I sat with Soe in a quiet corner near her home, overlooking the rice fields, shutting off the tape recorder after she finished telling her life story. I could not express myself verbally; my thoughts were complex, filled with perplexity, bewilderment, and countless questions. Soe’s story was laden with drama and tragedy and differed widely from interviews I had held at the time. I thought I had gotten to know Soe well. I spent quite a bit of time with her over that year and the previous one, meandering among the villages, conversing and ambling about the town, attempting to learn about the lives of H’mong tourist guides in northern Vietnam.

We formed close ties and developed a sense of mutual understanding despite our disparate cultures. Even when misunderstandings occasionally arose between us, they originated, in my estimation, in a lack of specific knowledge about the culture or society, in my blind spots concerning her lifestyle. When she finished her story, however, my sense of mutual understanding dimmed somewhat: How did the story she just told me connect with the vibrant character I knew? Could her interpretation of “tell the story of your life” be so different from mine?

The comfortable feeling I had enjoyed until then seemed to fade; I had no idea what to feel, think, or say. Gadamer (1960) describes the fusion of horizons that takes place when an interpreter encounters text, claiming that his perspectives and those of the text (or interview) combine into a new and more all-encompassing horizon. Interpretation always starts with a question, claims Gadamer, but at the end of Soe’s interview, I had too many of them and could not conceive of any interpretation that appeared reasonable or suitable.

This study focuses on cases in which the horizons of the researcher do not merge with those of the informant. In such situations, the researcher senses that the informant’s statements raise questions, cause confusion, or are perceived as perhaps unacceptable. It analyzes these moments and their implications regarding the research process and findings. We claim that not all statements are accepted. Researchers sift through questionable data, disregarding it at times. This may cause a “converse error,” leading researchers to ignore information perceived as doubtful that in fact could be valuable and contribute innovative understandings and knowledge.

Unbelievable Literature

Since the 1980s, the narrative research method (Bruner, 1986; Kohler Riessman, 1993; Newbury & Huskins, 2010; Polkinghore, 1988; Sullivan, 2010) has emphasized the subjective conception of informants, who describe reality as they themselves experience it. Most studies intentionally avoid unambiguous differentiation between fact and inter-
pretation, thereof, claiming that the researcher has access to the informant’s words alone. As such, the discussion primarily concerns representations that are influenced by the individual’s views and conceptions, whereas the relationship between the narrative and the reality described is not challenged.

Notwithstanding the relativistic approach, the aim of such research is to produce accounts that correspond to reality (Hammersley, 2001) or to consider the relationship between the subjectivity of participant and the phenomenon under study (Newbury & Hoskins, 2010). The problem of truthlikeness (verisimilitude or nearness to the truth) has been described as one of the most fundamental problems in philosophy of science (Zamora Bonilla, 2005). Its dominant conception is the correspondence model or the so-called picture theory of truth. Truth, in this conception, is the relation of a picture to its pictured object, whatever the nature of the picture or the object might be (Geldsetzer, 2011). Falsity, therefore, obviously always introduces itself as a true picture.

Capturing the “nature of social phenomena” is a primary goal of the social sciences. One of ethnography’s main claims is that it is superior to other methods because it comes close to social reality (Atkinson, 2001; Hammersley, 2001; Lofland & Lofland, 1995). Although we seek to study social phenomena through the constructions of informants, we are concerned with their ties to reality. Although the clear-cut model of truth is not “appropriate” in our research fields, concepts such as verisimilitude, truthlikeness, or falsity may certainly be of use. Our aim, as social scientists, is, after all, to describe pictures that are close to reality. Nevertheless, the dilemmas of truthlikeness or verisimilitude are mostly ignored in narrative research.

The relationship between an individual’s subjective and relative conception and the events that took place is not a simple one, however. Subjective truth in narratives involves not only distorted memory that affects research at times (Drexler, 2006), but also various drives and motivations that structure highly divergent interpretations of the situation (Skogen, Mauz, & Krange, 2008). These affect the narratives and subsequently also the research, that usually aims at deriving knowledge rather than achieving familiarity with the individual’s subjective inner world. Moreover, even if only to understand and interpret the informant’s inner world, the researcher ought to be aware of the gaps between the narrative and the events. Although the truthfulness of a story indeed does not limit itself to the realm of facts (Minh-ha, 1989, p. 144), one should pay attention to the extent of the gap nonetheless.

Research literature apparently lacks discussion of researchers’ options regarding verisimilitude, truthlikeness, falsity, and the acceptance or rejection of informants’ statements, possibly because these issues are perceived as complex, threatening, and above all highly politically incorrect. Over the years, however, a few studies have included various interpretations that affect the acceptability of informants’ statements.

Studies regarding truthlikeness and the gaps between memory and the past (Drexler, 2006; Rosenthal, 1993) emerge as exceptions. Narratives, claims Gabriel (2004), allow facts to be reinterpreted and embellished. They can serve not only as vehicles of contestation, enlightenment, and understanding but also of dissimulation and lying (Gabriel, 2004). Atkinson (2001) comments that there is nothing privileged about personal narratives. Like all accounts, they are shaped by motivations and conventions. Although textbooks offer extensive guidance to researchers about conducting interviews, almost no guidance or advice is available about “challenging” interview behavior (Collins, Shattell, Thomas, & Porter, 2005).

Generally speaking, postpositivism ascribes significance to the conceptions of the informant and virtually scorns “reality,” even though the three-way researcher-informant-reality relationship is not always clear. In situations in which researchers find themselves unable to assess the verisimilitude of narratives, no matter what concepts of relativism or postmodernism prevail, most researchers, we claim, continue to use the traditional conception of the picture theory. They treat narratives as truthlikeness pictures of their research field and try to clarify all parts that do not yet fit adequately into this world picture (Geldsetzer, 2011). Researchers, we presume, apply and analyze data that relate to the picture differently from data that do not.

As researchers, we desire not only to hear the narrative and analyze it but also to examine, even if intuitively, the thickness of the masks that envelop the narratives. Questions that arise among researchers who investigate their informants’ motives in telling their stories also exert an effect, consciously or otherwise, on the manner in which these researchers use the data gathered, its analysis, and the resulting findings.

Do we indeed accept everything that informants say without criticism? Is there no difference in our attitudes toward various narratives? Although the prevailing approach and methodological studies call on the researcher to absorb as much as possible from the informant (Kohler Riessman, 1993; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), in practice, researchers in the field act according to their intuitions, that are based on a combination of knowledge and personality traits. Researchers are neither tape recorders that record everything nor sponges that soak everything up indiscriminately. They interpret what their informants say according to their own subjective inclinations and according to what develops during the encounter between them and their informants. They sort data and decide what is important and what is not, what is relevant and what is not, and also what is perceived as reliable and what arouses suspicion. During research, then, an internal dialogue takes place—a dialogue.
that derives knowledge from the theory, society, and culture. In seeking significant, reliable information, researchers apply various “filters,” some of them stronger than any relativistic paradigm that they may have acquired during their professional experience. These internal processes and their implications for the research findings are frequently overlooked.

A narrative perceived as reliable will be used differently from one that raises question marks. As the scope of material in qualitative research is enormous, almost insurmountable (Goetz & LeCompte, 1981; Huberman & Miles, 1994), researchers sift through it and sort it. During this process, they also sift out the informants’ words, ideas, and themes according to various criteria: What appears irrelevant to the topic, what says nothing new, and also things that are difficult to interpret, before which one stands confused and incredulous.

The unexpressed assumption in research is that a good researcher, who is familiar with the culture and the informants, knows how to resolve such issues based on expertise and experience. Nevertheless, we presume that researchers indeed examine, evaluate, and at times hesitate over what their informants say. In most cases, researchers lack tools of sufficient quality to assess the truthlikeness of their informants’ statements. Consequently, we posit that at times, most researchers experience some doubts regarding certain narratives that affect the use they make of the data and consequently also the analysis and findings.

The literature virtually ignores these occasions, perhaps out of apprehension of being depicted as paternalistic, mistrusting, and suspicious. Nevertheless, relating to a narrative raises certain questions: Does the narrative reflect the inner world of the informant—and even if so, does it describe actual events that took place? What tools does the researcher have to cope with doubt? Up to what limit must the researcher be tolerant and accepting? What do researchers do with data they consider suspect?

This study does not propose solutions, tools, or definite answers. We seek to shed light and reflect on those same moments at which the horizons of the researcher and the informant do not merge, elucidating their possible implications on the research. These moments, we maintain, arise precisely when researchers face significant and innovative research findings. We believe that although the literature avoids dealing with the topic, the manner in which the researcher accepts the words of the informant is significant, as it affects the research as a whole.

**Strange Deaths and a Late Wedding**

Some of these questions arose during research that the first author conducted among H’mong women in the Lào Cai province in northwestern Vietnam. The study examined transitions in lifestyle and identity of H’mong tourist guides, who maneuver along the border between their own local culture and that of Western tourists. The encounter between the first researcher and Soe, a H’mong woman informant, revealed those moments when the merging of horizons does not take place as well as their implications for research findings.

I spent much time with Soe during my first visit to Sapa village. She was then in her early twenties and always made sure to wear traditional clothing made of cloth that she and her mother wove, dyed, and embroidered by hand. When I commented about the heat, she laughed. “When it’s really hot, the dye from the clothes comes off on the body.” Soe was working as a tourist guide and I often toured with her and conversed with her at length. She spoke good English and was cheerful and full of vitality. Despite her young age, she possessed vast cultural knowledge and was pleased to share it. “I like to learn a lot from the old people,” she explained while smiling and talking to people we met along the mountain paths. She seemed to know everyone.

Our conversations and the time spent together were interesting and enjoyable for me; I liked talking to her and appreciated her liveliness and knowledgeable guidance. Despite her extensive knowledge and cultural ties, however, she would have preferred an occupation other than one of the traditional ones: “Maybe one day I’ll have my own shop in Sapa; working in the rice fields is so hard.”

When I arrived on my second visit to the region, it was rice harvesting season. Soe invited me to her family’s home for a celebration in which we would eat the first rice harvested that season. Their home, where Soe herself lived as well, was situated in a village about three hours’ walking distance from Sapa. The house, like all H’mong houses, was built of rough-hewn planks and had no windows although the weather is pleasant most of the year. The house was dark and lacked any decoration. There was no toilet or running water in the house, and the only electric bulb was powered by energy generated by a water turbine.

During the meal in honor of the first rice harvest, the approaching wedding of a relative was discussed. Soe was very talkative, joking with the men, unlike her sisters who sat by quietly and appeared more reserved. “I was kidnapped three times [as a marriage proposal ritual in H’mong culture], you know, but I refused all those who wanted to marry me.” She then recalled Anders, a young Swede who toured the area the year before and returned to Sweden to complete his university studies. “Anders,” she said, “is supposed to return to Vietnam in a few weeks and we plan to be married, I am waiting for him the whole year.” When I asked if she would live in Sweden, she responded that she does not know how to read and write and could not adjust to a place that was so different. “Anders will come and live with me in Sapa. He will build a guest house and then I can also work there or I will have a shop.”
After the meal, we went to sit in the yard, and I asked her if she would be prepared to tell me her life story. The request embarrassed her: “What?” she asked, “What is there to tell?” “You can tell me whatever you like,” I replied, attempting to offer her comfortable “wiggle room.” “My story is very poor, not interesting,” Soe said. I answered that everyone’s life story is interesting to me, especially, I emphasized, the story of her life. This statement apparently weakened her resistance and she opened up and started telling her story.

My father died when I was 5 years old, and then my mother, my little sister, brother, and I got very sick. My father died after 3:00. He just fell asleep and we didn’t know how long he was dead. [At that time] my mother went to another family to ask for food and it was raining, and the river went high and she could not get back. I tried to wake my father. I called, “Father! Father! Wake up!” but he did not move. For a few hours, my mother did not know he died, and neither did I.

I already forgot his face. We still have his identity card and that is the only photo we have of him. When I was small, he worked a lot and was very busy. He worked in the rice fields. The rice was not good and he went to the mountains every day to pick mushrooms and opium poppies. But I do not remember him. After my father died, my two smaller sisters, one small brother, and two older brothers came to Sapa.

I was born in Lào Cai. We moved to Son La. We thought we would have more food and money there. After my father died, we returned to Lào Cai. We walked back 6 days, sleeping by the roadside and eating rice we brought. We had fire. We slept near the roads in caves. When we slept, about 2 to 3 ghosts came. I remember, my uncle came to Son La to bring us back and got sick, I think from the ghosts.

Later, I lived with my mother, three sisters, and two younger brothers. My grandfather sold my three-year-old brother to another family that lived far away, 3 to 4 hours’ walking distance. Mama did not know about this and was very sad when she found out. She did not quarrel with him, but she felt that her life was very miserable. I moved with my younger sister to live with an aunt, other children lived with other aunts and one of my sisters lived with my grandmother.

The aunt I lived with did not have enough food. She was never nice. She grew a lot of cucumbers, her husband ate them, and she blamed me. She always yelled at me and hated me. I ran away to my mother’s house but my mother forced me to go back. And after that I ate some poison leaves. I tried to stay with my mother but she didn’t want me. I tried to kill myself three times with poison leaves.

My father’s brother tried to kill my younger sister. My cousin tried to strangle her, and she was blue already when an old neighbor saw it and saved her. They didn’t have enough food. That is why they tried to kill her. Later, my mother’s brother built her [my mother] a house and we all lived in it. I liked that period.

I came to town [Lào Cai] when I was fourteen and learned English and sold jewelry and embroidery. My older sister helped me and gave me some money. I found a room and I bought bracelets and worked with tourists, and learned more English. My mother said: “Why don’t you come and stay in my house now?” I said OK—she is my mother. She remarried when I was fourteen—nine years ago. My stepfather was mad and mean. He yelled at us a lot. As tourist guides, we give money to our stepfather. I try not to be angry at my stepfather, but my mother likes me. It’s OK.

Soe finished telling her story and I felt I had to respond, show empathy, support, and appreciation of her willingness to share such a harsh story with me. Along with this, I also had a strange feeling: “My life is poor, not interesting,” said Soe. But the story unfolded before me a rich and dramatic tapestry of pain, distress, disease, and death. Parts of it enveloped me in sorrow, pain, and amazement and also raised several questions: Does Soe’s story reflect the manner in which she perceives her life story? Does she seek only to recount or did she want to challenge and even overturn prevailing social paradigms concerning her culture (Skogen et al., 2008)? Or did she perhaps elaborate on a story in my honor, in an attempt to impress and interest me, the foreign researcher? Or perhaps I should not have asked myself these questions: To ask whether or not a given story is true “is to cause confusion by an incorrect question” (Minh-Ha, 1989, p. 149). At that time, enveloped by Western theories and perceptions, I did not have the tools to answer these questions and still lack them today.

De Sardan (1992) and Harvey (2003) claim that Western researchers are enchanted by the exotic, by the occult, and the supernatural, whereas banality and pragmatism are perceived by them as inferior. Can it be, I thought to myself, that as a tourist guide, Soe may have discerned that Westerners flock after exotic, dramatic stories and decided to present me with a mystic and drama-filled narrative that would satisfy me?

Certain researchers (Angrosino & De Perez, 2000; Visweswaran, 1994) describe informants who change their stories for various reasons to satisfy the researcher. Moreover, the informants perceived as most interesting and desirable, claims Nachman (1984), are those who sense what the researcher wants them to say and tell their stories accordingly. Such informants are first and foremost skilled story tellers, turning themselves and their stories into an important part of every study.

The moment of hesitation over untenable stories, however, eats away at the researcher’s omnipotence and the doubt it casts on the narrative leads researchers to question themselves as well. How is it possible, in such cases, to express empathy in a manner that will not sound hesitant? Or perhaps it is indeed desirable and even necessary to be
hesitant? To what extent can the researcher accept the informant’s words and use them as data? These questions shook me as I listened to the story. I began to question my habit of aligning myself with participants to understand them sincerely and at times even to identify with them. Although numerous researchers (Butler, 1990; Reinharz, 1997; Weiner-Levy, 2008; Weiner-Levy & Popper-Giveon, 2010) describe the deep ties formed between researcher and informant, I felt that a troubling voice was infiltrating and a shadow was cast on the harmonious interview experience.

I attempted to understand what in the story aroused discomfort in me. It was not the part about the family’s encounter with ghosts. Despite my secular and Western conceptions that keep me from accepting such phenomena, belief in ghosts, as expressed in the story, appeared to me as an authentic part of her culture and life story, familiar from conversations with fellow researchers who studied the H’mong and from my previous stay in the region. Nevertheless, other parts of the story appeared unclear. The vitality, receptivity, and joie de vivre that Soe displayed made it difficult for me to connect her with the tragic life she described. Moreover, the story of the attempted murder of her sister by her cousins and of Soe’s own attempts at suicide aroused some disquiet in me. Unlike the ghosts, that I could accept, attempted suicide and murder left me troubled. It is precisely those ostensibly universal elements of the story—that also interface with Western culture and are not enveloped in beliefs that are alien to me—that raised so many questions. These events take place in the Western society in which I live even though I, like many others, prefer to believe that their incidence is low. They constitute a kind of taboo that is not spoken about (Redfield, 2000), at least not the way it was presented in the story.

Furthermore, in Soe’s narrative, the tragic story was told as something obvious, in a matter of fact manner. The attempted murder and suicide, and her mother’s schemes, were all reported without the emotion that I felt “had to” be present in the story. Consequently, I felt there was a discrepancy between the nature of the story and the manner in which it was told. Stories not only purport to relate to facts that happened but also seek to discover meaning in these facts (Gabriel, 2004). Narratives are not just chronologies or reports of evidence; according to Gabriel they represent poetic elaborations of narrative material, aiming to communicate facts as experience—not facts as information. Though I was overwhelmed by the abundance of chronological events, I did not sense any experience or emotion involved in them.

Although Franzosi (1998) claims that a good story has to be dramatic, that is, to include a gradually developing conflict that is ultimately resolved, Soe’s story, notwithstanding its overly dramatic elements, was told without dramatics and with minimal emotions. Rimmon-Kenan (1983) made a similar distinction between satellite events and kernel events. Omission of kernel events is liable to disrupt the internal logic of the narrative. In Soe’s narrative, it was not a lack of kernel events that undermined the story but rather an excess of them. Her narrative was loaded with significant, larger-than-life dramatic events resembling none that were mentioned in other interviews, literature, or conversations with researchers. The narrative deviated from “everyday normalcy,” at least as perceived by Western eyes.

Additional characteristics that render a narrative accepted, convincing, or reliable were described by other researchers. A narrative perceived as “good” is one that is organized along a certain chronological line (Franzosi, 1998), constructed along a logical axis, and its events unfolding naturally from one another without leaving loose ends (Rayfield, 1972). Alternatively, it may be assessed according to its progressiveness (Gergen & Gergen, 1988), consistency, or lack of contradictions (DeGloma, 2007; Goldthorpe, 1998). The acceptance of a narrative, according to Rayfield (1972), is connected not only with its content but also primarily with the complexity of its structure; a narrative will be rejected intuitively by the hearer if its structure is too simple, too complex or too confused.

Despite the multitude of definitions above, researchers do not define coherence or comprehensibility—values that are apparently culture-dependent. The chronological axis around which the narrative is woven is also significant, especially in Western culture, in which linear time fulfills an outstanding function (Kohler Riessman, 1987). As such, the studies do not constitute an effective tool for evaluating the truthlike-ness of narratives, especially narratives from other cultures. Furthermore, the criteria presented in various studies point only to narratives perceived as convincing or reliable and that are therefore accepted without incredulity or question. Obviously, not every narrative perceived as convincing is also a sincere one that reveals the informant’s inner truth or reflects verisimilitude. Conversely, not every authentic narrative will be esteemed as a “good” one.

These Western ideas, that apparently also influenced my own conceptions in the field, were challenged by Minh-ha (1989). The attempt to find structure in the narrative, she claims, is characteristic of the Western researchers. Westerners, Minh-ha claims, perceive narratives as having four elements: a beginning, development, a climax, and an end that leaves the mind at rest, whereas the native story “is not a (Western) drama of four or five acts . . . It can have no climax or climax after climax” (Minh-ha, 1989, p. 143). Alternatively, it can just drift along, year after year (ibid.). “Thinking true means thinking in conformity with a certain . . . ‘scientific’ discourse produced by certain institutions” (Minh-ha, 1989, p. 124). For many researchers, “good” story, therefore, must be structured in conformance with the ready-made idea Western adults have of reality (Minh-ha, 1989, p. 142).

I arrived with Western conceptions and was consequently captive to Western theories and outlooks regarding
the nature of an accepted narrative. As a result, it became increasingly difficult to know how to interpret Soe’s story and the merging of horizons was not enabled. It seemed that the narrative did not fit coherently into other theories or transdisciplinary horizons with which I was familiar.

At such moments, relativism was no less problematic than the contested concept of realism. Understanding of what did take place, although enveloped in a certain perspective and culturally relative knowledge, seemed to be of importance. Different versions of a narrative hold certain points of view that color the phenomena and are constructed to satisfy different motivations and needs (Skogen et al., 2008) or to serve certain ideologies and faiths (Jacobs, 2007). Nevertheless, there is an expectation that those perceptions and views will be at least a picture-like distortion of the world (Geldsetzer, 2011).

Every culture has a façade that it presents outwardly, whether intentionally or otherwise. Façades are present in virtually all intercultural contacts and even within the same culture. When in contact with a foreign culture, however, the researcher has fewer tools enabling differentiation between what reflects the informant’s subjectivity and what deviates from it. For example, the “authentic houses” in Soe’s village in which tourists stay are entirely different from those in which most H’mong live.14

This perceived intercultural façade, that at times engenders mistrust, was echoed in Soe’s statement: “When we tour among the villages, I show the tourists the plants from which we weave cloth. They always giggle. They don’t believe me, and say that these are our hashish plants.” Such lack of understanding and its attendant skepticism pervade intercultural encounters with tourists and researchers alike. The various layers through which informants describe themselves and their culture might impel researchers toward alternative, nonsimplistic interpretation.

Not every narrative perceived as truthful is actually so (Medford, 2006; Rayfield, 1972). Nevertheless, the literature offers a few principal methods on which to base research credibility: Intense acquaintance with the culture studied (Stoller & Olkes, 1987) triangulation—in which multiple perspectives guide narrative research (Hall, 2011; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and others (Watson, 2009; Hannes, Lockwood, & Pearson, 2010). Supportive sources on which to rely are not always available, however. Moreover, when researchers hear informants’ stories that arouse incredulity, their first reaction will usually be to set aside such stories and not invest any additional effort in corroborating them. Even familiarity with the culture—as seen in the case of Mead or Freeman (Freeman, 1986; Mead, 2001)15—does not always guarantee research verisimilitude. An examination of the truthlikeness of narratives is thus not always possible. Josselson (2004) calls for relying on theory and not on technical procedures such as those described above. Theories, however, are just possible explanations that ought to be strengthened or shattered by the data, meaning to help explain it—but not to confine it.

Following my acquaintance with Soe, I felt curious and obliged to attempt to clarify aspects related to her story. I interviewed her sister, who consented after some insistence. We met at a restaurant where she worked, and she asked if we could sit in the kitchen, where we would have more privacy. She did not resemble Soe; she was thinner and spoke more hesitantly in a solemn, serious tone.

During the interview, Soe’s sister burst into tears several times. Her harsh story paralleled Soe’s. When we left, she approached an elderly woman walking in the street, took some money out of her pocket and gave it to the woman. She introduced us and said: “She’s like my mother. She’s the one I told you about, who saved me from death at the hands of my cousins. She gave me food when I was a child and allowed me to live in her home.” My interpretation of Soe’s narrative changed. In this case, the narrative could be triangulated—but that is not always possible.

Later, when I stayed in the region, Anders, Soe’s tall and fair Swedish boyfriend, appeared riding on his rented bike, he accompanied by his mother, who told me that she had come to meet her future daughter-in-law. We met on several occasions and hiked together to the nearby falls. Anders shared his reservations with me concerning the materialistic Western way of life and told me about his plans to open a guest house in Sapa. He described the healthy life that the H’mong live, close to nature and free, in his conception, of Western diseases such as cancer or diabetes. His ideas about life among the H’mong were enveloped in a Western perspective in the New Age spirit. It struck me that his assumptions, although different from my own, painted the region and its residents no less vividly.

Discussion and Conclusions—Narrative, Verisimilitude, and the Converse Error

Researchers usually shy away from stories that are too strange or arouse incredulity and question marks. Challenging the narrative often sounds like a critique or is perceived as paternalistic or politically incorrect. In Soe’s story, the angle from which the story was told was so different from that prevailing in the Western world or that of H’mong life that it did not elucidate a new aspect of the topic but rather rendered it virtually untenable. For example, psychological theory and knowledge (rooted in Western culture) does not prepare the researcher for the encounter with a young woman like Soe, whose life is replete with trauma and pain, yet she remains effervescent, vibrant, full of life, highly able to conduct her life, and communicate.

A story like Soe’s, according to Western treatment assumptions, would have to be accompanied by many...
difficulties, that might have been expressed as lack of adjustment, malfunctioning, depression and more (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 1994). Even trauma recovery narratives demonstrating success are filled with struggles and pain (Hall, 2011). Neither studying a culture nor extended stays in the field can contribute to understanding such events, that take place in private, concealed contexts. Only by hearing the informant’s exceptional life story can the researcher effectively be exposed to these aspects and understand them.

Ostensibly, one may assume that moments such as those documented above, “when horizons do not merge,” will occur more frequently and with greater intensity when the researcher is a stranger to the culture studied and rejects stories that bear a different cultural load. We, however, seek to claim otherwise. Perhaps researchers who are within the culture studied and feel familiar with it would be the ones most likely to reject stories perceived as “too strange” or “too astounding.” Researchers’ familiarity with their own culture is thus liable to work to their detriment, rendering them more likely to rule out information that does not conform with the cultural order that they perceive as familiar. In most cases, they may be right, but the few times that they are not, the different, new, and challenging information will be lost.

Conversely, Gabriel (2004) posits that a story may deceive us precisely because its meaning rings true. “Truth does not make sense, it exceeds measure,” claims similarly Minh-ha (1989, p. 150). Could it be that the more authentic a story seems, the more reason we have to approach it with caution? Might it be that the closer the narrative gets to the truth, the greater the likelihood of a veil of deception?

The problem in identifying the narrative’s “truthlikeness” leads most researchers to rely on intuition. Beyond the moments of confusion, such as those aroused by Soe’s story, such reliance may also lead to a converse error. By “converse error,” we refer not to inclusion of erroneous and misleading stories in the study, but rather to the words of the informants that are perceived by researchers as untenable and are consequently tossed into the “recycle bin,” whereas it is actually precisely these words that are significant, different, and innovative.

The literature is silent regarding the converse error—the researcher’s disregard of potentially valuable information perceived as “deviant.” We posit that researchers screen out segments—even if not consciously so—that they consider too divergent, bizarre, or innovative. Lacking sufficient tools, stories that arouse incredulity or questions might too often be disregarded and not included in the study. Although it is erroneous to use incorrect information for structuring a theory, it is equally wrong to toss information out for fear that it is questionable, when it may well possess the potential for a significant contribution to research.

We claim that it is precisely the deviant and extraordinary data, that does not conform with the researcher’s expectations and knowledge of the culture studied, that is rejected because it is perceived as improbably. Often, what remains in the study is only the banal, familiar material that corroborates the theory, conforming with what is already known or deviating from it only to a predictable extent. “Legitimate” discoveries, such as a new waterfall or a small island in a river, are accepted as appropriate, rendering it difficult to discover more revolutionary data. The converse error makes it difficult for researchers to learn about the culture and society, leaving them and the scientific community with knowledge that conforms to known rules and theories, to what is considered coherent in the literature and the discipline in which they were schooled.

Soe’s story opens the way to new learning precisely because her vitality and functional abilities do not conform with Western knowledge. In Western culture, people who have undergone severe trauma generally have difficulty in coping, functioning, and forming social ties (Solomon, 1998) and are believed to require extensive therapy to overcome the trauma. Soe, a popular tourist guide, acquired fluent English, supports her family and leads a rich and full life. The functional picture that Soe portrays—if not consigned to the researcher’s recycle bin—could challenge existing theories and, in this case, may possibly divert attention to coping methods different from those known in the West.

Relativism presumably protects the researcher from stumbling over the converse error. It maintains that the narrative represents the inner world of informants, their experiences and the meaning they ascribe to them and consequently should be accepted. It limits research to the boundaries of “discourse” (Clifford & Marcus, 1986) that is not necessarily grounded or reflected in reality and presents the narrative as a product of construction in which the text and author are involved, but not necessarily truthlikeness, representation of reality or facts.

Obviously, we claim that the more extreme relativism is, the more meaningless it becomes, and the assumption of such unlimited relativism itself constitutes a kind of methodological problem: If everything has meaning, then to a certain extent, meaning becomes meaningless. The question concerning whether the actions described occurred or not is a legitimate one. Even under the umbrella of relativism, researchers do not accept anything or everything. They seek to locate valuable information and in this process apply various “filters,” some of them stronger than any relativistic paradigm they may have acquired during their professional experience. Relativism, according to Fish (1995), is a stand people adopt but do not act on.

We believe that not everything is relative, not everything can be accepted without questioning or without raising doubts. As researchers, we seek to learn new aspects of
life and culture from the narratives and for this purpose, the narratives must not only be perceived as reliable and convincing but also actually present a certain mirrored picture of reality. Knowledge is acceptable by virtue of its correspondence to the phenomena it intends to represent (Hammersley, 2001).

A narrative, we claim, must be truthful, but in the absence of an objective method of determining its veracity, we must at least be cautious not to accept every narrative in the name of relativism and conversely not to automatically disregard doubtful or discomfited narratives.

Methodological tools and criteria for judging a good narrative (such as progressiveness, plausibility, and the presence of an engaging plot) do not provide adequate response to assessment of the credibility of a narrative. What, then, does the researcher do—during and after the interview—with the doubt and confusion, with the desire to know and understand? Researchers can make sure not to ignore that moment when they encounter an informant whose words are untenable. They can discern, recognize, and even describe it in writing, once reports of this type are accepted by the scientific community. Vagueness and uncertainty are not necessarily shortcomings and may also be a source of power (Flanagan, 1985), especially in qualitative research. It is thus possible to allocate a place in research for discoveries that the researcher leaves with questions. An additional examination of the informant’s words, especially when they depart from the established body of knowledge or deviate from those of other interviews, may lead, at times, to the discovery of valuable cultural and social information.

Greater receptivity to this issue and sharing of material laden with researchers’ doubts call for a different kind of writing. It may be significant for researchers to include informants’ statements that they perceive as incredulous, thus sharing their uncertainties. As such, researchers effectively enable readers and colleagues to examine these issues and apply them to data they possess or experiences they encountered, thus allowing research to develop. When various researchers with different knowledge and experiences face the data, a situation may result in which even if the informant’s horizons do not merge with that of the interviewers, they may indeed interface with those of colleagues and readers, thereby expanding the body of knowledge.

**Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**Notes**

1. Earlier anthropological studies confronted the researcher’s difficulties and at times, even addressed the inability to understand informants’ declarations that were deemed unacceptable (in Smith, 1993). Subsequently, researchers analyzed similar statements in the spirit of functionalism, a point of view that aspires toward explaining informants’ statements according to the principles, language, and context particular to the unique culture (Evans-Pritchard, 1956) or in a symbolic manner (Geertz, 1973), wherein suspending doubt and criticism enabled researchers to recognize the declarations as representative of an experience that has no internal contradictions, at least in their own cultural context.

2. The relationship between memory and past is complex. The way narratives relate or reveal events of the past differ considerably among interviewees. The problem, notes Drexler (2006), of using narratives to research violent events in conflict situations is not one of truth but rather of liability and accountability (p. 315).

3. Such feelings regarding unclear motivations arise in Bohannan’s description of her research in West Africa under the assumed name Bowen: “I found myself in the spare time amusement of people who told me what they considered it good for me to know and what they were interested in at the moment” (Bowen, 1964, p. 38).

4. Perception of the “other’s” narrative is neither straightforward nor simplistic. Researchers apply various methods to interpret or impart meaning to narratives. Josselson (2004) describes two possible approaches: One, hermeneutics of faith, expresses the informants’ voice from their own point of view, while through the other, hermeneutics of suspicion, the researcher reveals and interprets the hidden, unconscious meaning—beyond the self-evident.

5. Even the marginal comment mentioned by DeGloma (2007), noting that he does not relate to the truth or falsehood of the narratives, is depicted as extraordinary.

6. According to Freilich (1970), the paucity of studies on the topic, even in the period preceding postpositivism, stems primarily from the efforts of researchers to blur and conceal their having probably been manipulated and the embarrassment they might have suffered. Researchers also avoid hinting that their relationships with informants are not as personal or as close as they try to present. Alternatively, they may be apprehensive about violating the principles of political correctness.

7. According to Kvale (1988), the quantity of data may exceed a thousand pages.

8. Not every sincere narrative or narrative that reflects inner truth echoes events. We do not wish to elaborate about the differences, however, assuming that most narratives, if sincere, do reflect different aspects of events and experiences.

9. The H’mong highlanders are one of 54 official ethnic groups in Vietnam. The earliest H’mong settled in the northern area around 1820. Since then, H’mong have remained relatively
autonomous in their sociopolitical organization and economic activity. Their livelihoods generally rely on subsistence production, supported by collection of forest products, commerce, tourism and textile manufacture. Since unification in 1975, Vietnam has been committed to integrating all such highland societies into the Viet nation, the Communist state, and the national economy. This vigorous policy has been carried out through the relentless extension of infrastructure, national education in the Vietnamese language, and economic reorganization (Tapp, 2002; Turner, 2007).

10. The informant’s real name, like those of others mentioned in the study, has been changed.

11. In the H’mong culture, when a man wants to propose marriage, he and his comrades “kidnap” the woman and take her to his parents’ home for three days. He does not touch her. During that period, Soe, for example, slept with the man’s sisters or with other women in the “kidnapper’s” family. If the woman agrees to marry the man at the end of the three-day period, she drinks an alcoholic beverage together with her intended husband and if she refuses she returns to her home.

12. Soe said her mother remarried nine years ago. As she says she is twenty-one, she would have been twelve. But here, she says she was fourteen when her mother remarried. Why do the numbers make a difference? Is it a math problem? Or might she want to appear younger for marriage purposes?

13. In this context, “everyday normalcy” refers to the “cognitive style which characterizes the natural attitude, that is to say, in brief, a system of representations which, in a given society exists on the level of “what goes without saying”: the warp and woof of those actions, discourses, concepts, and interpretations which are an integral part of daily life; those symbols and meanings which are undefined yet tacitly accepted by everyone, and which are at the same time not subject to interpretation because they are overshadowed by the trivial actions and fundamental interactions of daily life” (De Sardan, 1992, pp. 10-11).

14. In tourist accommodations, toilets are built beside the houses and guests sleep on beds with soft mattresses. There are refrigerators and even television sets. For breakfast, pancakes and bananas are served. These houses are entirely different from the prevailing one. Presuming that the study reorganization (Tapp, 2002; Turner, 2007).

15. The importance of the informant’s sincerity to the process of analysis may be learned from Margaret Mead’s well-known study Coming of Age in Samoa (Mead, 2001). Mead drew conclusions and built an extensive theory concerning adolescence based on informants’ statements. Freeman (1986) challenged Mead’s data, claiming the informants’ words did not reflect “reality” and that for various reasons, they described a different picture from the prevailing one. Presuming that the informants did not lie to Freeman but to Mead, the untruthful stories have a far-reaching effect on the conclusions drawn and the theory that Mead developed.

References


Jacobs, R. (2007). There are no civilians; we are all at war: Nuclear war shelter and survival narratives during the early cold war. *Journal of American Culture, 30*(2), 401-416.


**Bios**

**Naomi Weiner-Levy**, PhD, is a social psychologist and codirector of MEd program at David Yellin Academic College in Jerusalem. Her fields of interest include implications of cultures and crossing cultures on identity and gender among Vietnamese, Palestinian women, and immigrants. She has also published articles regarding issues of qualitative methodology.

**Ariela Popper-Giveon**, PhD, is currently teaching at David Yellin Academic Collage in Jerusalem and The Open University. Her fields of interest include integrative oncology, traditional healing, notably women healers, as well as Palestinian women in Israel, as well as their coping strategies. She also has an active interest in qualitative methodology.