cue particular reading habits and strategies (Rabinowitz & Smith, 1997), cultural knowledge about the production of the text (Purves & Purves, 1986), a social understanding of the context of reading and response (Floriani, 1993), and subjectivity in interpreting codes and infusing them with personal meaning (Smagorinsky et al., 2007). These textual and personal factors work in relation to the context of reading and an understanding of the contexts of the text's construction.

Understanding characters in qualitative research reports may involve emotions that help build connections between readers and those depicted in research reports, even when they do not share the same specific experiences. The rendering of characters' experiences, and readers' knowledgeable engagement with them, may rely on what we have called *empathic framing* in our work (Smagorinsky & Johnson, 2021), that is, the ways in which taking an empathic view of one from another realm of culture may foster connections that are not available simply from the degree to which experiences are shared or to which textual cues are appropriately read. In her extensive review of the construct of empathy, Stueber (2019) elaborates how the "concept of empathy is used to refer to a wide range of psychological capacities that are thought of as being central for constituting humans as social creatures[,] allowing us to know what other people are thinking and feeling, to

emotionally engage with them, to share their thoughts and feelings, and to care for their well-being" (n.p.).

In sorting through the complex and contested *problem of other minds*, Stueber (2019) affirms Davis's (2006) conclusion that it "has proven surprisingly difficult to answer" (p. 443) the question of what people mean by empathy, "since researchers in different disciplines have focused their investigations on very specific aspects of the broad range of empathy-related phenomena," resulting in "a certain amount of conceptual confusion and a multiplicity of definitions" (n.p.). For instance, Brown (2021) is often referenced as a source, yet has been criticized for assuming that people from all heritages have the same luxury of setting aside their own interests in order to tune into the feelings and experiences of others, particularly when it comes to members of oppressed races (e.g., Yazeed, 2021).

In the sort of social science narratives that are the subject of my inquiry, the construction of characters and settings may be consciously designed to help bridge people of dissimilar socialization and experience. Status differentials are often in play: between authors and participants, participants and others, readers and participants, and other sets of actors. Empathy may provide the capacity to disrupt power inequities across people from social groups of different social status, such as those reported through counternarratives in social science portrayals that go against the grain of conventional wisdom and its orthodoxies (Lueg & Lundholt, 2021). Empathy may motivate altruism toward complete strangers, in contrast with the ways in which people tend to extend more understanding to people from within their kinship groups than to those they consider outsiders (Haidt, 2012; Von Vugt & Van Lange, 2006). High social status can produce empathetic failures (Castano & Giner-Sorolla, 2006; Dietze & Knowles, 2021; Kraus et al., 2010), reducing the capacity to demonstrate concern for the interests, suffering, and needs of strangers, whose difficulties can then be attributed solely to them (Kraus et al., 2012). A well-crafted, data-driven social science narrative or counternarrative potentially disrupts these disjunctures and enables readers to respond with a degree of compassion.

The idea of a "well-crafted" narrative is highly subjective, but there are criteria I can offer to help define the notion. First, the narrative needs "news" value: a compelling story that challenges readers to question what they believe they know. Vygotsky's (1971) early work as a literary critic is salient here. He argued that a work of art—his focus was on literary texts, particularly Shakespeare's *Hamlet*—succeeds because it produces in readers *intelligent emotions* through what he calls a process of *catharsis*, a term to which he assigns a particular meaning (cf. Smagorinsky, 2011). Catharsis involves "an affective contradiction, causes conflicting feelings, and leads

to the short-circuiting and destruction of these emotions" (Vygotsky, 1971, p. 213). This process produces "a complex transformation of feelings" (p. 214) that results in an "explosive response which culminates in the discharge of emotions" (p. 215) such that "art complements life by expanding its possibilities" (p. 247). A well-crafted narrative in this sense produces contradiction—a key facet of the Hegelian dialectic that both Ricoeur (1983) and Vygotsky relied on—that must be emotionally resolved to result in a higher level of understanding. Counternarratives that fight back against stereotypical views exemplify this phenomenon. This value on contradiction is different from literary theories that emphasize the unity of the whole work—including the New Criticism and Chicago School of my own education—rather than the conflicts whose resolutions enable a reader's elevated emotional state.

To produce this effect, a social science author needs to assemble the data into a story that, while having overall narrative coherence, also includes the sorts of contradictions that Vygotsky found essential to the psychology of art. The narratives I present below violate some readers' expectations: an intelligent and highly effective teacher emphasizing five-paragraph themes; an institutionally savvy and critically conscious group of housing project residents seeking new residences after eviction; and a group of Black adolescents defying their school's assumptions about their intelligence and character to articulate sophisticated and insightful understandings of their surroundings. A reader's emotional commitment to the plight of the characters follows from the orchestration of events to create this possibility, which is abetted when readers associate their own experiences with those of the research participants to form affiliations, even with those of vastly different life experiences. I next more fully detail those qualities that enable a Vygotskian catharsis and thus a heightened emotional response to a social science research report.

Reading Social Science Research Characters

The success of a narrative-based qualitative research report depends in great part on the author's character-and-setting representation and the story that is rendered through the construction and emplotment of a selection of data from the collection. Readers' emotional responses to the characters follow from how the characters are constructed and presented, and the degree to which readers resonate with the experiences presented in the narrative (or in some cases, the degree to which they are indifferent to or hostile toward the focal characters in the report – this too is at times a consequence of how an author interprets and presents them). The persuasion is more similar to how readers respond to other stories than it is to how they respond to the sort of analytic argument that the APA style was originally created to structure (Bazerman, 1988).

I have come to this understanding as a reader of narratives in a variety of fields and as an author of case studies that rely on narratives of participants' speech and actions. Many have viewed imaginative and informational texts as separate and incompatible. Rosenblatt (1985), for instance, distinguishes between *efferent* literal reading in which information is extracted from the text without readerly construction, and *aesthetic* literary reading undertaken as a constructivist transaction between reader and text. Although she characterizes the two stances as representing a continuum, they are often positioned as dichotomous. Duke (1999) finds informational and narrative texts to represent different and incommensurate genres in early grade schooling, with informational texts short-changed in the balance. Yet I have begun to understand them as closely related, in spite of institutionalized efforts to establish informational texts in opposition to creative texts in such movements as the Common Core State Curriculum (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012).

My orientation to cultural-historical theory (Cole, 1996) has made attention to historical contexts paramount in my understanding of human behavior. In the last decade or so I have focused on histories of Mexico and its relationship to the United States as a way to inform my work there (e.g., Gayol et al., 2020). I have also read histories of Eastern Europe to learn about the era that produced Vygotsky's conception of human development and in turn to understand the factors that led Stalin to purge the field of pedology, that is, the comprehensive science of the child predicated on the unity of biological and mental development and reliant on a variety of fields and foci (Smagorinsky, 2024; Vygotsky, 2019).

In both of these national settings, this reading of the past has helped me understand the dynamic tensions that remain in the news today. My reading has involved both efferent learning about the historical events of remote times and places, and a sort of aesthetic approach by imagining what life was like in those times. This envisioning has involved multiple senses and emotions as I sympathize with various characters, am repelled by others, and locate my psyche in their experiences and eras. In this sense the lives of historical characters have meaning and experiences that raise emotions in me as I engage with their stories and passions, and often their tragic outcomes, as a way to understand life in the present, both thematically and in terms of historical precedents and developments. This way of reading history fits with Faulkner's (1951) oft-quoted observation in cultural-historical studies—which he presented in an experimental fictional genre rather than a social science treatise—that "The past is never dead. It's not even past. All of us labor in webs spun long before we were born, webs of heredity and environment, of desire and consequence, of history and eternity" (p. 73). These experiences have helped me recognize how my reading of social

science reports is in part an emotional experience. A research narrative that takes into account the factors I have reviewed can potentially facilitate the empathic framing described earlier, that is, a way of viewing others—especially those whose experiences are far afield from one's own—emotionally such that one feels for them as fellow humans struggling with life's challenges and complexities.

Writing Social Science Narratives With Readers in Mind

My review suggests that a set of assumptions could guide the writing of qualitative research narratives based on characters constructed from data:

1. Qualitative characters are constructions of authors designed to present them in particular ways through the selective use of data.
2. A reader's trust in the narrator's reliability in telling stories about another person's life is essential to the persuasive success of the story (Coulter & Smith, 2009).
3. These representations of characters and their settings are incomplete, and so rely on an author's judicious selection of data so as to emplot action in ways that bring coherence to stories. This coherence should not smooth out the contradictions whose dialectical resolution potentially generates intelligent emotions in readers through the process of Vygotskian catharsis.
4. The resulting story relies on language that produces effects on readers that ideally are congruent with the author's purposes and contribute to the text's verisimilitude.
5. Readers of such constructed texts engage in analytic thinking within the bounds of textual genres, and in imaginative thinking through which they evoke images that form to some degree the basis for their emotional response to the story.
6. Persuasion is achieved both through the analytic logic of the report and the way that readers feel about the characters and their circumstances, whether they have shared their specific experiences or not, with empathic framing providing bridges to lives that are unlike their own.
7. Authors of social science narratives face a range of ethical questions in reporting stories that depict the experiences of research participants through the selective use of data and construction of characters that represent the accounts provided in data collections.

If these premises hold up, it becomes incumbent on narrative researchers to consider a range of questions about how to produce narratives that are ethically sound, intellectually responsible, and narratively compelling. I next review three studies to make the case that their careful construction and situatedness within theoretical and methodological concerns can move readers emotionally as well as persuade them intellectually.

There are many such studies, so it is worth reviewing my selection principles. First, I am familiar with the work that I review. I coauthored the first, and have had decades-long collegial relationships with the other two authors, making them accessible and familiar to me. I was the coeditor of *Research in the Teaching of English* for the publication of the Cushman (1999) article I review, giving me inside knowledge of its construction. Thematically, each of the three articles involved researchers studying populations with which they had some sort of affinity, but with which they could assume many readers would lack shared experiences.

The first study was one I conducted with a teacher (same profession and discipline) who was also white but of different gender, age, and regional experiences. I have undertaken many such case studies and chose this one because I was initially taken aback by one central feature of her teaching: her routine instruction in five-paragraph themes. Yet she was a highly effective teacher according to both measurable success and my subjective evaluation of her teaching, with her students producing high scores on a state writing test using a five-paragraph theme rubric that validated her instruction. My task, then, was to understand why a highly regarded teacher was teaching a form derided among composition theorists, and in turn to help account for her decisions while also being attentive to their limitations.

The second study I review was conducted by Cushman (1999) on evicted public housing residents, who are often assumed by critical theorists to lack critical consciousness and to have adopted a false consciousness that makes them complicit in their own oppression. Cushman rejects this belief, using data from her study to illustrate that they are astute navigators of their environments and that they exercise agency in resolving their ongoing housing crises. Understanding her participants' critical capabilities required Cushman to rely on more than the remote perspective allowed by theory. Rather, establishing relationships enabled a deeper look than was typically available from theorists who operate "from a distance" (Cushman, 1999, p. 249). For Cushman, the relationship was facilitated by the mixed-race Cherokee heritage she shared with her participants, their status as women, and their common experiences with eviction and homelessness. This study illustrates how shared demographic traits between researcher-author and participants, especially those not typical among the professoriate, enable the sort of trust

required when investigating people's most challenging experiences and how such trust enables greater insight into participants' lives than more reductive, less intimate relationships make available. Even in my study (1997) where I served as a third-party confidante, I spent enough time with the student author to establish some intersubjectivity, that is, a similar understanding of the situation (Wertsch, 1998), at least enough for him to contribute a great deal of time and energy to the research without any prospect of material reward.

The third study, Kinloch et al.'s study of young Black adolescents involved in a community ethnography, features a different affiliation. Kinloch and her coauthors are all Black women; their participants were all Black male youth. Their shared racialized experiences enabled a trust through which the youths' assessments of their circumstances emerged during their conversations. I chose the last two of these studies because I believe I could not have gotten access to, or developed relationships as easily with, these participants as did researchers who came from similar backgrounds and thus could work to establish intersubjectivity.

Each of the three studies, then, relies on developing a rapport with participants as a way to both listen carefully to their accounts of their actions, and to report them with respect and fidelity. This relational approach, often facilitated by shared cultural experiences, enabled the researchers to get behind stereotypes and assumptions and find greater complexity than is often presumed of people whose appearances suggest a lack of awareness and insight, and to construct their narratives so as to promote feelings of empathy in readers.

Framing a Narrative

One way that a narrative presentation of a case can construct a character as sympathetic is through the way the study is framed in the opening section of an APA research report, especially when the focal participant is engaging in actions that might not align with the preferences and expectations of readers. This framework could serve narratives that aim to present the participant favorably, or presumably to do the opposite: to present the participant pathologically, as has often been the case where the object is to illustrate what the researcher considers to be poor teaching (e.g., Picower, 2009). Ricoeur refers to this advance preparation as prefiguration, described by Ginn (2017) as "the understanding, general and context-specific, that we bring to the narrative" (p. 69), in this case provided by the researcher-author when presenting the story to readers. This framing leads to configuration, "arranging the various elements into an intelligible whole or plot" (p. 69). Ultimately, the narrative

should produce refiguration, "applying the narrative to the world [which] changes understanding of both the world and the subject" (p. 70).

To exemplify a positive framing or prefiguration of a seemingly negative teaching practice, I'll draw from one of my own studies (Johnson et al., 2003), in which we present the case of a U.S. middle school English teacher I had taught at the University of Oklahoma, whom I observed and interviewed a number of times during her student teaching and first year of full-time teaching. She had been a student in one of my classes, where I got to know her, and we shared a white racial heritage and a professional identity as secondary school English teachers, which I had been for 14 years before undertaking a university career. We departed in our gendered sensibilities and our socialization from having grown up in states in different time zones and sociopolitical eras. She had excelled in her teacher education program, undertaken through a master's degree after majoring in psychology as an undergraduate, and was widely viewed in the program as highly promising. Yet when I observed her teaching, she consistently emphasized instruction in the five-paragraph theme, a form scorned by many academics as detrimental to a writer's development into a sophisticated thinker (Labaree, 2019). My first reaction was that she was engaging in a counterproductive pedagogy. But almost immediately I began to ask, why is a teacher who excelled in so many areas doing something that is widely deplored in universities and among many process-oriented teachers?

It turned out that there were good reasons. As a student, she had been successful in English classes where the five-paragraph theme had been required, legitimizing it in her experience. The state had a high-stakes middle school writing test that used a five-paragraph rubric, which in turn served to evaluate her teaching effectiveness. The university program methods course she took had emphasized literature and poetry over writing (a common imbalance; see Tremmel, 2001), leaving her with a limited set of options to draw on. Her student teaching mentor teacher in a middle school had modeled the teaching of five-sentence paragraphs under the assumption that multiple-paragraph writing was beyond her students' capabilities. Her teaching load made planning and grading writing amenable to shortcuts like formulaic writing. Her colleagues applied peer pressure to teach to the test. Her students did well on the test, validating her repeated instruction in the form, which in turn reflected well on her and her school to people in policy, administration, and community, where real estate values were correlated to test scores in the schools, an international phenomenon of long standing in capitalist societies (Fleishman et al., 2017).

As I began to understand the conditions that produced her decision to teach five-paragraph themes throughout the school year, I took on her

perspective and realized that the most interesting story was not about a teacher doing something irresponsible and counterproductive. Rather, I took a relational view that led me to understand the circumstances of her path to teaching and the setting of her instruction. These realizations led to a decision to prefigure the research report by contextualizing her instruction with a review of the factors that lead teachers to replicate their own experiences as learners, that focus teacher education on some strands of the curriculum more than others, that create conditions that promote formulaic teaching, that include pressure from more senior colleagues to teach in specific ways, that require teachers to teach to high-stakes tests, and that limit the possibilities available to teachers—especially vulnerable beginning teachers—working within restrictive environments. With this advance preparation, readers might be inclined, before beginning to read the Findings where the case unfolds, to extend empathy to teachers as they work within institutions, policies, and traditions, including teaching in ways not approved of by those positioned above her in the profession's social hierarchy as experts.

A second way to present this case from the participant's point of view was to include her as a coauthor and provide her with space at the end of the report where she commented on our analysis and provided her own perspective on her teaching. It served as a sort of member check while also honoring her contributions to the research, making her less an object of study and more of a participant in the generation of the report, providing some degree of validation for the account we wrote of her teaching narrative.

The published study illustrates how authorial perspective-taking to assume the view of participants can produce a less judgmental account of actions that on the surface appear to be inexplicable and to go against the grain of received wisdom. This sort of contradiction between the expectation that five-paragraph theme instruction will be excoriated, and the manner in which we situated her teaching within a rationale for why it made sense to her at the beginning of her career, might correspond to the dialectic processes in which conflicting views may produce a synthesis that produces a more nuanced response to the central character in the narrative.

Affiliative relationships undoubtedly played into the decision to interpret the teacher's instruction sympathetically and to produce what we hoped was a more provocative report that argued against conventional wisdom. All involved in the study came from generally similar backgrounds as upper-middle-class members of the same race with similar professional orientations. Given the scorn heaped upon teachers who require five-paragraph themes of their students—for example, Emig's (1971) conclusion that it is "pedagogically, developmentally, and politically an anachronism" (p. 100), or Rosenwasser and Stephen's (1997) view of the five-paragraph theme as a

"simplistic scheme [that] blocks writers' ability to think deeply or logically, restricting rather than encouraging the development of complex ideas" (p. 44)—many readers familiar with the issues might ask, "Why is she doing this, when we all know it's wrong?"

Our study was designed to interrogate these disdainful assumptions by focusing on her rationale for teaching this form, including the factors in the environment that made five-paragraph themes an engrained part of the writing curriculum and state assessment of both student writers and their English teachers. These environmental effects were available throughout her schooling, normalizing the five-paragraph theme firmly in her mind without a university course in teaching writing to provide a critique or alternative. By telling the story from her point of view, we were able to construct a narrative that positioned her teaching as following a logic, if not the logic preferred by many readers of the journal. Our configurational challenge was to relate her teaching as it exhibited an oft-excoriated practice, which we assumed that many readers might enter with negative feelings toward and intellectual arguments against. By emplotting her instruction in far broader contexts, both historically and across the realm of the present, we sought to make her circumstances explicit and possibly relatable and amenable to empathic framing in order to understand, if not wholly agree with.

Accounting for Empathy for Participants

I next review studies conducted by a pair of fellow literacy researchers who studied populations with whom they shared lives and circumstances that enabled a perspective on experiences not generally available to outsiders to the communities under study. Research from new, emic perspectives has helped to shed light on lives that are typically not possible for white researchers like me to earn enough trust to investigate. Among university professors, presumably the largest audience for research publications, the largest racial group is white (66.3%), followed by Asian (11.3%), Latiné (10.1%), and African American (7.1%) (Zippia, 2024). Readers who lack engagement with populations from a nondominant demographic may approach these narratives informed more by residual stereotypes from media accounts and societal assumptions, along with scholarly beliefs originating from theories based on assumptions more than empirical evidence. This condition of readers' lack of familiarity with the lives of research participants may motivate authors to present counternarratives that challenge the stereotypes by which "the other" is often judged deficient by outsiders with greater social status (Patton Davis & Museus, 2019). How do authors account for their own sympathies with their research participants in ways that both validate the report and also tell a

story with sufficient factual fidelity to enable it to stand as research in quest of some empirical or emotional truth, or at least a persuasive point?

Cushman's (1999) study of the navigation of the public housing system by people facing eviction illustrates the complexities of these questions. At about the time of the article's publication, the "right to write" question (Wolf et al., 1999) was in the air: Can authors authentically represent the perspectives and experiences of people who are not members of their own cultures, a problem of ongoing concern in the social sciences? This question had surfaced in response to criticisms that researchers have historically misjudged and belittled the people they study when they view them through the prism of their own enculturation and positioning (Said, 1978). The problem becomes critical when relating narratives about those from cultures distant from one's own. Such relational obstructions often create barriers to empathy (Von Vugt & Van Lange, 2006), even as they might typify the ways in which human societies have historically defined themselves and others through contrasts and conflicts with competing social groups (Christakis, 2019; Herodotus, 425 BCE/2013, referenced in Cole, 1996; Stearns, 2009).

Specific information on social class membership of professors is in short supply (Lee, 2017), and social class fluidity complicates the problem. Yet as Lee and others note, university faculty from working-class backgrounds often feel stigmatized and obligated to "pass" to feel accepted in university communities, suggesting a minoritized status in academia. The path to the professoriate must go through undergraduate college education, a master's degree, and a doctorate, requiring a decade or more of dedicated time and money. This series of required degrees makes university positions more available to those with means than they are to those with fewer academic models and traditions in their homes and communities, and fewer family resources to invest in educational degrees and experiences. As a result, published research tends to be read by people advantaged enough to have had the luxuries of time and resources to support their professional progression.

Cushman (1999) addressed the question of how she engaged with her public housing participants explicitly. She informed her readers that her own ethnic history and social status contributed to her ability to establish a rapport with people from a demographic rarely known by the university professors who comprise the audience for research reports. Because this subjectivity statement provides a good exemplar of how to position oneself in relation to research topics and participants, I include it with minimal use of ellipses:

> Along with reciprocity, solidarity in the form of mutual identification also facilitated the development of our relations. Although we had similar experiences due to our gender and race (I'm White Cherokee with family from

> Oklahoma; many residents were Black Cherokee with family from the Carolinas), we talked about class issues the most. My family has been evicted three times and was homeless for a summer in 1984, and I was evicted once during the course of this study. Since our class backgrounds overlapped, we talked about our experiences in ways that fostered a mutual trust for and identification with each other. If our similarities worked to an advantage in building a relation, so too did our differences. Community members often used the status markers of my university position and White looks as another means to their own ends as I will report. They believed that by associating with me, they increased their acceptability in the view of wider society's institutional representatives. In like fashion, by associating with me, they legitimized my presence in neighborhoods, churches, and institutions not ordinarily frequented by scholars. These forms of enhanced reciprocity, mutual identification, and marked difference gradually increased our rapport with each other, leading us all to find ways to make this study beneficial to everyone involved. . . . When self-reflexivity is accounted for, the researcher's positioning and research context can provide greater access to data that impacts the validity of results (Cushman & Guinsatao Monberg, 1998). Yet, when critical literacy scholars study hegemony from a social distance, they rarely take such methodological and social issues into consideration (Cushman, 1996). (p. 252)

This shared set of experiences first enabled her to gain access to their confidence, and in turn to their brutally honest views of unstable life in public housing. This relationship led to an empathic portrayal of the people featured in her study, those getting evicted from their residences and navigating the system to find a new place to live.

As we did in our study of five-paragraph-theme instruction, Cushman prefigured her research narratives with a critical analysis of common assumptions: in particular, she critiqued critical theory's reliance on "false consciousness" as a way to diminish those who do not take up its call to an elevated mindset and revolutionary action. Rather, she detailed the conditions that deny agency and limit possibilities for those who fight against various forms of oppression. She further, through her close relationship and intimate conversations with her focal participants, identified many occasions of critical attention in their perspective on society, conducted outside the paternalistic view of university critical theorists who loftily assume that the residents lack the level of consciousness and the critical tools to advocate effectively for themselves.

Her framing of the study thus prepares readers to view the presumably powerless housing project residents as being far more conscious of their circumstances than an outsider might assume them to be. This insight provides her narrative with a compelling perspective that enables readers to

step down from the veranda of academia and immerse themselves in what, for most readers of scholarship, is a foreign world (Kappler, 2013). She also details her own subjectivity and the access it provided to a population sample that few university researchers would or could approach or be trusted and accepted by.

Through this relational approach, Cushman was able to present a narrative that allowed her to argue that the residents were highly literate in institutional language and concepts, that they engaged in forms of critical literacy unseen by outside observers, and that they defied notions of their depressed state by acting with agency to find new homes when evicted. Under the header *Accessing the Privileged Discourses of Landlords*, she relates the following incident:

> Mirena opened the newspaper onto the kitchen table and leaned over it, scanning the "Apartments for Rent" section according to her primary needs: a three or four bedroom apartment. "None of these landlords will let me rent when they hear me on the phone. They probably won't even show me the place or tell me where it is." [Cushman:] "Why's that?" [Mirena:] "The way I talk. They'll know I'm Black. You want to help me practice what I'm gonna say on the phone?" I agreed. She said my talking with her would "help [her] sound more respectable, you know White." She asked me for more information about these apartments, and as I modeled some lines for her, she wrote down what I said on the back of Chinese take-out menu. (pp. 258-259)

Cushman returns to this exchange later to clarify that the residents' language choices were not a reflection of their own values, or an indication of appropriated racial pathology, but a rhetorical move to facilitate their navigation of the system:

> Even though both women said that using White English sounded respectable, they were not conferring a lower status to their vernacular. Instead, they showed their recognition of the common prejudices some have against Black English. After this interaction and others, I asked them why White English was valuable to them. Mirena told me that "That's what landlords want to hear. They want to rent to someone they recognize." Lucy said that "It ain't that *I* think White is more respectable than Black. But I think they gonna think that way." Both women were aware that the high value they placed on their vernacular would likely conflict with the cultural assumptions of landlords. So they selected discursive and literate tools that indexed the cultural assumptions they believed the landlords had in order to present themselves in such a way that catered to landlords' belief system. (pp. 262-263; emphasis in original)

Cushman's study thus used an appropriately framed, relational narrative approach to construct stories that revealed a greater sophistication among her participants than university critical theorists might assume, providing her study with the sort of pointed theme or moral that Coulter and Smith (2009) argue is central to narratives based on research data, and that Ricoeur (1983) found to be essential to narrative emplotment. She further was able to argue both that these residents merit greater respect than is typically accorded, and that critical theory tends to rely on assumptions about people of little means that fit the theory better than the realities of those people's lives, meanwhile reifying the very hierarchies that critical thinking is designed to dismantle. Her narratives invite readers' empathy for the characters she presents to make them more wholly human, leading to her conclusion that

> the nuances of everyday literacy and political life in this inner city show that residents both complied with and resisted a system that did not always recognize and thus serve their interests. The goal-directed, strategic processes of both their compliance and resistance illustrate their sophisticated use of critical literacy and suggest the need for researchers to come into more direct contact with those whose lives they seek to report and uplift. (p. 272)

These qualities and attributes only became evident when Cushman conducted a study with a strong relational dimension that she developed in order to construct counternarratives that presented her characters as strong, intelligent, knowledgeable navigators of systems built to suppress their possibilities in life. She effectively provided their perspective through her careful theory-building and pointed research questions, which she used to frame the residents in ways that lent great credibility to the narratives she produced for the research report.

Narrative Qualities

Authors of research reports relying on qualitative data make principled selections of excerpts to arrange into a narrative and to emplot them into a story that typically includes the dramatic elements of setting, character development, plot, tension, denouement, and implied meaning to produce an empathic response in readers to the focal participants' experiences. I will draw on the work of Kinloch et al. (2017) to illustrate this discursive move. The authors are African American women studying the literacy lives of African American male youths. Like the other studies I have reviewed, this one uses the opening framework to set the stage for the narratives they report based on their ethnographic data collection. They position their study in opposition to the

conventional ways in which Black youth have been depicted in mainstream representations:

> Black adolescents have their own stories to tell and dreams to pursue. Unfortunately, their stories of "motivation [and] perseverance" do not get much airtime in US media and popular discourse. The master narrative on Black adolescents would have us believe they are uncontrollable inside and outside schools, and that they willingly sit by in silence as their personhood is torn asunder. According to Allen (2015), the master narratives about Black adolescent males typically center on educational failure and "perpetuate deficit views of Black male culture, that erroneously portray Black males as lacking normative intellectual and behavioral qualities needed to be successful" (p. 210). Examples like [Allen's focal participant] contest essentializing mischaracterizations of Black adolescents as uneducable, irresponsible, and inclined to criminality. (p. 39)

Like Cushman (1999), they position their own report as a counternarrative, a genre that challenges conventional and stereotypical narratives and replaces them with stories that take the perspective of the focal characters. Kinloch et al.'s principles of selection from the whole data set should ideally represent the whole collection as well as produce in readers the same empathy they feel for the young men themselves. To ensure the reliability of their account, they report on their triangulation of data sources in order to arrive at a version of events corroborated by multiple forms of evidence. Their report of their triangulation methods reinforces their claims, helping readers to develop confidence that they have not left out discrepant and disconfirming data to produce their counternarrative. In their Method section, the authors detail some of the processes through which they made principled selections of what to include in the narratives they report, a move that Smith (2009) argues contributes to the trustworthiness of the narrative (cf. Smagorinsky, 2008). This process involved identifying recurrent themes running through the data that enabled them to select representative stories to include in their report.

The authors' framing of their report prepares readers for their section featuring one participant, Khaleeq, from which the following is excerpted (pp. 45-47). The event described took place during a walk through Khaleeq's neighborhood, where gentrification was raising the specter that his family would be soon priced out of the area and, like Cushman's (1999) participants, have to live life on the move. They relate the conversation taking place on this walk as follows, with researcher Kinloch becoming an actor in the story:

> When Phillip, another youth participant, asked Khaleeq to talk about the threat of being pushed out of the community, Khaleeq said, "This my home but that don't matter. Our struggle to live never matters to other people. Can we really do anything about it?" Valerie [Kinloch] asked, "You don't think you can do anything? Why you participating in this [research] project?" To this latter question, Khaleeq explained, "It's about our community. I know that." He continued: "But it's also about me. In school, like I don't be feelin' free. You know, like sometimes I be suffocatin' and think I'm ah stop breathin'. Then, we be out here doin' the work . . . I'm breathin', feelin' like I'm smart. That's how I always wanna feel. I be in school and get tired being labeled the Black boy who don't know somethin', who ain't smart enough. Out here, I don't worry 'bout that."

The authors then pause their narrative presentation to provide their analytic treatment of the data in relation to their theoretical framework. They describe Khaleeq's account of his high status in the community and low status in school as "poignant" (p. 45), and thus sympathetic, and note how through his own counternarrative he rejects the stereotypical ways in which he is constructed in school. The authors are well-aligned with their participants' viewpoints and experiences and position the adolescents as reliable interpreters of their surroundings. The youth not only critiqued their environment but also imagined ways to fight back against material and psychological obstacles to being seen as whole people with talent and possibilities. The authors link the adolescents' comments to their motivating theory, saying,

> Rather than capitulating to failure, Khaleeq demonstrated academic, social, and creative competence in the community. His participation in our project and awareness of the need for Black people to tell their stories point to how he used literacy within nonschool contexts to interrogate his racialized experiences and produce counternarratives to pervasive labels of intellectual inferiority.

These analytical comments by the authors account for their own emotional reactions to the youths' stories and perspectives. Lead author Kinloch, who collected the data, includes herself within the narrative as a conversational partner, often validating the youths' perspectives—something they testify does not happen in school—and encouraging them to pursue their lines of inquiry.

I can assume that the authors are relying on excerpts that are aligned with their theorizing of the data and eliminating extraneous or redundant data from the report. Readers—and before them, reviewers and editors—must trust that the authors are not eliminating disconfirming or discrepant data, and that their

methodological report provides confidence that the reported data represent themes identified analytically, assisted by the ways in which their theoretical and topical frameworks help readers generate responses to the narratives in empathic ways.

Among the methodological tools reported by Kinloch et al. to increase reader confidence in findings is data triangulation, accompanied by member checking, to increase readers' trust in the validity of the claims:

> Data triangulation within and across the studies also allowed us to "map out the richness of human behavior, interaction, and responses to persistent issues" (Kinloch et al., 2016) related to Khaleeq's and Rendell's racialized literacy experiences beyond schooling environments. To do this, we coded journal entries, field notes, and video- and audio-taped data for recurring themes of engagement, resistance, and identity within the stories of participants (data analysis Phase 1). Then, we turned attention to how Khaleeq and Rendell, within their immediate contexts, engaged with peers and shared literacy stories about their engagements, as demonstrated by their attitudes, dispositions, and descriptions of how they worked collaboratively with others to accomplish goals (data analysis Phase 2). Throughout our data analysis phases, we focused on Khaleeq's and Rendell's decisions to use literacy to participate in nonschool spaces and their processes of "mak[ing] sense of who I am and what I can use literacy for" (Khaleeq). This latter point was a major theme that emerged from the data and from Valerie's ongoing observations of Khaleeq, Rendell, and their peers. In addition to the phases of data analysis, it is important to note that participants across the two studies engaged in extensive member-checking sessions of collected data for accuracy. (p. 44)

This report on triangulation helps give me, as a reader far removed from the research site and with little access to the lives of people like those reported by the authors, confidence in the findings.

When I read these narratives and the authors' analyses, I feel for how these youth have been assumed to be criminals in the making, destined for prison instead of college (Chávez-Moreno, 2022), incapable of processing their life circumstances or becoming constructive members of society. The authors have presented these adolescents as sympathetic, strong, and insightful, no doubt in relation to their own experiences with racism and to their hope that their scholarship will help the next generation to be treated with greater dignity and respect. The authors' decisions have produced, at least in this reader, an empathetic response to people very unlike me: I am saddened by how their lives have been diminished by the beliefs of the broader society. Their account gives me hope that interventions like Kinloch et al.'s (2017) can shine a light on these adolescents' intelligence and potential and help to change the oppressive narratives that these young men and this study

are working to counter. I believe that readers' emotional responses will contribute to the empathic framing that enables a new way of thinking about people from other worlds of experience.

Discussion

In this essay I have made the case that reading well-crafted, appropriately framed, data-true social science narratives may produce responses in readers that are emotionally persuasive as much as they rely on analytic discernment. These responses may move readers to make emotional connections, based on images from experience or on their imagination of lives from beyond their personal knowledge. These relational feelings with people from outside their own experiential worlds may follow from the construction of counternarratives that may be difficult to recognize directly in their own experiences, yet may also open new possibilities in their understanding of the social world.

Readers may have a reservoir of shared emotions through other experiences with disrespect that enable them to question the validity of the assumptions they bring to their reading, as counternarratives are designed to achieve. The text's verisimilitude, as much as its analytic conclusions, produces imperatives to think differently about those whose lives otherwise might become available largely through stereotype and misrepresentation in society, including academia, as the example of Amy Wax indicates (see Young, 2024). Readers do not have access to the full range of material available to authors to construct their characters, including their own role in the presentation of data. This selectivity creates subjective decisions about how to portray the research participants that in turn produce the effects on readers, whose responses may introduce additional narratives emplotted with the text's to construct in their minds an emotionally rich understanding of the reported data.

Social science argumentative practices, reported through the established APA structure, have historically valued dispassionate analysis, even of phenomena fraught with tension and emotion (Emihovich, 1995). However, when narratives comprise the data, a different set of considerations emerges. It is useful for authors to know that they are working within a genre that does accommodate an emotional dimension and for readers to know that the text's persuasion relies on more than conventional logic. A narrative report's impact is in part a consequence of its capacity to make points by going beyond the facts and into the reader's emotional life and experiences. Thus enriched, the report becomes more fully human and potentially persuasive at a deep level that includes but can go beyond analytic reason. The analysis interprets the narratives through the lens provided by the opening framework; the method

includes such means as triangulating data and identifying recurring themes to promote trustworthiness; the participants are included to some degree in the reading of the data and generation of the report. Each measure contributes to the validity of the investigation and provides some evidence to readers that the research was conducted ethically and that the construction of the narratives is responsible and faithful to the range of data collected.

The narrative turn in social science research (Goodson & Gill, 2011) continues to move forward. Understanding how narratives are constructed, how they function, and how they affect readers is critical to their effectiveness in making persuasive points to readers. This effect may be prompted by an opening framework that theorizes and establishes the points that are central to reading the ensuing narratives empathically. Part of this effect employs conventional analysis. Part relies on character constructions and plotlines that resonate with readers emotionally. None is necessarily paramount, but all matter. Undertaking each ought to follow some standards for ethical conduct in a variety of areas: the initial data collection, a trustworthy analytic method, a theory that helps the narratives make sense, a data reduction that represents the whole corpus without distortion or selectivity that ignores competing themes that undermine a preferred interpretation, and the construction of narratives that have both fidelity to the data and include the verisimilitude that lends authenticity to reported accounts. Each stage requires considerable rigor and diligence. The people whose lives are depicted in the accounts deserve no less.

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