

This article was downloaded by: [Bluck, Susan]

On: 18 February 2011

Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 933676720]

Publisher Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Discourse Processes

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t775653637>

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Online publication date: 18 February 2011

To cite this Article Baron, Jacqueline M. and Bluck, Susan(2011) 'That Was a Good Story! Preliminary Construction of the Perceived Story Quality Index', Discourse Processes, 48: 2, 93 – 118

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/01638531003702109

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01638531003702109>

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That Was a Good Story! Preliminary Construction of the Perceived Story Quality Index

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The objective of this research was to develop a preliminary Perceived Story Quality Index to assess laypersons' views of story quality. Research to date has not employed a standard measure of perceived quality, nor reported whether different lay-raters judge stories similarly. The study involved systematically generating core dimensions of perceived story quality and addressing whether (a) lay-raters of different ages and genders evaluate story quality consistently and (b) multiple dimensions of story quality form a general factor (i.e., an index). Sixteen lay-raters judged 129 autobiographical and fictional stories. Analyses show that young and older men and women lay-raters judged story quality consistently (i.e., share an implicit theory) and that quality ratings form a unitary factor. This structure holds for both types of stories and is maintained across age and gender. The discussion focuses on the scope and limitations of the developed preliminary Perceived Story Quality Index.

Humans are storytellers. Telling stories is a unique phenomenon (Dautenhahn, 2003; Dunbar, 2005; McAdams, 2003) that occurs across various cultures (Freeman, 2001; Strawbridge, 2005; Wang, 2004). Within cultures, young and older men and women share stories with one another as part of their daily lives (Nelson, 1988; Pillemer, 1998). As part of everyday life, young and older men and women in long-term relationships recount events of having spent time together (Ross & Holmberg, 1992). Because of the ubiquity of this type of storytelling,

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scholars in various fields (e.g., psychology, anthropology, linguistics, and communication sciences) have an interest in narrative analysis of the characteristics (e.g., level of detail; Levine, Svoboda, Hay, Winocur, & Moscovitch, 2002), structure (e.g., coherence; McAdams, 2006), and purpose (e.g., communication goals; Trunk & Abrams, 2009) of stories. Analyses of narratives often evaluate either microstructure (e.g., linguistic features) or macrostructure (e.g., content, organization; for a discussion, see Schneider & Winship, 2002).

Taking an alternative and more social approach to the study of stories, other researchers have focused on conceptualizing the dimensions of stories that relate to their quality *as perceived by others* (e.g., EerNisse, Willbrand, & Milosky, 1989; James, Burke, Austin, & Hulme, 1998; McCabe & Peterson, 1984; McFadden & Gillam, 1996; Merckelbach, 2004; Pratt & Robins, 1991; Schneider & Winship, 2002)—that is, they investigate how the listener or reader evaluates the quality of a story to which they are exposed. Some of these story quality studies examine professional (e.g., teachers) or trained judges' perception of quality, whereas others investigate untrained laypersons' perceptions of the quality of a story. This study takes this latter approach: the aim is to develop a preliminary tool for use in research on perceived story quality as judged by lay-raters (i.e., representing people in everyday life, not experts' views of story quality).

Story quality may sometimes vary depending on such things as the story's basic structure, the storyteller's motivation or goals, the audience to whom the story is being told, or the topic of the story (e.g., McAdams, 2006; Schneider & Winship, 2002; Tversky & Marsh, 2000). Although these situational variations may be of intrinsic interest, people also appear to have a general implicit theory (Morris, Ames, & Knowles, 2001) of what constitutes a good story. Grice's (1975) classic conceptualizations, such as brevity and relevancy, outline certain social conventions necessary for social conversations. Note that constituting a story and constituting a *good* story is not the same thing—that is, to even be considered a story a narrative must have, for example, basic structural content (e.g., a beginning, middle and end) and certain core features (e.g., a plot). Moreover, stories told in everyday life must also contain a baseline level of coherence or it would not be possible to understand them (Grice, 1975). Beyond those structural features that make a text a story, however, there may be a few core characteristics, that are necessary for a story to be perceived as a *good* story, and that are relatively invariant across content and contexts. Demonstrating that there is a set of core dimensions for judging perceived story quality that is used similarly by various groups of lay-individuals acting as story-raters would provide indirect evidence that a culturally-shared implicit theory of a good story exists.

In this research, the story-raters were systematically chosen to vary by two fundamental and universal human characteristics: age and gender. Although fu-

ture research might examine variability in regards to other individual differences, this preliminary study examined perceived story quality across men and women who were either young or older adults. If young and older men and women tell stories differently, it seemed a strong test of an implicit theory approach to demonstrate that their ratings of perceived quality of other people's stories was not different, but relied on a core set of dimensions. Research shows that the way individuals tell stories does indeed differ across these groups. Young and older adults' stories differ in terms of specific characteristics, such as their level of detail (Adams, Labouvie-Vief, Hobart, & Dorosz, 1990), and the extent of off-target responding (Arbuckle & Gold, 1993). Older adults appear to use a more selective process directed at integrative recall (see Giles & Coupland, 1991, Pragmatic Change Hypothesis) instead of at producing detailed accounts (e.g., Adams, Smith, & Nyquist, 1997). Some older adults also contend with impaired inhibitory processes that decrease their ability to suppress irrelevant information when telling stories (see Hasher & Zacks, 1988, Inhibitory Deficit Model). Men and women's stories also differ. Studies show that women recall certain types of stories with greater vividness (Ross & Holmberg, 1992). Gender differences in storytelling may emerge because of differences in early scaffolding of narratives and broad socialization differences with boys and girls (e.g., Fivush & Reese, 2002; Nelson & Fivush, 2000).

In choosing the stories to be rated in this study, the focus was on two types of stories commonly shared in daily life. Storytelling in everyday life includes sharing stories about generally positive personal life events (e.g., Bluck, 2003; Nelson, 1991; Rubin, 1998) and, albeit less commonly, sharing non-personal stories (e.g., Dixon & Gould, 1996; Ross & Holmberg, 1992). The types of stories most often shared are autobiographical (Cohen & Faulkner, 1988); they are personal accounts of specific episodes (not complete life story accounts) that have unfolded in our lives (Pillemer, 1998). Storytelling can also, however, include stories about other people's experiences (e.g., comedic accounts of things that happened to others or gossip about events in others' lives) and fictional accounts about events that happen in books or movies. Thus, in this study we include two types of stories: autobiographical memory stories and fictional stories about other people. A single story domain was selected as the topic cue for eliciting stories to increase the scientific rigor in the study. After careful consideration, a story about an event involving a significant other (e.g., spouse or partner) was chosen. This general domain was selected because research suggests that this type of event is experienced equally by men and women of various ages, and this topic has been used as a standard text in the cognitive aging literature (e.g., Dixon, Hultsch, & Hertzog, 1989). We explicitly decided not to have participants self-select the story domain of their choosing as various factors, such as practice effects and selective rehearsal affects recall of narratives (Tversky & Marsh, 2000). Of course, note that, although the stories were prompted using

a particular topic cue, individual storytellers told a wide range of stories in response to that general cue.

THE IMPORTANCE OF TELLING A GOOD STORY

Stories about personal life experiences have received attention from autobiographical memory researchers (e.g., Bluck, Alea, Habermas, & Rubin, 2005; Pasupathi & Mansour, 2006). Sharing autobiographical memory stories is theorized to serve important psychosocial functions (Bluck, 2003), including maintaining self-continuity (Habermas & Bluck, 2000), developing and preserving social bonds (Alea & Bluck, 2007; Pohl, Bender, & Lachman, 2005), and directing and guiding future behavior (Bluck & Glück, 2005; Pillemer, 1998). The perceived quality of shared stories may have an impact on the extent to which these psychosocial functions are served (Pasupathi, Stallworth, & Murdoch, 1998). The perception of sharing a “good” versus a “poor” story may also affect social dynamics: the number of listeners that can be engaged and the extent to which listeners are interested in the story (Pasupathi, 2006), as well as the extent to which the person telling the story is perceived as realistic and credible (Merckelbach, 2004).

MOVING STORY RESEARCH FORWARD

Although research on narratives of specific events is gaining momentum, one issue that needs to be addressed is the assessment of perceived story quality. Researchers have studied a diverse set of dimensions related to the layperson’s perception of a good story (e.g., James et al., 1998; Merckelbach, 2004; Pratt & Robins, 1991; Schneider & Winship, 2002), but there is no standard tool for assessing perceived story quality. Dimensions for assessing quality have been idiosyncratically chosen by each researcher and may not fully represent *core* components (e.g., must a good story *always* be humorous?). A second issue in the current literature is that researchers do not report whether the raters of story quality (such studies commonly employ lay-raters) are consistent with one another. Whether men and women of different ages draw on similar or different concepts of a good story offers a window into whether there is a shared cultural view of storytelling. At least within a given culture, individuals who judge a story for its quality are likely to draw on a common implicit theory (e.g., Morris et al., 2001). Based on previous studies, however, it is unclear whether men and women, or people of different ages, judge the quality of stories similarly and whether lay-ratings vary across types of stories (e.g., personal and fictional stories). A final issue relates to whether rated dimensions of story quality (e.g.,

interesting or informative) should be considered individually or combined into an index. Although some studies do collapse dimensions into a global index, research has not determined whether a consistent set of dimensions hang together statistically. This study addresses these issues.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON PERCEIVED STORY QUALITY

Researchers from various fields have an interest in the perceived quality of personal and fictional stories (e.g., James et al., 1998; Kang, 2003; Kemper, Rash, Kynette, & Norman, 1990; Labov & Waletzky, 1967; Merkelbach, 2004; Olness, Ulatowska, Carpenter, Williams-Hubbard, & Dykes, 2005; Pratt & Robins, 1991; Schneider & Winship, 2002). To provide a background for this study goal of deriving a preliminary standard measure of perceived story quality, three studies that used lay-raters are examined later to provide examples of methodological issues in this literature.

To determine whether perceived story quality differed by age and gender of rater, James et al. (1998) investigated global story quality by obtaining ratings from 10 young ($M = 18.30$ years, $SD = 1.30$; 5 women and 5 men) and 10 older adult lay-raters ($M = 72.30$ years, $SD = 5.50$; 5 women and 5 men). Stories were obtained from 20 young and 20 older participants about their personal life (e.g., work and family). Age of rater and storyteller were both of interest and, thus, this study included two groups to assess the consistency of ratings across age and gender. To reduce burden, 10 raters (5 young and 5 older) assessed one half of the stories and a different 10 assessed the other half of the stories on six dimensions nominated by the researchers: interest, informativeness, clarity, focus, talkativeness, and global story quality. Although the dimensions have face validity, no systematic method for creating the list of dimensions was reported. Using these dimensions, young and older lay-raters did not provide consistent ratings. The authors did not collapse dimensions into an index so no information on suitability of collapsing dimensions was reported.

Another example of research in this area (Kemper et al., 1990) had 10 undergraduate students (no gender or descriptions of age of raters were provided) judge the global story quality of stories told by three older adult groups ($n = 28$, aged 60–69 years; $n = 22$, aged 70–79 years; and $n = 12$, aged 80–90 years). Whether older participants' stories were considered better quality than young participants' stories was of primary interest. The narratives were of stories one might tell to a child. The stories were assessed for global story quality, rather than dimensions of quality, on a single 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*very bad story*) to 7 (*very good story*). Whether ratings across the ten individual lay-raters were statistically reliable was not reported. Using a single indicator is

useful because it represents a general conception of perceived quality, although for statistical reliability, multidimensional rating is superior. No information was provided on whether the raters judged the stories consistently.

Finally, Pratt and Robins (1991) investigated perceived story quality using the personal stories of twenty people in each of three groups: 18 to 25 years, 26 to 55 years, and 60 to 87 years. Twenty-six adult peer-raters (range = 17–76 years) judged the stories on dimensions nominated by the researchers: good description, interesting, makes a point, dramatic, vivid, humorous, clear and easy to follow, and whether it was a “good story.” Again, this research employed age matched raters and storytellers, as well as a list of dimensions that have reasonable face validity but were not systematically derived. Note, for example, that a good story may or may not have dramatic tone or be humorous. Because all raters did not rate all stories, the authors were careful to check for consistency by correlating dimensional ratings of a random half of the raters with the ratings provided by the remaining half. There is no report, however, of whether dimensional ratings were consistent across raters of different ages and genders. Recall that in addition to a set of dimensional ratings, a “good story” rating item was also included as an anchor of global story quality. To check whether each rated dimension represented global story quality well, each dimensional rating was correlated with the overall story quality rating ($r = .48-.91$). As these correlations were in the moderate to high range, a global story quality index (i.e., average of all 8 ratings) was computed to be used in further analyses. Although this provides some evidence of consistency across the dimensional ratings, optimally an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) would be performed to more precisely examine whether formation of an index is warranted.

Researchers have made great inroads in studying perceived story quality in laypersons. In sum, however, there is little convergence across studies on the core dimensions of perceived quality. Studies sometimes do not present information about the age and gender of lay-raters or test for consistency across raters, both of which are important components for determining whether lay-raters rely on an implicit theory of a good story. In addition, research sometimes uses a single rating of quality and sometimes collapses across idiosyncratically chosen dimensions to form an index without presentation of relevant statistics.

THIS STUDY

This study attempts to shed light on these issues. The use of focus groups comprised of laymen and laywomen was combined with a review of the literature on laypersons' perception of quality to generate a sound and relatively inclusive list of the core dimensions of perceived story quality. The study had two major objectives related to examining the reliability of these dimensions. The first was

to determine whether lay-raters of different ages and genders use the rating tool consistently (i.e., had a similar implicit theory of a good story). A measure of perceived story quality that aims at assessing core aspects of a good story should be used consistently across story listeners of different ages or genders (i.e., the layperson-raters). The second objective was to assess whether the identified dimensions form a general factor of global perceived story quality such that the ratings can be combined into a perceived story quality index. If individuals have an implicit theory (Morris et al., 2001) of a good story, the dimensions representing that theory should hang together in a factor. This factor should include the same dimensions across stories told by different individuals (i.e., men, women, young and older adults) and across different types of stories (i.e., autobiographical memory and fictional stories).

METHOD

The study had three phases: (a) eliciting autobiographical and fictional stories to be rated for perceived story quality, (b) running focus groups to identify core dimensions of perceived story quality, and (c) obtaining independent lay-ratings of two types of commonly told stories (i.e., autobiographical and fictional stories) using these dimensions. Independent samples of participants participated in each of the three phases.

Participants

Stories that were rated in this study for the purposes of developing a Perceived Story Quality Index were collected as part of a larger project (Alea & Bluck, 2007; $N = 129$). Young adults (32 men and 32 women) were between 19 and 39 years old ($M = 27.94$, $SD = 4.84$). Seventy percent of the young adults were White, 10.9% were Hispanic, 9.4% were Asian, 7.8% were Black, and 1.9% reported his or her race as "other." Older adults (33 men and 32 women) were between 64 to 86 years old ($M = 74.66$, $SD = 6.05$). Of the older adults, 97% were White, 1.5% were Black, and 1.5% were Asian. The ethnic composition of the sample mirrors the ethnicity of the population where the study was conducted (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

Because the study involved older adults, steps were taken to ensure that the stories provided by these individuals were not compromised by abnormal declines in cognitive ability. Older adults were pre-screened using a modified telephone version of the Mini-Mental State Examination (Roccafort, Burke, Bayer, & Wengel, 1992) to exclude individuals with impaired cognitive ability. The following measures were also used simply to confirm that this was a "normal aging" sample. The following findings suggest that the sample is typical with

respect to age differences in cognitive function (Schaie, 1994)—that is, as is very common in the gerontology literature, older adults ($M = 30.65$, $SD = 5.00$) had better vocabulary scores (Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale–Revised; Wechsler, 1981) than young adults ($M = 27.61$, $SD = 4.66$), $t(127) = 3.57$, $p < .001$; but performed worse ($M = 8.09$ problems; $SD = 3.73$) on a reasoning task (Primary Mental Abilities Reasoning; Thurstone, 1962) than young adults ($M = 14.53$ problems; $SD = 5.24$), $t(125) = 7.95$, $p < .001$; and made more errors (younger: $M = 1.53$, $SD = 3.07$; older: $M = 3.13$, $SD = 2.68$), $t(125) = 3.12$, $p < .01$. A single trial of the Auditory Verbal Learning Task (Rey, 1941/1993) showed young adults correctly remembered more words ($M = 8.91$ words; $SD = 2.12$) than older adults ($M = 7.23$ words; $SD = 1.94$), $t(127)$, $p < .001$. In short, these findings show that older adults in the sample do not show marked decline that might affect their ability to construct a story narrative.

Procedure for Eliciting the Stories

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two memory story conditions representing two categories of stories commonly told in everyday life. They either remembered and told an autobiographical memory story (i.e., a personal story from their own life) or listened to and recalled a prerecorded fictional story. Autobiographical stories of both mundane and significant personal events are often told and retold in daily life. The fictional story condition represents a slightly less common type of story. It provides an analog of non-autobiographical stories such as recalled episodes from movies, television programs or books, as well as jokes and secondhand stories about others' lives. Stories were shared orally with an interviewer trained as an interested, engaged listener but who did not provide oral feedback or comment during recall. Although having young and older male and female interviewers may be ideal, a fully crossed design was not feasible. Instead, all participants recalled their memory story to a young female interviewer allowing for standardization of gender and age of interviewer across participants.¹ Participants' stories were audiotaped.

In the autobiographical memory story condition, participants were given 3 min to think of a personal story of an event shared with a partner that they would like to share. Participants then were given 10 min for narration so as to reflect the time one might reasonably take to tell an anecdotal story in everyday life. When the participant slowed down, or appeared to finish the story, three standard

¹It is possible that participants' stories were affected by the fact that a young female interviewer served as the story listener. Studies show that when listening in social interactions, women show greater interest than men (e.g., West & Zimmerman, 1983). Future research could, however, benefit from empirical investigation of the effects of the interviewer's age and gender on the characteristics of a shared memory and, thus, on the quality of the produced story.

probes were used to elicit further recall. Note that limits for the age of the memory (e.g., demanding that the memory be of something that occurred in the last year) were purposefully avoided to allow individuals to choose a significant memory from their own life. Whether age of memory should be separated from age of participant is a complex theoretical issue. The chosen procedure results in older adults' memories being, like the participants themselves, older than the memories of the young adults. For ecological validity, this procedure is superior to providing a standard timeframe from which the memory must be recalled, as doing so often results in preferentially significant memories for young adults.

The fictional story condition employed a standard passage about an event shared with a partner that has been used in narrative memory research (Visiting Washington Mall on the 4th of July for a picnic; Dixon et al., 1989). Such events have been used in research on narrative recall (e.g., Dixon & Gould, 1996; Ross & Holmberg, 1992) because they are likely to have been experienced as personally significant by men and women of various ages. The fictional story is written in a colloquial style and includes information about the character's intentions, evaluations, and outcomes. Participants have reported that these narratives are moderately emotional stories, elicit positive feelings, and are somewhat interesting and true to life (Dixon et al., 1989). The 3-min fictional story was presented via audiotape. Participants then immediately recalled and narrated the story for 10 min. The recall directions were identical to those in the autobiographical memory story condition except they pertain to the fictional story the participant just heard. Other measures, not central to this study, were administered after completing the storytelling session.

Participants shared a story in a pre-specified domain, an event shared with a partner, to control for variability across participants in the types of stories shared. For example, allowing participants to tell any story they chose would result in confounds between the type of story men and women, older and younger people, chose to tell versus the quality of that story. In both the autobiographical and fictional story conditions, the domain was equally applicable to young and older men and women and involved telling about a generally positive, social event. In the autobiographical memory story condition, the prompt served as a point of departure and allowed for broad variation in the stories that individuals chose to tell. The following are some examples of the topics of participants' narratives: the day her fiancé got out of jail, a long rambling walk on the beach, the experience of being "high" on mushrooms, watching an interesting television program, attending a professional conference, and saying goodbye to friends and family before being deployed to military service. In the fictional story condition, the goal was to recall the fictional story, but allowed for additional information to be included such as personal connection to the character's experiences. In both conditions, shared stories contained varying amounts of detail and personal significance (Baron & Bluck, 2009) and, although stories were about an event

with a spouse or partner, they were not specifically romantic or intimate stories (Alea & Bluck, 2007).

Procedures and Measures

The major study variables and how they were derived is described later. This includes a summary of the development of the perceived story quality ratings through focus groups and the procedure for obtaining lay-ratings of the autobiographical and fictional stories from an independent group of lay-raters.

Development of the perceived story quality ratings. The perceived story quality ratings were developed through consideration, and integration, of methods for story rating that currently appear in the psychological literature (e.g., James et al., 1998; Pratt & Robins, 1991). Although there is research (e.g., Schneider & Winship, 2002) and scholarly writings (e.g., McAdams, 2006) on other micro- and macrostructure of stories, such as elements of plot and coherence, this research focused on broader and more social components of story quality reflecting the study goal to create a measure of laypersons' perceived story quality. Rather than solely combining dimensions of story quality used in previous academic studies, focus groups consisting of persons who were untrained in perceived story quality were also conducted. This approach provides an informal opportunity to examine whether the dimensions previously utilized by researchers converge with story dimensions that characterize laypersons' implicit theories of a good story and allows identification of new dimensions that may have been overlooked in previous research.

The focus groups included 12 laypersons from the community. Previous research has not employed focus group members at all in its consideration of story quality. Six focus group members were young adults (19–39 years; $M = 26.67$, $SD = 7.71$) and 6 were older adults (64–80 years; $M = 71.67$, $SD = 6.12$). Age groups were balanced by gender. The majority of adults were White (66.6% of young adults and 83.3% of older adults). Focus groups included two exercises accompanied by structured discussions. The first exercise had three parts. First, individuals were asked to recall good stories that they had read, heard, or been told. These could be stories on any topic or of any type. They then brainstormed and wrote down a list of up to 15 dimensions, with brief descriptions, that they believe describe good stories (range of dimensions produced = 3–10 dimensions). Next, focus group members were asked to identify one specific story that they think of as a really good story (e.g., one they have previously told, read, or heard). They wrote that story down in brief, were asked to think about it, and to write a list of up to 10 dimensions that describe what made that story particularly good (range of dimensions produced = 4–6 dimensions). Next, a structured sharing and discussion of the nominated dimensions occurred.

Finally, focus group members consolidated the dimensions generated in the first two parts of the exercise. A formal review of the generated dimensions occurred, and laypersons then independently nominated up to five rank-ordered dimensions that, to them, describe the truly essential aspects of a good story (range of dimensions produced = 2–5 dimensions). Focus group members then shared and discussed what they perceived as the essential dimensions of a good story.

The second exercise was based on a questionnaire developed by the authors from story quality dimensions commonly used in previous literature. Focus group members rated the extent a good story *must* contain each of eight dimensions on 5-point scales ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*). An average for each item was computed across group members. Items included entertaining ($M = 4.25, SD = 0.62$), coherent ($M = 4.25, SD = 0.62$), complete ($M = 3.08, SD = 0.99$), memorable ($M = 4.33, SD = 0.65$), interesting ($M = 4.58, SD = 0.52$), informative ($M = 2.92, SD = 0.79$), vivid ($M = 4.25, SD = 0.75$), and provides insight into the characters ($M = 3.33, SD = 0.99$).

Responses to these two exercises were used to develop the story quality ratings to be employed by the lay-raters in the next phase of the study. Frequencies for each of the nominated adjectives from the five rank-ordered dimensions of the perceived essential aspects of a good story (Exercise 1, part 3) were obtained (see Table 1). Dimensions with at least seven nominations (greater than $\frac{1}{2}$ of the focus group members generated that dimension) were considered for inclusion in the final questionnaire. From Exercise 2, dimensions with an average rating of four or higher (on a 5-point scale) were considered for inclusion on the final questionnaire.

TABLE 1
Adjectives Nominated in Exercise 1 (Focus Group)

<i>Adjective</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>%</i>
Engaging	11	92
Original	10	83
True to life	9	75
Emotional	8	66
Humorous	3	25
Comprehensive	2	17
Informative	1	8
Intelligent	1	8

Note. $N = 12$. In total, laypersons nominated 13 unique adjectives that represented discrete constructs of story quality dimensions perceived as “essential.” The table shows the eight top-rated adjectives. Only adjectives nominated by at least 50% of the sample were included in the final story quality ratings.

TABLE 2
Perceived Story Quality Ratings

Instructions: Read the story and answer each of the following questions. CIRCLE the number that best describes your opinion of this story. Feel free to use the entire scale. Please answer all questions.

1. To what extent was this story *entertaining*?
2. To what extent did this story *lack coherence*?
3. To what extent was this story *"true to life"*?
4. To what extent was this story *unemotional*?
5. To what extent was this story *memorable*?
6. To what extent was this story *unoriginal*?
7. To what extent was this story *rich in imagery*?
8. To what extent was this story *engaging*?

Note. Responses were made on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*). Items 2, 4, and 6 are negatively worded and reversed for scoring.

Using this procedure, four novel adjectives that emerged from Exercise 1 of the focus group sessions were included in the final story quality ratings. These included emotional (66% nominated), original (83% nominated), engaging (92% nominated), and true to life (75% nominated). Four of the eight items based on dimensions used in the previous literature (i.e., Exercise 2) were maintained: entertaining ($M = 4.25$, $SD = 0.62$), coherent ($M = 4.25$, $SD = 0.62$), memorable ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 0.65$), and vivid (i.e., rich in imagery; $M = 4.25$, $SD = 0.75$). Once these dimensions were decided on, several other precautions were taken to ensure that, in the next phase of the study, the dimensions received reliable ratings when used by the layperson-raters. The rating questionnaire items were worded both positively and negatively to avoid item response bias—that is, to ensure that lay-raters considered each dimension individually and assigned a unique rating for each (Schwarz, 1999b). Although parsimony suggests wording four of the items negatively, only three of the eight adjectives were worded negatively. Pilot testing indicated that the items chosen for reversal were appropriate and easy to understand and that negative wording for the other items would obscure their meaning. The ratings employ 5-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*). Research suggests that individuals, particularly older adults, generally rate items with greater consistency when a description label is included (Schwarz, 1999b). Thus, numbers, as well as descriptive labels, were included for all points on the scales. The resulting story quality rating scales appear in Table 2.

Obtaining layperson assessments using the perceived story quality ratings. The rating procedures are based on previous research (James et al., 1998;

Pratt & Robins, 1991). A group of 16 independent lay-raters were employed for this phase of the study. Previous studies have used a similar number of lay-raters in their investigation of story quality. Eight young men and women ($M = 24.63$ years, $SD = 4.00$) and 8 older men and women ($M = 76.00$ years, $SD = 7.30$) each provided ratings of story quality for all of the stories. Of the lay-raters, 75.0% were White in the young adult group, and 100% were White in the older adult group. The lay-raters were volunteers from the community who received \$30.00 for completing the ratings. Lay-raters assessed the 129 transcribed autobiographical and fictional memory stories using the story quality ratings shown in Table 2. To account for the relatively small number of lay-raters in the study, all raters judged all stories. This approach offers statistical power for assessing reliability and consistency among raters.

The rating sessions were held at a community location and included no more than four lay-raters per session to ensure data quality. To control for any boredom or fatigue effects, four different randomly ordered sets of all stories were created and rating of the four orders was counterbalanced across lay-rater age and gender. The number of memory stories rated in each session was pre-set so that lay-raters did not feel pressure to complete their ratings hurriedly. Pilot testing determined that two 2-hr sessions were adequate for completion of the 129 stories (including orientation to the task at both sessions). In the first session, lay-raters signed an informed consent and completed a background questionnaire. They then received an introduction to the project and standardized instructions on how to complete the ratings. Each rater read and judged 60 of the 129 stories in the first session at a self-paced rate. In the next session, the lay-raters received a reiteration of the instructions and completed ratings of the remaining 69 stories. To reduce the likelihood of fatigue effects in both story rating sessions, lay-raters were given breaks in the middle of the session. In addition, raters were also provided light refreshments that were available throughout each session and were encouraged to take, as needed, personal breaks.

RESULTS

The results are divided into three sections. The first section reports preliminary analyses. The second section addresses the study's first objective: The reliability of the perceived story quality ratings is demonstrated through examination of consistency of ratings across lay-raters of different ages and genders. The third section addresses the second objective: It describes the results of the EFA, identifying those story quality dimensions that form a unified Perceived Story Quality Index. The factor structure of this index is shown to be consistent across different types of people and different types of stories—that is, across age groups and gender, as well as across the two types of shared stories.

Preliminary Analysis

A preliminary analysis was conducted to identify potential order effects for the presentation of story materials used in the layperson rating sessions. Order effects might indicate that lay-raters became fatigued or bored as the session progressed. To determine whether the order of presentation of the stories impacted the way in which lay-raters assessed them, a 2 (Age Group: young or old) \times 2 (Gender) \times 2 (Memory Story Condition: autobiographical or fictional) \times 4 (Presentation Order: A, B, C, or D) multivariate analysis of variance was conducted. The eight story quality dimension ratings formed the dependent variables for the analysis. There were no order effects.

Objective 1: Reliability of Perceived Story Quality Ratings Across Lay-Raters

The first objective of the study was to determine whether lay-raters of different ages and genders use the rating tool reliably (i.e., consistently) to evaluate story quality. Thus, to determine whether the 16 lay-raters judged the memory stories similarly (as should be the case if they are drawing on a culturally shared implicit theory of a good story) an intraclass correlation (ICC) was performed. A two-way mixed-effect model was computed for each of the eight story quality dimension ratings of the 16 lay-raters. The consistency approach was used to look for association across lay-rater's judgments rather than variability in terms of absolute ratings. The average measure ICC determined that the 16 lay-raters were reliably similar in judging the stories on all of the dimensions: entertaining, $\rho_I = .90$, $F(119, 1,785) = 9.92$, $p < .001$; coherent, $\rho_I = .77$, $F(117, 1,755) = 4.28$, $p < .001$; true to life, $\rho_I = .74$, $F(120, 1,800) = 3.79$, $p < .001$; emotional, $\rho_I = .89$, $F(119, 1,785) = 9.27$, $p < .001$; memorable, $\rho_I = .90$, $F(119, 1,785) = 10.35$, $p < .001$; original, $\rho_I = .86$, $F(118, 1,770) = 6.90$, $p < .001$; rich in imagery, $\rho_I = .90$, $F(118, 1,770) = 10.12$, $p < .001$; and engaging, $\rho_I = .90$, $F(118, 1,770) = 10.27$, $p < .001$. In sum, lay-ratings of perceived story quality were consistent across all raters for all dimensions and did not vary systematically by age or gender of rater.

Objective 2: Formation of a Perceived Story Quality Index

The second objective of the study was to assess whether the identified dimensions form a general factor of perceived story quality such that the ratings can be combined into a story quality index or whether multiple factors of quality exist. To determine if the story dimensions formed a single factor of perceived story quality, an EFA was conducted. There is neither empirical support nor an explicit theoretical rationale to suggest conducting a confirmatory factor analysis (for a

review of this issue, see Stevens, 1996). Instead, EFA was chosen because this is the first study to systematically generate the characteristics and dimensions of perceived story quality and to examine whether these dimensions form a unitary construct. Although a single overarching factor of perceived global story quality was expected, a principal components analysis was not conducted because EFA better accounts for the reliable, shared, common variance among dimensions.

Factors were extracted using a principal axis common factors model with an oblique promax rotation in SPSS Version 17.0 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL). The story dimensions were expected to correlate, so an oblique rotation was used. Employing Kaiser's (1960) rule of extracting factors with eigenvalues >1 and examination of the scree plot, one factor emerged. The initial eigenvalue (6.31) showed that the first factor explained 78.92% of the variance ($\alpha = .96$). Although the initial factor pattern matrix reported in Table 3 was adequate, it included two distinctly lower loading items: coherence (.47) and true to life (.73). The factor loading for coherence was close to traditional cutoff levels for rejection of an item. The factor loading for true to life exceeded traditional cutoffs, but was still drastically lower than the loadings for all other items—that is, neither of these items showed the same high factor loadings as the other six items, which all had loadings of .90 and above. Thus, the model was re-run using only the six high-loading dimensions of story quality to explore whether it would provide a superior fit (Gorsuch, 1997). The final resulting model (eigenvalue = 6.45) increased the variance accounted for to 80.32% ($\alpha = .98$; see Table 3). Thus, the remaining analyses were performed using the six-item solution, which appears superior based on consistently high factor loadings, as well as amount of variance explained. The final Perceived Story Quality Index appears in the Appendix.

To actually replicate the model, independent samples would be required. That was not our aim in the following analyses. Instead, the goal was to determine

TABLE 3
Initial and Final Factor Loadings for Story Quality Dimensions:
Exploratory Factor Analysis With Promax Rotation

<i>Story Quality Dimension</i>	<i>Initial Factor Loading</i>	<i>Final Factor Loading</i>
Engaging	.99	.99
Memorable	.97	.98
Entertaining	.96	.97
Emotional	.94	.96
Rich in imagery	.92	.94
Original	.92	.94
True to life	.73	
Coherent	.47	

whether the factor structure obtained for the whole sample would hold across stories told by different groups of individuals (i.e., age and gender groups) and across different types of stories. To examine whether the factor structure was maintained for these groups within the sample, additional EFAs were performed. The EFA method described earlier was re-run separately for autobiographical memory stories and for fictional stories. In both cases, one factor emerged. The factor loadings for autobiographical memory stories ranged from .88 to .99 and accounted for 76.77% of the variance (eigenvalue = 6.14; $\alpha = .96$). For fictional stories, loadings ranged from .82 to .94 and explained 74.84% of the variance (eigenvalue = 5.99; $\alpha = .95$). Thus, the same unitary factor appears to hold well for both types of stories.

The same EFA procedure was also employed to examine equivalence for gender and for age group. Again, a single factor emerged for analyses investigating both men and women separately. For men only, factor loadings ranged from .77 to .99, and the factor solution accounted for 74.20% of the variance (eigenvalue = 6.09; $\alpha = .95$). For women only, the range of factor loadings was .77 to .98 and explained 80.26% of the variance (eigenvalue = 6.25; $\alpha = .97$). One factor also emerged in analyses of both young and older adults. The young adult group had factor loadings that ranged from .72 to .98, which explained 77.64% of the variance (eigenvalue = 6.12; $\alpha = .91$). The older adult group factor loadings ranged from .73 to .99. This solution explained 76.90% of the variance (eigenvalue = 6.11; $\alpha = .96$). The unitary factor structure for the Perceived Story Quality Index, thus, appears to hold for both types of stories, and is maintained in groups of men and women, and young and older adults. In all cases, the factor loadings are high across items, and the total variance accounted for is large. Thus, the newly devised Perceived Story Quality Index appears to have preliminary promise as a useful tool for assessing perceived story quality across different story types and different groups of individuals.

DISCUSSION

After early childhood, most people engage in informal storytelling on almost a daily basis (Dautenhahn, 2003; Dunbar, 2005; McAdams, 2003). The most commonly shared stories are autobiographical in nature and are about specific episodes. Storytelling is a social phenomenon: for every story told there is at least one listener. How do listeners judge the quality of the stories they hear? Grice's (1975) classical conceptualizations suggests that other's use various assumptions about stories when judging their quality. Previous research has investigated perceived story quality but has lacked a standard tool that reliably assesses a core set of dimensions that might represent an implicit theory of a

good story. In addition, previous studies have not statistically examined whether men and women lay-raters of different ages provide similar judgments of story quality, and have not assessed whether core dimensions of story quality can be reliably collapsed into an index. This study addressed these issues.

Eight core dimensions of perceived story quality were identified, reflecting both laypersons' implicit theories as gathered from focus groups and aspects of story quality used in previous studies. These were included in the perceived story quality rating measure that was then used by an independent group of lay-raters. Factor analyses showed that six of these core dimensions hang together to form an index of story quality. Young and older men and women lay-raters judged the quality of autobiographical memory and fictional stories similarly and there was consistency in how raters judged the two story types. The result of the study is the production of a preliminary Perceived Story Quality Index. The index reliably combines multiple dimensions and could be used in future research to rate episodic stories of different types (e.g., autobiographical or fictional) produced by men and women of different ages.

Two of the initial eight dimensions, true to life and coherence, had considerably lower factor loadings than the retained dimensions. These two dimensions do not substantially add to the overall variance explained. Explanations for these lower loadings are speculative but presented here. It appears that true to life may be a useful, but not necessary, construct for assessing quality. Stories must have an underlying element of truth. Some stories, however, may be considered good stories because they are, in fact, extraordinary—that is, they are stories that test the boundaries of being true to life; they go beyond the mundane to describe events that are slightly fantastic or a little incredible.

Coherence is quite a different type of dimension; but, similarly, stories must have a baseline level of coherence to even be considered a story (i.e., instead of simply rambling text; Grice, 1975). Coherence also seems to be necessary but not sufficient for perception that a story is good. Coherence appears to be a building block of stories but not a strong feature whose variance is related to perceived story quality. Previous research has found that level of coherence in stories told by unimpaired individuals does not predict ratings of story quality (Baron & Bluck, 2009). It appears that the autobiographical and fictional narratives in this study, like the stories shared in everyday life, contained an adequate baseline level of coherence. Most participants, similar to normatively healthy individuals (e.g., cognitive unimpaired) in non-stressful situations, told relatively coherent stories. Note that in stories drawn from a population in which coherence does not achieve some baseline level (e.g., narratives of individuals suffering with Alzheimer's disease or posttraumatic stress disorder survivors recounting trauma) coherence of the story may become an issue for assessing quality. Although we empirically selected the six-item factor solution (not including coherence), this item fell just within conventional factor loading cutoffs (i.e., .47). Researchers

particularly interested in populations expected to produce narratives that vary widely on coherence may elect to include the coherence item when employing the Perceived Story Quality Index, or to assess story coherence using other measures.

More generally, given our interest in developing a Perceived Story Quality Index that combines dimensions of story quality that are shown to vary systematically, we did not focus on analysis in terms of individual story dimensions. Researchers interested in the perceived quality of stories could employ the overall index but might also be interested, however, in analyzing individual items depending on their investigative aims. Capturing whether particular types of stories rate high on one dimension and low on another is clearly possible, although the multi-item index is expected to be more reliable than single items.

Scope of this Research

The matter of what people perceive as a good story is far from settled by this work. Although we believe this research makes a definite contribution, in the following we delineate its scope in regard to three issues. The formation of the Perceived Story Quality Index provides the foundation for future work replicating and extending this preliminary research on lay perceptions of story quality. The conceptualization of perceived story quality was purposely limited to layperson's perceptions—that is, the goal was not to provide an expert view of what differentiates a story from other prose or conversation (e.g., plot and narrative coherence, McAdams, 2006; predictable grammar, Mandler, 1984). The Perceived Story Quality Index cannot differentiate whether a text passage is a story or not by linguistic standards. Instead, it is limited to use with existing stories and is a metric of their perceived quality—that is, it is a useful measure of perceived quality for narratives that already contain the basic structure and content necessary for a story to be considered a story. This line of research might be extended to chart the association between laypersons and expert views of story quality. Whether lay-raters perceive quality similarly to scholars and experts, who are informed about the micro- and macrocomponents of a story, is an area for future research.

In this study, the storyteller's communication goals were not varied as they were not of primary interest. Understanding the relation between perceived story quality and a storyteller's goals in a given situation, however, offers an interesting avenue for future study. Some research has examined young and older storytellers' communication goals in sharing autobiographical narratives (Trunk & Abrams, 2009) and whether individuals can change those goals when asked to by the researcher. Currently however, no work has related storytellers' communication goals to the quality of their story as perceived by a listener.

The Perceived Story Quality Index could be of use in such future endeavours. Of course, the issue that arises is whether what constitutes a good story varies depending on the storytellers' goals.

The existing story quality measures in the fields of psychology, linguistics, and speech-language pathology vary from being technically analytic to relatively holistic (McFadden & Gillam, 1996)—that is, some measures focus on relatively narrow quantitative aspects of stories, such as, amount of information recalled or percentage of clear expressions, whereas others focus on stories in their entirety. The conceptualization of story quality for the formation of the Perceived Story Quality Index involved examination of particular dimensions of story quality but also show how they form an index. Dimensions of perceived quality for this research were drawn from focus group of laypersons combined with dimensions in use in published work in the psychological literature. Thus, although the set of dimensions utilized is reasonable, it is also reasonable to suggest that other dimensions of perceived story quality exist, particularly if the aim is not a global measure of quality but an analysis of technical and structural features of stories. For example, a different measure of lay perception or academic analysis of story quality might be designed that could tap into various content-related conceptions (e.g., plot) or structural-related elements (e.g., chronology of events). Thus, the scope of the current Perceived Story Quality Index is to identify laypersons' perceptions of story quality at a global level. Other features of good stories certainly may exist at other levels of analysis.

Story Quality as an Implicit Theory

The conceptual background for attempting to create a Perceived Story Quality Index is the notion that individuals have an implicit theory (e.g., Sternberg, 2000) of what constitutes a good story. There are both strengths and challenges in eliciting implicit theories in empirical research (for a thorough review, see Morris et al., 2001). Many researchers simply avoid reference to implicit theories suggesting that such theories are beyond the layperson's declarative knowledge (i.e., ability to self-report) or that self-reports regarding implicit theories tap different concepts than those used in actual working theories. This research asked individuals about their concept of a good story in the preliminary focus groups, but the main part of the study measured individuals' implicit theories through their story ratings (i.e., not through direct self-report concerning their implicit theory). Evidence of an implicit theory was sought, and obtained, through the consistency with which diverse dimensions hung together across a large set of varying stories, and across various types of individuals (i.e., young, old, men, and women). According to our analyses, this preliminary study suggests that at a basic level young and older men and women share an implicit theory of what constitutes a good story.

Note, however, that like most implicit theories, this shared conception of a good story, although it holds for men and women of different ages may be limited to a culturally homogeneous sample. Researchers have posited that many cultural differences are best understood in terms of implicit theories (e.g., Morris & Peng, 1994). Raters in this study were largely Caucasian. Ethnic background may play a role in how participants' implicit theories of a good story are formed (Morris et al., 2001). For example, differences in how stories are told exist between individualistic and collectivistic cultures (Wang, 2004). The act of storytelling occurs across cultures but whether different cultural groups draw on similar implicit views of story quality when listening to other's stories is a direction for future research. For example, a next step for validation of the Perceived Story Quality Index would be to replicate this study with stories and ratings from a variety of ethnic groups within American culture (e.g., African Americans or Hispanic Americans), as well as from individuals of other nations. These future directions provide exciting opportunities for examining the universality of implicit theories of story quality.

Future Directions for the Perceived Story Quality Index

Although this study provides only preliminary support for the Perceived Story Quality Index, future directions are promising and a further developed measure has intuitive appeal for utilization in a variety of settings. In everyday life, for example, a young man might share his personal experience of a fun time at the beach with his girlfriend or an older woman might recount an episode from her favorite television program to her neighbor. Storytelling of these types takes place on a daily basis and individuals listen to such stories and make judgments about their quality. One avenue for research using the Perceived Story Quality Index is to examine how perceived story quality is related to the psychosocial functions that memory sharing serves (Bluck, 2003). Sharing autobiographical memory stories to serve social functions, such as to initiate social relationships, maintain social bonds, and increase intimacy, have been theorized as the primary function of the human ability to recall the personal past (Bruce, 1989; Nelson, 1993). Storytellers' memory for events is improved when a listener is engaged versus distracted (Bavelas, Coates, & Johnson, 2000; Pasupathi, 2003). Thus, what listeners hear and learn from the storyteller may be affected by their perception of whether it is a good story. The Perceived Story Quality Index provides a preliminary tool for examining the relation between perceived story quality and the extent to which memory sharing serves psychosocial functions.

The Perceived Story Quality Index was employed with stories elicited from a particular prompt. As such, from a thematic perspective these stories may be more likely to be high in the theme of communion and lower in the theme of

agency. Investigating the relation between stories having particular themes, such as agency and communion, in relation to perceived story quality, may prove an interesting avenue for research. If further validated in future research, we envision the Perceived Story Quality Index to also have utility in research in unique life settings where reliable assessment of the perception of story quality is of interest. These might include contexts such as the legal setting, the therapeutic setting, and the family setting.

Study Limitations

Although care was taken to ensure methodological rigor, the study has methodological limitations. The domain of the shared stories presents a limitation. In line with past research, we chose to limit the cue for eliciting the shared stories to one domain an event with a spouse or partner. Previous research has limited the domain of stories to provide a standard cue (e.g., work or family related, James et al., 1998; children's stories, Kemper et al., 1990). Doing so maintained the methodological rigor of the study but did not drastically limit the content and diversity of shared stories. The stories contained a wide range of events and experiences and differed on all kinds of details across participants. The narratives produced in response to this domain cue were, however, generally positive social stories. Positive stories are more often shared in social contexts (e.g., Nelson, 1991) and this study aimed to investigate the social perception of story quality as it is likely to occur in daily life. Although this index is likely useful with a variety of relatively neutral or positive stories, further research is needed to address the perceived characteristics of a good story about a negative event (e.g., a sad story or a tragic story). Future research will also, hopefully, continue to identify the utility of the Perceived Story Quality Index through its use in assessment of a broad variety of stories across many life domains.

The number of focus group members and lay-raters may have been less than ideal. Previous studies have not employed focus groups at all, however, to generate story dimensions. Thus, although the group was relatively small, it is an improvement over previous work in which story dimensions were simply chosen by the researchers due to their face validity. In addition, care was taken to balance the focus groups by age and gender. In terms of the lay-ratings, only 16 lay-raters were employed to assess the 129 stories. All raters, however, judged all stories, adding statistical power to the story assessments. In other published studies using lay-raters of story quality, numbers of raters vary between 10 and 26, and the lay-raters did not always rate all stories. Thus, although having a larger group of lay-raters would always be optimal, this study conforms to parameters within this literature and also improves on some past research by including focus groups and balancing age and gender of lay-raters. Despite these limitations, we believe that the current Perceived Story Quality Index provides

a unique and positive development over previous assessment tools used in the literature to assess perceived story quality.

CONCLUSION

The newly developed Perceived Story Quality Index, albeit preliminary, is a face-valid, brief, and reliable tool for assessing laypersons' implicit conceptions of a "good story." This study statistically confirmed that there are core dimensions of perceived quality, that several of these dimensions hang together to form a general factor of perceived story quality, and that the resultant index shows equivalence across positive, social stories told by men and women of different age groups and across both autobiographical and fictional stories. The Perceived Story Quality Index contributes to the literature by providing a standard preliminary assessment tool for examining laypersons' perceived quality of positive, social stories told in everyday life.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This research was partially supported by a National Institute on Aging, Predoctoral Training (T32) Fellowship and an American Psychological Association, Division 20 Master's Proposal Award to Jacqueline M. Baron.

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APPENDIX
Perceived Story Quality Index²

Instructions: Read the story and answer each of the following questions. CIRCLE the number that best describes your opinion of this story. Feel free to use the entire scale. Please answer all questions.

-
- | | | | | | |
|--|-----|----------|----------|------|-----------|
| 1. To what extent was this story entertaining ? | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) |
| Not at all | | Somewhat | A little | Very | Extremely |
-
- | | | | | | |
|---|-----|----------|----------|------|-----------|
| 2. To what extent was this story unemotional ? | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) |
| Not at all | | Somewhat | A little | Very | Extremely |
-
- | | | | | | |
|---|-----|----------|----------|------|-----------|
| 3. To what extent was this story memorable ? | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) |
| Not at all | | Somewhat | A little | Very | Extremely |
-
- | | | | | | |
|--|-----|----------|----------|------|-----------|
| 4. To what extent was this story unoriginal ? | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) |
| Not at all | | Somewhat | A little | Very | Extremely |
-
- | | | | | | |
|---|-----|----------|----------|------|-----------|
| 5. To what extent was this story rich in imagery ? | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) |
| Not at all | | Somewhat | A little | Very | Extremely |
-
- | | | | | | |
|--|-----|----------|----------|------|-----------|
| 6. To what extent was this story engaging ? | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) |
| Not at all | | Somewhat | A little | Very | Extremely |
-

²Items 2 and 4 should be reversed for scoring.