

**The Performative Narrative Interview: A Creative Strategy for Data Production drawing on  
Dialogical Narrative Theory**

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**Abstract**

This article presents a novel methodological approach to data collection/production: the Performative Narrative Interview (PNI). This approach was developed as part of an empirical study on the processual construction of the sexual identity of sexually diverse men\* in Santiago de Chile. By drawing upon narrative-dialogic theoretical frameworks of subjectivity, the PNI makes explicit three aspects of narrative interviews that tend either to remain unaddressed or are treated separately within narrative inquiry: the performative, the creative, and the intersubjective. The PNI utilizes these three aspects to generate a creative interview framework, detailed here, in which multiple versions of subjectivity can emerge. We suggest that methods like the PNI, which support this multiplicity to surface, lead to the production of deeper and more complex narrative data on subjectivity than traditional narrative interviews are able to produce.

*Keywords:* Narrative inquiry, narrative interview, dialogism, subjectivity, creative research methods, qualitative research

Within the social sciences, narrative inquiry has become a central theoretical and methodological approach to study subjectivities; the “narrative turn” (Bamberg, 2011; Hammack and Cohler, 2009; McAdams, 1993; Stanley and Temple, 2008). From the 1970s onwards, philosophers, psychologists, and (socio)linguists have argued that there is an inseparable relationship between people’s subjectivities and the narratives they tell about their embodied experiences in the world (Bruner, 1987; cf. Strawson, 2004; Labov and Waletzky, 1997; Polkinhorne, 1988; Ricoeur, 1992). Consequently, social scientists have become interested in using narrative approaches, and the narrative turn has proven to be productive in generating new knowledge about subjectivities, across countries and disciplines (Çalışkan, 2018; Smith and Sparkes, 2006; Wolgemuth, 2013).

Probably, the most important methodological strategy to produce empirical narrative data has been the narrative interview (Blakely and Moles, 2017). However, the many diverse and even contradictory ways to conduct narrative interviews (e.g., Alheit and Dausien 1985; Fraser and Taylor, 2020), has made it difficult for researchers to understand what they are doing when they are conducting a narrative interview (Silverman, 2017). This may be indicative of a deeper issue within social scientific narrative inquiry: empirical researchers’ surprisingly limited engagement with the theories of language that inform our projects (see Hyvärinen, 2010, for a discussion on different language theories within narrative studies). Every narrative research project makes theoretical assumptions about language which lead to subsequent assumptions about subjectivity, but many of these remain invisible and/or unaddressed (Blumenreich, 2004). In turn, researchers need to develop or utilise theoretically coherent methodological strategies. In this paper, we show how a commitment to drawing on narrative-dialogic theory of language (e.g., Bakhtin, 1981; 1986) led the first author to develop a very distinct form of narrative interview; the Performative

Narrative Interview (PNI; Author, 2020, forthcoming). Although the PNI was designed specifically to explore sexually diverse subjectivities in Chile, the method may offer an alternative strategy for data production for narrative researchers more broadly. By working within a narrative-dialogic theory of language, the PNI produces an interviewing frame in which multiple and usually repressed aspects of subjectivity can surface (Billig, 1997, 1998). Consequently, subjectivity can be studied in its multidimensional complexity, without reducing it to solely the verbal propositions enunciated by an individual. Furthermore, the PNI contributes to heated contemporary discussions around narrativity, language, interviews, and social sciences (Whitaker and Atkinson, 2019; Blakely and Moles, 2017; Silverman, 2017; Tamboukou, 2015).

The PNI presupposes three theoretical assumptions that are different to the theoretical assumptions of researchers working within other narrative frameworks (e.g., cognitive, structuralist, or poststructuralist): 1) a self-narrative is a presentation (not just a representation) of an only partially unified subjectivity-in-process (as opposed to essence or stability), 2) a self-narrative is a provisional creative accomplishment, and 3) a self-narrative is an intersubjective co-creation situated in a specific time and space. The PNI seeks to offer a data production strategy that can deal with the challenges raised by these theoretical assumptions by highlighting three aspects of the narrative interview that tend either to remain unaddressed or are treated separately by narrative researchers working outside of dialogism: 1) the performative aspect, 2) the creative aspect, and 3) the intersubjective aspect. The paper will explore both the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of each strand of the PNI production strategy, before giving an outline of the method.

## **Theoretical framework**

### **Dialogic subjectivity**

The PNI is a methodological strategy to produce data from a narrative-dialogic perspective. Specifically, it is informed by a dialogic (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986; Linell, 1998) and aesthetic (Rancière, 2009) interpretation of the concept of narrative identity developed by Ricoeur (1992) and of creativity developed by Winnicott (1971) (see also Author and Author, 2020). From this perspective, language is the material that makes possible the experience of being a relatively constant and unique subject within a situated (space) and historical (time) self-narrative (Jones, 2016). It is in a through language, both within inner and intersubjective dialogues, that people negotiate the different versions of subjectivity that will come to constitute a relative constant, unique, and unified sense of being a subject (Hermans, 2001; Larraín & Haye, 2019).

According to Ricoeur (1992) personal identity implicates a movement between two different modes of subjectivity: idem-identity or sameness and ipse-identity or ipseity. Neither of these modes can be thought as static entities, but rather as two dialectically interdependent modes of being that allow people, among other things, to deal with the dichotomy of constancy and change throughout their lives. Both sameness and ipseity are constitutive modes of subjectivity. Hence, from this perspective, subjectivity is a movement and not an essence, a process that moves back and forth between sameness and ipseity depending on contextual needs, and that never achieves final stability.

Despite the appearance of stability across time in the sameness mode of subjectivity, sameness is actually a contraction of multi-voiced stories (Ricoeur, 1992: p.122). These multi-voiced stories do not necessarily accord with one another to form a coherent unity. They are frequently in conflict (Hammack & Toolis, 2019), requiring effort and negotiation to organize

(Larraín & Haye, 2019). This is because subjectivity develops from the outset within a “dialogic skeleton of highly diversified interpersonal exchanges” (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 44). This dialogic skeleton is populated by very many historically contingent and often contradictory “preferences, evaluations, and estimations” of others (Ricoeur, 1992: p. 122). This is what some dialogic scholars have called historically meaningful “voices” (Bertau & Karsten, 2018 and p. 10) or “ideological perspectives” (Larraín & Haye, 2012; 2019). These only exist in and through a language used and embodied by language users (Cresswell and Baerveldt, 2011).

For Bakhtin (1981), subjectivities develop within a dialogically-organized semiotic field in which multiple voices (ideological perspectives) constitute the polyphonic nature of culture and self (Bakhtin, 1992). These ideological perspectives are historically situated and hierarchically organized by the opposing “centrifugal and centripetal forces of language” (Bakhtin, 1981, pp. 271-272), which stabilize (centripetal) and destabilize (centrifugal) the available linguistic voices (Ruffolo, 2016). This occurs both intra- and intersubjectively (Hammack and Toolis, 2019). For instance, in many contemporary societies a powerful centripetal force (though not the only one; cf. Crenshaw, 1991), is heteronormativity (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1978; Warner, 1991). That is, there is a linguistic nucleus around which most ideological perspectives and cultural artifacts tend to converge (Hammack & Toolis, 2016), which normatively dictates that the only normal and healthy way of embodying subjectivity and organizing society is compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980).

It is through practicing language with other subjects and cultural objects within an organized semiotic field that a person internalizes, and thereby embodies, the ideological perspectives that she will use to establish a relationship to herself. This is the indispensable requirement for subjectivity to emerge (see Vygotsky, 1931/1997: pp. 105-106). Hence, the semiotic means that a person uses to create her sense of subjectivity via a self-story are, always and

already, shaped by the ideological perspectives of others. These in turn are shaped by the forces of language within the semiotic field: the “I” always implies a “You”. “I” is, and never ceases to be, an “I-You” (Ricoeur, 1992: p. 41).

Thus, from narrative-dialogic perspective, a self-narrative is a partially unified semiotic field of tensions, “an internalized structure of the mind” (Hammack & Toolis, p. 467), in which multiple and even contradicting ideological perspectives coexist. Hence, the first theoretical assumption underpinning the PNI is that the narrative interview elicits a moment in which this field of tensions is made manifest (Hartman, 2013). Consequentially, since subjectivity is a process and not an essence, what one observes in a self-narrative is the ways in which a person is agentially and/or passively negotiating with the multiple ideological perspectives of an internalised semiotic field. By creatively moving through ideological perspectives, the person produces the effect of being the same throughout a personal lifetime (Larraín and Hays, 2019).

### **Self-narrative as creative accomplishment**

A self-narrative is a presentation, and not (only) a representation of this internalized field of tensions. Language does not simply mechanically reproduce the linguistic practices of a community, either intra- or intersubjectively. It also produces and expresses new practices in an aesthetic manner (see Linell, 1998; Rancière, 2009). This aesthetic can be understood as the everyday creative art of composing multiple ideological perspectives, or, in line with Rancière (2009: p. 25), the quotidian art of reorganizing the normal coordinates that regulate and enable social/personal life.

The concept of an *ideological perspective* implies an emotional (evaluative) stance (Vološhinov, 1929/1973) taken by a language-practicing community towards a social

phenomenon. These emotional stances are informed by the sociohistorical centripetal and centrifugal forces of language. In the context of sexually diverse identities, homophobia is a useful example. Different communities within a situated semiotic field develop different emotional stances towards sexuality. Heteronormative power structures (Butler, 1990), operating as centripetal force, mean there are likely to be a great number of negative emotional stances toward sexualities that do not conform the heterosexual norm. For instance, aligned with this powerful sociohistorical centripetal force (Foucault, 1978), some conservative religious communities may have a negative emotional stance toward homosexuality, whereas a progressive queer community, in a centrifugal countercultural move, may (need to) develop a positive stance. These emotional stances are defended and brought forward through the creation of narratives (i.e., linguistic compositions) about same-sex practices, identities, and experiences. By producing and using these narratives, the emotional stances mobilised by narratives of (homo)sexuality start populating the situated semiotic field in which the narratives are produced. Communities use a variety of semiotic means (flags, images, clothes, haircuts, dances, etc.) to express their ideological perspective towards the phenomenon, not only verbal expression.

Through embodied dialogues with other subjects and objects, a person, whatever her sexual identity, is constantly confronted with these different ideological perspectives towards (homo)sexuality. By repetitively sensing and utilising these narratives, the emotional stances become internalised (Tappan, 2005). Hence, to internalise ideological perspectives means to be bodily/psychologically affected by the world. In this process, the body-mind is not affected singularly, but in many ways simultaneously, considering the multiple communities developing different ideological perspectives towards social phenomena (Bertau and Karsten, 2018).



Thus, a self-narrative is an individual's creative and unique process of (re)organizing, transforming, and, also, reproducing (representing) the multiple emotional stances of a situated semiotic field, through verbal and non-verbal language use. Therefore, the second theoretical assumption of the PNI is that a self-narrative is a provisional, aesthetic and creative accomplishment, which presents a unique negotiation with, and (partial and tentative) unification of, the multiple ideological perspectives encountered throughout a lifetime into an experience of being a relatively constant and particular subject. The narrative interview is a moment of narrative creation in which this process is presented. The researcher can therefore observe the multi-semiotic and dynamic self-aesthetic that makes up the subject through her self-narrative (see also Cresswell and Baerveldt, 2011; Larraín and Haye, 2019, for other aesthetic approaches to dialogic subjectivity).

### **Self-narrative as intersubjective co-creation**

From the dialogic-narrative perspective, every single utterance, as well as a whole meaningful composition of utterances (e.g., the narrative), occurs within an intersubjective frame situated in a specific time and space. This is what Bakhtin (1986) calls the responsiveness of language (pp. 68-69). Responsiveness refers to the fact that a self-narrative is not just created by the subject for the subject, but it considers the gaze and understanding of real and/or imagined others and their evaluative positions (ideological perspectives).

The idea of responsiveness resembles Pirog's (1987) and Billig's (1997) dialogic proposal in which it is argued that language, due to its intersubjective nature, is both expressive *and* repressive. Offering a sociogenetic reading of the concept of repression as a higher mental function (Vygotsky 1931/1997a), Billig (1997) suggests that repression is practiced and internalized by

engaging in dialogues with other subjects and cultural artifacts. Simply put, Billig (1997) does not see repression as a universal and individual intrapsychic mechanism (cf. Freud 1915/1995), but rather as contextually-contingent patterns of intersubjective communication, in which certain things are permitted to be part of public dialogues, whilst others must remain hidden. From a sociogenetic perspective (Vygotsky, 1997), these patterns work both at an intra- and intersubjective level: repression is first learned in relationships with others and later reproduced internally within the inner dialogues of the self. Thus, it cannot be assumed that narratives are solely expressive in the sense that they tell us everything about a subject's life story. There may be things that cannot be expressed, at least not straightforwardly.

The repressive aspect of intra- and intersubjective communication has enormous consequences for a narrative interview: firstly, because on an intrasubjective level a self-narrative will "refract" (Vološhinov, 1929/1973: p. 10) repressive patterns of communication internalised throughout life that might make self-understanding a difficult task; and secondly, on an intersubjective level, the event of the narrative interview might reproduce repressive patterns of intersubjective communication. In a cultural setting such as an interview, these patterns are inevitably brought into the research context by both interviewer and interviewee and will shape the creation of a self-narrative. Therefore, the third theoretical assumption of the PNI is that the interview will contain both expressive and repressive patterns of communication and will be an intersubjective co-creation. The researcher will need to create strategies to overcome, integrate and/or interpret the impact of repressive dynamics in order to support the expressive dynamics of the interview, but a self-narrative will always be co-created, with all the complexities that this implicates.

### **Performative Narrative Interview (PNI)**

The PNI is a creative interview method that was developed and used within the first authors' research project on the relationship between the narrative sexual identity of sexually diverse 'men' and their psychological distress. The 'men' in this sample were people who were assigned male at birth, but who are critically questioning "hegemonic masculinity" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). They define themselves as sexually diverse because they sexually and affectively desire other 'men'. Despite their critiques of hegemonic masculinity, they still identify as having a 'somehow' masculine gender identity due to their psycho-socialization as masculine persons. The first author (interviewer/facilitator) identifies this way too. Eight self-identified sexually diverse 'men' participated. They were between 21 and 27 years old and from different socioeconomic backgrounds within Santiago de Chile. To illustrate the different aspects of the data production strategy, the following description will provide separate examples to demonstrate the performative, creative, and intersubjective aspects of the PNI in practice. Nevertheless, in reality, these three aspects of the process are interdependent and, thus, inform the methodological strategy as a whole. Ethical approval was granted for the project by the Ethics Committee of Universidad Alberto Hurtado.

As argued, a dialogical theory of language leads us to three theoretical assumptions: 1) a self-narrative is presentation of an internalised and partially-unified semiotic field of tensions, 2) a self-narrative is a provisional creative accomplishment and 3) a self-narrative is an intersubjective and situated co-creation. These theoretical assumptions pose specific methodological challenges.

Self-narratives are aesthetically composed during the intersubjective encounter of the narrative interview, created from the participants' more or less dis/organized autobiographical semiotic materials (e.g., words, short stories, long stories, images, body sensations, characters, etc.

– see Warr, Taylor, and Jacobs (2020) for a discussion of multi-modal semiotic materials).

Drawing upon Rancière (2009), we argue that self-narratives are aesthetically composed in the PNI because participants, as in contemporary artistic processes, are invited to create a relatively unified object (i.e., their self-narratives) by using and bringing together their own autobiographical materials. This is a creative process in which conscious and unconscious, personal, and public aspects are welcomed (see Rancière, 2009, p.5, for a discussion).

For this intersubjective, creative presentation to emerge and to be useful for research, the interviewing frame must create a space in which the creativity of the research participants is stimulated. The researcher will need to safely hold this space, and to allow a range of ideological perspectives to (relatively freely) emerge. This can be emotionally demanding for both researchers and research participants. Finally, given that narratives are composed of multimodal semiotic materials (such as body language, the enunciation of “irrational” thoughts, or, as often happened in this study, images or texts from social media), the researcher needs to be sensitive to, recognize, and integrate all communication attempts that are meaningful to the participants.

To respond to these methodological challenges, the PNI addresses and intentionally employs three aspects of the narrative interview: 1) the performative; 2) the creative; and 3) the intersubjective.

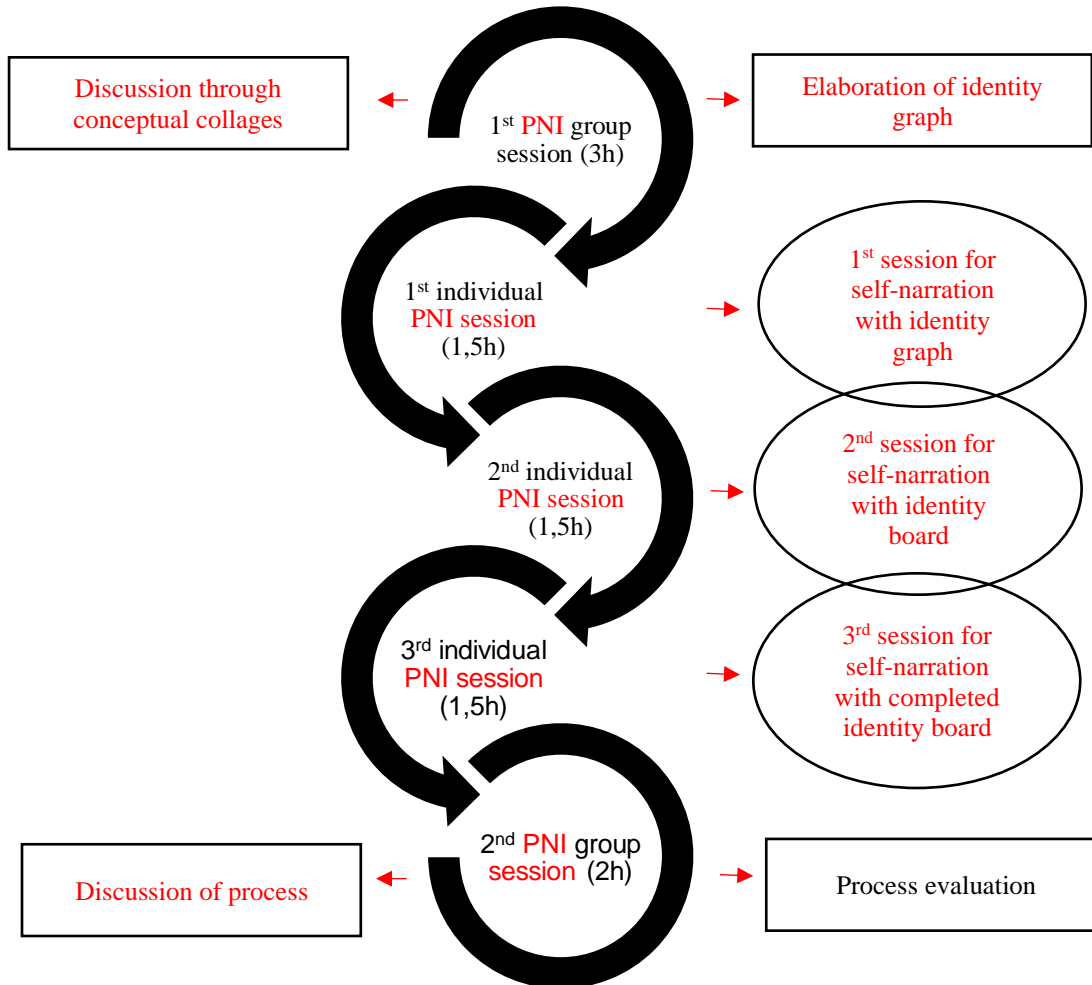
### **Performative aspect**

For Denzin (2001), an interview is a catalyst to do/create something between a researcher and a research participant: it is performative. Autobiographical-performative narratives composed within a narrative interview are complex in that they not only express themselves through relevant information (contents), but also via affectivity and bodily sensation (forms). The PNI seeks to intentionally generate an interviewing frame in which contents, emotions, and sensations that may

otherwise be repressed are permitted and even encouraged. Furthermore, the PNI is constructed as a series of steps, so that when repressive patterns of communication emerge, these can be creatively worked with, and even used as semiotic materials within the self-narrative. For instance, once in a session of our research project, a participant expressed how boring and useless their own narrative of sexual identity might be for the researcher, and that the narratives of the other participants are, for sure, much more useful and interesting. Instead of avoiding this rather painful semiotic material, the researcher shared with the participant that, at least for them (researcher), the participant's narrative was anything but boring. This very act of sharing is what we consider the production of new semiotic material. The researcher also shared with them (participant) how interesting it is that they experience the same narrative from two different affective perspectives. We believe that this idea of speaking from our own affective perspective was what allowed the participant to express that this feeling of being useless and less worthy than others was, indeed, a very common emotional self-state in their life relating to their story as a bullied queer boy in childhood and adolescence. This short "open dialogue" (Seikkula and Arnkil, 2019: p. 24) created the space in which the participant could share shame-related life events regarding their sexuality with a certain level of relaxation and safe distance. These life events were not part of the narrative of sexual identity before this session; they were too shameful and/or "uninteresting" to be expressed aloud. Furthermore, according to the participant, these life events had emerged neither in their therapy nor in conversations with close sexually diverse friends. We believe that it was thanks to the interviewing frame that the PNI creates –including the researcher's self-disclosure of his own gender and sexual self-identification – that these materials could be safely voiced/performed as units of meaning within their larger narrative of sexual identity (Adam, 2006). These new units added complexity to the participant's narrative in the sense that new perspectives towards their

own sexual identity could be carefully visited, felt, and voiced. Thus, whilst the term ‘performativity’ implies its social scientific connotations of *doing* a narrative (Butler, 1990), primarily, we are using performative to mean the intentional (co)creation and staging of a self-narrative.

To elicit such processes of self-narration, the PNI is structured as a series of sessions, made up of different creative/artistic processes in which the participant, in collaboration with the researcher and self-made visual materials (e.g., Figure 2), slowly composes their self-narrative. As can be seen in Figure 1, sessions took place within a month of each other, to allow time in which different internalised ideological perspectives could emerge. In our experience, sometimes multiple sessions were required in order to overcome issues such as mistrust or the disorganization of the participants’ and the researcher’s internalised ideological perspectives. The multiple sessions allowed the participants’ and researcher’s repressive patterns to diminish and for the interview to be established as a safe space to express oneself. The whole process was video recorded, and the videos (40h) and visual materials formed the data.

**Figure 1***Complete structure of the PNI*

The performative aspect of the PNI invites the researcher to become creative about the strategy they are using to generate narrative data. Depending on the project, the PNI could be adjusted: one PNI session might be enough for some themes, but more sessions are likely to support the performative aspect of the process, which invites the researcher to think creatively too, both in terms of the whole structure of the research, and in terms of what is considered narrative material (see Boydell et al., 2016, for a discussion on tensions when using non-traditional research methods).

### **Creative aspect**

As a cultural artefact, a narrative interview is not naturalistic. It is a highly artificial event – and a specialized “discursive genre”<sup>1</sup> (Bakhtin, 1952-1953/1986) – that the researcher creates to study subjectivity according to her research aims. Thus, although the traditional narrative interview tends to obscure its artificiality (Whitaker and Atkinson, 2019), accepting this fact opens the process up to creative transformations. Furthermore, due to the nature of social scientific inquiry, participants tend to come to the artificial space of the research with internalised ideological perspectives that may be damaging or distressing and are likely to make them suspicious of intimate spaces, such as a narrative interview (Helms, Nicolas, & Green, 2010). When a person has been chronically exposed to harmful ideological perspectives (e.g., homophobia), their capacity to creatively play with their life-narrative is, likely, to be diminished (Author & Author, 2020). In this regard, Winnicott’s (1971) definition of creativity is helpful: creativity is a body-mind state in which many paradoxical versions of subjectivity and social reality (ideological perspectives) can be simultaneously held (see Winnicott, 1971, pp. 87-114). Thus, being chronically exposed to harmful ideological perspectives may limit creativity, however, for Winnicott (1971), creativity is not an inherent capacity of some persons, but a state that can be supported through specific procedures. In the present study, this was done through three individual PNI sessions containing various creative tasks, as well as two collective/group sessions with all research participants (see Figure 1). The collective sessions were included to support the participants to understand that this research was not about them as individuals, although their unique experiences were honoured, but about their self-narratives as embedded in a specific sociocultural context shared with others. In the

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<sup>1</sup> For Bakhtin (1986) a specialized speech genre or secondary speech genre is a relatively stable type of utterance that emerges from more simple intersubjective interchanges mediated by language: primary speech genres. Secondary speech genres are characteristic of linguistic communities of specialists, such as the scientific community.



first collective session, the researcher shared some concepts related to psychological distress, homophobia, and homosexuality, and invited the group to collectively create conceptual collages (see Figure 2). This session also created a sense a communal project and broke the ice between the researcher and the participants.

## Figure 2

### *Collective conceptual collage*



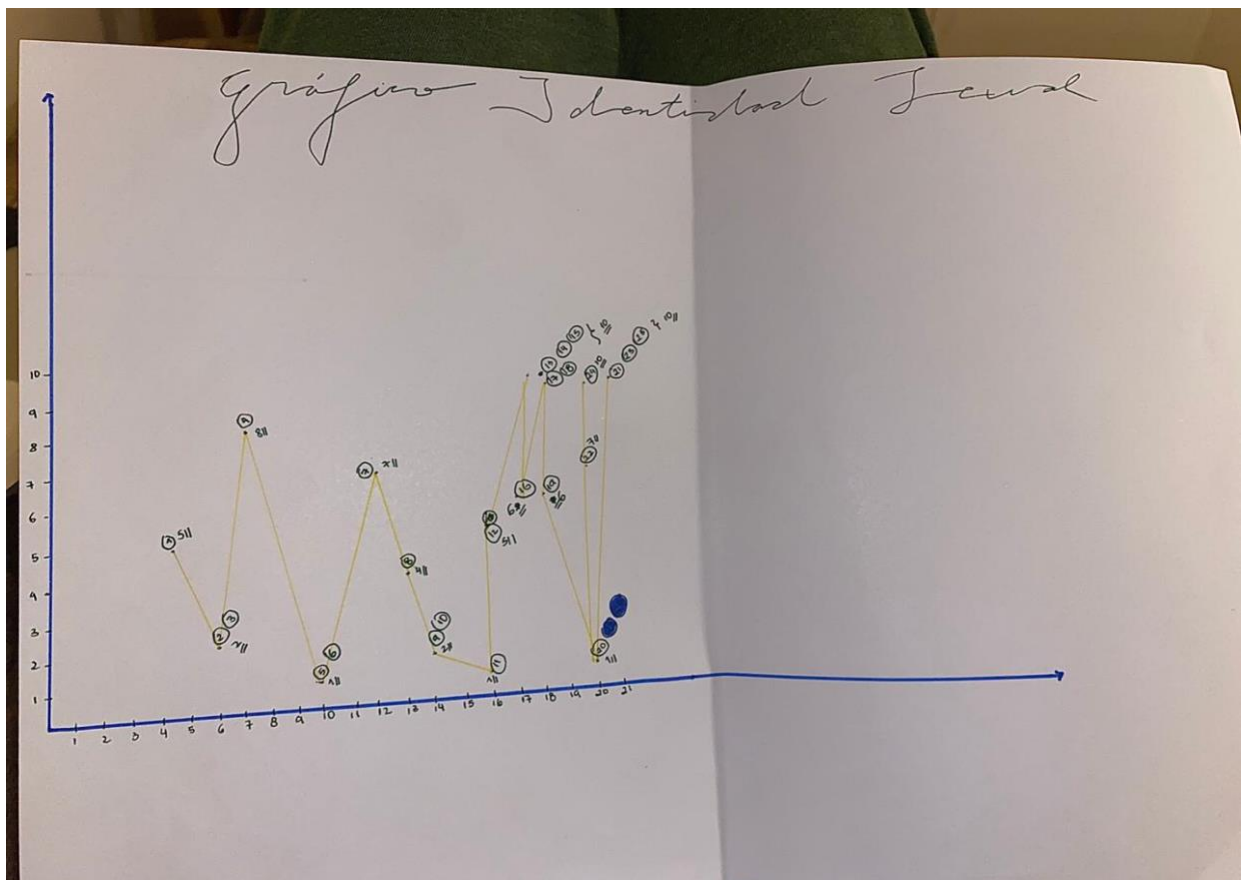
*Note.* 'Homosexuality' is in the centre and around that are words such as resistance, fight, displacement, freedom, and sadness. Due to Covid-19 restrictions, the collage was made on the computer since the first session was held online, using a virtual whiteboard tool.

After deindividualizing their experiences as sexually diverse 'men', in the second half of the collective session participants were invited to complete a coming-back-to-the-self activity: a personal *sexual identity graph* (see Figure 3). This graph is a visual, material account of their life experiences around their sexual identities (see Clausen, 1998). In the graph they were invited to

plot different life events regarding their experiences as sexually diverse men across different ages (X axis) and to evaluate these events from zero (I felt horrible) to ten (I felt great) and plot this on the Y axis. This graph provided visual material coloured by the affective/evaluative aspect of the participants' experience. During the first session it served as an anchor point from which the self-narratives started and were developed.

### Figure 3

*A participant's sexual identity graph*

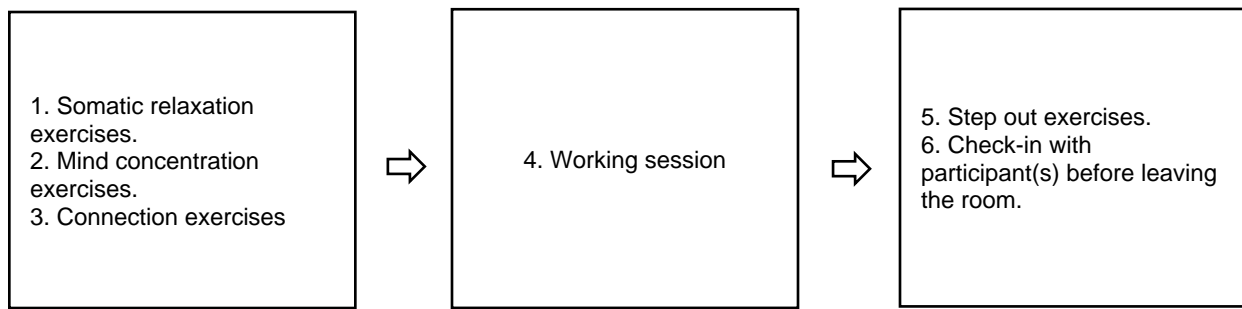


To enhance participants' creativity in the individual sessions, the PNI makes use of artistic practices of improvisation (Bogart and Landau, 2006; Johnstone, 1992) to elicit intersubjective play between participant and researcher. Intersubjective play requires the creation of a very

specific frame in which the facilitator of the practice intentionally tries to “suspend the normal coordinates of sensory experience” (Rancière, 2009: p. 25). This requires the researcher to include activities such as warming up, relaxing, feeling the body, and connecting with the improvisation partner. These steps are intended to produce a particular body-mind state of relaxation and trust, and so the PNI sessions in this project were designed with this in mind (see Figure 4).

#### Figure 4

##### *One session of the PNI*

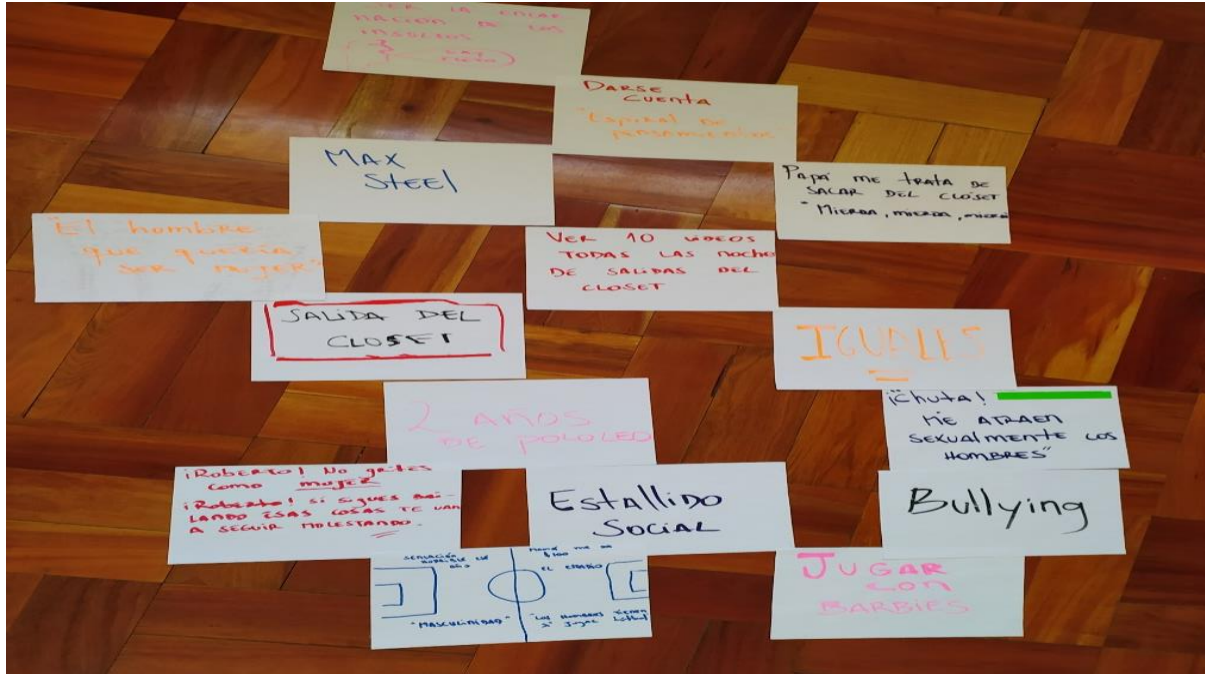


Each (collective and individual) PNI session starts with exercises that seek to produce body-mind effects on three levels: somatic proprioception (e.g., a body scan), awareness of the current mental state (e.g., recognition of thoughts and emotions), and intersubjective connection with the researcher (e.g., mirroring/dancing the other’s movements). After warming up at these three levels, the working session, in this case the autobiographical narration of sexual identity, begins. Since practices of improvisation that focus on autobiographical narration can cause deep and even painful memories emerge or cause the person to become more aware of threatening aspects of subjectivity or of repressive patterns of communication, each session finishes with a step-out exercise (e.g., shaking the body for a few minutes) and a check-out (e.g., exploring how the participant feels before they leave the room). Structuring each session like this provides the

boundaries that generate a safe space of creativity and intersubjective play separate from the life outside the research. This, in turn, has proven to elicit profound moments of self-narration.

The first individual PNI session mainly focused on producing the chronological narration of the events shown in the graph (see Figure 3). After the first encounter, the researcher watched the video of the session, writing down on separate pieces of paper the participant's utterances that seem most important in the developmental process of his sexual identity. The selection of the utterances was discussed and reflected upon with one senior researcher on sexually diverse people and an emotional/methodological supervisor. The role of the supervisor will be addressed later.

In the second individual PNI session, the self-narration revolved around the researcher's paper sheets, which were placed on the floor as a *sexual identity board* (see Figure 5), so that the participants could see pieces of their own narrative. This supported the participant to view their subjective experience of being a sexually diverse 'man' from a safe distance, as well as to become aware of what they "freely" narrate when they are asked to talk about their sexual identities. Reflecting on and talking about the self-narrative in this way is akin to the creative strategy known as the *distancing effect* (Blanariu, 2012) within art practices.

**Figure 5***Sexual Identity Board*

*Note.* Translation: coming out, “stop yelling like a girl!”, “if you keep dancing like a girl, they will keep bullying you”, bullying, “my dad tried to disclosure my sexual orientation”, “fuck! I feel sexually attracted to men”, “Every night I watched 10 coming-out videos”.

In the third session, the researcher invited participants to add meaningful characters (e.g., people or institutions) to their identity board by writing them down on new pieces of paper. While doing this, they could narratively deepen these characters. Finally, in the last collective session, the participants came together again, talked about the whole process of remembering, narrating, and (de)composing their sexual identities. They also evaluated the research process by recording individual voice messages that they later sent to the researcher.

Throughout the whole research process, participants were actively encouraged to use different semiotic means to create their sexual identity narratives. To do this, the researcher

needed to carefully listen to participants' narratives and recognize if they were experiencing difficulties in expressing themselves or felt that words did not do justice to their experiences. If so, the researcher asked, for instance, if there were songs, texts, poems, noises, or images that the participant would use to express better that part of the narrative. For example, one participant danced to a very liberating song when narrating the coming out moment, another read a poem that was meaningful during the self-acceptance process. The aim of this procedure was to keep the communication between researcher and participant moving forward. In practice, the interviewing frame (e.g., beginning with a body and/or voice warm-up) meant that the participants tended to intuitively use a variety of semiotic means, in addition to words, to express themselves<sup>2</sup> (e.g., big gestures, photos from their social media, exaggeration of body reactions, etc.). It is, however, important to recognise that a long silence may sometimes be an important part of a self-narrative: many silences are expressive and as such the researcher will need to tolerate them and sensitively choose when to encourage expression and when to support a moment of pause.

As it has been argued within dialogism, the main characteristic of art as a discursive genre is that it makes multiple aspects of social/personal life emerge with fewer limitations than in daily life (see Vološhinov, 1926/1994, for a discussion on art as genre). The inclusion of this wide range of semiotic materials brings about challenges in the analytic process in subsequent research phases, however, when integrated into the PNI sessions, their inclusion seemed to support a more playful

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<sup>2</sup> We are not separating the body from verbal language. Rather, based on Vološhinov (1929/1973), we consider that adding more semiotic means of expression such as bigger gestures, tones of voice, or personal photos represents a daily activity that we normally do, for instance, when we are relaxed talking with a friend or discussing a topic in an informal dinner. By including more semiotic means, the verbal utterance is enriched by different layers of signification.

and committed attitude of the participants towards their own narration process and, in turn, they achieved a deeper level of complexity and nuance in their self-narratives.

### **Intersubjective aspect**

Dialogue always implies the reproduction of expressive *and* repressive patterns of communication, including when that dialogue is between participant and researcher during a narrative interview. These repressive patterns align with what feminist researchers have called omnipresent power imbalances between researchers and participants (Fraser and Taylor, 2020) and therefore the reflexive stance of the research was crucial. Both research participants and researchers carry their own rehearsed and internalised repressive and expressive patterns of communication, that may lead the participants to feel reluctant about sharing certain intimate or painful life experiences. It is therefore the researcher's task to be aware of these patterns of communications, not to avoid them (which would be impossible), but to acknowledge and utilise them when they emerge.

In this study, participants disclosed a range of experiences, including distressing and significant life events. Whilst, to pursue the research question, the interviewer was keen to deepen these parts of the conversation, this had to be balanced against the ethical stance of the research, and where observation of the participants' verbal and non-verbal signs indicated they may be becoming distressed, topics were not pursued. In these cases, at future sessions, the participants themselves often chose to share more about their experiences, and whilst sometimes challenging, participants reported that they very much appreciated the process. Participants were given the opportunity to receive free counselling sessions should they feel the need, but none took this up.

In order to be present for the participant and fully engaged in the intersubjective process, ethical considerations extended to the wellbeing of the researcher, who was supported throughout

by a clinically and academically experienced supervisor. The PNI requires the emotional involvement of both researcher and participant, therefore it was imperative that the researcher could talk about different methodological (e.g., research aims), ethical (e.g., power imbalances), and emotional (e.g., moments of distress) issues that emerged throughout the project. This is a matter of emotional self-care and of understanding the different dimensions of the research process through reflection (Author et al., 2016). Since the researcher self-identified as part of the research population, their own emotional wellbeing was a particularly important aspect to observe.

One participant explicitly thanked the researcher for waiting for them to be ready to share their experiences. They reported that ‘the waiting attitude’ made them feel that it was the right time to share that moment with the researcher: they felt their story was not just data, but that the researcher respected them as a human being. What is important about this moment, and many others throughout the project, is that ‘waiting’ was not just the researcher’s idea. Waiting was co-constructed between the participant and the researcher as part of the situated intersubjective encounter, and between the researcher and their supervisor who discussed many emotionally and methodologically challenging moments. ‘Waiting’ was the result of an interplay between the expressive and repressive patterns of communication within the interview process, and within the emotional/methodological supervision, and was explicitly co-created.

Whilst we acknowledge that there are many factors that could make the communication between researcher and participant challenging, we did not want to become paralyzed by this issue. Instead, the PNI allows for these challenges to be approached creatively, not by solving issues individually, but by naming them and bringing them into the dialogue. This was repeated at the level of researcher-supervisor where openly talking about problematic issues was permitted, as



well at the level of researcher-ethics committee, who were including through open discussion of concerns raised throughout the process.

### **Examples from the data**

The PNI has the capacity to produce more complex data than other narrative interviews. Monologised self-accounts, that is self-narratives told from only one perspective, enter the dialogical and creative space of the PNI, producing various versions of oneself and others. For instance, in the first session of our project, some participants narrated themselves mostly from the position of being the victim of homophobic violence. This happened both verbally (e.g., concrete events of victimhood) and non-verbally (e.g., body/voice states of grief). However, as the process progressed, in the next sessions their narratives began to be complemented with other layers in which the self was (rightfully) portrayed as victim, but also as enjoying, desiring, resisting, longing, etc.:

Participant A: (looking at their sexual identity board on the floor and pointing to one paper sheet) the most painful parts of this process is my childhood (...) At that time, you don't have any tools. In my case, there was no supportive network either. (With a subtle smile) The only space where I could be relatively free was in this world of Japanese animé, they (the other youths) didn't really care. That's why I look (looking at their sexual identity board, smiling, and softening their voice) with tenderness to the 'Eurocentro' (a place in Santiago where queer youths gather) (session 2, 0:43:14-0:43:57).

This excerpt is illustrative of what usually happens in the PNI, especially from the second session onwards. In the first session, this participant freely narrated their story, a self-narrative mostly marked by homophobic violence. However, by taking a second look at their narrative (a concrete look since in the second session the narrative literally lies on the floor), the participant (counter)argued that they were not only a victim, but that there were safe spaces of care and love

too. Later, with the help of the dialogue opened by the PNI, this participant added to their narrative that they themselves found those safe spaces, defying many family and societal norms. Other participants started portraying their families as non-homophobic and non-violent, adding later that homophobia was, in fact, a rather common phenomenon within their own homes. Others could integrate into their narratives that their schools and universities were not only homophobic but that there were friends, teachers, and activist groups who helped them to resist violence too. We suggest that multi-layered (multi-voiced) data produced through the PNI gives a deeper account of subjectivity in which the creation of a one-sided self-narrative, whether positive or negative, agentive or non-agentive is challenged by the method itself. It is a method that follows what Jones (2016) calls a “dialogical epistemology”, in which surprise and unfamiliarity are welcomed.

Due to the performative quality of the PNI, data produced through this method is unexpected and surprising for researchers and participants. This does not mean that “everything goes”. As feminist and other researchers have argued (Author et al., 2016; Fraser & Taylor, 2020), constant reflection around difficult emotions, methodological questions, and ethical issues is an unwavering commitment of the PNI. Other relevant aspects regarding data analysis from a dialogic perspective such as utilizing videos and not transcripts to include body language and tones of voice into the analysis are discussed in a forthcoming article.

### **Discussion**

The theory of language underpinning narrative research defines how subjectivity is conceptualized and poses very specific challenges to its empirical study. The PNI is a method that takes a dialogic approach to the narrative interview. It is novel in that it explicitly brings out the performative, creative, and intersubjective dimensions of the data production process. The Bakhtinian dialogic theory that underpins the PNI enables these three aspects to become visible,

and thus, available for deliberate use in generating an interview frame that supports participants to become creative regarding their own life stories.

Narrative inquiry represents a diverse field of research (Whitaker and Atkinson, 2019) and the PNI offers one possible methodological strategy to approach the exigent challenges of producing data on subjectivity. As a dialogic approach, the PNI contributes to those theoretical and methodological researchers who attempt to defy individualism in the study of subjectivity, without dismissing the individual experiences of the subject (e.g., Fraser and Taylor, 2020; Wells et al., 2020). Dialogism has shown to be a promising theoretical and methodological basis for the empirical study of subjectivity, dissolving dualisms such as individual/social, body/language, identity/multiplicity, and passivity/agency (Frank, 2012; Hermans, 2008). Furthermore, the PNI contributes to specific debates within and outside dialogic inquiry in which subjectivity has been theorized as an aesthetic accomplishment (Larraín and Haye, 2019; Marcella-Hood, 2020). Finally, the PNI enters a heated debate around the role that interviews play within qualitative research (Silverman, 2017). It draws on the extensive development of visual and arts-based methodologies within the social sciences (e.g., Coemans and Hannes, 2017), uniquely offering an extended framework of creative sessions in which participants and researchers can ‘play’ together in the process of performatively creating participant self-narratives.

Use of the PNI may be limited by the requirement of the researcher to feel competent and confident in drawing on creative skills and/or artistic knowledge, in particular the skill to improvise and to reflexively and spontaneously work with whatever unfolds during and between the sessions. This is not a method that follows a set of interview questions (although there is a structure to work within and through). The authors of this article are trained artists, as well as trained social scientific researchers. However, many of the skills used in facilitating the PNI can also be found within

community and learning praxis, some psychotherapeutic praxis, creative qualitative inquiry of various sorts, and no doubt other fields too. From our experience, a social scientific creative process such as the PNI, demands the researcher has the patience and emotional capacity to deal with a high degree of uncertainty and emergence within the research (Boydell et al., 2016). Whilst the PNI invites research participants to play and create with their self-narratives alongside researchers, creativity, in Winnicottian (1971) terms, can be menacing or disorganizing, both for the researcher and the research participants. Consequently, employing the PNI does not pre-determine how research participants, or researchers, will act or feel. The research team must co-supervise and reflect upon the research process, so that modifications can be promptly made to support the participants, the researcher, and/or the research endeavour where needed. Finally, the PNI requires a large time investment from researchers and participants, which, in turn may imply that sample sizes of participants are limited.

### **Conclusion**

The PNI offers a valuable contribution to the empirical study of subjectivity within social scientific narrative inquiry. Within qualitative narrative inquiry, the theory of language and subjectivity tends to remain unaddressed. The PNI offers a performative, creative, and intersubjective narrative interview method, which can support researchers to explore participants' subjectivities in relation to a range of topics. The approach produces deep, nuanced, and polyphonic qualitative data and may offer an alternative method of narrative inquiry that does not solely rely on verbal material, and which is coherently grounded in narrative-dialogic theory.

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Videos files make up most of the research data. Due to the weight of the files and the necessity of protecting the research participants' identities, if any researcher would like to access our research data, we ask them to write us directly.