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**Navigating the narrative space: Insights, experiences, and emotions of the novice researcher.**

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3 Navigating the narrative space: Insights, experiences, and emotions of the novice  
4 researcher.  
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## 6 **Abstract**

### 7 **Design**

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12 This paper draws on the experiences and emotions involved in undertaking narrative  
13 inquiry as a novice researcher. The paper focuses specifically on the challenges of  
14 opening, working in and closing the narrative space.  
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### 17 **Purpose**

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20 The purpose of the paper is to explore the theory and approaches employed by a  
21 novice narrative researcher to open, work in, and close the narrative space. The  
22 paper reflects on this personal journey and aims to provide insight for other novices  
23 to successfully navigate the narrative space.  
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### 27 **Findings**

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30 Through a critical and reflective discussion of approaches to narrative inquiry, the  
31 paper points to key theories, approaches, which guide narrative research. In doing  
32 this, the diversity in interpretation and application of narrative research are noted as  
33 essential components of both its challenge and beauty.  
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### 37 **Practical Implications**

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40 The practical implications of this paper are linked to its utility in helping others reflect  
41 on their own practice and also providing insight and support to other novice  
42 researchers seeking to navigate the narrative space.  
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### 46 **Originality / value**

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48 The paper provides a subjective interpretation and application of the theory  
49 underpinning narrative research and how it was used to guide the authors research  
50 into care leavers journeys into and through university.  
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## Introduction

The novice researcher is presented with many challenges and the research journey is long, complex, and evolving. Choosing a robust methodological framework is an essential part of the process. For me, narrative research linked well to my ontological and epistemological beliefs in that there are multiple realities and that meaning is subjective. Equally, the following overview of narrative research reflects my own experience of living a narrative life, whereby I have organised meaningful life events into story form and have told, re-storied and retold them, depending on the audience and the context. Much narrative research focuses on preserving the human voice (Bekaert, 2014) and for my study, which focused on the experiences of care experienced students, I felt this was essential, as many young people in care report feeling they are not listened to and do not have a voice (BECOME, 2020). Whilst this paper is grounded in my personal experience of researching care leavers' journeys into and through university, the focus of this paper is on how narrative inquiry was used as a methodological framework and the practical challenges of opening, working in and closing the story-telling space as a novice researcher.

### What is narrative research?

Narrative research is situated within the interpretivist paradigm, adopting a post-positive stance, which recognises that knowledge is not absolute, but is instead relative, subjectively created; it is dynamic, evolving, and transient in nature (Denzin and Lincoln, 2013; Patton, 2015). People by nature lead storied lives and narrative researchers describe such lives, collect, and tell stories of them (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990). The terms story and narrative are used interchangeably in the literature, however, Polkinghorne (1998) suggests that the story is the outcome of events or experiences being told, whereas the narrative extends beyond this to consider the thought processes and influences that shape the story. Consequently, the story is much more than an aimless string of words, it is constructed and meaningful. Clandinin and Connelly are often cited as being the first to use the term narrative inquiry. In their work narrative is considered both the phenomenon and the method. Narrative inquiry focuses on the individual, society and culture expressed through narration and analysis of this (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). The term inquiry underlines that the stories or narratives are being used for research purposes

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3 and so move beyond retelling of events, to interpreting them (Holloway and  
4 Freshwater, 2007); the story is viewed as rhetorical, constructed, and interpretive  
5 (Riessman, 1993).  
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9 One of the inherent challenges of conducting narrative research is that there is no  
10 consensus about how to carry it out. Indeed, Andrews (2020) refers to the difficulty of  
11 doing quality research in a methodology as notoriously murky as narrative research.  
12 Narrative research is often used as a generic term and some researchers conduct  
13 narrative studies focused on collecting narratives of human experience based on key  
14 principles, as opposed to outlining a distinct approach (Buttina, 2015). This reflects  
15 Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) reference to three "commonplaces" that are  
16 essential in distinguishing narrative inquiry with other methodological approaches.  
17 These are temporality, sociality and place. These commonplaces are linked to the  
18 philosophy of Dewey (1938) whose theories on education referred to the importance  
19 of exploring the personal, social, temporal and situation and so, to understand  
20 people, we need examine not only their personal experience, but their interactions in  
21 the world. Equally, Dewey (1938) suggests that experiences grow out of other  
22 experiences and this can be expressed through the continuum of the imagined now,  
23 imagined past and imagined future. So, essentially here, it is important to recognise  
24 the immediate impact of experience, as well as the later and possible future impact  
25 this has on on-going experience and understanding (Ricoeur, 1984). This is a vital  
26 feature of narrative inquiry, whereby attention is paid to how we look back and look  
27 forward (Cousin, 2009; Ricoeur, 1984) and often appears in many approaches to  
28 narrative inquiry (Goodson et al., 2017). In my work I drew on these principles by  
29 asking students to look back at how their aspirations for university developed, to look  
30 to their present experience and to look forward to their imagined futures.  
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47 The past and present actions of the storyteller or narrator can provide insight into  
48 potential future action (Wang and Geale, 2015), but as mentioned previously, the  
49 narrator may have multiple versions of their history and may also select which  
50 version they present (Cousin, 2009). This links to the performative nature of  
51 storytelling (Polkinghorne, 1998). The notion of temporality differentiates narrative  
52 research from other approaches such as phenomenology, but also underlines the  
53 value of individual experience and meaning (Ricoeur, 1984). I felt this was important  
54 for my research because I wanted to understand the way experience shapes  
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3 decisions to go to university, as well as experience once there. The second  
4 commonplace, sociality, refers to the milieu, the conditions under which peoples'  
5 experiences and events are unfolding. So, in the case of my study, the social context  
6 of widening participation for care leavers. The third commonplace is the specific  
7 place or sequence of places that the events took place. So, in my work, place is  
8 university, but notably other places may also be of relevance, for example the care  
9 setting and compulsory education settings. This three-dimensional way of working is  
10 what allows narrative research to be considered a methodology, rather than simply a  
11 method of data collection (Clandinin, 2006).  
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19 In my own study these commonplaces connected well to Bourdieu's (1990) theory of  
20 practice, which was the theoretical lens through which I conducted the study, where  
21 past and present experience (primary and secondary habitus) and the capitals  
22 accrued are measured in the context of field (university). This combination of the  
23 theoretical and methodological approach enabled me to explore the temporal nature  
24 of individual experience, the collective experience of care leavers, as well as the  
25 wider social and cultural influences on their educational trajectories, and importantly,  
26 to understand how they imagined their possible futures beyond university; what  
27 Ricoeur (1984) refers to as a sense of hope. In using Bourdieu's (1990) theory my  
28 narrative research was grounded in a sociocultural methodological stance, whereby  
29 my focus was on the broad cultural narratives that influence individual experience  
30 (McAlpine, 2016). So, here I was considering the wider context of higher education  
31 and the increasingly dominant socio-cultural value placed on university education, as  
32 well as the widening participation agenda and how this influenced the narratives of  
33 the care experienced students in my study. This differs from the two other key  
34 stances: Naturalist, which focuses on rich descriptions of people's stories about  
35 significant issues and literary, which focuses on the discourse, images, metaphors  
36 used to represent experience and how the story is acted out through plots, storylines  
37 and characters (McAlpine, 2016).  
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52 I drew on a particular approach outlined in the work of Reissman (2008) and Squire  
53 (2013) whereby the focus was on personal experience. This reflects moves within  
54 the broad remit of narrative research to be more precise in declaring the conceptual  
55 distinctions between different approaches and being clear about whether research is  
56 focused on life story, biography, discourse, history, oral history, collective narratives,  
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3 or experience centred narratives (Denzin, 2009). The experience centred approach  
4 is based on the premise that narratives are sequential and meaningful, definitely  
5 human, re-present experience, reconstituting it and expressing it and that they  
6 display transformation and change (Squire, 2013). There are arguably overlaps with  
7 other approaches to narrative research in that the narrative may include elements of  
8 life history and biography and the inclusion of non-story material (Goodson et al.,  
9 2017), but it also emphasises description, theorising and looking to the future. In  
10 contrast, often life history and biographical approaches focus on narratives of past  
11 experience and lived situations (Roseneil, 2012). For me I wanted to capture how  
12 students imagined their futures beyond the university setting and their possible future  
13 self, considering whether going to university had had a transformative effect. The  
14 flexibility of experience centred narrative methods allowed for me to expand the  
15 context from the interview to the inclusion of documents shared by two of the  
16 students taking part (Squire, 2013). One student brought in four of her social workers  
17 case files documenting aspects of her pre-care and care experience and another  
18 student brought in school and university reports. These allowed for the consideration  
19 of non-first person accounts from the professionals involved in the lives of the  
20 students, as well as allowing contextualising the work in the larger cultural narrative  
21 about young people in care (Squire, 2013).  
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36 It is often the case that researchers who are interested in personal accounts of  
37 experience are also interested in the role of stories as a means to express and build  
38 personal identity and agency (Squire, 2013). These features are central to the ethos  
39 of this study and the recognition that often care leavers do not have always have a  
40 voice and whilst stories may change and be altered over time, this study aimed to  
41 capture what the participants wanted to share about their lives. In doing this the  
42 process of narration can help the individual to think more deeply, to not only give  
43 meaning, but to make sense of experience and emotions, as well as consider  
44 responsibility, blame, and praise for specific individuals and circumstances (Elliott,  
45 2005). Further to this, by telling these narratives, my research aimed to address the  
46 dominant narrative discourse, which positions care experienced students as  
47 “unsuccessful” in the education system, reinforced by statistics that label them as not  
48 in education, training and employment and over-represented in the criminal justice  
49 system (Centre for Social Justice, 2015; Department for Education, 2017), without  
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3 considering the complex and cumulative social inequalities that produce these  
4 outcomes. This is synonymous with wider social narratives where under-represented  
5 groups in university are labelled as lacking motivation, aspiration and capability, so  
6 positioning them as neo-liberal subjects who are responsible for their own  
7 educational trajectories (Campbell and McKendrick, 2017). Narrative research, and  
8 particularly that which is conducted from a social methodological stance (McAlpine,  
9 2016), occupies a key role here in illuminating the gulf between dominant narratives  
10 and social reality, as well as foregrounding the injustice that produces unequal  
11 opportunities (Goodson et al., 2017). In my research I wanted to publicise the assets  
12 and success of care leavers, as well as providing a forum to understand how, as  
13 educators, we can work towards challenging this discourse and present a different  
14 truth (Goodson et al., 2017).

### 24 **Opening the story-telling space.**

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27 Most narrative inquirers begin their inquiries either with engaging with participants  
28 through telling stories or through coming alongside them in the living out of stories  
29 (Clandinin, 2006). In my research, as the students were unknown to me, I had to  
30 invite the stories through interview conversations. The interviews were arranged via  
31 e-mail or telephone with each student and were conducted on university campuses  
32 at convenient times for the students. Most of the students requested a campus  
33 venue, citing this as a convenient and familiar location. I felt it was important to offer  
34 this choice, as it is consistent with the narrative approach, which fosters shared  
35 decisions and negotiation (Bashir, 2019). The face to face interviews were held in  
36 either private study rooms in library locations or private rooms within the campuses,  
37 which provided familiar and comfortable surroundings and avoided interruptions  
38 (Cousin, 2009). Each interview lasted about 90-100 minutes.

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41 In narrative research one interview is rarely enough. The value of second interviews  
42 is in adding depth, but also creating space for storytellers and researchers to reflect  
43 on initial discussion and the opportunity to further explore any points or add detail  
44 and depth is noted (Polkinghorne, 2005). In my study the second interviews did not  
45 generate any new themes, but did allow participants a chance to confirm what they  
46 had said, but also to ask questions. One student also used the second interview to  
47 question me, asking me to recall information she had shared previously. Whilst she  
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3 did not explain this, I interpreted this as her way of checking I had listened,  
4 remembered, and was interested in her story. This underlines the responsibility to  
5 treat the storytelling space and the storyteller with care (Bashir, 2019).  
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9 The first interview I conducted was at a time when I had not had chance to undertake  
10 as much reading as I would have liked, but being conscious that I didn't want to lose  
11 the chance to capture the student's story, I carried out the interview. Having asked  
12 one of my early doctoral supervisors, an experienced narrative researcher, how to  
13 begin I set off with the advice to "simply ask for stories". I felt the interview went well  
14 and the student talked freely and at length. However, as my experience and reading  
15 progressed I drew more on the work of others to inform my approach. There is no set  
16 formula for getting narrators to tell their stories, but the important thing is to use an  
17 approach that encourages the story-teller to do most of the talking and allows them  
18 to time and space to speak (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990); the researcher's role is to  
19 "sponsor the voice of the narrative teller" (Goodson, et al. 2017, p. 4). Establishing a  
20 climate that allows for storytelling is vital and as narrative researchers we create or  
21 visit the space for tales (Barusche, 2012, p. 5). These spaces can be through  
22 conversations, but may also include spaces such as correspondence, emails and  
23 social media, (Barusche, 2012); in my study these included the case files and school  
24 reports, mentioned earlier. I found that creating the story-telling space was helped by  
25 introducing some general small talk at the beginning of the interviews i.e. asking how  
26 students were enjoying their courses. This was to initiate conversation, helping  
27 participants to feel relaxed and created a conversational approach, as opposed to a  
28 more interrogative style. Whilst researchers often do this both at the beginning and  
29 end of the interview, they make different decisions about whether to record this or  
30 not (Ranse, et al., 2020). I made the decision to start recording, with consent, at the  
31 very beginning and right up until the end of each interview. This meant no data was  
32 missed, but it also helped me to remember introductory details the students had  
33 shared.  
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## 52 **Working in the narrative space**

### 53 **Co-construction: The relationship between the narrator and the researcher**

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55 Narrative researchers recognise and accept that the narratives told are influenced by  
56 who is telling them, to who and for what purpose, as well as the impact of the  
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3 researcher's own subjective interpretation of them and consequently they are often  
4 considered to be co-constructed (Mischler, 1986; Reissman, 2008). This relationship  
5 reflects the multi-dimensional nature of narrative methodology. In this methodological  
6 approach it is not possible to bracket the researcher out of the inquiry, instead  
7 attention must be paid to the relational process and acceptance that the researcher  
8 is complicit in the world they study (Clandinin, 2006; Allen, 2017). Importantly  
9 Reissman (2008, p. 6) refers to narrative methodology using the analogy of "nested  
10 uses". These begin with the narrative impulse, the desire to tell a story, which is in  
11 itself interpretive. This leads to narrative data that is then interpreted by the  
12 researcher. A further stage of analysis occurs when the published account is read.  
13 To add to this process further, drawing on the work of Bruner (1990), the entire  
14 process helps both the narrator and the listener pause to look, a time for reflection  
15 on the narratives of their lives and those of others. Such reflection may lead to  
16 personal and practical change as we understand how we compose and recompose  
17 the stories we live by (Clandinin, Pushor and Orr, 2007).

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The focus of my interviewing approach was to create a space whereby the students  
could freely tell me about their personal experiences and therefore, I began by  
making the broad inquiry "tell me how and why you got to university". Inviting stories  
through a broad opening question is a widely used approach to narrative interviewing  
and allows the storyteller to influence the direction of the story, but at the same time  
directs the conversation to focus on the story that is of interest to the researcher  
(Wengraf, 2001; Roller and Lavrakos, 2015; Allen, 2017). Having posed an initial  
opening question, or what Wengraf (2001) refers to as the single question initial  
narrative, I actively listened, giving the student time to speak freely. This was not  
without challenges. For example, when Lily (a pseudonym) said:

**Lily:** "Oh, you're not going to go anywhere. You're just going to end up in  
prison. A teacher saying that. So, I'm just kind of like, if I could just see him  
now, I'd like to give him the finger".

I had to resist the urge to interrupt her story to question this further, but once it was  
clear she had finished that part of her narrative, I returned to the comment (Anderson  
and Kirkpatrick, 2015). Using the language Lily had used, I asked her "can you tell  
me more about experiencing that teacher's comment when he said "you're not going

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3 anywhere. You're just going to end up in prison?" In this sense I was both actively  
4 listening, as well as being emotionally attentive to Lily's experience, but also asking  
5 for more detail without imposing judgement or opinion (Muylaert et al. 2014; Allen,  
6 2017). This facilitated a space where Lily went on to talk about the impact of stigma  
7 and labelling she had experienced throughout her time in the care system and how it  
8 impacted on the identity she wanted to create as a university student. So, here,  
9 whilst following Lily's direction and taking cues from her story, my role was also to  
10 use the interview to elicit rich data from the narrative, whilst foregrounding her  
11 personal perspective (Muylaert et al. 2014; Allen 2017). In my later analysis, I was  
12 also able to contextualise this with the broader social narrative that care leavers are  
13 often labelled or perceived by the professionals working with them as having lower  
14 abilities than those not in care (Jackson and Cameron, 2012) and, as such, assigned  
15 the position of failing subject (Mannay et al., 2017). So, here, the narrative was both  
16 personal and experience centred, as well as socio-culturally bound (McAlpine, 2016).

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28 Alongside the opening question I had formulated two broad (exmanent) questions  
29 based on my prior reading (1. Tell me about your experience at university; 2. Tell me  
30 how you see your future beyond university) seeking to understand journeys into and  
31 through university, which were followed by immanent questions (based only on the  
32 story), such as "what happened then" (Muylaert et al. 2014, p. 186). This is  
33 synonymous with the approach outlined by Giovanna et al. (2019) where the  
34 interview "opens the door" for narration, but is facilitated by active listening and open  
35 questions based only the content of the story. According to Squire (2013) most  
36 experience centred narrative interviewing is semi-structured and involves varying  
37 degrees of involvement, depending on the researchers individual approach. Whilst,  
38 conscious that my questions influenced the narrative, I did not want to "abdicate"  
39 from this role (Goodson et al., 2017) because ultimately, my research was for the  
40 purpose of understanding care leavers journeys into and through university. I did,  
41 however, restrict my questions to these three, basing further questions on seeking  
42 depth only by asking for detail based on the story.

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54 The approach taken in my study may raise questions about the extent to which I  
55 controlled the narrative. Some narrative researchers see themselves and the  
56 participants as co-constructing each part of the inquiry, whereas for others, they  
57 prefer to maintain some distance (Clandinin and Huber, 2012). The level of  
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3 interaction presents a paradox for narrative researchers and whilst some adopt a  
4 role of listening and no collaboration or co-construction of the narrative (Goodson et  
5 al., 2017), others refer to claims of “letting participants speak for themselves” as  
6 naïve, given the implications of most research being conducted with and for specific  
7 purposes (Mazzei and Jackson, 2012, p. 747). There is also discrepancy about how  
8 to question with some suggesting you should avoid asking “why” questions (Muylaert  
9 et al. 2014) and others indicating these are okay (Allen, 2017). I accepted that my  
10 questions did shape the narrative. However, I ensured the questions were few and  
11 broad, aiming to strike a balance between providing a comfortable arena for  
12 storytelling, whilst also being conscious of my role as an academic and researcher  
13 and the purpose of my study. For me, this seminal statement by Bruner (2004, p.  
14 708) captures the nature of asking for stories in narrative work: “a life as led is  
15 inseparable from a life as told- or more bluntly, a life is not “how it was” but how it is  
16 interpreted and reinterpreted, told and retold”. In this sense, there is a shared  
17 responsibility for the stories that are produced through the asking for and telling of  
18 life experiences, but equally the stories are about experiences that are already  
19 edited as they are told; edited both by the fact they are requested, by my presence,  
20 by the time constraints imposed by the interview, as well as by the narrator  
21 (McAlpine, 2016; Sikes and Goodson, 2017).

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37 Whilst conducting the interviews I did share aspects of my personal story where  
38 relevant and was honest about my interest in the topic, when asked. It is suggested  
39 that self-disclosure can help establish comfort, trust, and rapport, particularly when  
40 studying sensitive topics (Batty, 2020). What I wanted to do here was establish my  
41 genuine interest, but also show honesty (Bashir, 2019). This can present a challenge  
42 in some instances, as narrators may ask probing questions. Indeed, Hydén’s work  
43 on narrating sensitive topics refers to this issue and she reports feeling embarrassed  
44 when a narrator asked her to join her in discussing her sexual experiences. Hydén  
45 dealt with this by introducing more neutral topics into the conversation. Here, this  
46 presents a challenge in terms of silencing what might be an important issue for the  
47 narrator and Hydén admits that the narrator seemed to become irritated. As  
48 researchers’ the balance of power is an important consideration. Whilst story-tellers  
49 are in control of which narratives they share, the researcher can also exert control in  
50 terms of encouraging or closing discussion, as outlined later. Equally, Hydén (2008)  
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3 suggests that researchers are often held in high esteem, which can also produce a  
4 power imbalance. In Lily's case I was reminded of her wish to control how she was  
5 represented when she contacted me to respond to the verbatim interview transcripts  
6 I had sent her. I had assigned Lily her pseudonym to protect her confidentiality, but  
7 Lily asked that it was changed:  
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12 **Lily:** "Jenny makes me sound old – I would prefer Lily".  
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15 This was particularly important for Lily and she described the lack of control she felt  
16 during her time in the looked after care system, when she was not consulted about  
17 the many changes of placement and school she had experienced. Whilst the other  
18 students in the study were also given the same choice, they were happy for me to  
19 choose their pseudonym. My use of pseudonyms had been in an attempt to  
20 emphasise the personal nature of the narratives in published work but Lily's request  
21 made me realise that that even without thinking I had assumed control of this part of  
22 the research process, and, importantly, that enabling choice was important moving  
23 forward in my research (Bashir, 2019).  
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31 In my work, whilst I was not asked any challenging questions, I did feel that one of  
32 the students, Kelly, (a pseudonym) talked about two sexually explicit encounters  
33 during her narrative. At both times she leaned towards me and looked at me intently,  
34 as if reading my reaction. Whilst I did not feel uncomfortable with the conversation, I  
35 was conscious about the potential impact of my response. Here, I tried to respond by  
36 asking how she felt talking about these experiences or what happened then?  
37 (Muylaert et al. 2014). In these situations, there is no guide-book about how to  
38 respond, but this perhaps presents an opportunity to reflect on similarities and  
39 differences between the narrator and the researcher. Hydén used her experience as  
40 an opportunity to consider how her own prior social and cultural background  
41 influenced her perceptions about what should be publicly and privately discussed  
42 and why this led to her own feelings of embarrassment when she encountered  
43 questions about her own sexual preferences. Bashir's (2019) research into the  
44 experiences of qualitative researchers working with vulnerable people acknowledges  
45 both the privilege and power of the researcher's position in being able to capture  
46 personal narratives, but also notes the vulnerability of researchers; this is referred to  
47 as the flip side of the research encounter. This vulnerability manifests in varying and  
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3 complex ways, but includes anxiety about the unpredictability of participants, the  
4 dangers of research in field settings, as well as gaining unexpected or emotionally  
5 charged insights, which might generate feelings of sadness or discomfort for the  
6 researcher. The dynamics between the interviewer and the narrator affect the  
7 narrative and perhaps the sensitive or private nature of the topics discussed shows  
8 that a comfortable space has been created. Sometimes the story-telling space allows  
9 for stories that have never been told, or perhaps formed, to emerge and be shared  
10 (Bashir, 2019). Mischler (1986) compares this space to special relationships i.e.  
11 doctor-patient, where the most private and intimate topics can be discussed.  
12 However, it is also important to consider the halo effect whereby, narrators tell you  
13 what they think you want to hear (Kvale, 2011). I was aware that even by nodding or  
14 offering affirming sounds or even saying “go on”, this might indicate that the narrator  
15 was relaying something of interest to me and would shape the story, but also  
16 accepted that these were important features of showing interest (Bashir, 2019)).  
17 More than that, I was aware that the narrator and I were engaging in a process  
18 whereby we were both monitoring what was said,  
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31 Indeed, Kelly shared during her interview that she was watching for my reaction and  
32 would change her approach, consistent with the halo effect (Kvale, 2011).  
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35 **Kelly:** “I do reflection in action all the time. So, every time I say something to  
36 you, I look at how you’re reacting, and I change what I say, and I know exactly  
37 what I can say that might spoil it or change it”.  
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41 This discussion clearly points to the halo effect and it was interesting that she had  
42 used the word spoil. This perhaps reflects the legacy of her care experience where  
43 the relationships she formed were often fragile and she recounted many friendships  
44 she had lost. What may also have been happening here, is that Kelly was  
45 establishing entitlement to speak and presenting what she considered were tellable  
46 stories. This is sometimes considered a defensive approach where the narrator is  
47 defending the validity of their position, but is also responding to their interpretation of  
48 the research context (Andrews, Squire and Tambouka, 2013). Looking back at this  
49 encounter I wish I had asked her to explain what she meant by spoiling it. Whilst this  
50 was a missed opportunity, it was only afterwards, when I became emersed in the  
51 data, that it seemed to hold such importance. Here, the murky or messy nature of  
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3 narrative research means it is not always clear what does and does not constitute  
4 data and how meaning should be made from it (Sikes and Goodson, 2017). There is  
5 no failsafe way to assure that the same words are understood in the same way by  
6 any two people, or even by the same person from one moment to the other  
7 (Andrews, 2020). Whilst this may lead to criticism of narrative research, narrative  
8 researchers to not pretend that their work is objective, but instead is based on  
9 people answering questions they have been asked and researchers building their  
10 work on what they think they have been told (Andrews, 2020). What is left out of the  
11 story can be as significant as what is told and, as in my case, researchers are not  
12 always able to discover omissions; what is reassuring is that participants are often  
13 keen to tell relevant stories (Sikes and Goodson, 2017). This can be confirmed by  
14 participants asking the interviewer if “this is the sort of thing you’re interested in”  
15 (Sikes and Goodson, 2017, p. 65) and in my study:

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26 **Kelly:** “is that the type of thing you want to know about?”.

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28 Whilst the narrative literature can inform our approach, it cannot teach us the  
29 nuanced and complex skill of navigating the narrative space. Here, we can only do  
30 our best to open the space and work in partnership to grasp each story and interpret  
31 it, as it was told and heard at that moment in time, to the best of our ability

### 32 33 34 35 36 **Emotion work in the narrative space**

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38 As discussed earlier, my experience of interviewing Kelly led me to consider my own  
39 vulnerability as a researcher. Researchers’ are not faceless interviewers and so  
40 being distanced from the experience of gathering data is difficult (Dickson-Swift et  
41 al., 2008; Bashir, 2019). This is particularly relevant to narrative studies, where the  
42 topics can focus on private or sensitive issues and indeed, as outlined already,  
43 sensitive questions for both the narrator and the researcher..

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49 One of the interviews, with a student given the pseudonym Connie, contained lots  
50 (ten) of episodes of silence, ranging between 15 and 30 seconds. During some of  
51 these, it appeared that she was thinking about what to say, but I felt this did not  
52 explain some of the silences. Whilst I was conscious I did not want to respond by  
53 successive questioning, the three questions I had identified needed to be supported  
54 by other questions, such as tell me more about that, to encourage dialogue. Here, I  
55 was presented with a situation I had not anticipated and felt the interview had not  
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3 flowed and was generally less successful than the others. Perhaps some of the  
4 students I felt had told less of their story had actually told as much as they wanted to  
5 at that particular time. Allen (2017) refers to the concept of narrative coherence and  
6 suggests that if one is not able to narrate their experience it may mean that they are  
7 not able to understand it. Memory is also selective, and it is suggested that whilst we  
8 remember what we can, some experiences are deliberately or unconsciously  
9 forgotten (Muylaert, et al. 2014). This may have been the case given the pre-care  
10 experience of the students in my study, however, silence can also be an important  
11 mechanism for the narrator to seek power over the dialogue and determine what  
12 they do and do not wish to talk about; what is not said can be as powerful and as  
13 important as what is not said (Mazzei, 2007; Bengtsson and Fynbo, 2017).

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23 This silence can also exist on both the part of the story-teller and the listener, which  
24 is important to consider in research where interviewers refrain from questioning, as  
25 considered earlier. I found the lengthy silence disconcerting, and this can also be the  
26 case for those who are telling their story (Bengtsson and Fynbo, 2017). Equally, the  
27 process may have been stressful for them. Relaying sensitive stories can generate  
28 powerful emotions and researchers' working in these spaces must be particularly  
29 alert to this (Sikes and Hall, 2019). Bekaert (2014) notes the social value or labels  
30 often ascribed to certain groups, whereby they are stigmatised and, at times, blamed  
31 for their own circumstances. In her work, this related to teenage mothers, but this is  
32 also true of those in the care system and, in Hydén's (2008) research, those who  
33 have been subject to domestic abuse. Whilst Hydén's earlier approach of changing  
34 the subject does not always work, she has found this a valuable strategy where  
35 narrators appear visibly upset or affected by their account. Here, she suggests  
36 intervening by asking if the story-teller is OK to continue or by asking them to recall a  
37 time when they felt differently, or whether they think others may have had the same  
38 experience. This is based on the premise that revealing sensitive experiences is  
39 culturally bound and connects to feelings of being unimportant, vulnerable, and  
40 powerless and, very often, alone. Knowing others may have had similar experiences  
41 can reduce feelings of isolation, but also, for some, guilt, and self-blame (Hydén,  
42 2008).

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58 A fundamental role of narrative research is to address what Bekeart (2014, p. 98)  
59 refers to as the "narrative silence towards experiences". Bekeart importantly notes  
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3 that people are not entirely free to construct their own narratives. As our lives are  
4 socially bound, often we can only use the narratives that are available to us within  
5 popular understanding. Given that some sensitive, personal and /or illicit experiences  
6 are not readily available in the narratives of everyday life, this can sometimes silence  
7 such experiences. By opening the space to talk about them, this gives them a voice,  
8 but further, by publishing these narratives, we can help people to relate to their own  
9 experience in the narratives of others. This has the wider impact of helping people to  
10 construct who they were, are, or might become (Bekeart, 2104); looking to the past  
11 and the future are central features of narrative research (Ricoeur, 1984).

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19 In the case of my study those involved wanted to challenge negative stereotypes  
20 about children in care and their academic potential, but also felt their stories of  
21 success at university could help others in care to imagine a better future. Therefore,  
22 the complexity of silence in interviews must be considered and care must be taken  
23 not to close down opportunities for a narrator to talk about something of importance  
24 to them (Mazzei, 2007). When interviewers feel uncomfortable, out of their depth and  
25 do not know what to say there is a temptation to try to “escape from an unpleasant  
26 dialogue” (Bengtsson and Fynbo, 2017; and this is perhaps reflective of my earlier  
27 point about interviewers “abdicated” from their role (Goodson et al. 2017). Here,  
28 terms such as “it’s okay if you don’t want to talk about it” are tempting, as I wanted to  
29 say at times, but refrained from, being conscious I did not want to silence important  
30 experiences for the narrator (Bengtsson and Frynbo. 2017, p. 31). Here, whilst,  
31 again I was navigating uncharted territory, I tried to offer more neutral intervention,  
32 saying “are you comfortable to go on”, as Hydén (2008) did, to try and keep the  
33 narrative space open. Further to that, I wanted to embrace the silence and examine  
34 it in more detail in my analysis, looking for patterns and connections between  
35 silences (mine and the narrators’) to try and further explore the dynamics between us  
36 and the narrative space that had been opened.

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51 Emotional work manifests in other ways for researchers, through eliciting and  
52 hearing distressing stories, but also when the researcher has personal, experiential  
53 and insider knowledge. Sikes and Hall (2019, p. 170) consider this in their work, and  
54 acknowledge that at times it becomes “too close for comfort” touching the lives of  
55 both the participant and our own. Having worked as a health visitor for many years, I  
56 had been involved in safeguarding children at risk of childhood neglect, abuse,  
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3 poverty, and bereavement linked to much of my prior professional experience; these  
4 are often the reasons children enter looked after care (Department for Education,  
5 2017). Therefore, I did not anticipate my research to have such an emotional impact  
6 on me. However, two of the students had a profound effect on me and I found it  
7 difficult not to think about them or to feel sadness and concern for them. As a  
8 researcher, I was not able to follow them up or provide ongoing support, as I would  
9 have done in my health visiting role, and this produced a sense of powerlessness, as  
10 noted in Bashir's (2019) work. I was able to direct them to support within their  
11 university settings, which did help to address some of this concern Sikes and Hall,  
12 2019), but did not completely remove the emotional work involved in conducting this  
13 research.

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23 The concept of emotion work is largely derived from seminal work by Hochschild  
24 (1979) and was based on studying the significance of emotions within the workplace  
25 and the work expended in managing these. There are social rules that require us to  
26 induce or suppress emotions, depending on situation and context (Darra, 2008).  
27 These rules generally go unnoticed until there is a mismatch between what the  
28 individual feels and perceives they should feel. When this occurs, the individual is  
29 required to engage in emotional labour, which requires acted behaviour in order to  
30 try and show the socially accepted behaviour; this is likened in some studies to  
31 acting and putting on a happy face (Darra, 2008).

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39 The literature around emotion work and labour has focussed on a range of  
40 occupations including flight attendants (Hochschild, 1979) and health professionals  
41 (Darra, 2008) and is increasingly evident in qualitative research literature. Early work  
42 by Campbell (2002) was useful for me, because it did specifically focus on the  
43 impact of undertaking qualitative research with rape victims and some of the  
44 individuals in my research shared their prior experiences of sexual abuse. Here,  
45 personal interaction with the research subjects and the sensitivity of the topic, were  
46 noted as requiring emotional labour in order for the researcher to manage their  
47 emotions. Whilst the literature around dealing with emotions during interviews varies  
48 with some researchers showing visible signs of being upset, including openly crying,  
49 others suggest it is inappropriate to show such emotions and indicate these should  
50 only be released afterwards (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009). Showing empathy can be  
51 achieved by paraphrasing when appropriate and picking up on the emotion, using  
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3 relevant statements. For example, “So, at this point you felt no one listened?” This is  
4 consistent with mirroring the emotion without imposing judgement (Wengraf, 2001;  
5 Giovanna et al. 2019).  
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9 One particular emotion that was not expected in my work was the experience of  
10 strong feelings of dislike for one student. This was encountered during the interviews  
11 and was reflected upon afterwards. There was no real reason for this, other than  
12 perhaps a human preference, but it was important to acknowledge it may have  
13 impacted on the interview. Many factors can impact on the dynamics of the interview,  
14 including age, gender, social class and that these can be conscious or unconscious  
15 (Bold, 2012). By being aware of it at the time, I was able to draw on previous  
16 professional experience to show empathy through active listening and whilst being  
17 conscious of the feeling, I was able to value the student’s unique contribution to the  
18 study (Wengraf, 2001; Yow, 2006, cited in Bold, 2006). In this case, suppressing this  
19 emotion during the interview was paramount (Darra, 2008). A concern in  
20 suppressing emotions is that researchers can feel frustrated or overwhelmed  
21 (Dickson-Swift, Kippen and Liamputton, 2009) and in my case, guilt for not liking the  
22 student.  
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33 Bergman Blix and Wettergren (2014) capture the multi-dimensional nature of  
34 emotion work, where qualitative researchers work hard to gain access to the field,  
35 building trust, as well as maintaining that access by being conscious of and  
36 measured in their responses in order to inform their interviewing approach and not  
37 alienate the narrator. Drawing on Hothschild’s earlier work, they outline the emotive  
38 dissonance that researchers’ can feel by working in this “false” manner, but equally  
39 suggest that focus on the positive final outcomes of the research can help and  
40 indeed, enhance our emotional energy as researchers. For me, listening to some of  
41 the narratives where students had experienced pre-care neglect or abuse led me to  
42 think about my own health visiting practise and “should I have done more”  
43 (Clandinin, Pushor and Orr, 2007, p. 31) to safeguard children. These feelings are  
44 known to occur, especially when doing emotion work (Clandinin, Pushor and Orr,  
45 2007) and at times, collecting, reflecting on and engaging with the narratives was  
46 stressful and, as other researchers acknowledge, difficult to “get out of my head”  
47 (Sikes and Hall, 2020, p. 167). Consequently, it was important for me to ensure that I  
48 had time to reflect after each one and that I spaced them apart where possible. I  
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3 found seeking formal peer support from my research supervisors, as well as informal  
4 peer support from other doctoral researchers helpful (Sikes and Hall, 2020). Further  
5 to this, I also drew from Yow's (2006, cited in Bold, 2006, p.104) framework to  
6 question myself and the relationships I developed with the students. Here, some of  
7 the questions I asked myself included, why am I feeling this about the narrator; what  
8 are the similarities and differences between us? I also considered the effect on me,  
9 as well as how my reactions might impact on the research (Yow, 2006, cited in Bold,  
10 2006). Although this can never completely remove the researcher's impact from the  
11 study, this reflexive process was helpful for me in examining my role and the  
12 developing relationships with the students.  
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### 20 21 **Closing the storytelling space.**

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23 Closing the storytelling space is an important stage in narrative research and it is  
24 vital to be aware of cues that the narration is complete (Muylaert, 2014). One of the  
25 common features of narratives is that they almost always have a beginning, middle  
26 and an end and arguably, this reflects the nature of the interview, which generally  
27 includes an initialisation, main narration, questioning and closure phase (coda),  
28 sometimes followed by "small talk" (Mulyaert et al. 2014). When the narrator starts to  
29 say less, this may be simply that they are thinking about what to or not to include,  
30 therefore, picking up on closing statements i.e. that's where my story ends or that's  
31 about it, can help (Wengraf, 2001; Riessman, 2013; Mulyaert et al.2014). Wengraf  
32 indicates these often occur spontaneously (Wengraf, 2001). I felt it was important to  
33 give students the opportunity to ask me questions and talk about the interview  
34 process. Equally, as some interviewees often reflect on the events once the  
35 interview has finished and think about things they might have added (Clegg and  
36 Stevenson, 2013), my contact details were re-iterated. However, I realised that I had  
37 paid more attention to how I would open and work in the narrative space than I had  
38 to closing it and had naively expected that the interviews would end with some  
39 closing, informal discussion and that would be that, and I wouldn't hear from the  
40 students again. A fundamental principle of research is that those taking part should  
41 not experience harm (physical or emotional) beyond that, which they would  
42 encounter during the course of their normal lifestyle (Breakwell, Smith and Wright,  
43 2012). Whilst, there is discrepancy in the literature about what constitutes a sensitive  
44 research topic, I was very conscious that asking for stories about care experience  
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3 may bring about powerful emotional responses including sadness, anxiety, anger  
4 and embarrassment and consequently considered the study to be a potentially  
5 sensitive area of inquiry. As such, I should have perhaps, anticipated that closing the  
6 narrative space may not be so straightforward, as some of the literature suggests  
7 (Muylaert et al. 2104).  
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12 Batty (2020) points to the risk of dependency produced by engaging in intimate  
13 conversations with researchers and indicates that some participants may feel  
14 abandoned when ending the relationship. This is notably of greater risk in the case of  
15 longitudinal research, as in much of Batty's work, but careless closure of the  
16 narrative space, even in shorter relationships, may cause harm. Indeed, participants  
17 have reported feeling used or shocked at the end of a study, and this can occur even  
18 when the end of the study has been clearly articulated (Morrison et al. 2012; Iverson,  
19 2009). Whilst most of the interviews I conducted ended with brief informal discussion  
20 and goodbyes, one student emailed me regularly to ask about the progress of my  
21 work in the months following her interviews and another sent me two social media  
22 connection requests. In the case of my study those taking part wanted to understand  
23 how their stories would be shared and how I would re-story them. Whilst initially they  
24 had power over whether they took part in the study and what stories they shared,  
25 and essentially, as a researcher, I was asking something of them, there was now a  
26 shift in the balance of power. Through my re-storying what they had shared and  
27 developing this into scholarly work, I was in control of what was publicly shared  
28 (Hydén, 2008). With this in mind, and the privileged position I felt at having been  
29 given their stories, I wanted to assure the participants I would treat them and their  
30 stories with care. As such, this served as a reminder that I had opened a space for  
31 storytelling and, therefore, had to close the space sensitively. In this case, each time  
32 I was contacted I responded with a friendly, brief update, and, as Batty (2020) found,  
33 over time the messages stopped, and the relationship came to a natural end. On  
34 reflection, this is something I need to think about when closing interviews, preparing  
35 those taking part for the closure of the relationship. Here, rather than viewing closure  
36 of the narrative space simplistically, or as a one off event, it may be better, as Batty  
37 (2020) suggests to view it as a process, which may occur over time and that this  
38 phase will be governed more by the participant than by me as a researcher.  
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3 Batty (2020) outlined a range of approaches in her work where she exchanged text  
4 messages and phonecalls after the final interview. Again, this is an area where the  
5 researcher must make a choice. My own approach will incorporate better signposting  
6 that the relationship is ending, by outlining, for example, “this is the final interview”,  
7 but also being clear about how any future contact may occur and underlining that this  
8 would be via a designated email account rather than social media. Hopefully, this  
9 will support more careful closure of the narrative space.  
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## 15 **Conclusion**

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18 By sharing my own personal story of embarking on my journey as a narrative  
19 researcher, my intent is not to direct the individual work of other researchers, but  
20 more with the hope that others who are new to narrative inquiry and indeed,  
21 conducting empirical research, will be able to draw on some of the experiences I  
22 have shared to inform their own approach. My journey was both challenging and  
23 stressful at times, and I was initially overwhelmed by the volume of literature relating  
24 to conducting narrative research. Moving from my first initial interview, I was able to  
25 refine my approach and adopt a style of interviewing that allowed me to balance the  
26 skill of active listening, with facilitating the story through careful questions with  
27 increasing confidence and (I hope) competence. Opening the space for storytelling  
28 required careful thought and work, but so did working in the narrative space and this  
29 presented an opportunity to critically reflect on my interviewing approach and the  
30 impact of this on the outcomes of my research.  
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41 My own experience has helped prepare me better for engaging in further research  
42 and the potential for listening to emotive stories of life experience, as well as thinking  
43 about how opening this space impacts on those taking part. An important lesson is to  
44 consider how to plan closure of the storytelling space and to try and ensure to close  
45 it with care. Admittedly, I may look back in future years on my own story of becoming  
46 a narrative researcher and be critical of my decisions, however, I am ultimately  
47 happy that I was able to capture the “rare voices” (Chan, 2017, p. 29) of care  
48 leavers, whose stories may otherwise not have been heard. For me, part of the  
49 challenge and the beauty of narrative inquiry links to the diversity in its interpretation  
50 and application. What I have done in my own research is draw on the principles  
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3 outlined in this paper and in doing this was able to find my own voice as a  
4 researcher, as well as giving voice to the stories I was given.  
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