Narrative CVs – evaluative storytelling and the construction of academic value(s)

Dr Justyna Bandola-Gill

University of Birmingham

Abstract

In recent years, narrative CVs have gained prominence in the UK and internationally. This format aims to replace the traditional list-like CV and asks researchers for a descriptive story of their contributions to the field, leadership potential and wider societal impact. The key motivation behind introducing this format was to capture a wider variety of experiences and achievements beyond a narrow understanding of academic excellence. But do narrative CVs realise this promise? This project explores this question by focusing on the evaluative processes involved in the assessment of narrative CVs (as opposed to traditional ones). Employing an innovative methodology of vignette-based interviews, this study identifies different evaluative lenses mobilised in the assessment of narrative CVs, including evaluative story-telling and story-listening. This study offers insights into the conceptual stretching of 'excellence' by exploring it as a process of addition rather than an extension.

Introduction

Recent years have witnessed a growing critique of research metrics (e.g., journal impact factors or citation counts) as promoting a narrow understanding of 'good' research (de Rijcke et al., 2016) and damaging research culture (Wellcome Trust, 2020). In response to this critique, UKRI (2021) introduced Resume4Researchers (R4R), a new CV format aimed at reconfiguring the reward and recognition system. R4R – a single format for all seven research councils – rather than a list of publications or research grants, asks researchers for an outline of their contributions to the field, leadership potential and wider societal impact. The format of a narrative CV involves a structured description of achievements across four modules without any list-like information[1]. The goal of this assessment innovation is to move away from publication metrics and instead "to broaden the range of things that researchers and innovators get recognition for" (Frances Downey, cited in Lacchia, 2021). UKRI lists multiple reasons behind the introduction of the narrative CV – from the responsible research assessment ethos and EDI considerations to cross-sectoral mobility and career developments[2].

---

[1] See: https://www.ukri.org/publications/resume-for-research-and-innovation-r4ri-template/

[2] See: https://www.ukri.org/what-we-do/supporting-healthy-research-and-innovation-culture/research-and-innovation-culture/supporting-the-community-adoption-of-r4r-like-narrative-cvs/narrative-cvs-what-they-are-and-why-use-them/

The narrative CV is not just a UK innovation – indeed this format is gaining international traction as a growing number of countries are introducing this format, including the Dutch Research Council, the Health Board of Ireland and Science Foundation Ireland, the Luxembourg National Research Fund, the Swiss National Foundation and the National Institutes of Health in the United States (Fritch et al., 2021).

And yet, despite this undeniable promise of narrative CVs, little is known about the processes of evaluation of these formats. Narrative CVs have been the focus of practice-based opinions and evaluations of the format's effectiveness (Meadmore et al., 2022; Hatch and Curry, 2020), but the scholarly work has been limited (Bordignon et al., 2023). This project aimed to address this gap by providing new theoretical tools supporting the understanding of evaluative inquiry in assessing academic CVs. Against this backdrop, this project explored two questions: i) What types of evaluative inquiry are mobilised in the assessment of narrative CVs?; ii) How is the academic value constructed in the process of evaluation of narrative CVs?

These questions are of key importance as the introduction of a narrative CV is underpinned by the assumption that using this format will lead to different effects (if not only outcomes) than a traditional CV assessment. This project explored the process of research assessment as inherently a practice of narrativization as the decision-makers "think in terms of stories" (Kaplan, 1986; Czarniawska, 2004). It approaches the assessment of different types of CVs as driven by the logic of story-telling versus story-listening (Dillon and Craig, 2021) in order to identify the key components of 'narrative inquiry' in evaluation – e.g. how evaluators interpret, categorise, and compare and rank different narratives. Thus, the case study of narrative CVs explores the tension between evaluation and valuation (e.g., Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006; Lamont, 2009) in the process of research assessment. Narrative CVs are aimed at capturing multiple and co-existing values, such as academic excellence, societal impact and leadership. Therefore, CVs are subjected to different "regimes of valuation" (Fochler, 2016)– making some practices visible (worthy and legitimate) whilst others become invisible (irrelevant or illegitimate). This project explores the situated practices of valuation involved in the assessment of narrative CVs to investigate whether this format indeed lends itself to an appreciation of different values and the extension of the idea of 'excellence' beyond metrics.

Methods

This project involved vignette-based qualitative interviews to explore the differences in the assessment of standard and narrative CVs. The use of vignettes is an effective method for mimicking real-life experiences and exploring participants' interpretative processes (Jenkins et al., 2010). The participants (20 in total) were academics with experience sitting on the UKRI panels. Participants were asked to pretend they were part of the evaluation panel of a new early-career fellowship scheme. They were presented with instructions to select one candidate to be awarded a fellowship and a short description of the terms of the fellowship (created on the basis of existing UKRI fellowship scheme descriptions). Participants were presented with a set of two 'mock' CVs: standard and narrative CVs (based on an R4R template). The vignettes were developed based on real-life UKRI-funded academic profiles, which were anonymised for the purpose of the study. Interviewees were asked to assess the different types of resumes and select one candidate whilst narrating their thinking processes. At the end of the interview, the interviewees were asked to reflect on their experience and any challenges to the review process they identified during the exercise.

Findings

Evaluation as story-telling (traditional CVs)

When evaluating the traditional CVs, the interviewees followed a nearly entirely standardised process – in each section, they looked at the same elements in the same order (even though the assessment of 'quality' at times slightly differed). In their assessment, they mobilised traditional criteria of merit: looking at the universities the candidate obtained their PhD from/work at ("prestigious institutions" – Interviewee 3), looking at the publication list and, in most cases, counting the number of publications, evaluating the journals where the papers were published (including looking them up and checking their impact factor). In the overall assessment, the interviewees were focused on what is 'missing' – both in the CV (e.g. information about whether the candidate finished their PhD in 3 or 4 years, with whom they conducted KE/impact activities) but also in the candidate profiles (more extensive teaching experience, solo-authored publications).

During the evaluation, the interviewees created narratives of the candidate's achievements based on the list-like information (i.e. "the candidate managed to secure a postdoctoral position", "published widely"). Strikingly, the constructed narratives about the achievements

were often quite negative, and the interviewees/assessors often speculated about the intentions of the CV writer. For example:

"So that's a bit odd; that makes it look more impressive than it might be" (Interviewee 1).

Therefore, the interviewees were focused on the 'negative picture' of the CV – not only on what is presented but also on what is not presented and why. Strikingly, this practice did not interfere with the overall assessment of the candidate, which was predominantly very positive. This contradiction between the evaluative narrative and the final assessment indicates that this critique is a part of the evaluation process – a ritual rather than an outcome.

Evaluation as story-listening

It took the interviewees nearly twice as long to assess the narrative CV as compared to the traditional format evaluation. The interviewees employed a less standardised approach to assessing the narrative CVs – which is not surprising considering that this is a new format and the 'evaluator's eye' (Derrick, 2018) is yet to be developed. The interviewees assessed the narrative section-by-section or read the entire text first and then, in most cases, moved back and forth between different modules. Generally, the interviewees were more forgiving about the 'gaps' in the provided information and were less critical of the overall candidates' profiles during the evaluation process (and, again, despite the fact that the overall assessment of the two candidates was similar and generally positive). Nevertheless, the interviewees still expressed a critique of a "PR" embedded in the narratives and exaggerated claims made by the candidate. For example:

> "It seems a bit sort of PR, it seems like anyone could write this about themselves. Because nobody's going to write, 'I'm a really bad interdisciplinary scholar, not really very much committed to sustaining relations' so in that way, they could big themselves up, as the other [candidate] did. But then here we go - they're giving evidence, which is good, so they're trying to evidence this commitment that they've stated upfront." (Interviewee 2)

Even though the assessors were not uncritical of the candidate, they were less challenging to the general narrative (and the intentions behind it) that was presented by the candidate in this format.

Expanding excellence?

The narrative CV assessment allowed the interviewees to appreciate a broader set of criteria (notably impact) in the assessment process. However, arguably, the evidence that these different categories are entering the evaluative inquiry as 'excellence' is, at best, ambiguous. The interviewees assessed and valued various practices (including impact, public engagement or mentoring), going beyond just standard achievements such as publications – however, they differentiated these practices from the concept of 'excellence', which was still reserved for the more traditional criteria of merit. Therefore, the notion of excellence was expanded not by stretching to accommodate more diverse practices but rather by adding 'excellence adjacent' categories.

Furthermore, the narrative CV format did not mark the complete break from the metricised research assessment. The interviewees re-introduced quantification in the assessment process, for example, by counting the number of publications, checking the journal impact factors (even though, in most cases, they acknowledged the problematic nature of this measure) or requesting additional information they would like to see in the CVs (e.g. grant sizes). Furthermore, using numbers in the narrative CV format was generally seen as strengthening the storyline (akin to other narrative evaluation tools; see Bandola-Gill & Smith, 2022). Perhaps most interestingly, nearly all the interviewees saw the lack of a list of publications as the major weakness of the narrative CV format and mentioned they would like to see both the narrative and the list of publications. Therefore, the case study of narrative CVs indicates that quantification is deeply embedded as an epistemology of research assessment and moving away from it as a mode of assessment is challenging and requires going beyond just the assessment format.

Conclusion

This project offered insights into the different evaluative logic of narrative and standard CVs. The traditional CV assessment was guided by the highly standardised 'logic of challenge' – the interviewees followed the prescribed set of steps to assess the CVs and looked for deviation from the implicit 'ideal' candidate. Therefore, this logic was oriented towards looking for gaps and weak points in the CVs – and the narratives created by the assessors based on list-like information were often negative and aimed at challenging the storyline presented (or assumed to be presented) by the candidate. The overall logic of assessment in the narrative CVs was significantly different – here, the logic was one of 'addition'. The interviewees generally took

the self-narrative presented by the candidate for granted and did not pose a challenge to the candidate's self-presentation. Consequently, the reviewers were more open to different types of practices and achievements. Therefore, the values constructed in the process of assessment of narrative CVs were, in fact, more diverse (within the limits of 'restrictive storytelling' used in the evaluation process – Bandola-Gill and Smith, 2022), and the evaluation was relatively non-standardised and more open when compared to the traditional CV.

Finally, it should be noted that this project took place in a very specific assessment context whereby the narrative CVs were just introduced across the UKRI and all of the research councils. As the interviewees had very limited (or no) experience with this format, their engagement with the narrative CV was relatively open and unrestricted to informal rules, judgements or implicit standards regarding what a 'good narrative' ought to be. It is expected that this might change as the evaluators develop more extensive experience in assessing narrative CVs (especially under time pressure) as well as a broader learning process – including a growing experience of candidates' writing their CVs and the emergence of guidelines and good practice within the sector.

References

Bandola-Gill, J., & Smith, K. E. (2022). Governing by narratives: REF impact case studies and restrictive storytelling in performance measurement. *Studies in Higher Education*, *47*(9), 1857-1871.

Boltanski, L., & Thévenot, L. (2006). *On justification: Economies of worth*. Princeton University Press.

Bordignon, F., Chaignon, L., & Egret, D. (2023). Promoting narrative CVs to improve research evaluation? A review of opinion pieces and experiments. Research Evaluation, rvad013.

Czarniawska, B. (2004). The uses of narrative in social science research. *Handbook of data analysis*, 649-666.

Derrick, G. (2018). *The Evaluators' Eye: Impact Assessment and Academic Peer Review*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Dillon, S., & Craig, C. (2021). *Storylistening: Narrative evidence and public reasoning*. Routledge.

Fochler, M. (2016). Variants of epistemic capitalism: Knowledge production and the accumulation of worth in commercial biotechnology and the academic life sciences. *Science, Technology, & Human Values*, *41*(5), 922-948.

Fritch, R., Hatch, A., Hazlett, H., & Vinkenburg, C. (2021). Using Narrative CVs: Process Optimization and bias mitigation. Retrieved from: https://sfdora.org/resource/using-narrative-cvs-process-optimization-and-bias-mitigation/ [accessed 18/12/2023]

Hatch, A., & Curry, S. (2020). Changing how we evaluate research is difficult, but not impossible. Elife, 9, e58654.

Jenkins, N., Bloor, M., Fischer, J., Berney, L., & Neale, J. (2010). Putting it in context: the use of vignettes in qualitative interviewing. Qualitative research, 10(2), 175-198.

Kaplan, T. J. (1986). The narrative structure of policy analysis. Journal of Policy Analysis and Management, 5(4), 761-778.

Lacchia (2021). A new form of CV for researchers. Another step away from narrow, biased measures of success in science. Online: https://www.nature.com/nature-index/news/new-form-of-cv-resume-for-researchers-scientists [accessed: 15/06/2023]

Lamont, M. (2009). *How professors think: Inside the curious world of academic judgment.* Harvard University Press.

Meadmore, K., Recio-Saucedo, A., Blatch-Jones, A., Church, H., Cross, A., Fackrell, K., ... & Tremain, E. (2022). Thematic framework for exploring the use of a narrative CV, initial findings from secondary analysis of Royal Society data. NIHR Open Res, 2(15), 15.

Rijcke, S. D., Wouters, P. F., Rushforth, A. D., Franssen, T. P., & Hammarfelt, B. (2016). Evaluation practices and effects of indicator use—a literature review. Research Evaluation, 25(2), 161-169.

UKRI (2022). UKRI introduces new Resume for Research and Innovation. Online: https://www.ukri.org/news/ukri-launches-new-resume-for-research-and-innovation/ [accessed 15/06/2023]

Wellcome Trust (2020). What researchers think about the culture they work in. Online: https://wellcome.org/reports/what-researchers-think-about-research-culture [accessed 15/06/2023]