Crafting Credible Homicide Narratives: Forensic Technoscience in Contemporary Criminal Investigations

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Drawing upon qualitative data gathered during a four-year ethnographic study of homicide investigation in Britain, this paper explores how detectives, scientists, and other experts use findings from forensic sciences and technologies (FSTs) when constructing and modifying pre-trial homicide narratives. We consider how these narratives unfold from the earliest moments of the investigation and are told and re-told, as they are assembled into one coherent narrative fit for elocution in criminal court. We explore the embedding of findings from FSTs into narrative; the attention given to narrating character, motive, and intent; the use of narrative shifts to accommodate unwelcome findings from FSTs; attempts to deal with ambiguity during narrative creation; and, crucially, the reciprocal relationship between narrative and evidence. We suggest that narratives, such as those that we examine, are not mere chronologies, but the artful products of coordinated professional practice. Our research suggests that illuminating the origins and unfolding of such narratives during criminal investigation is as important as recording their final polished deployment within the theatre of the courtroom.

Keywords: narrative criminal justice, homicide investigation, sense-making, forensic science and technology, ethnography.

Introduction

Homicide investigation is primarily "sense-making" work (Innes 2003; Salet 2017; Smith, Pederson, and Burnett 2014) and in performing this work, detectives, in collaboration with a host of other criminal justice actors, necessarily construct, test, modify, and present, narratives of the fatal event.[1] Faced with what are often messy and chaotic scenes, and ambiguous or contested information, investigative actors seek to reduce levels of uncertainty and to provide, in conjunction with prosecutors,[2] a comprehensive and compelling narrative to present to a jury in the course of a criminal trial. Given the expansion of forensic science and technology it is perhaps unsurprising that criminal justice actors increasingly use forensic sciences and technologies (FSTs) to support this aim and, specifically, to produce convincing answers to critical questions in a criminal trial; who? What? When? Where? How? And why? How such narratives are constructed, as well as the ways in which findings from FSTs are woven into these narratives and to what effect, is an under-researched area.

For Frank (2015:35), narratives are necessarily "polyphonic," merging multiple voices, and in his research on ill peoples' stories, he found a variety of borrowed words, phrases and their encompassing logics, from medical professionals, loved ones, friends, and fellow ill people. Like these and other such narratives, the pre-trial (a term we use to refer to all stages of an investigation prior to the point of a trial) narratives that we discuss in this paper are informed by multiple voices, notably those of detectives, scientists, other experts,

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[1] We use the terms narrative and story interchangeably, as others have done, but acknowledge that for many analysts, the two are qualitatively different. Whereas some analysts view story as episode-oriented, others deem story to be that which actually happened (see Presser 2008).

[2] We use the term prosecutor to overcome differences in terminology between England and Wales, and Scotland. It refers to those who have responsibility for prosecuting crimes, including beginning legal proceedings and conducting the case against a defendant at court.

and prosecutors alongside those of suspects, witnesses, family members, and informants. Pre-trial narratives are initially constructed by those who attend the crime scene and are shaped and re-shaped as investigators come together (formally and informally) at various times to discuss, negotiate, and co-construct a commonly agreed account of the actions and events in question. These various criminal justice actors are ever mindful of the potential adversarial trial to which suspects will be put, and of the kinds of counter-narratives that the Defense may present.[3]

This paper, based on findings generated during a four-year ethnographic study of the use of FSTs in homicide investigation in Britain, explores how pre-trial homicide narratives are constructed by a variety of actors. Specifically, we unravel how detectives, scientists, other experts, and prosecutors use findings from FSTs to create, build, test, and support an emergent singular pre-trial narrative, which is arranged ultimately as the prosecution trial narrative presented at court. Our aim is to illuminate in detail how pre-trial homicide narratives are crafted by criminal justice actors and the reciprocal relationship between narrative and evidence. As we shall discover, forensic technoscience both informs, and is informed by, narrative.

We adopt a broad and inclusive view of the range of forensic disciplines that can be utilized in criminal investigations. Some forensic technologies are deployed within a controlled laboratory environment by scientists who are intimately familiar with them and have a detailed understanding of their nature and application (e.g. DNA profiling). Others are utilized in the field by personnel who may be trained in their use but who may or may not have a detailed understanding of their technological or scientific basis. Examples of the latter

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[3] Whilst we acknowledge how these considerations inform the pre-trial narrative, space does not permit a detailed consideration of how detectives, scientists, and prosecutors pre-empt defense narratives.

technologies would include the various chemical, physical, or electronic screening applications used at scenes. Some technologies are used routinely in many cases, whereas others are more rarely adopted. Included within our notion of FSTs are technologies that have been designed with no direct forensic purpose, but may yield information that has forensic significance, such as mobile phones, computers, and CCTV.

Various theoretical and empirical studies inform our research, including work on legal storytelling, research based broadly within the genre of science and technology studies, and the newly emergent narrative criminology. In the sections that follow, we consider these bodies of knowledge. We then move on to describe the methodology and the data that inform the present study, before presenting our findings and discussing their implications.

The narrative turn

First published in French in 1966, Barthes's (1975) *Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative* reflected on the long interest in narrative by literary historians, and also accorded it a central place in the emerging genre of socio-cultural analysis of which he was a major proponent. His assertion that "there is not, there never has been anywhere, any people without narrative" (Barthes 1975:237) animated the work of many of the scholars who contributed to the "narrative turn" that happened in the human sciences during the closing decades of the 20th century. During that time, and continuing into the present day, historians (e.g. White 1978, 1980, 1984), philosophers (e.g. Ricoeur 1988), sociologists (e.g. Maines 1993; Plummer 1983; Smith 2005), linguists (e.g. Labov and Waletzky 1967), psychologists (e.g. Bruner 1991), socio-legal scholars (e.g. Ewick and Silbey 1995), and criminologists (Presser and Sandberg 2015) have contributed to this turn by exploring the variety of narrative forms that are used by people to explain events and actions by reference to their location

within comprehensible orderly sequences.[4]

Most scholars view three elements as key to narrative – causality, temporality, and character. Narratives are said to follow a particular structure or plot that describes "the cause-and-effect relationships between events that take place over a particular time period and that impact particular characters" (Dahlstrom 2014:13614). Plot then, "is the means by which what would otherwise be mere occurrences are made into moments in the unfolding story" (Polletta et al. 2011:111). It is also recognized that narrative recipients usually feel a sense of empathy with at least one character (Polletta et al. 2011:111; see also Sarbin 1995). A narrative approach to social analysis contrasts with efforts to explain social life by reference to factors or formula. As Maruna (2015:ix) puts it "when human beings, in every culture, seek to understand 'why did she do it?' the answer is not a mathematical formula but a story" (see also Polkinghorne 1988). If people live in and through narrative, then it is to these told stories that we need to turn if we are properly to explain how people - institutionally, collectively, and individually - act.

It is impossible to delineate here all of the many ways in which the transdisciplinary character of narrative has played a part in recent and contemporary social research (see Polletta et al. 2011). Instead, we want briefly to describe some examples of previous work on narrative formations which are especially relevant to the analysis undertaken in this paper. Once we have done this, we will go on to describe how evidence from FSTs is both shaped by, and used to shape, the narratives that emerge through the course of criminal investigations that we have observed and recorded.

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[4] See Polkinghorne (1988) for an account of some of the key early moments in the narrative turn. See Hyvärinen (2010) for a more contemporary, revisionist view.

Legal narratives and narrativity

In one of his many explorations of the nature and significance of narrative, White (1980) suggests that "the value attached to narrativity in the representation of real events arises out of a desire to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary" (p. 27). Criminal trials, and accounts of the social actions on which they adjudicate, are recognized instances of efforts to generate this kind of narrative and pragmatic closure. In the law, narrative is both topic and resource, and so as Olson (2014) reminds us, "Narration plays a central role in legal discourse, and permits law to be communicated, adjudicative acts to be justified, and their principles to be explained" (p. 1). Many studies of law-in-action have explored the scope and consequences of this centrality, and some have been especially effective in their deconstruction of courtroom narratives and how they are deployed in persuasive and contested sense-making in these (usually) adversarial settings. These include: Bennett and Feldman (2014) on stories as "systematic means of storing, bringing up to date, rearranging, comparing, testing, and interpreting available information about social behaviour" (p. 17); Den Boer (1993) on the abstraction and polarization of courtroom narratives; Conley and Conley (2009) on the relevance of narrative to jury evidence-processing; Jackson (1988a, 1988b, 1990, 1996) on narrative typification and the courtroom contests between competing narrative accounts; and Brooks (2017) on the narrative poetics of legal arguments and opinions.

A small number of socio-legal and criminological researchers have studied the construction of narratives prior to their presentation in trials. Works by Sanders (1987) and by Innes (2002) have illuminated the process of case-building and sense-making from this perspective. In his account of case-building at the time of the emergence of the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), Sanders (1987) explores the construction of prosecution stories by

the police, as well as some of the ways in which such stories can be attacked by defendants and their advocates. In the course of this study, he usefully reminds us that the strengths and weaknesses of prosecution cases rests as much on pre-trial processes as they do on trial performances by advocates and witnesses. In Innes's (2002) symbolic interactionist account of murder investigations, the construction of a "plausible chronology" (p. 682) by detectives is represented as a way of discursively accounting for events, actors, and actions, as a resource for shaping ongoing investigative action, and as a means of pre-testing the credibility and legality of potential prosecutorial claims. van Oorschot (2014) examines the processes of "case visualization" by Dutch legal actors, and considers the ways in which the legal case file as a material object is developed and known by legal actors in what she describes as the "story-before-the-trial" (p. 454). A final example is found in recent ethnographic work by Offit (2019) on US federal prosecutors' creation and critiques of opening and closing statements. Offit neatly illustrates how prosecutors relied on each other as "sounding boards for narrative presentations that would have to pass muster with discerning and potentially sceptical lay interlocutors|" (p. 92-93).

In various ways, these studies help us to understand how legal actors construct narratives. In order, however, for narratives to be created, the teller has to make sense of and organize or - as Goffman (1975) puts it – "frame" information. Goffman defined his frame construct as "principles of organization which govern the subjective meanings we assign to social events" (1975:11). The notion of framing is rooted in the constructionist dictum that meanings do not naturally or routinely attach themselves to the events or experiences that we encounter, rather they arise, instead, through "interpretive processes mediated by culture" (see Snow et al. 2007:387). "By rendering events or occurrences meaningful, frames function to organize experience and guide action, whether individual or collective" (Snow et al. 1986:464). Snow et al. (2007) suggest that frames perform three core functions in interpretive

work. First, they *focus* our attention by highlighting what is relevant (Goffman's "in-frame") or irrelevant (Goffman's "out-of-frame"). Second, they act as *articulation* devices tying together various elements, so that one set of meanings or "story" rather than another is told about them. Third, they serve a *transformative* function by reconstructing how certain objects of attention are seen and understood (in relation to each other or the actor) (Snow et al. 2007:387). For Goffman ([1959] 1990:26), framing takes place during (face-to-face) interactions. Framing is an important concept in the context of homicide investigation and the creation of narratives because detectives and prosecutors inevitably have to select, from a vast array of information, what to tell and how to tell it. Moreover, they do this collectively.

Few criminologists have employed Goffman's frame analysis. Two recent notable exceptions are Hawk and Dabney's (2014) exploration of culturally based storylines that aid US homicide detectives in prioritizing cases and managing the emotions that accompany their work and Salet's (2017) examination of how Dutch police officers interpret and reconstruct crime. Both studies found frame analysis to be a valuable heuristic device for understanding how detectives makes sense of their work.

Forensic science and the construction of legal narratives

On traditional notions of objective reality, an understanding of the production and use of science and technology in general, and forensic science and technology in particular, may seem unable to benefit from the attention given to narrative as outlined above. If it were true that "evidence speaks for itself," then such evidence becomes available to detectives, prosecutors, and adjudicators without a narrator and external to any narrative accounting. However, a moment's reflection suggests that any such notion of un-authored declarations is an epistemic and social impossibility. As Stubbins and Stubbins (2009:101) assert, "Evidence without a narrative is mute," and for Jasanoff (2006:339), "Scientific truth-making … is

always a social enterprise. It is situated in particular places and circumstances; it is context-specific, purposive, and culturally embedded" (for an "insider's" view, see Brown 2015). These arguments are well articulated in Edmond's (1999) detailed account of the construction and deconstruction of scientific evidence in courtroom trials in which the concept of narrative is given a central place.

In light of such counter claims, we need to consider, following Woolgar (2002), the sociomaterial entanglements of forensic and other evidential contributions with legal narratives. A recent paper by Coeckelbergh and Reijers (2016) deploys Ricouer's influential approach to narrative in order to examine - in general terms - the "narrative capacity of technologies" (p. 337), and the mutual shaping of humans and technologies, an idea which is taken up by a number of other writers more closely focused on the narrative uses of material sciences and technologies.

The interweaving of social actions and material objects into credible investigatory and prosecutorial narratives has already been the subject of (sometimes explicit, but often implicit) attention in a number of studies of FSTs. Early instances of such studies focused on particular types of forensic evidence and how, within adversarial trials, the evidential legitimacy of different kinds of forensic science practice and products are asserted, assumed, contested, and denied (see for example, Goodwin 1994 on CCTV evidence; Cole 2001 on fingerprint evidence; and a series of studies of DNA evidence including Halfon 1998; Lynch 2013; and Lynch et al. 2008).

A more recent study influenced by these earlier accounts, and focusing more directly on the concept of narrative shaping, is Kruse's (2016) ethnographic account of the deployment of forensic science within the Swedish criminal justice system. Kruse (2016) shows how results from forensic laboratories are transformed into legally meaningful evidence "through legal storytelling, a way of simultaneously presenting evidence, making it

legally meaningful, and evaluating it" (p. 16). The process of constructing narratives enables actors to evaluate forensic results and transform them into evidence that has meaning and significance for court, and Kruse argues that the end story told at court "is a conglomeration of different kinds of knowledge, forensic and other evidence, woven together, intertwined with legal stories, and translated from epistemic culture to epistemic culture" (p. 131).

Narrative criminology

Narrative criminology, formulated by Presser (2009) and first brought together by Presser and Sandberg (2015) in an edited collection, is "an inquiry based on the view of stories as instigating, sustaining, or effecting desistance from harmful action" (p. 1). To date, narrative criminology has tended to focus exclusively on offender narratives, seeking to understand stories of crime. Nevertheless, the ideas that narrative criminology have synthesized can be applied equally well to the study of criminal justice narratives.

The ways in which stories are assembled and mobilized is paramount to narrative criminologists who take insight from four theoretical traditions: narrative psychology (that emphasizes how speakers seek coherence); ethnomethodology (that reminds us that speakers use narratives as devices in particular social contexts), cultural structuralism (noting that narration is essentially reproductive), and postmodernism (with its focus upon the fragmented and hybrid nature of narrative) (Presser and Sandberg 2015:11). Of particular relevance to our research, narrative criminologists focus on how stories "inspire" and "legitimate action," providing "a culturally feasible path of action" (Presser and Sandberg 2015:287-88). Whilst narrative criminologists have in mind how narrative inspires the actions of criminals (see for example, O'Connor 2015; Presser 2018) we can just as easily consider how narrative inspires criminal justice "action" and how, in turn, action and story become one. Finally, narrative criminologists keenly recognize that "stories promote action by story-tellers *and* by listeners

… and the story probably works differently for each" (Presser and Sandberg 2015:288-89). Criminal justice narratives are "taken-in" by those who create them and, in a different way, by those who receive them. For "tellers," the narrative might help to justify particular investigative action; for "listeners," it might mobilize actions to charge a suspect or find him/her guilty at court (e.g. see Barrera 2019; Offit 2019).

In the following sections of this paper, we use the ideas outlined briefly in these sections to examine in more detail the construction and modification of forensically informed and legally relevant sense-making narratives in the course of the homicide investigations we have studied. This examination is also influenced by Harre's (2002) observation that "an object is transformed from a piece of stuff definable independently of any story line into a social object by its embedment into a narrative" (p. 25). However, we go further than Harre by asserting that the construction, not only the embedding, of such forensic objects is also informed by a potential or emergent narrative produced (and sometimes contested) by a range of investigative actors. The narratives on which we focus are not mere chronologies, but the artful products of coordinated forms of professional practice (see Dupret 2011).

Method

The study and research sites

This paper draws upon data gathered during a four-year ethnographic study of the use of FSTs in British homicide investigations. The broad aims of the research were to provide an in-depth understanding of how FSTs contribute to the police investigation of homicide. The study explored decision-making and sense-making processes and how detectives, forensic scientists, and other experts used the results obtained from FSTs to develop intelligence and evidence. The data include case papers, interview transcripts and ethnographic fieldnotes

relating to 44 (suspected) homicide investigations across four police services.

The four police services that took part in the research were chosen due to their distinctively different models of forensic science provision which, in part, developed in response to the closure of the Forensic Science Service in 2012. Each police service provides a differing level of forensic science provision, ranging from comprehensive services provided by a "public" forensic laboratory through to those police services who have smaller in-house capabilities, such as blood screening, drugs testing, or imaging, but rely on private forensic science providers (FSPs) for the vast majority of their work.[5] In addition, we visited three major private FSPs and two public laboratories in order to gather data on how they operate and, principally, to interview forensic scientists. We also toured one police service's in-house capabilities. All research sites and data related to research participants and homicide cases have been given pseudonyms or disguised to maintain anonymity of the data.

The homicide cases and the data

We retrieved and analyzed a broad range of data relating to 44 homicide investigations. All offences, except for two, took place between 2011 and 2017, with most cases (*n*=32) occurring between 2014 and 2017. Two homicide investigations related to "cold" cases, one from 2005 and another from 1984. Thirty-three of these investigations were "completed" (or virtually completed) at the time of data gathering (i.e. a guilty verdict of murder or manslaughter had been reached at court or agreed through pleas). The remaining 11 cases

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[5] The term public in this context refers to forensic science provision that is funded by the police service or the police authority.

were live homicide investigations[6] that we shadowed as they unfolded, including two cases in which the victims survived despite the prognosis that they were likely to die from their injuries. These cases were investigated as homicides though, ultimately, the suspects were convicted of lesser offences. Additionally, in a third case, the prosecution service directed that no further action would be taken.

The completed homicide cases were selected by the research team from summary lists provided by each police service. The selection of live investigations to shadow was less structured in that we took cases that arose during the study period at each police service (see below). Nevertheless, these cases also represent the kind of diversity reflected in the completed investigations (see Table 1 in the appendix). The 44 cases studied reflect a range of modus-operandi (sharp instrument, blunt instrument, strangulation/asphyxiation, shooting and poisoning) and victim-suspect relationship (partner, child-parent, parent-child, friend/acquaintance and strangers). Our cases include those where suspects were identified very quickly through to complex, protracted investigations that were not resolved for many months or years.

Our research broadly encompassed three phases and forms of data gathering and analysis (i) background documents and homicide case papers, (ii) in-depth interviews, and (iii) ethnographic observations.

Documents and case papers

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[6] Live homicide investigations refers to those that commenced during our fieldwork, as opposed to those that were already solved or "closed".

We gathered a plethora of information on the structures and makeup of the major crime units where homicide teams were located, as well as of all scientific and technical support to these investigators. In addition we gathered detail on the emergence, makeup, and structures of the three major private FSPs. This provided an important set of backdrop documents to which we regularly referred. For each homicide case we retrieved case papers and/or made extensive notes from documents that were on HOLMES2 or available to us as original case papers.[7] These provided us with documentary material to analyze, including police closing reports, policy files from senior investigating officers (SIOs) and crime scene managers, minutes from forensic strategy meetings, briefing notes, statements and reports from forensic scientists and other experts, and prosecution documents. We spent 650 hours (81 working days) retrieving these data.

Ethnographic interviews

In-depth semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 134 criminal justice practitioners who were directly involved in homicide investigation (see Table 2). Interviews took place between January 2015 and December 2018, and with the exception of one, all interviews were, with the permission of interviewees, digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. The average length of interviews was 83 minutes. In addition, we conducted 10 informal interviews with forensic practitioners during tours of forensic science facilities.

In keeping with Spradley (2016) and Wilson-Kovacs (2018), we took the view that data "are produced not collected" (p. 464) through "a series of interactional occurrences" (p.

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[7] HOLMES (Home Office Large Major Enquiry System) is a computerized information management system used for the investigation of major crimes. HOLMES2 is the second version of this system.

6) where the building of trust and rapport between the participants and researcher is key. We were mindful never to reveal to interviewees what other respondents had divulged to us during interview (see Dabney and Brookman 2018). However, we would, where necessary, provide general anonymized insights into emerging data where this facilitated the ethnographic conversation. We were keen to gather participants' views, perceptions, and reflections upon a host of organizational processes and changes as well as details of their work on particular homicide investigations.

We tailored our interview schedules to each participant, according to their role (as detailed in Table 2) and their work on a case. However, all schedules were organized around three broad themes (i) case specific questions (e.g. role and responsibilities, decision-making, whether and how FSTs were used to progress the case) (ii) communication and liaison (e.g. amongst SIOs, forensic scientists, prosecutors) and (iii) challenges and working practices. In addition, we asked forensic scientists and others in specialist roles (e.g. fingerprint experts, CCTV officers) about their background and training, and about giving evidence at court. Our interview schedules were refined as we gained new insights from our participants and through our observations. This iterative process allowed us to explore new areas of interest and probe further existing themes. For example, during our observations of a homicide investigation, the deputy SIO mentioned the difficulties CSMs face when managing SIOs' expectations. We subsequently asked CSMs, forensic scientists and other specialists (e.g. digital forensics, intelligence analysts, CCTV officers) about how they managed the expectations of SIOs and others, such as barristers. Moreover, our choices of who to interview grew throughout the research process as we learnt about new roles and came to realize the value that these additional voices could bring to the research.

[Insert Table 2 near here]

Table 2. Summary of interview data

Ethnographic observations

The third phase of our research involved ethnographic observations of 11 live homicide investigations. This aspect of the research was the most immersive. We spent 700 hours (almost 88 working days) observing different moments of homicide investigation, from the initial scene attendance by homicide detectives through to trials at court. Of these 700 hours, we spent 120 (17%) engaged in joint observations, on occasions taking the opportunity to observe different aspects of the same investigation. We wrote, and later typed up, our fieldnotes separately for these joint observations. Our ability to take verbatim fieldnotes and capture sense-making and decision-making, as well as "off the record" comments in real time allowed us to carefully document the collaborative development of homicide narratives.

Observations took place at all four police services between July 2015 and January 2018, and were staggered to ensure that we were available to respond as soon as we were informed of a homicide. We reached an agreement with each police service that as soon as a homicide occurred (within the timeframes of our fieldwork) we would be informed by mobile telephone and make our way to the major incident room as soon as possible. Depending upon the location, we were able to attend almost immediately or a day or so later.[8]

We were given virtually unfettered access to these live investigations. We entered crime scenes and observed discussion and debate amongst crime scene managers, exhibits

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[8] In some cases we were already undertaking data gathering at the relevant police service and accompanied detectives during their first visit to the crime scene. On other occasions, we received a telephone call at home and had to travel some distance by car, train, or plane, to the police service. We usually missed the first day of the investigation in these instances.

officers, forensic scientists (specializing in chemistry, biology, and firearms), and other experts, such as fire investigators. We accompanied detectives on house-to-house and CCTV enquiries, and attended daily briefings, forensic strategy meetings, senior manager meetings, prosecutors' conferences, and different stages of the trial process. We observed detectives making urgent applications to track suspects' mobile phones, discussing strategies to trace outstanding suspects, and organizing arrest and interview strategies.

We also spent many hours inside major crime units and major incident rooms retrieving documents and data and occasionally observing recordings of suspect interviews and CCTV footage as it emerged. Being embedded within the core hubs of these investigations enabled us to engage with detectives in informal discussion and we invariably spoke to detectives at lunch and during coffee breaks, all of which was invaluable to our overall understanding and appreciation of their work and our ongoing relationships with the investigators. On occasions we were treated as proxy detectives and asked our views about the strength and direction of "evidence" and on one occasion, during a prosecutor's conference, we were both asked to play the role of juror and comment on the persuasiveness of forensic scientists who we had heard present dummy runs of their evidence (see also Offit 2019 on being treated as a proxy juror).

Data analysis

The interview transcripts, fieldnotes, case papers, and notes made from case papers and documents were all uploaded into NVivo 12 and analyzed thematically (Braun and Clark 2006). This involved all four members of the research team engaging with the data at different stages of the project in order to become familiar with it in the first instance and then creating memos containing more general reflections and codes of conceptual categories in accordance with grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss 2008). At regular points the team met

(in person or virtually via Skype) to discuss and debate the emerging findings. Throughout this process some codes were expanded whilst others were collapsed. In this way, and with our different backgrounds and expertise, we developed and agreed more than 450 nodes. For the purposes of this paper, we focus upon 14 nodes that reveal how criminal justice actors collaboratively construct homicide narratives.

Positionality, access, ethical considerations

In terms of positionality, the lead and second author, who collected all of the data, are both white, British females and, at the time of data collection and analysis, were in their early and late forties. We had substantial experience of homicide investigation and the environment of major crime investigation. The lead author had engaged previously in ethnographic research of police homicide units in Britain and the USA, and had the benefit of prior exposure to detectives from different backgrounds and homicide units, and other criminal justice actors. The second author was a former review officer in England[9] and, as a "former insider," had specialist knowledge of systems and processes, and shared occupational knowledge that was of practical benefit but also allowed her to engage in shared stories and conversations about "the job" and investigative work. Whilst homicide investigation is still predominantly a male dominated environment, our positionality meant that we were quickly accepted by a broad range of detectives, SIOs and police investigators as well as prosecutors and forensic

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[9] In Britain, review officers generally review undetected homicides, "cold" cases, domestic homicides, stranger rapes, and long term missing persons. They help to identify good practice and any investigative opportunities that have been overlooked, outlining recommendations for further work.

scientists (many of whom were female and of similar age and ethnicity). The first and second authors jointly observed some investigations and carefully compared fieldnotes. In this way we came to understand some of the different ways that we understood and recorded our observations. There were times when our different experiences and research/practitioner backgrounds likely impacted upon how we received some of the information, stories, and worldviews of the detectives.

Gaining access to the closed world of homicide investigation can be difficult given the sensitive nature of the work of homicide detectives. However, the experience and credibility of the research team (which also included a retired forensic scientist and sociologist of forensic science), plus established relationships with key stakeholders and gatekeepers, were central to negotiating access to research sites and ensuring that the research progressed effectively. Subsequently, the (trusting) relationships that the researchers formed with participants were crucial when renegotiating day-to-day access to people, places, and information (Brookman 2015a:243). The positionality of the lead and second author also impacted on the information that respondents shared (Berger 2015). Respondents frequently disclosed to us sensitive information and occasionally sought our opinions and suggestions about working practices (see also Mason-Bish 2019). The research was conducted in accordance with the British Society of Criminology code of ethics (2015) with particular attention to the issues of informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, and stringent data management protocols.

Findings

In this section, we explore how a variety of criminal justice actors interactively construct and modify pre-trial narratives throughout the course of homicide investigations. We consider how the narrative frames, guides, and (to some extent) constrains how the investigation

proceeds, and how findings from FSTs are both shaped by, and used to shape, emerging narratives through a process of interpretation, evaluation, and negotiation. We explore how particular components (character, motive, and intent) are central to the homicide narrative but are generally inferred by actors. We also explore how criminal justice actors use FSTs to resolve ambiguous or conflicting information or evidence. Lastly, we illustrate how criminal justice actors foreground some voices during the construction of pre-trial narratives, and suppress others. We focus on the journeys of narratives throughout the various phases of a criminal investigation from initial response through to court preparation, noting how actors constantly imagine how the narrative will be perceived and evaluated by judge and jury. Homicides are invariably difficult events to recreate; crime scenes are often chaotic, witnesses and suspects are often not (wholly) truthful, evidence from science and technology is often partial or open to (mis)interpretation, and detectives often face overwhelming amounts of information. Nevertheless, criminal justice actors work hard to construct and present a single, lucid, and compelling homicide narrative capable of overcoming reasonable doubt.

Initiating narrative framings

The seemingly settled story that is told by the Prosecution at court of who killed whom, where, when, how, and why, emerges, is modified, and sedimented, in a variety of texts and in the course of discussions and negotiations between the many actors found within the pre-trial investigation phase. In the earliest stages of an investigation there may be any number of competing and potentially plausible stories that could be told about the fatal event. Such narratives begin to emerge as soon as detectives receive word of a potential homicide. Although the information imparted at this stage is often limited and sometimes factually inaccurate, detectives nevertheless form early impressions about what *kind* of homicide they are dealing with (e.g. domestic, gang-related, or stranger) and what *kind* of killer(s) and/or

victim(s) are involved. As the narratives are assembled, they are framed (Goffman 1975) by these early impressions, "gut feelings," and imaginations, often filtered through detectives' past experiences; they are recorded in documents, told and re-told during team briefings, and, more informally, exchanged during various ad-hoc discussions.

In Operation C04,[10] a male contacted the police reporting concern for his mother (Joan Cook) who he had been unable to contact for four days. Officers attended Joan's flat and determined that she had been murdered. Her throat was cut and, near to her body, police found what they understood to be a bondage item and some beads from a necklace. Aware of a history of domestic violence between Joan and her estranged husband, Simon Cook, detectives quickly categorized the event as a "domestic" murder and the SIO recorded that:

> Simon, estranged husband of Joan, is now a suspect for her murder and will be arrested
> … it is clear that the victim was in fear of Simon finding out where she lived and that he
> had made concerted efforts to do so. She felt that he would not stop trying to find her and
> that he would kill her when he did. (Extract from SIO policy file, Operation C04).

This initial narrative framing, assembled on the first day of the inquiry and based on information "clear" to the SIO, was used to guide the subsequent investigative actions. For example, these actions included: the forensic examination of the bondage item and swabs from the scene (to be compared with Simon's DNA profile); researching police-held intelligence in relation to Joan (as a prior domestic violence victim) and Simon (as a prior perpetrator of domestic violence), and an urgent Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) check on the vehicle owned by Simon; examination of mobile phones and computers recovered from Joan's and Simon's addresses; and CCTV enquiries. The domestic narrative

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[10] As outlined in the method section earlier, all data have been disguised or anonymised. Homicide cases have been given alphanumeric codes based on the research site and case number.

placed Joan's estranged husband at the center of investigative activities. If detectives had formed a different narrative, for example, one that suggested a stranger had entered her flat (stranger murder narrative), the actions that followed would have been quite different.

Therefore, having assembled the domestic homicide narrative from the earliest moments of the investigation, detectives sought to strengthen it with findings from FSTs and present a legally persuasive narrative to the prosecutor for charging purposes. However, following scientific work commissioned by the inquiry team, the emerging domestic narrative was undermined because the DNA profile generated from the bondage item did not match that of Simon. Furthermore, on day two of the investigation, a neighbor revealed that they had witnessed a disturbance outside Joan's flat involving an unidentified male, five days before her body was discovered. The description of the male did not match Simon, casting further doubts upon the credibility of the domestic narrative. Nevertheless, in the absence of a compelling counter narrative, the focus upon Simon as the prime suspect continued until, on day four of the investigation, a detective who had completed house-to-house enquiries at the flats raised concerns about a male, William Knight, who lived immediately above Joan's flat. He noted that "he was shifty. There was something not right" (interview with SIO, Operation C04). Though little more than a "feeling" at this stage, the SIO encouraged the detective to revisit William's flat. Following further enquiries and intelligence checks, William's flat was examined forensically. A suitcase containing sadomasochistic items and distinctive beads from a necklace, similar to those found in Joan's flat, was discovered. Traces of blood were also identified on the suitcase. Presented with this conflicting information, detectives were compelled to engage in reframing (Goffman 1975:308) - and formulate a new suspect narrative:

> [Day 6] William is a suspect for the murder of Joan … He fits the description provided by
> the witness, and from his account to the officer conducting house-to-house enquiries, was
> at home at the relevant time. Furthermore, scenes of crime officers have found bondage

material in black bin bags and these appear similar to the item that was recovered near the body. (Extract from SIO policy file, Operation C04).

Subsequently, blood from William's suitcase was matched to Joan and DNA from the bondage item matched William. On day eight of the inquiry, prior to William being charged, the victim's estranged husband was released from custody.

This example illustrates how actors begin to frame and shape homicide narratives from the earliest moments of an investigation and often from limited information (see also Salet 2017).

Emerging accounts of the actions and events under investigation are assembled, challenged, modified, and re-assembled by reference to shared informal typologies of homicides of the kind found in formal and informal handbooks and manuals of practice (see for example, Cook 2019). Where possible, detectives seek to strengthen or test the initial narrative through information given by the application of FSTs, and this narrative guides and (to a certain extent) constrains these investigative actions. When presented with information that disrupts, undermines, or discredits an emerging narrative, detectives can abandon it, modify it (depending upon how badly "damaged" the initial narrative is), or reframe it (Goffman 1975). Salet (2017:136) suggests that "radical ruptures with a fundamental change of perspective are very exceptional in criminal investigations." Nevertheless, in Operation C04, an overwhelming shift in the narrative was necessary in order to accommodate and integrate new findings from FSTs.[11]

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[11] Informally, several detectives told us that this case would likely have resulted in a miscarriage of justice in previous decades with the absence of the kind of science and technology to eliminate Simon. They explained that a strong circumstantial case would have been assembled against Simon as it seemed so obvious that he was the killer.

Narration and character

Despite Aristotle's assertion that character is subordinate to narrative, more recent human science scholarship (see for example, Margolin 1990; Propp 1984) argues that the relationship between narrative and character in accounts of human conduct is a mutually constitutive one: each implies and requires the other. At the most superficial level, the characters in homicide narratives are no more than stock-in-trade identities - suspect, victim, witness, persons of interest, call handler, crime scene examiner, expert, response officer, etc., etc. However, when the details of individual cases are examined, it becomes clear that these categorical characters are enlivened by the provision of details of demeanor and conduct that also accord them moral shading and investigative significance. Whether these details are directly observed by detectives, reported by other participants, or inferred from documentary sources, their inclusion in a developing narrative may become a further contribution to its credibility; when inclusion is problematic, the establishment of such details may be a reason for its modification.

The earliest impressions that detectives form will already contain outline inferences concerning the character of the unique victims, suspects, witnesses, and others that are involved in the case. Assessments of the morality, integrity, and honesty of these individuals shape, and are shaped by, the emergent narrative of the case. For example, a witness might be described as "unprejudiced," "disinterested," or "involved" and information given by them treated accordingly. Efforts to determine the veracity of reports may turn on such lay assessments of character in the absence of other available evaluative criteria. The SIO in one of the cases studied suggested that:

> Then you think about, right, well whose agenda is it to not tell us the truth, and who
> doesn't have an agenda? Well, the neighbor doesn't have an agenda, he doesn't know
> them, he's just telling us what he's heard and what he's seen. So the likelihood of his

account being more likely is, in my opinion, probably the more accurate one. (Interview with SIO, Operation E11).

 In the following example, we observed the investigation into the fatal stabbing of a young male, Nokutenda Diallo. The victim was with two friends when he was attacked and the suspect group included three males (Denzel Djokoto, Kanye Mbanefo, and Tarif Arazi). On day two of the investigation, the SIO explained to his team that the case was slightly different to the usual "slag on slag" murder as the victim group were "decent guys" (extract from fieldnotes, Operation W13). A pre-trial narrative was assembled around these characters, pitting the "good" victim against the "bad" suspects (believed to have been drug dealers), which in turn guided investigative action, enabling the police to "show" that the defendants had a propensity for carrying knifes:

> We tried to create bad character to show that these people carry knives …. we found an intelligence report that said Denzel Djokoto had been arrested for drugs and the police officer had gone to search his address and when they knock on the door it's opened by Kanye Mbanefo and he's got a knife in one hand and another knife in his pocket …. We included this intelligence in our bad character to show that Kanye has knives. (Interview with deputy SIO, Operation W13).

At trial, the Prosecution successfully argued that this bad character evidence be admitted and heard as part of their narrative.

In a separate investigation (Operation N13), Wendy Andrews was found fatally stabbed in the kitchen of her home address and her son, Steven, was found critically injured in the lounge. Wendy's partner, Brian Green, was suspected of both attacks. Detectives believed that Brian attacked Wendy because he thought that she had passed to him, a sexually transmitted disease (this was proven not to be the case). On day six of the investigation, we observed an intelligence meeting, attended by prosecutors, the SIO and the intelligence

analyst where the prosecutor pursued opportunities to "blacken" the character of the suspect through medical records and mobile phone data:

> Prosecutor: We need a timeline of the sexually transmitted disease, the whole picture, to show that it was premeditated… when was Brian infected? We need his medical records… go back, blacken his sexual character and not hers. We need to present the jury with how he was a carrier of genital warts and how he's given it to her… we need to paint as dirtier a picture as possible to the jury… I suggest you look for any spyware on Wendy's phone…
> Intelligence analyst: There were 40 text messages the day before the murder between Brian and Wendy plus a picture message…
> Prosecutor: It would be nice to see if there are any threats. (Extract from fieldnotes, Operation N13).

We encountered many instances in which detectives and prosecutors sought to establish the credibility of a range of characterizations through the application of various kinds of science and technology. CCTV footage was often used to this effect. Of course character is not something that one can truly "see" from this kind of footage and so detectives (and later prosecutors) draw inferences from images by selecting, organizing, and editing often hundreds of hours of footage into a slick set of images, appropriately sequenced and enveloped within a narrative to support their case. In this way, and with all the contested artfulness noted in previous accounts of the narrative uses of video evidence (see Goodwin 1994; Kim 2016), detectives tell a story of what can be "seen" by a universal observer and how, collectively, a jury should define "what is going on?" and "what does it mean?" (Goffman1975; Salet 2017). To illustrate, detectives investigating a triple murder recovered CCTV footage and wove a narrative around carefully selected images to suggest that the suspect was callously going about his everyday tasks after the murders:

> Presentation to a jury is so important and people with much better ways with words than me will articulate it in a way that you will see, this fellow now is cool, calm, calculated. Look at him, withdrawing the money now and then calmly walking off here, and look,

he's using another cashpoint, calmly walking off there .… he's calm, calculated, collected .… here he is getting on the tube, not a care in the world. What do you think, members of the jury? And they will hate him, they will start to hate him because of what he's done, and it just helps with the presentation and the building of the case. (Interview with SIO, Operation W08).

In another investigation, Operation C02, Keith Saunders was stabbed in the leg and died three days later. The attack happened in the early hours of the morning on a city street and was witnessed by Keith's friend, Findley Armstrong, who subsequently named two suspects. Both Keith and Findley were known drug users and dealers (as were the killers) and the Prosecution and police were aware that the Defense would likely try to discredit the witness. The police and prosecutors sought to strengthen the credibility of their "problematic" star witness by showing CCTV footage of his brave efforts to defend the victim from further attack (after he had fallen).

Prior research by Hawk and Dabney (2014) and Simon (1992) has illustrated how homicide detectives form typifications of homicide victims such as "true" victims versus "precipitating" victim.[12] Our findings illustrate that typifications extend to other characters within the homicide narrative, including offenders and witnesses. The findings also reveal how, increasingly, findings from science and technology are being used to "show" – literally and figuratively - the moral worth of these various characters.

Narrating motive and intent

Detectives, prosecutors, and other criminal justice actors spend a great deal of time discussing

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[12] See also Wolfgang (1958) on victim-precipitated homicide and Christie (1986) for a broader

   discussion of "ideal" and "non-ideal" victims.

and exploring motive and intent in the course of homicide investigations,[13] partly because they are an established part of sense-making but also because they provide essential correlates to the characterizations of persons and events. Whilst the law does not require motive to be demonstrated or proven to establish guilt, these conditions of action are assumed by detectives to form the crux of a good story - a core element of a complete and meaningful homicide narrative - that ties the characters to the action, helps to explain the inexplicable, and enables a persuasive narrative to be told. For example, as this detective explained:

> All you're hearing as the jury is a story, and it's easier to understand if you can say to them, the victim owed the suspect money for drugs, which I think is the motive, but I can't prove it .… I'm suggesting that the jury sitting there, would find that more palatable, easier to understand, than me saying, they attacked him, but I don't know why. (Interview with SIO, Operation W11).

Unless a homicide suspect engages with police during interview (they often do not), motive and intent are inferred rather than directly reported. In the following example, a female was murdered as part of a carefully planned attack by her partner and two co-defendants. Detectives weaved various discrete pieces of information and findings from technologies into their narrative and presented a convincing account at court that the murder had been financially motivated:

> Because it's about combining the power of extracting all of this information, isn't it? Data from ANPR, from phones, from downloads of phones, from computers, from witness accounts, and combining that to tell a really compelling account of what had happened in this murder. We didn't have our eye witness testimony, we didn't have any forensic breakthroughs, so we had to tell the story through circumstantial evidence, and it

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[13] Although there is a subtle difference between motive and intent, detectives and others often use the terms interchangeably. Jefferson (2015:80) refers to a distinction made by Lord Goff in the Privy Council Case Wai Yu-Tsang v R [1992] 1 AC 269, between "underlying purpose" (motive) and "immediate purpose" (intention).

was the analytical work that did that .… So it provided motive and movements on the night, and it was compelling. (Interview with Detective Sergeant, Operation E09).

In a second case, Mary Collins was killed by her son Andrew. The following extract from an interview with the SIO illustrates how findings from FSTs were transformed into legally meaningful evidence and integrated into the narrative to construct a credible chronology that informed intent. It also shows how detectives sometimes seek to demonstrate intent to help to secure lengthy minimum term prison sentences:[14]

> He's prodded her with the scissors, he's inserted that knitting needle into her, then he strangled her … I think he's gone downstairs to the kitchen, got the knife out the drawer, gone back upstairs, which is why you've got that palm print going up the stairs in the blood, and then he stabbed her .… And why is that important? Because that's pre-meditated murder; that's not somebody who's just lost the plot and stabbed her, he's sexually assaulted her … then he's strangled her, and then he's gone to get a knife. He intended to kill her .… then he's left the scene … he sends a text message at half past seven in the morning to the girlfriend saying, I've done something dreadful. We've got the CCTV of him at half past five in the morning, so within an hour of the murder, acting perfectly normally. We track his car on ANPR .… so the start point to me was going to be 30 years for him .… but in order to achieve that I had to prove the sexual element. So the semen on the high vaginal swab was crucial, absolutely crucial. (Interview with SIO, Operation E07).

Whilst incorporating character, motive, and intent into the pre-trial narrative is preferred, there are occasions when criminal justice actors actively choose to omit some or all of these usually crucial components from their story. To illustrate, in Operation C02, Findley

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[14] In England and Wales, a "whole life order" can be given to an offender (who was 21 or over at the time of the offence) where the court takes the view that the murder is so grave that they should spend the rest of their life in prison. Where this is not warranted, but the seriousness of the offence is particularly grave, the appropriate starting point is 30 years, for example, a murder that is committed for gain or involving sexual or sadistic conduct (CPS n.d.).

Armstrong witnessed the fatal stabbing of his friend, Keith Saunders. Whilst Findley subsequently named two suspects, Ben Adkins and Scott Nesbitt, Findley's account was minimal and he claimed to have no idea why the suspects attacked Keith. Detectives were of the view that there was some kind of "history" between the offenders and victim, and that this was not a random attack. As the following quote illustrates, detectives rejected Findley's witness account and sought to infer motive and intent, in order to construct a credible chronology around which they could frame their narrative:

> The motive is important, obviously, because it forms part of the *mens rea* and gives us an indication of what has gone on, that built up to the actual attack. It's not just a random attack, they haven't just come across each other on the street, had an argument and somebody's pulled a knife. Clearly they'd gone there, and it's proving the intent as much as anything else and showing the picture beyond that, the fact that things began to escalate, and how these two managed to know that Keith and Findley would be where they were at the time. (Interview with Detective, Operation C02).

Seeking to infer motive and intent, detectives hypothesized whether Keith was attacked because of mistaken identity or as part of a revenge attack, having received intelligence that Keith and Findley, as well as the two killers, were all involved in the drugs world. Moreover, detectives were concerned that Findley had not been truthful about why he and the victim were at the scene. This presented detectives and prosecutors with a dilemma - usually it is beneficial for the narrative to demonstrate motive but in this instance it would have portrayed the victim in a negative light. These concerns are illuminated in the following extract, taken from our observations of the prosecutor's conference:

> Intelligence officer: Clearly Keith and Findley are involved in drugs too
> Prosecutor: We've got to focus on what our case is. What do we say? If we rely upon what Findley our key witness says, it's all over nothing. So we have to be a bit cute about how we play this. Given that this case depends almost entirely upon a witness but he is not telling the truth entirely I'm nervous about doing anything to undermine his credibility. So the issue of drug dealing has to come from the Defense at the moment,

tactically. The Defense say that the victim was there for a drugs deal. Findley says it's all over nothing and there is no mention of drugs. We have to think presentationally, what's our case? (Extract from fieldnotes, Operation C02).

Unable to resolve this dilemma satisfactorily, the Prosecution chose not to present a motive as part of their narrative.

These examples illustrate how from an early stage in the investigation, narratives are recipient designed (Polanyi 1985:33) as criminal justice actors imagine how a jury might digest and evaluate the ultimate prosecution narrative. Developing plot lines, character, motive, and intent appear to be critical components built into pre-trial homicide narratives and opportunities to demonstrate or infer any or all of these parts of the account from FSTs are favored by criminal justice actors. Often character, motive, and intent are intertwined and in some instances detectives are confronted with the dilemma of whether or not to build in reference to motive or intent where it might impact negatively upon the character of the victim (or a key witness) and detract from a coherent narrative of good (victim) versus "evil" (offender).

Resolving ambiguity

As outlined earlier, there are instances where findings from FSTs are understood to contest an emerging homicide narrative, and so it is revised dramatically. However, there are other occasions where ambiguities arise which criminal justice actors must negotiate. If these ambiguities are not properly resolved, they can result in misframing or frame disputes - where parties with opposing interpretations of events openly disagree (Goffman 1975:308, 322). Resolving this ambiguity or "troublesome knowledge" (Nic Daéid 2007) is crucial in order that a coherent, fixed narrative can emerge to present at trial. As Goffman (1975:303) observed "in our society we often give over to specialists the task of clearing up an ambiguity

of frame." Homicide investigations are replete with examples of experts and specialists being tasked to resolve uncertainty, with varying degrees of success.

To illustrate, in Operation C02, Keith Saunders received stab wounds to his leg and heel. A black combat knife was found hidden under a pillow at the suspect's, Ben Adkins, address, which was similar in appearance to the description provided by the witness, Findley Armstrong. The knife was examined but no blood was found on it, which neither confirmed nor refuted that it was the murder weapon and presented detectives with uncertainty. In the following extract, criminal justice actors were observed at a forensic strategy meeting discussing opportunities to resolve this ambiguity through FSTs:

> SIO: As it's a folding knife I've asked for it to be taken apart and re-examined
> Crime scene coordinator: There might be fibers from the victim's jeans on the knife and we could test for that too?
> SIO: Yes, we've talked about that
> Forensic scientist: Fibers from jeans are a very common fiber and so it's probably not worth exploring further .…
> SIO: If I gave you the knife could you compare it to the marks in the jeans?
> It was then agreed that the jeans would be sent to a private forensic science provider for full damage assessment as this was decided to be the most effective way to try to link the knife to the victim's wounds at this stage. (Extract from fieldnotes, Operation C02).

Despite the scientist's concerns, the decision was later made for fibers from the knife to be compared with Keith's jeans and socks. However, findings from the fiber comparison and damage assessment proved inconclusive. Although DNA from the suspect, Ben Adkins, was ultimately found on the knife, scientists could not fully establish that this was the murder weapon. Nevertheless, as illustrated in the following extract from an interview with the SIO, a narrative was built that accounted for the absence of blood on the knife and allowed a series of assumptions that detectives held about the knife, to be rendered more credible:

We're assuming it's the knife. We're assuming the knife that we found is the knife that was described - and it does match the description - but what we haven't got is any blood on it at all, which isn't unusual.… So we've established then that there is no DNA belonging to Scott on the knife, no DNA belonging to Keith on the knife but DNA belonging to Ben.… What Ben is saying is that Keith has brought it to the party. Well we've got nothing to suggest that. There's no fingerprints on it. We will say that it's been washed, it's been cleaned, if we're going to say that it's the knife that was used. It probably was. (Interview with SIO, Operation C02).

In a second case, which involved the fatal stabbing of Nokutenda Diallo, detectives pursued a narrative of joint enterprise from day one of the investigation.[15] In these cases, the law permits prosecutions where it is not necessarily clear who, from a number of offenders at the scene, did what (e.g. delivered the fatal wound). Nevertheless, detectives wished to construct a narrative that proved who had stabbed Nokutenda and that removed any ambiguity. Initially, detectives thought that two key witnesses had identified that the suspect, Denzel Djokoto, was in possession of a knife and believed that he had stabbed the victim. This belief framed the narrative that was constructed and opportunities were sought, through CCTV, to strengthen the narrative. CCTV footage was unclear and could not be used to support the narrative that Denzel stabbed the victim. Meanwhile, the deputy SIO discovered, from reading the two witness statements, that they gave conflicting accounts, and introduced the possibility that another suspect, Kanye Mbanefo, had a knife at the scene. We observed detectives in the major incident room, coming together to negotiate this ambiguity:

A detective came over to chat with the officer in the case and the deputy SIO about the witness statements from the victim's two friends, and how their descriptions of the suspects are confusing. Between the three of them they worked out who they thought the

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[15] Previously referred to as joint Enterprise, the CPS has published revised guidance on "Secondary Liability" which advises that if a secondary party (or parties) assists or encourages the principal party, they can be prosecuted and punished as if they were the principal offender (CPS 2018).

witnesses were referring to and they decided that one of the witnesses got the two suspects mixed up, bearing in mind how quickly the incident happened. (Extract from fieldnotes, Operation W13).

Subsequently, having viewed video identification parades, both witnesses identified different suspects as carrying knives. In the absence of clear and compelling witness accounts or clear CCTV footage, detectives adjusted the narrative to resolve this unacceptable ambiguity:

> We decided to run on the premise that they both had a knife.… we said we didn't know who stabbed him. We're saying it was a joint enterprise, it was a team effort, all three of them went together. (Interview with deputy SIO, Operation W13).

The task of narrative creation now shifted from trying to pinpoint and tell *which* of the three suspects killed the victim (as this was unachievable) to creating a narrative through which all three suspects would be equally implicated in the murder. To these ends, the investigation team sought to demonstrate - through witness accounts, CCTV, and mobile phone data - that all three suspects moved around together and "acted" together before and after the fatal stabbing. This was an almost instinctive response to the challenges of identifying within the storyline who had actually killed the victim. In the knowledge that courts readily accept joint enterprise prosecution narratives, the shift was made effortlessly.

In the final case presented here (Operation W12), we observed a meeting between the prosecutor and SIO where they discussed their concerns at the lack of clear evidence regarding the weapon used to shoot the victim (who survived his injuries):

> SIO: Do you need scans of the victim's brain?
> Prosecutor: No, the bullet is still there, none of this is going to be disputed by the Defense. We do need to prove he was shot and is in a critical state though… we can't wait 6-8 months for a medical statement
> SIO: What about the type of bullet?
> Prosecutor: Unless I am wrong, they can't get the bullet out as it will kill him. What about a ballistician?

Detective Sergeant: We have been told that the longer it remains in there the more it is deteriorated and we can't get anything meaningful from a scan…

SIO: What might happen if the Defense argue it was an air gun?

Prosecutor: It doesn't seem likely to be an issue but I suppose if one of the suspects said I fired an air gun … you've convinced me, can we rule it out? ... if they can say anything about the power of the firearm from the injury that would be great – it lets us close down that avenue of defense. (Extract from fieldnotes, Operation W12).

The examples above demonstrate how detectives, and prosecutors, when confronted with conflicting or ambiguous information that challenges the unified narrative that they seek, attempt to resolve these tensions by rearticulating or negotiating existing accounts, modifying the storyline or, more dramatically, shifting narrative.   In much the same way as (one of) Offit's (2019:80) federal prosecutors spoke of a burden of "coherence" (as well as to proof) in the formulation of opening and closing statements, British prosecutors were keenly aware of this burden when crafting pre-trial homicide narratives.

Selecting voices

Pre-trial homicide narratives are polyphonic (Frank 2015) and merge many "voices" but their construction is highly selective to enable a coherent and compelling story to be told. Some of these voices come from witnesses or suspects, but others come through the narrating of findings from FSTs. Based on data from our observations of the re-investigation of a cold case (Operation E10), the following illustrates how some voices are brought to the foreground whilst others are dismissed completely. More specifically, we show how the voice of a witness was initially regarded as pivotal within the pre-trial homicide narrative but was later omitted because detectives and prosecutors changed their minds about the credibility and reliability of the witness.

In the 1980s, a young female was fatally stabbed and the case remained unsolved for 30 years (the suspect was eventually identified through familial DNA). Over the decades there were a number of reviews and media appeals. Following one appeal in 2009, Thomas Byron contacted the police reporting that on the night of the murder he had seen a male following and arguing with a female, near to where the victim's body was discovered. He thought that he had seen this male before. Although Thomas reported this at the time of the murder, a statement was never taken. As recounted by the SIO, early on in the re-investigation, actions were raised in relation to Thomas's statement and his account framed and shaped the narrative, helping to inform the chronology:

> So Thomas Byron comes forward after 25 years, and he's our first eyewitness, and he sees the victim arguing with a man. He then sees them walking up the road and her looking very frightened, he hears screams, goes back, sees that same man running down exactly the same route as the blood trail. So we're saying that's the murderer. A lot of my media appeals, subsequently then, were based on that, because he said he recognized him from being local. Just a lot of things around Thomas were really important to us. (Interview with SIO, Operation E10).

Using an image of the suspect from the time of the murder, Thomas participated in an identification procedure but failed to make a positive identification. At a case conference, eight months into the re-investigation, the prosecutor requested that the police evaluate the strength of his evidence. The prosecutor was concerned that Thomas's credibility might be undermined because he had only recently provided some details and police-held intelligence cast doubt on his reliability as a witness. For example, Thomas reported concerns that he was going to be killed following a dispute with his Russian business partner, which detectives believed sounded far-fetched. Ultimately, the disclosure officer concluded that Thomas's evidence was not convincing and the prosecutor omitted his account from the narrative. The SIO explained that although they were convinced initially by Thomas's account, they had

changed their minds because of how they imagined his account would be perceived and evaluated by jurors:

> He is a great character to put into court .… I know why people want him, and I was the same to start with, with Thomas, but now the scientific evidence is so strong we don't need to muddy the waters, we don't want to confuse it.… all we need now is to prove that [the suspect] raped and murdered her, or did whatever he did. We don't need Thomas getting the jury thinking he saw the murderer but he didn't pick him out [in the identification procedure], so is that the murderer or not, even though we've got this really strong scientific evidence. (Interview with SIO, Operation E10).

This example illustrates the fluidity of narrative construction and how some voices are brought to the foreground temporarily, then later dismissed in preference of other voices. In this instance, the witness and his evidence ultimately never formed part of the prosecution narrative, despite his account remaining stable over time. Instead, findings from FSTs were brought to the foreground and used to frame the narrative. By excluding the "problematic" witness and accentuating the findings from FSTs, the SIO and prosecutor sought to present a lucid narrative and to minimize opportunities for doubt or confusion that they imagined might occur in the future amongst members of the jury. The case also illustrates how detectives readily dismiss the "impossible, improbable or unrealistic" (Salet 2017:137) - in this instance, Thomas's reports about his Russian business partner.

Discussion and conclusion

In this paper, we have explored the construction and modification of narratives by criminal justice actors through the course of homicide investigations. We have followed the journeys of narrative constructions from the initial crime scene(s) through to trial preparation and provided an insight into how criminal justice actors deal with, and make sense of, high degrees of uncertainty and ambiguity, drawing upon the findings from FSTs to try to resolve

these tensions. Our findings reflect work already undertaken in this area but also offer new insights.

Our research supports the work of Polletta et al. (2011) and Santos (2014), illustrating how actors interactively construct homicide narratives through a process of sense-making, dialogue, and negotiation. Pre-trial narratives of homicide are co-constructed by a variety of actors, including detectives, scientists, and prosecutors. They are told and re-told within the pre-trial investigation phase, as they are assembled, arranged, re-arranged, and shaped into one coherent, plausible narrative. Our findings resonate with those of Kruse (2016), emphasizing how a number of plausible emergent narratives unfold within the pre-trial investigation phase, which must be negotiated and reduced, ideally, to one persuasive and coherent narrative. Like Innes (2003) and Hawk and Dabney (2014), we found that actors' impressions, experiences, and expectations of what kind of homicide has been committed frame how they construct these emerging narratives. Criminal justice actors quickly form a version of narrative based on limited information that initially enters the homicide investigation and this account or "main frame" (Goffman 1975) guides how the investigation proceeds, becoming the foundation upon which further plot lines rest or are tested.

We have demonstrated that whilst pre-trial homicide narratives are polyphonic (Frank 2015), and merge many voices, whose voices are heard and how they are represented is a critical element of the narrative construction process. Some voices are brought to the foreground, others that are imagined might damage the prosecution trial narrative or confuse the jury are re-shaped or dismissed completely, in an effort to present a lucid narrative "beyond reasonable doubt." Narratives sediment over time, but they can also remain precarious and contestable until they are tested in adversarial tribunals.

In following these investigations from their inception through to trial, our findings also reveal how the authoring of homicide narratives tilts from homicide detective towards

prosecutor, as the investigation moves closer to trial. By the time the story is told in court, it belongs almost wholly to the prosecuting barrister who narrates it. Yet, as we have shown, homicide narratives are invariably built around (intricate and sometimes complex) scientific and technical evidence. This raises interesting questions about the distance between those who finally craft and tell the story, and their proximity to its fine detail. Are there, for instance, important scientific and technical knowledge gaps among those who (finally) craft, shape, and deliver homicide narratives? What might be the implications for justice? Our research, then, feeds into broader debates about the veracity of the claims made about technoscientific evidence (Casey 2019; Lynch et al. 2008; Wilson-Kovacs 2019).

Our research contributes to the legal storytelling literature and illustrates how the pre-trial homicide narrative is recipient designed from the earliest moments of its conception through to trial. Detectives, and later prosecutors, imagine how a jury might digest, evaluate, and assess the credibility and persuasiveness of the story. Like Offit (2017, 2019), we observed first-hand how "legal elites" imagined jurors' skepticism and defense counsel's counterarguments and how they deliberated and attended to these prospective challenges to the prosecution narrative. Innes (2003) suggests that as part of homicide case narratives, detectives produce moral identities for victims and suspects, and they consider motive as central to persuading a jury to accept the prosecution narrative. Similarly, our findings reflect how criminal justice actors seek to construct pre-trial narratives around character, motive, and intent. These central components, necessarily drawing on existing common-sense characterizations (Schutz 1967) and repertoires of motive (Wright Mills 1940), provide a powerful framework around which the story can be woven and are considered the crux of a good story, tying the characters to the action. Moreover, detectives pursue opportunities through FSTs to demonstrate or infer character, motive, and intent, in an effort to support and strengthen the pre-trial narrative. Often these components are intertwined and actors may

disattend (Goffman 1975:202) to motive or intent, if this will help them to preserve the character of the victim or a key witness.

Our findings contribute to the fledgling narrative criminology literature. To date, narrative criminology has largely studied offender narratives. We suggest, like Barrera (2019), that criminal justice narratives are also worthy of attention and hope to have gone some way to taking up his call for more research "that recognizes the constitutive power of narratives in criminal justice" (Barrera 2019:40). Importantly, narrative criminology contests the notion that stories only rationalize past action and instead suggests that stories also inspire and shape future action (Presser and Sandberg 2015). Stories have material effects (Frank 2010) and one of these effects is decision-making (Barrera 2019:41). Our findings confirm that pre-trial narratives not only serve a retrospective function (i.e. to narrate past events) but they also serve a prospective function (Innes 2007). We have illustrated how emerging prosecution narratives enable and mobilize criminal justice actors along particular investigative trajectories, directing and guiding further lines of enquiry or forensic examination. Our findings suggest that as the pre-trial homicide narrative gains pace and traction, it offers both opportunities and constraints to subsequent actions and lines of enquiry. Moreover, as suspects are folded into the narrative, efforts are made to enhance the narrative through the use of FSTs. As Innes (2003), Salet (2017), and Stubbins and Stubbins (2009) reflect, actors selectively interpret the fatal event and they have a tendency to assemble evidence that confirms the advancing narrative, which can lead to investigative failures. Our findings illustrate that unless presented with information that seriously disrupts or discredits the advancing narrative, it may only be adjusted or modified in order to accommodate and integrate "difficult" or ambiguous findings.

We have highlighted the reciprocal relationship between narrative and evidence and the reciprocal relationship between narrative and investigative practice. Borrowing from

Coeckelbergh and Reijers (2016), we argue that detectives and prosecutors - like others - simultaneously use technologies to assemble and test narratives relevant to their work, as well as use narratives to make sense of the results of the technological applications that are available to them. This recursive use of narratives and narration further emphasizes the socially constructed nature of forensic evidence and adds to existing work on how findings from forensic laboratories are transformed into legally meaningful evidence (see Dupret 2011; Harre 2002; Jasanoff 2006; Kruse 2016; Lawless 2016; Polletta et al. 2011; Santos 2014; Stubbins and Stubbins 2009). More broadly, the homicide narratives that we have studied exemplify the complex balance between technology and culture in organizational practice (see Vaughan 1996). We suggest that findings from FSTs are now routinely embedded in homicide narratives and investigative trajectories and that they each inform the other.

Advancing the work of Harre (2002), we have provided detailed examples of how particular FST findings have been interpreted or negotiated within the context of emerging homicide narratives. Presser and Sandberg (2015) acknowledge that few scholars have studied "the continuous flow of narratives in a social field, and thus the way criminogenic stories are made up, taken up, exaggerated, moulded, or rejected" (p. 293). We hope to have gone some way to meeting both challenges in this paper. In particular, our research provides insight into how ambiguity is dealt with as the prosecution narrative is formed and evolves throughout the pre-trial investigation phase. For example, we have illustrated how criminal justice actors make sense of equivocal information gained from multiple witness accounts by collaboratively rearticulating or negotiating their credibility, in an attempt to present one coherent narrative. The ways in which the elements of homicide narrative accounts are choreographed to contribute to the account as a whole is best appreciated by reference to Gurwitsch's (1964) account of gestalt contexture:

> The functional significance of each constituent derives from the total structure of the Gestalt, and by virtue of its functional significance, each constituent contributes towards this total structure and organization. Both formulations are but two expressions of the same phenomenal state of affairs (p. 146).

It is this feature, of the mutual relatedness between parts and the whole, which contributes to both the stability and fragility of emergent homicide narratives. The perceptual gestalt switches that occur when viewers look at the famous Rubin's vases (see for example, Pind 2014), where changes in the perception of either figure or ground will force reassessments of the other, are echoed in the ways that changes in available information, or a novel perspective on the case as a whole, can force detectives and prosecutors to deframe or reframe (Goffman 1975; Salet 2017), abandon or reformulate, an emerging pre-trial homicide narrative. Equally, a change in the overall homicide narrative forces a re-assessment of the nature and/or significance of any or all of its contributory elements.

It is frequently asserted that findings from FSTs are used by criminal justice actors - especially in courtroom settings - to confer a particular legitimacy and credibility to prosecution cases against accused persons (Kruse 2016). Our focus is less on advocacy and case presentation and more on the ways in which the legitimacy and credibility of candidate narratives are asserted, tested, modified, and sedimented in the course of investigations. Findings from FSTs are rarely certain and never speak for themselves. Instead, they are infused with a sense of certainty through a process of narrative framing (Goffman 1975). Nevertheless, certain kinds of FSTs are treated with an air of credibility rarely afforded to other kinds of information (such as, for example, witness statements).

Since we have worked with a broad definition of FSTs, our research has shown how actors socially construct the meaning and significance of data derived from digital devices. Our findings illustrate that detectives and prosecutors afford a particular legitimacy to CCTV footage when constructing pre-trial homicide narratives. Yet CCTV footage is often grainy,

invariably lacks audio, and often lends itself to competing interpretations (see Brookman et al. 2020). Nevertheless, our findings highlight how criminal justice actors use such ambiguities to their advantage and purposively select, organize, and edit many hundreds of hours of footage to arrange characters and events into a compelling and temporally ordered storyline. Through this creative artistry, detectives and prosecutors together engage in narrative persuasion. Interestingly, temporality (one of the key components of narrative) is often demonstrated, in criminal justice narratives, through FSTs. For example, detectives, analysts, and prosecutors devote considerable time to "sequencing events" (and implicating suspects) through CCTV footage, mobile telephone cell site data, and financial transactions, and carefully fold this evidence into the narrative.

Our findings suggest that the "voice" of science and technology seems to carry greater weight than other forms of information (in the minds of criminal justice actors at least) in criminal justice narratives of this kind. FSTs are seen as the bedrock of credible homicide narratives and persistently sought out in order to stabilize uncertainty. Equally, though, findings from FSTs can seriously undermine an emerging or developing narrative. We witnessed many occasions when detectives waited, with baited breath, for the findings from FSTs to be returned and their disappointment when scientific reports did not provide the certainty that they anticipated. Detectives, in fact, often talked of scientists "sitting on the fence" when reporting the significance of findings from scientific examinations.[16] Their stock police response to this troublesome ambiguity was, invariably, to seek out more tests (of different kinds or on different exhibits). Rarely was science or technology abandoned. Human witnesses, on the other hand, were routinely treated more circumspectly.

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[16] Space does not permit us to explore, in this paper, the important ways in which actors with different epistemic cultures, expertise, experience, and knowledge share and try to assimilate knowledge (see Nic Daied 2007; Perkins 1999).

To conclude, homicide investigations, when studied ethnographically, provide a rich source of information about collaborative narrative construction. Our findings have illuminated some of the "backstage" (Goffman [1959] 1990) interactions and negotiations amongst police, prosecutors, and scientists, which play a crucial role in shaping the construction of evidence in homicide narratives. Within the adversarial trial that characterizes many criminal justice systems, it is not the "truth" that is contested, rather it is the veracity, plausibility, and persuasiveness of the competing narratives of prosecution and defense (Jasanoff 1998:731; Sanders 1987:230). If sufficiently persuasive, prosecution homicide narratives can send offenders to prison for lengthy periods or, in countries with capital trials, to their death. We suggest that credible prosecution narratives, in which social stories and material facts are used mutually to reinforce one another, are more fully understood by examining their pre-trial histories. In particular we have argued for the necessity of carrying out ethnographic research on how the emerging outline and shifting contours of such narratives are conditioned by, and further condition, the routine social and material work of a variety of criminal justice actors.[17] This work is done in formal meetings and informal conversations; in filling forms and authoring and validating documents; in interviews with suspects, witnesses, and others; and in attendance at crime scenes, at laboratory benches, and at computer desks. The fact that such work - informal as well as formal, implicit as well as explicit, social as well as technical, intuitive as well as rational, reported as well as unreported - will have been done long before any such narrative is presented in court is of more than academic relevance. After all, prosecution narratives can mobilize juries to convict the innocent as well as the guilty.

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[17] See Brookman (2015b) for a discussion of the shifting narratives of violent offenders.

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