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Qualitative research in crisis: A narrative-practice methodology to delve into the discourse and action of the unheard in the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

This paper develops and applies a methodology of qualitative inquiry that equips researchers to capture how social actors produce and contest accepted forms of knowledge at the margins of mainstream globalizing discourses in times of crisis. Standing at the intersection between conceptual and empirical research, our methodology builds on the common epistemological premises of 'narrative', as stories constructed and enacted in social life, and 'practice', as tasks and projects composed by 'doings' and 'sayings'. Overcoming the dualism between 'action' and 'discourse' in traditional social theory, this methodology integrates narrative theory and practice theory into a joint framework for fieldwork and interviews. The use of the narrative-practice methodology in ethnographic case studies – such as interpreters' experience of the COVID-19 pandemic in Qatar – allows researchers to gain analytical granularity on participants' storied practice and practiced stories of the crisis, to harness 'peripheral' knowledge and refashion public discourse.

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Correction (April 2023): Due to an error in production, article has been updated to add reference 'Hermans et al., 2022' in text and 'Hermans et al., 2022', 'Shove et al., 2012' in reference list and to modify 'Boéri, 2023a' and 'Boéri, 2023b' in text and in reference list.

Keywords
COVID-19, crisis, ethnography, fieldwork, interpreting, interviews, narrative, practice, Qatar

Introduction

Over the past two decades, growing attention has been paid to the development of qualitative research tools for capturing the narratives and the practical configurations of everyday life (Halkier, 2010; Schubert and Röhl, 2017). 'Practice theory' (Nicolini, 2012; Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 2012) and 'narrative theory' (Polletta, 2006; Somers, 1992, 1997, 2008; Somers and Gibson, 1994) lie at the core of these discussions. While practice theory accounts for social life through 'practice', or what people do and how this is coordinated through socially learnt skills, materials, cultural and affective meanings, narrative theory considers 'narratives' as prisms for people to make sense of process, time and change in their lives (Nygren and Blom, 2001; Syrjälä et al., 2009) and the world within which they lead their lives (Somers and Gibson, 1994). A growing qualitative methodological corpus relying on observations, interviews and text analysis has emphasized narrative as the concept that binds together practices across time and space, and as a device configuring how individuals make sense of their actions in particular ways (Bueger and Gadinger, 2018). This approach to narrative and practice has become particularly influential in the study of international relations (Bueger, 2015), post-conflict and post-authoritarian justice (Buckley-Zistel, 2013) and diplomatic negotiations (Faizullaev and Cornut, 2017). As the latter note, 'narratives cannot be separated from the processes that enact them and put them in competition with other narratives' (2017, p. 598). This emerging scholarship has demonstrated its value and scholars their capability to explore ideological clashes, competing narratives of politically significant events and diverging geopolitical interests. However, it falls short of expanding on the conceptual, interpretative and methodological implications of the entanglement of practice and narrative.

This paper contends that a better integration of the two theories equips researchers to capture how actors negotiate and forge narratives that may overlap and differ from the rationalizing, globalizing discourse that may objectify them. It introduces a 'narrative-practice' framework to help qualitative research amplify the voice of those whose experiential knowledge remains unheard in the noise of larger narratives, not only in the analysis of interviews data but also in the very methodological design, which we frame as practical-narrative enactments.

These practical-narrative enactments emerged in the context of conducting interviews with members of a specific professional category (interpreters)[1] on their experience of the pandemic, in a particular location (Qatar). Because fieldwork and interviews give access to and co-construct practice and narrative, they provide a fertile ground to rethink public discourse at times of global crises. It is common knowledge that the pandemic globally disrupted people's professional and personal life in unprecedented ways. However, as it is often the case with large-scale crises, the evolving discourse homogenizes people's

experiences, leaving little space for nuance and variation across individuals and contexts (Boin, 2005).

Ethnographies of interpreters communities have shown that the profession's mainstream narratives often fail to do justice to interpreters' heterogeneous experiences resulting from the multiplicity of social contexts and labour markets where they operate (Boéri, 2023b). The profession has generally prioritized the recognition of a uniform category among key stakeholders, in supra-national, diplomatic and business contexts, and to a lesser extent in public services such as hospitals, schools and courts, as a result of increased migration and mobility (García-Beyaert, 2015). It also reinforces a homogenizing discourse of victimization of interpreters, lack of professional recognition and need for protection (Boéri, 2008, 2015b).

This is manifest in the COVID-19 pandemic and in professional organizations' narratives, like the FIT (Fédération Internationale de Traducteurs), representing 130 associations and training institutes and 85,000 language professionals in 55 countries. At the height of the pandemic in March–June 2020, FIT Europe conducted three surveys on its impact on language professionals in 'European' and 'other' countries (FIT, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c). The surveys highlight the challenges of a mainly freelance population that does not receive enough policy attention (lowering working conditions, reduced rates, instability). Nonetheless, the findings are not disaggregated, nor do they offer details beyond European countries, leaving aside the unspecified 'others'. As a result, they generalize knowledge from one reductive profile of the freelance European professional. The professional group is depicted as a monolithic workforce and the local market and sociocultural specificities are eschewed. Such homogenization of interpreters' problems and needs indicates rationalized and collective rather than experiential and personal narratives, and may be situated within a pattern of other global imaginaries in times of crisis (see, for instance, Tafakori, 2021; Zou, 2021, on narratives of COVID-19).

The development of our narrative-practice methodological framework in an ethnographic case study of interpreters' experience of the pandemic in Qatar allows us to gain granularity on participants' storied practice and practiced stories, to harness 'peripheral' knowledge and refashion public discourse. Beyond interpreting as a profession and as a field, this paper provides a qualitative methodology to account for how individuals negotiate discourses and actions in times of crisis.

Methodological and theoretical framework

Our methodology sets out to address researchers' concerns for decentring knowledge from the nodes of power in a given field or industry. This research agenda stems from a commitment to redress (to the extent that it is possible) western and liberal slants that limit researchers' understanding of people's experiences of crises in their personal and professional daily routines, across cultural, social and economic contexts. We situate empiricism in a postpositivist epistemology, whereby researchers are recognized as impacting the knowledge produced, through the methods and theories they resort to, and through their subjectivities and engagement in the social phenomenon under study. Within such an approach, we not only acknowledge our own imprint on 'empirical facts'

but also that of the social actors we involve in the research: how do interpreters experience and express the impact of COVID-19 on their lives, across family configurations, areas of expertise, sectors of the industry, etc.? How can we theoretically and practically harness these insights within the larger ecology of knowledge in the interpreting field of enquiry and practice to which we belong, and more largely in qualitative research? In this sense, the methodology we develop is at the cross-roads between empirical and conceptual research.

Method: Ethnographic case study

Case studies are a primary choice for empirical enquiries on contemporary events in real-life settings and for in-depth investigations into a specific context (Yin, 1989). They constitute an amenable method to explore the COVID-19 pandemic and delve into interpreters' practices and meta-discourses in both their collective and individual dimensions. They allow to address the ways in which their experience is affected by their position in the profession and the labour market in Qatar, and by the configuration of their personal lives.

Nevertheless, our method may not qualify as a case study stricto sensu. This is because our interest is not only invested in the specific case but also in the very methods of enquiry employed and their capacity to challenge the status quo in the representation of interpreters worldwide. That is, tools and sources are not just means to ends in an instrumental logic to guarantee validity, reliability and objectivity. Means extend to larger resources which are unique to researchers undertaking the case study: contacts, skills in eliciting information, knowledge, understanding, interpretations, etc. (Koskinen, 2008: 209). Acknowledging our imprint on the process and the results brings our method closer to ethnography, particularly bearing in mind that we resort to qualitative interviews, and consider them as a space for interaction between the researcher(s) and the informants to construct socially situated knowledge, rather than as a mere tool to elicit data.

We did not include observations in our ethnographic case study because interpreters' workplace was mostly relocated at home during the pandemic, and entering their home would have exacerbated the disruption brought about by COVID-19. As regards participant observation, it would have required the researcher in charge of fieldwork to be hired as an interpreter over a sustained period of time and within a stable team. Despite being professional interpreters ourselves, the settings (medical, police, immigration, cybersecurity, etc.) are generally too sensitive for 'outsiders' to step in and too diverse in terms of required referential and linguistic expertise for one or two researcher-interpreters alone to cover. Last but not least, since our study targeted professionals whose main activity is interpreting, we did not fully qualify as participants-observers. Indeed, our main occupation being teaching and research at the University, we were not socioeconomically affected in the same ways as research participants.

In this light, we consider that we undertake a case study from an ethnographic perspective (Saldanha and O'Brien, 2013: 208–209), since it revolves around both a specific case (Qatar-based interpreters' experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic) and the very ethnographic process of co-construction and streamlining of the case. Rather than

mere instruments, developing an appropriate theoretical framework, doing snowball sampling, conducting semi-structured interviews, analyzing and interpreting the data, are research practices through which we sharpen the artefacts and configure the space of knowledge construction within the larger interpreting field of enquiry and practice. Acknowledging such an imprint of researchers on the narratives and practices of resistance and dominance demands a critical approach. We use the term 'critical' to refer to a methodology which contests mainstream globalizing discourses in times of crisis and which highlights the need to harness 'peripheral' knowledge and refashion public discourse. More specifically, within a post-structuralist approach to resistance, counter-hegemony is never exempt of reproducing dominance and research is no power-free, truth-holding space but a mediating incubator of critical and reflexive social transformation.

To live up to this challenge, we develop a new theoretical-analytical framework which integrates practice theory and narrative theory. The methodological integration of narrative-practice emerged through a collaboration between the two authors, who have converged through their own respective theoretical framework in their work about interpreting and translation studies. In the early phases of this project, we had decided to look at the frontline experiences of interpreters during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the first stage of data analysis, we started to interpret the data through our own ontological sensitivity. Throughout the data analysis process, we realized that the narrative and practice approaches generated a fluid epistemological dialogue. On the principles of collaboration, we developed the narrative-practice approach iteratively by foregrounding dialogue and integration between the two theories, to produce a qualitative inquiry technique that would facilitate accessing knowledge, power and action.

Socio-narrative and practice theories explained

In everyday life, practice and narratives are used in a broad sense: practices are what we do, whereas narratives are the stories we tell and are told. These terms have taken on different meanings across time and disciplines.

In the wake of the 'narrative turn' in the humanities and social sciences, narrative has been reframed as an ontological and epistemological condition of social life (Somers and Gibson, 1994). Now considered as an archetype of communicative action (Somers and Gibson, 1994), narratives have inspired renewed theoretical and analytical frameworks to explore the discursive enactment of social configurations of action, power and knowledge. They are no longer restricted to verbal language but extend to all apparatuses of power across media, sensory modalities and contexts. From a Foucaldian perspective, they function as a 'strategy of ordering the flow of discourse' (Wodak, 2005: 113). Narratives thus constitute a key locus of analysis to explore discourse – understood as a set of relationships between discursive events, produced and circulated through social conventions and through power struggles to disrupt such conventions (see Foucault, 1980) – and to interrogate how power, accepted and contested forms of knowledge constitute social subjects.

A narrative approach provides tools to uncover the mechanisms of discourse, not only at the macro-institutional level but also at the (inter)personal level. It builds on post-modernist incredulity towards meta-narratives (Lyotard, 1979: 7). These preexisting sociocultural forms of interpretation legitimize the status quo, but they are also borrowed by and diverted from small narratives (*petits récits*). Narrative theory is thus well equipped to amplify the voice of individuals who are not generally heard. A narrative approach enables us to examine the power mechanisms of accepted forms of knowledge that underpin their professional life and the ways in which they assimilate and resist to these power mechanisms in context.

A narrative framework of analysis was devised by Baker (2006) in the field of translation. Referred to as socio-narrative theory because it builds on social theory (Baker, 2017: 179) and on its combination with narratological approaches (Harding, 2012: 295), it provides a textual analysis model to explore translators' positioning and their imprint on the constructed versions of events they translate (see Hermans et al., 2022). It has been used across translational contexts but also to account for practitioners' engagement with the polity in and beyond translation. In interpreting, Boéri (Boéri, 2008, 2010, 2014, 2015a, 2023a, 2023b; Boéri and De Manuel Jerez, 2011) has drawn on this framework to account for the constellation of narratives shaping the field of enquiry and practice, its internal power dynamics and its entrenchment in the mainstream.

Potentially applicable to all professions and fields of enquiry, this framework builds on the two tenets of socio-narrative theory, namely, the typology of narratives (Somers and Gibson, 1994), refined in Boéri (2008), Harding (2012) and Baker (2017), and the features of narrativity (Bruner, 1991; Somers, 1997).

While every narrative is unique, they can be grouped under different types according to their scale, theme, and constituency. A first discriminating criteria is whether narratives are shared or personal (Harding 2012: 292). *Personal narratives* refer to stories one is told by others, tells oneself or others – for example, (auto)biographies and eyewitness accounts – about one's place and history in this world (Baker 2017: 184), whereas shared or collective narratives encompass the three other types initially established by Somers and Gibson (1994), that is, public, conceptual and meta-narratives, from the most particular and concrete to the most general and abstract (Harding 2012: 291). *Public narratives* refer to 'stories that are elaborated by and circulated among formations larger than the individual' (Baker 2006: 33) and can be enhanced or undermined by *personal narratives* (29). *Conceptual narratives* are defined as the 'concepts and explanations that we construct as social researchers' (Somers 1997: 85) and which bear on the narratives researchers construct about society and knowledge. Meta-narratives are public narratives that reach a scale and breadth that make them inescapable and 'in which we are embedded as contemporary actors in history' (Somers and Gibson 1994: 61).

Two additional types enrich this typology and our study of interpreters' experience of the pandemic: *local narratives* because they relate 'particular events (and the particular actions of particular actors) in particular places at particular times' (Harding, 2012: 293), like the COVID-19 disruption of people's lives, and *professional narratives* because they refer to 'stories and explanations that professionals elaborate for themselves and others about the nature and ethos of their activity' (Boéri, 2008: 26).

All these narratives have joint mechanisms of construction and appropriation. The four identified by Somers (1992, 1997), and Somers and Gibson (1994), are the most significant because together with the typology, they are the tenets of the reframing of narrativity as ontological and epistemological. Those are temporality (the sequencing of events in time and space), selective appropriation (selecting or weighting particular events at the expense of others), relationality (the meaning-making connections between the elements of the narrative and between these elements and aspects of the overall context) and causal emplotment (gearing the plot towards a particular moral outcome). It is through these patterns of narrativity that we make sense of who we are (narrative identity), of the spaces we participate in or reject (relational settings) and how and why we behave as we do in this world (narrative action). This entanglement of identity, action and setting underpins not only socio-narrative theory but also practice theory.

Informally, the term 'practice' conflates with habitual ways of acting. Given its conceptual affordability, it became a distinct genre of social theory, particularly through social philosophy (Schatzki, 2002), organization studies (Gherardi, 2017; Nicolini, 2012) and cultural sociology (Reckwitz, 2002; Warde, 2014). These disciplines root practice theory in pragmatism, Marxism, and in the approach of Anthony Giddens (1984), Pierre Bourdieu (1977) and Michel Foucault (1980). Practice theorists position practices as the epistemological unit of analysis of social life. This means that social life emerges from 'practices', phenomena composed of shared norms, competencies, ends and emotions, materialities and embodiments, reproduced in specific contexts and temporalities (Reckwitz, 2002). Therefore, practice theory is a 'meso' level of analysis. It rejects dualistic descriptions of social life such as agency/structure, discourse/action or body/mind (Nicolini, 2012). This view departs from the social theory tradition which, according to cultural theorist Andreas Reckwitz, 'strictly oppose[s] practice and discourse (…) as though they were two separate orders of things' (2017: 122). Instead, so-called second wave practice theory, particularly with social philosopher Theodore Schatzki (2017), posits that discourse, that is, language, sayings and texts, is embedded in mundane life. In this light, discourse is neither to be granted special priority, nor is it to be studied in isolation from other practice elements. Therefore, because discourse carries meaning and intentionality on the scene of action, allowing actors to influence each other and the situation, it must be accompanied by data paying attention to all situated aspects of practice to better explain how practice enacts discourse (Bueger and Gadinger, 2018).

Schatzki (2002) provides an influential theorization of practice as sets of 'doings' and 'sayings' that compose tasks and projects, meaning that practice includes actions *and* discursive representations. Similarly, adopting a view of the social as a network of action-discourse complexes (2006, 2008), Reckwitz frames 'discursive formations' (*narratives*, we claim) as 'practices of representation in which objects in the world are represented, imagined and evaluated' (2017: 122; our addition). Distinctively, action and discourse converge through what Schatzki refers to as 'areas of significance' whereby sayings about practice constitute 'identities, relationships, politics (…) connections (between things/topics) and sign systems and knowledge' (Schatzki, 2017: 129). Individuals articulate their understandings of the world through end-oriented discourses which exhibit various levels of emotionality and alignment with social norms, making knowledge and meanings

explicit. As discourses travel and take shape across practices, they become inter-discourses, 'disseminating ideas, topics, motivations, self-understandings (...) and leading to individual or joint actions' (Schatzki, 2017: 135). As a form of socially situated action, (inter-)discourses can become pervasive narratives, that is, conceptual, public and meta-narrative as in socio-narrative theory.

In contrast with other strands of practice theory (cf. Shove et al., 2012), Schatzki (2002, 2017) and Reckwitz (2002, 2017) explicitly theorize sayings and doings as a reference for the organization of practice. More specifically, they formulate sayings and doings as an analytical category that composes and explains practices. Practice theory stresses the epistemic potential of doings and sayings, and includes elements as narratives, discourses and texts of ontological importance. This theorization is particularly useful to our inquiry of narrative and practice as formative of social reality, which then become 'suffused by articulated meaning' (Schatzki, 2017: 140). This approach echoes our epistemological understanding that narratives and practices generate knowledge, contributing to the meaningful existence of things in the world and to what makes sense to people. This perspective preserves, rather than excludes, an analysis of social life within the more comprehensive framework of narrative-practice formations. It suggests that to trace the ramifications and contestations of accepted forms of knowledge, we cannot view them in isolation but must analyze the connection between discursive and behavioural elements.

A practice-theory framework provides a major alternative to the action-discourse binary in the sense that it frames doings as storied and sayings as enacted. This inter-relation allows us to apprehend knowledge and power as some of the features of the world that are (re-)made in action and discourse (Nicolini, 2012). From a practice perspective, knowledge is mastery embedded in social, cognitive and material activities. It is based on collective understandings of competence, establishing what is 'right' and 'wrong' in a given practice. People reproduce knowledge by negotiating meanings, words, actions and situations, framing the sociocultural construction of the world through individual and collective activities.

Additionally, practice theory conceives of power as a situated accomplishment flowing from the configuration of practices, suffusing social reality through relations, interactions and actions (Giustini, 2021). This is particularly important for our study, as practice theory unravels power as relational and performative strategies that highlight how dominant narratives, on the one hand, and ways of doing, on the other hand, exist and develop collectively, especially when promoted by large phenomena like institutions, organizations and ideologies (Foucault, 1982; Watson, 2017). Theoretically and methodologically, a practice-based approach thus allows to pay attention to what practitioners actually say and do (Pouliot and Cornut, 2015: 306) and also to speak to larger configurations by capturing how systems, institutions, meanings, inequalities and so forth hang together (Hui et al., 2016).

Integrating practice and narrative theories in ethnographic case studies

Socio-narrative and practice theories share a common epistemological premise: narrative and practice are reciprocally constructed; through them we make sense of the world, integrate and contest particular forms of knowledge and power. Not only are the two theories epistemologically compatible, their integration is beneficial because their premises equip us to go granular and to connect localized knowledge to larger societal structures and discourses, while problematizing the process of doing so through their integrative strength. Far from a mere theoretical framework to be applied in the analysis of empirical data, the narrative-practice methodology we put forward informs every stage of the fieldwork. While traditional empirical analysis is utterly possible (Boéri and Giustini, 2023), here we use the stories collected to illustrate how the two theories function together within a joint methodological framework.

Fieldwork: Enacting researchers' narratives and narrating research practice

The fieldwork was conducted by the principal investigator of the project, located in Qatar. It started after obtaining ethical clearance from Hamad Bin Khalifa University, on 11th February 2021, and ended on 21 March 2021. Participants were recruited through purposeful, snowball sampling. We targeted Qatar-based interpreters whose *main* source of income was interpreting at the time of the COVID-19 outbreak in Qatar (March 2020).

Narratively speaking, sampling is a selective appropriation of *who* is entrusted as a teller of the COVID-19 story of interpreters. We aimed to host, rather than erase difference by including the maximum number of strata of interpreters population: trained, untrained, junior, senior, male and female, across household configurations, nationalities, language combinations, status, wages and work settings. The process of recruitment was tied to our attempt to problematize homogenizing narratives. This pattern underpins not only the data analysis, as we weaved interviewees' stories into our re-narration as researchers, but also the recruitment process. Contacts, media and documents used functioned as key artefacts to stage those storytellers whom, because of their multi-facetted diversity, could contribute to an inclusive narrative space of research practice. The starting point was the network of contacts available to the principal investigator thanks to her affiliation with the University running the Translation and Interpreting Institute (TII), a hybrid entity delivering education and research and providing translation and interpreting services in Qatar. The service provision branch (Translation Training Centre) provided her the contact of 8 interpreters. The invitation letter they received by email was important in crafting a participatory research space and, ultimately, in achieving a high rate acceptance (5 on 8 responded positively).

The email introduced the researcher as per her institutional affiliation (a key point of convergence with the addressee who worked as freelance for the entity in question) and justified the contact on the ground of the addressee's status as 'an active interpreter in Qatar'. This interpersonal characterization prepared the thematic framing of the project ('the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on interpreters in Qatar') and its ultimate goal

(‘hoping to raise awareness on and increase the recognition of the interpreting community among stakeholders’). The narrative research space was steered towards benefiting the addressee and her community.

This was immediately followed by an invitation: ‘Would you be able/willing to meet over a coffee and share your story with me?’ The space opened was configured as interpersonal to create a sense of intimacy which de-emphasized rational, expert discourse, in favour of storytelling. It was also configured as co-presential, in a context of gradual lifting of the restrictions in Qatar, although the online format was not discarded. The risks of research participation were addressed through guarantees of anonymity and confidentiality and the duty of transparency fulfilled by informing of the use of a voice-recording device. In doing so, we articulated the space according to the conceptual narratives of ‘do no harm’ and ‘fairness’ in research practice.

Since among these 5 interviewees, 4 were conference interpreters (considered the high end of the profession, in mainstream professional narratives), we decided to initiate contacts in other sectors beyond conference settings. The principal investigator used her network of contacts in Weill Cornell Medicine-Qatar (WCM-Q), a medical college providing training for medical interpreters in Qatar, and asked the two instructors to circulate a call for participation among alumni. The two interpreters who responded positively also provided more contacts, ensuring that snowball sampling could take place in health services and beyond the private sector of conference and media industries. Snowball sampling also took place through LinkedIn, a particularly appropriate media since it is designed for professionals. The principal investigator connected with the first interviewees and sent invitations to all interpreters among their contacts. 6 interpreters responded positively.

This recruitment process led to a sample of 14 interpreters (8 females and 6 males). Participants were aged 26–64 (with a median of 41 years), from countries including Syria, the Netherlands, Lebanon, Iraq, Sudan, Jordan, Kuwait, Tunisia and Russia. The participants vary in length of experience, ranging from 3 to 25 years (with an average of 14). They were all working full-time as interpreters, though their employment status varied. Ten were contracted as in-house employees; 2 were self-employed freelance professionals; and 5 combined self-employment with payroll. The participants worked with language combinations that systematically included Arabic and English. However, they also presented more tailored profiles, including languages such as Arabic sign language, Russian, Chinese, French and Spanish. All participants had formally trained as interpreters, except two who were self-trained. Eight interpreters on 14 had children, many times with an average of 3 children, often of a very young age.

February 2021 coincided with a gradual lifting of the restrictions, making face-to-face co-presential interviews possible. Participants were likely to resent further online interaction after a year of remote work; no participant requested an online interview. As researchers, we also felt the need to reconnect with the community after having conducted our duties from home.

Setting the interviews in public spaces framed the encounter as a tipping point in the pandemic, from which to look retrospectively at one’s experience, assess one’s situation at present and prospects for the future. Practice-wise, fieldwork became a set of relations

made up of the connections between multiple locations and between actors – informants and researcher – who engage in storytelling and in activity. Because of the public nature of the setting, it was important to guarantee confidentiality and privacy, through careful choice of seating arrangements in the space and of the technological set-up. The choice of iPhone earphones with an integrated microphone, avoided to attract attention from other people around us. The desired effect was that from the outside, the researcher and the participant would look like two lay people having a conversation in a public space. This effect was important also for the insiders, as the objective was to instantiate and embody the narrative space that had been verbally constructed in the invitation letter.

All interviews lasted for around 60 min. They were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by a research assistant. The authors conducted checks on each transcript.

Participants were asked to read the consent form, raise any question they may have and sign. To mitigate the inhibiting effect of this formality, the details about the *what*, *why* and *how* of the interview had already been provided in an 'Info Sheet', shared upon acceptance of the interview. This meant that participants could focus their attention on the conditions (voluntary and volunteer participation) and the potential risks involved in their participation (emotional, in this case, as the pandemic may have had traumatizing effects on certain people) as well as reassurances on confidentiality and privacy. The material and normative artefact of the consent form framed the casual environment as caring, the researcher as a professional who is aware of data sensitivity and the relationship as one of trust and respect.

Another artefact which was not shared but was functioning as a mental map for the researcher is the interview guide. It was designed as a flexible tool to orienting semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The interview questions covered themes such as the interpreters' career trajectories, their role perception across settings (from medical to media interpreting) and work experiences pre- and post-COVID-19 outbreak, as well as wellbeing. Questions were formulated as narrative prompts, pitched in on the basis of the informant's navigation into their recollections. The choice of semi-structured interviews contributed to a dialogic conversation, striking a balance between interviewees' self-direction and spontaneity and the engagement of the researcher. We conceived the interviews as part of the fieldwork practice, of a communication and storytelling practice pointing to the reflexive capacities of individuals to construct retrospectively their own practice.

In this sense, interviews involve the researchers in the actual production of the textual material: they create the space of interaction, they select the storytellers and they steer the interview in specific directions while attempting to grant the informant autonomy. While the oral, spontaneous and interactional nature of interviews make them prone to storytelling (Perrino, 2021), this is the first interviews study (to our knowledge) to use socio-narrative theory, as the latter has been mostly applied to texts which already exist. Adopting socio-narrative theory in symbiosis with practice theory allows to complement this scholarship with an exploration of the ways in which these stories circulate beyond the site of the interview and beyond the narrative speech mode (storytelling).

This is not to say that interviews should be considered as narrative accounts of practice only (as in Schmidt, 2017). They are narrative *practices* through which interviewees

construct meaning about another practice (Nicolini, 2017). Reckwitz (2008) indicates that conducting research through textual and discursive techniques means interpreting these in the light of the practices necessary to produce them. Interviews are 'a practice constitutive of the phenomena (the practices) one writes about' (Bueger and Gadinger 2018: 156).

Thus, interviews exist as part of a larger configuration, or as part of a 'relational setting', in narrative theorist Margaret Somers' terms (1992: 624). Relational settings refer to a temporal and spatial configuration of relationships where actions take place and are lent significance. Somers contends that 'social action [such as storytelling or retelling interpreting practice in the pandemic] can only be intelligible if we recognise that people are guided to act by the structural and cultural relationships in which they are embedded [the "relational setting" of the interview, and of interpreting] and by the stories through which they constitute their identities [as informants, interpreters, heads of family, etc.]' (Somers, 1992: 624; our additions).

We thus consider interviews and interviewees' narratives as a meshwork of 'doings and sayings', in Schatzki's words (2016: 130). From a narrative perspective, we could add that they are social practices, experienced, recalled and retold through narratives. Overall, we conceive of interviews and of interview data analysis as an epistemic practice in which not only representations of other practices are presented through narratives but in which and with which knowledge is actively co-produced.

Furthermore, since practices result in patterns of action, texts and structures of meaning, we direct attention to interviews as capable of giving these intelligibility, in a way which is respectful of practitioners' experiences, and which facilitates the academic writing of results. In our study, interviews empowered interpreters to switch to a narrative mode and researchers to immerse themselves in their experience. As performances of fieldwork practice in their own right, they constitute a sophisticated strategy to elicit narratives of the practice from a particular normative, emotional and moral angle, allowing to unravel the evaluative and lived dimensions of practice. (Re)telling stories is a core activity in any practice. Narratives were a crucial prism for interpreters to make sense of their changing practice in the COVID-19 pandemic. They pointed to the constant negotiation of practice as a shared, mutually intelligible enterprise, particularly as the stories they told often departed from those prevailing in the mainstream profession.

Magnifying the voices of the unheard with interviews

Integrating narrative and practice within a joint methodological framework allows to investigate how practice (skills, behaviours, beliefs, aims and emotions) is storied in the sayings of social actors (here interpreters) and how circulating narratives of work (interpreting), society and science are negotiated in practice. But more importantly, it allows us to situate local narratives and practices within larger configurations of knowledge and power in the field of interpreting.

See, for instance, the following excerpt of the interview of a senior interpreter with decades of experience, working at a major broadcasting company in Qatar. Below, Reza[2] mitigates the professional risks resulting from the reconfiguration of his work[3]:

> This guy [the guest speaker] is not using a proper mic, he's using the mic in his laptop. The producer (…) immediately went on the defense you know, and started saying: 'it took me hours to get this guy (…) You have to do your best.' I said, 'but my best will not be good enough… I'm coming to you with my problem before we go live, to give you a chance to solve it. Otherwise, it will completely destroy your program. Who is going to protect me?'. So anyway, I ignored the producer (…) and I asked the guy, I said 'please, it's very important that you use a mic. So can you go and get one before we start?' (Reza, 64, media interpreter)

Practice and narrative are weaved in context: practice unfolds (and is recalled) through a 'local narrative' of space, time, actors, roles and skills; in turn, the 'local narrative' of the COVID-19 disruptions constructs itself through localized practice in a situation of crisis where whom ought to do what is dynamically reconfigured. While professional narratives in interpreting rest on a clear separation of role between technicians and interpreters, many interpreters like Reza had no choice but to readjust skills and practice boundaries because precautionary measures disrupted their routine work settings, exacerbating their reliance on technologies. Reza challenges the professional narrative of the compartmentalization of technical and interpreting expertise (Boéri, 2008; Boéri and De Manuel Jerez, 2011). He takes action beyond the limits of his role as interpreter because of the detrimental consequences of technical disruptions on the quality of his output and thus on the program and on his own reputation.

Situating interviewees' narratives in larger discursive and practical configurations of interpreting and of the COVID-19 pandemic is embedded in the practice and the narratives of research which also constitute a locus of analysis in our methodology. Doing practice-based research means employing an internally coherent approach, 'where ontological assumptions (the basic assumption about how the world is) and methodological choices (how to study things so that a particular ontology materializes) work together' (Nicolini, 2017: 26). We converge ontological and epistemological approaches: the world as fabric of voices and actions configured around cores and margins in unequal relationships of power and resonance and research as a privilege and a duty to go local, go granular and contest the power of grand, global narratives.

Similarly, socio-narrative research acknowledges that researchers' choice of theoretical, analytical and methodological tools is contingent upon the 'conceptual narratives' (Somers and Gibson, 1994) they subscribe to. These conceptual narratives about science and epistemology are understood as tied to the positionality of the researcher, referred to as 'narrative location', that is, the 'dynamic intersection of the personal, public, conceptual and meta-narratives people subscribe to and which mediate their experience of the world and sense of identity' (Boéri, 2008: 26, 2023a). Despite different trajectories and biographies, our respective narrative locations overlap in the sense that we adopt a critical, qualitative approach to magnify the voices of practising interpreters which are often unheard in grand narratives of the profession; a marginalization pattern which we see as exacerbating in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

For instance, our approach has allowed us to access experiences that contest not only the hyperspecialization of knowledge (as highlighted above) but also the victimization of interpreters in the pandemic:

> Before the Covid it was crazy…We had to turn down a lot of people…the market was bursting. But then online started…we made up for the money lost in the beginning of the lockdown. We took it like a break. I was happy because I was back to the kitchen, I was baking, I was loving it. I was doing stuff at home. I was with the kids…This is when we slow down and it is good. (Rebecca, 37, freelance conference and media interpreter)

Rebecca experienced the lockdown as a tipping point, between declining clients' requests (a sign that she was doing well as a freelance interpreter) and having no work at all at the beginning of the lockdown. While this shift has generally been embedded in a professional narrative of financial loss worldwide (FIT, 2020a, 2020b), it is recalled here as an opportunity to recover a quality of life. When 'online [interpreting] started', personal and professional lives adjusted and even hybridized. For highly demanded female interpreters, like Rebecca and Samar whom were interviewed together, the time gained with the online mode was reinvested for themselves and for others in their household; a positive gain which never transpires global narratives of interpreting in the pandemic. For instance, because of their night shifts in a media broadcasting company, they both appreciated the slower temporality on the next morning – such as not having to commute to conferences the next morning, to greet the clients on arrival and to wait for them to start the conference. Instead, Samar (47) tells that she could just 'wake up, have a coffee and start working'. Anytime off the mic was reinvested away from work, including during the working hours. Rebecca retells, for instance, that she would do physical exercises when it was not her turn to interpret: 'I have a gym at home and I would work out and I would go back and oh my God, I'm full of energy and I'm working out while listening'. Freed from the physical constraints of a fixed console within a soundproof booth, she made the most of her mobile equipment to boost her physical wellness in a professional practice that is as physically still and as cognitively challenging.

A practice-narrative analysis of interviews is thus used to unravel the implicit structures of time, space and meaning embedded in practices and to rethink the representation of communities in times of crisis. Here, waged and unwaged labour seemed to adjust in a positive narrative of professional and personal fulfilment within the new materiality of interpreters' work at home, an aspect that never makes its way in larger professional narratives, exclusively (and sometimes inaccurately) focussed on financial loss. Individuals' doings and sayings are set against their immediate socio-normative, affective, political and economic contexts where alternatives to global narratives may dwell.

As highlighted above, our methodology has a dual focus on the thick behavioural and textual renditions of practices of interpreters, on the one hand, and the capturing of relationships in space, on the other: be them professional relationships between technicians and interpreters or personal ones between interpreters and family members. This dual focus enables to understand both the conditions of the local accomplishments of practice (the specific technical and family constraints or levers) and the ways in which practices are tied to or set against broader narrative textures, shaping the landscape of participants' daily life.

For instance, many interviewees stressed in their local narrative of the COVID-19 pandemic that the disruption did not come with remote interpreting per se but with the changing conditions of the household. Rebecca's ideal scenario of life–work balance

(above) ends with the following words: 'but then online schooling happened and my whole life was very difficult'. While Samar had 10, 13 and 16-year-old children, Rebecca's were 3 and 6, and this difference was emphasized as impacting on their material choice of where to work and how to work online. Samar would sit in her living room rather than in a locked, separate bedroom, whenever the event was not too demanding. Rebecca responded to this narrative with friendly sarcasm 'but she doesn't have monkey business in there!', depicting her two lively boys being 'all over the place'. As the requirements of everyday and interpreting practices became harder to adjust, in this second phase of the lockdown, their account of online interpreting from home becomes ambivalent, as acknowledged by Rebecca: 'I have mixed feelings about this online thing. I love it, but I hate it at the same time'.

Zooming into the private-professional world of interviewees is combined with going from the specificities of interviewees' gender, age, generational and specialization premises to the reconfiguration of professional practice in a bottom-up process:

> 'I can't work on zoom from home because I live in an apartment, my kid [is] always jumping on my head. I can't do that, so you [client/agency] have to provide me with a place with a laptop or a tablet. You set everything for me: you are the hardware, I'm the software, ok? I just show up, I talk, I go home, that's all I do'. And they said 'OK, we'll do it otherwise'. (Ismael, 51, employed conference interpreter)

The line drawn by Ismael between the 'hardware' and the 'software' of interpreting is a tenet of professional narratives which disclaim any responsibility in case of technical breakdown. Note here the contrast with Reza who took upon himself to ensure the quality of the sound, probably because he works for live broadcasts and his reputation is on the line. In medical settings, it was the very stakes of healthcare communication which pushed interpreters to go out of their way to deliver the logistics of interpreting. For instance, Rifqa, mental health interpreter, depicts a scenario in which she is the one who establishes the communication in the first place, in over-the-phone interpreting, instead of providers, as is normally the case with that interpreting modality:

> Exactly, they [providers] provide us with the landline number and I will connect to it, and I have passcode and I have the patient, the patient's family member and the therapist and I merge the call together, instead of relying on someone, on a technician to do that for us (…) we would rather do it because otherwise it's going to get really complicated (...) It just creates more problems [laughter] basically, and we want to make it easy. (Rifqa, 49, mental health interpreter)

Our methodology allows us to go granular and account for the variation of experiences depending on interviewees' cross-cutting circumstances. It also allows to contest global narratives about interpreters in the COVID-19 crisis. For instance, remote interpreting had different consequences on interpreters across settings and status. While mainstream professional narratives primarily focus on the conference interpreter as the primary 'victim' of the COVID-19 pandemic, medical interpreters among our interviewees tell a different story:

> During the pandemic the number of cases [relapsing] rose. You can't imagine, it's like 3 times [the number of patients]. It's because of anxiety and uncertainty. It's just, it was so difficult on the patients. They don't see the therapist and they talk to someone [the therapist] who can't understand their language (...) I have (...) to make sure she catches up (…) Sometimes the session runs longer than it's supposed to be because they need someone to listen to them. I mean, it's already difficult for everybody at this time of pandemic, lockdown, and you know for patient with a disease and their family. (Rifqa, medical/mental health interpreter)

Rifqa's experience emphasizes the impact of health restrictions on patients, as a result of initial suspension of therapy services (beginning of lockdown) and then resuming it remotely (in a second phase). The new materiality of therapist/patient communication posed an emotional and cognitive challenge. Adjusting tasks and role involved picking up non-verbal cues, making sure the therapist is not cut off from the patient despite patients speaking for much longer as a result of their distress, etc.

While our methodology garners positive stories which contest global narratives of victimization, it also retrieves more negative stories, particularly among medical interpreters who have been in the frontline in this pandemic and who, paradoxically, are not acknowledged into larger accounts of the pandemic. Most medical interpreters are employees, not freelancers. With remote work they had to transition from a '9 to 5' working shift to an unpredictable schedule, with unmanageable workload:

> I had to wait for a call. I had my phone on standby (…) I was stuck in one place like I couldn't move. What if I want to use the restroom? (…) I'm just stuck on my desk with everything, just waiting for the full 8 hours (…) Some physician would get used to one person, so they keep on calling them. (…) I informed everyone at home (…) no disturbance, once I got time I'll go grab something. I'd ask them to send me food, just get me anything. But it was so frustrating. (Mariam, 27, medical interpreter)

The five medical interpreters we interviewed showed concern for both maintaining the access to and the quality of the communication (not missing calls to allow interpretations), and for negotiating the new materiality (phone rather than on-site services), spatiality (the home) and temporality (unpredictable and unmanageable workload). In this light, the fabric of storied practices and enacted narratives of interpreting in the COVID-19 pandemic is more complex than mainstream discourse versus local stories of practice. Our methodology not only accounts for the divergence between the local and the global but also for the convergence. In doing so, it contributes to contest the uniformizing discourse which erases variations of social actors experiences across gender, generation, work setting, status, etc.

As we hope we have illustrated, the 'integrated narrative-practice framework' is particularly useful to ethnographic case studies. It allows in fact to unravel the complex trajectories and experiences of social actors in the specific temporalities and localities of their work in pre-/post-COVID-19 outbreak. At the same time, it allows us to address their knowledge and discursive attitudes in a way that does justice to their practical and personal realities against the homogenizing Western-centric discourse of their profession, endorsed by the power of institutions.

Conclusion

This paper focussed on the development of a qualitative inquiry method to capture knowledge production at the cross-roads of conceptual and empirical research. In an attempt to overcome the dualism between discourse and action in traditional social theory, our approach built on the common epistemological premises of *narrative* as enacted stories, and of *practice* as storied actions, through which individuals sequence events in time and space (temporality, relationality and materiality), make sense of their social life, drive their affective engagement and gear their behaviour towards particular outcomes (Somers, 1992, 1997; Schatzki, 2002). To capture how people experience global crises, our methodology relied on interviewing. We approached interviews as the practical and narrative site of knowledge construction and contestation that reveals participants' subjective stories and behaviours against wider meta-discourses (see also Bueger, 2015; Perrino, 2021). This was particularly important as interviews uncovered the institutional and ideological aspects of interpreters' work in Qatar during the COVID-19 pandemic. Delving into interpreters' narratives and their 'peripheral' position in a professional category illustrated how practice is storied in the interpreters' sayings and how narratives of interpreting, technologies, society and healthcare are negotiated and resisted in their everyday practice.

This instrumental fieldwork case study shows that interview processes constitute practical-narrative enactments that can equip the researcher to access life experiences at the peripheries of the rational, globalizing discourses. The analysis of interview data shows that a combined 'narrative-practice methodology' can help achieve further a granularity of what participants actually say and do. Qualitative research debates on the value of social practices and narratives are thus leveraged as multi-relational configurations that get us closer to data and participants (Halkier, 2010; Schubert and Röhl, 2017). At the same time, a combined framework equips us to contextualize participants' sayings and doings within immediate and wider configurations of meanings or 'relational settings' in which both participants and researchers are embedded.

By acknowledging that the practice of researchers and participants enacts and contests narratives of their profession and/or field of enquiry in times of crisis, our critical and reflexive approach operationalizes the ethical duty of qualitative research to do justice to 'peripheral' knowledge and to refashion homogenizing public discourse. It provides footprints to navigate the dynamics of action and discourse which play out in the relationships between human subjects and their embodied experience – here, of work, family issues, professional role boundaries, technologies, healthcare emergencies – and between researchers and research participants. Our approach is useful to alert researchers to the entanglement of practice and narrative when analyzing forms of knowledge and power, bringing into question how research participants but also researchers join in (and out) of the reproduction of shared ideologies, thereby contributing to re-calibrating these beyond rationalizing, Western-centric, and essentialist conceptions of lived experience and agency.

From our narrative-practice approach in general and the exploration of interpreters' behaviour and storytelling during the COVID-19 pandemic specifically, we find that there are many possibilities for further methodological development. This may involve exploring the specificities of other communities and areas of work in and beyond Qatar in relation to

the COVID-19 (as well as other) crises. By providing a tool and an illustrative case that can be applied as needed across settings, communities and crises, we encourage qualitative researchers to branch it out to study ready-made meta-narratives and uncontested practices.

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Notes

1. Established in the aftermath of post-WW2, the interpreting profession provides spoken and sign language services to users who do not share the same language.
2. Not his real name. All names have been changed to ensure anonymity.
3. As a result of social distancing, interpreting was taking place over a web or telephone link, whereas in normal conditions, guests and interpreters would be in the studio, with proper technical support.

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