Exploring the Methodological Possibilities of Narrative Inquiry in Service-Learning: Reflections from a Recent Investigation

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Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to argue for the use of narrative inquiry as a distinctive methodological approach in the study of college student experiences and outcomes in service-learning. The author reflects on a recent narrative study of college men in service-learning programs to highlight how narrative scholarship can illuminate the messiness and complexity of service-learning. A participant narrative from the recent investigation is utilized in order to highlight the key tenets of narrative inquiry. Suggestions for high-quality narrative scholarship in service-learning are also offered.

Keywords: Qualitative Research, Narrative Research, Service-Learning, College Students, Student Development, Civic Engagement

Introduction

Scholars and practitioners alike can attest to the characterization of service-learning as "messy, complex, and rarely predicable" (*Cooks & Scharrer, 2004, p. 52*). Engaging undergraduates in service-learning typically involves placing them in communities that are vastly different from their own. Course content that supplements experiences in the community can often challenge closely held beliefs and assumptions that have been inscribed by trusted friends, family members, and teachers. Additionally, the close proximity to community members and their real life struggles makes matters of social injustice and oppression anything but abstract and distant (*Keen & Hall, 2009*). In fact, as a participant explained to me in a recent investigation of college men in service-learning programs, engaging members of the community at a service site was akin to being up close and personal in a theater. Rather than watching action unfold on a television, where a screen separated him from the action, he likened his work to watching a drama unfold right in front of his very eyes (*Foste & Jones, 2018*).

This comment illuminates the complexity of the student experience in service-learning. Consequently, research on service-learning courses and programs requires methodological

approaches that account for the complexity and messiness inherent in the process. Brandenberger *(2013)*, writing about student development in service-learning, noted that much more is known about the final product than the process of learning and development itself. He explained, "It is not sufficient to survey students at the start and end of a course or program. What first caught students' attention about a social concern, and how did students' thinking begin to change?" *(Brandenberger, 2013, p. 149)*. These are questions that narrative inquiry is especially well suited to explore, given its focus on the temporal and contextual nature of experience *(Chase, 2010; Gubrium & Holstein, 2009; Riessman, 2008)*.

The purpose of this essay is to explore the potential of narrative inquiry for offering new layers of depth and meaning to research on undergraduates in service-learning. This essay is in many ways a reflection of my own experiences as the primary investigator conducting a narrative study of college men in service-learning programs *(Foste & Jones, 2018)*. First, I examine why service-learning scholars should consider narrative inquiry as a methodological approach in their research. In doing so I underscore the major tenets of narrative inquiry. Having established a foundational understanding of narrative inquiry, I then offer an example from the recent study to stress the potential of this methodological approach. Drawing on an individual participant's narrative, I illustrate how class and gender intersected to inform his motivations to serve and how he experienced his time in a service-learning course. I then review how the major tenets of narrative scholarship, introduced at the outset of the essay, influenced the construction and interpretations of the participant narrative. Finally, a number of design considerations for high-quality narrative inquiry are offered.

Major Tenets of Narrative Inquiry

The purpose of this essay is to argue for greater use of narrative inquiry as a methodological approach to studying college student experiences in service-learning programs. Qualitative researchers are well suited to identify a methodology for such work, since the methodology will serve as the guiding framework for a number of subsequent design considerations, including sampling, data collection, and analysis *(Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014)*. A review of qualitative scholarship on service-learning underscores a lack of methodological clarity (Jones & Foste, 2017), *leading to a critique that much of this work* is "more similar to journalism than to scientific research" *(Bringle & Hatcher, 2005, p. 35)*.

Using Dewey's *(1916)* notions of experience, continuity, and time as a foundation, scholars of narrative inquiry take "as a premise that people live and/or understand their lives in storied forms, connecting events in the manner of a plot that has a beginning, middle, and end points" *(Josselson, 2011, p. 224)*. The tradition of narrative inquiry is guided by the eliciting of stories that reveal insights into the human experience. A great deal of confusion exists regarding what constitutes narrative scholarship. Indeed, the term narrative has been used in a variety of ways in regard to qualitative research *(Josselson, 2011)*. Some refer to individual stories participants offer as narrative, whereas others contend that any account is itself a narrative. For the purposes of this essay, I rely on Riessman's *(2008)* definition that places the narrative at three different locations. She explains that narratives occur at three overlapping levels:

> stories told by research participants (which are themselves interpretive), interpretive accounts developed by an investigator based on interviews and fieldwork observation (a story about stories), and even the narrative a reader constructs after engaging with the participant's and investigator's narrative. *(Riessman, 2008, p. 6)*

Drawing on Riessman's conceptualization avoids the confusion that can result when discussing what constitutes narrative scholarship as a distinct qualitative methodology.

Although a complete review of narrative scholarship is beyond the scope of this essay *(see Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 2008)*, it is important to highlight some of the essential elements that make narrative inquiry a distinct methodological approach: the temporal nature of narratives, the focus on a construction and presentation of self through language, and the relationship between researcher and participant in constructing a coherent narrative *(Chase, 2010; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Elliot, 2012; Josselson, 2011; Riessman, 2008)*.

Temporal Nature of Narratives

Because this approach is concerned with the individual and the process of change over time, narrative inquiry gives particular attention to temporality *(Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 2008)*. Events are seen "not as a thing happening at that moment but as an expression of something happening over time. Any event, or thing, has a past, a present as it appears to us, and an implied future" *(Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 29)*. Put otherwise, individuals are always in the process of becoming *(Nixon, 2011)*. For instance, when

a student shares a story about his semester's work at a food pantry, this experience cannot be understood outside his earlier experiences with poverty. These may include early messages he received from parents about the poor or prior volunteer experiences in a high school student group or local community organization. For others, as occurred frequently in our study *(Foste & Jones, 2018)*, experiences were considered in light of spiritual and faith communities that were instrumental in early service memories. As detailed below, what one student in our study experienced working at a local community house could not be understood without the prior context of his working-class upbringing.

Central to this point, then, is that verbal accounts of experience are always given meaning in light of previous experiences. Discerning meaning is a hallmark of qualitative research broadly and narrative work in particular. It is the interpretive task of the researcher to link stories together in a way that produces a coherent narrative *(Gubrium & Holstein, 2009)*. Rarely do participants offer stories in a linear fashion, providing a beginning, middle, and end point. This is the work left up to the researcher.

Presentation of Self

Because narratives are always understood as a recapitulation of events for particular audiences, scholars are interested in the ways individuals structure a narrative. How a researcher interrogates this presentation depends in large part on the paradigm underlying the investigative approach: Constructivists largely rely on the words of the participants, whereas critical theorists of performance and dialogue search for meaning within language *(Jones et al., 2014; Riessman, 2008)*. Regardless of approach, narrative scholars tend to agree that language is never a neutral pursuit and that the choice of words is always to some extent a political act. This focus on the structure of narratives, how they are told and for what reasons, distinguishes narrative inquiry from other modes of qualitative inquiry. Narrative researchers consider how people want to be known and understood in a given social context *(Riessman, 2008)*. In this sense narratives are an active process, a doing of something. As socially and historically situated performances, narratives offer an excellent means of understanding identity *(Chase, 2010)*. Scholars are less concerned with whether the account is 100% factual. Instead, there is an interest in the structure and organization of stories. How are they sequenced? What language is used? From this perspective narrative scholarship cannot produce a confessional tale, because the interview setting provides a social context that in itself produces

certain motives. But it is not the factual confessional the narrative scholar is after; rather, it is a deeper understanding of how the participant organized and made sense of an experience, how they wish to be known and understood in relation to that experience, and how their perception of the experience is ordered and sequenced over time *(Chase, 2010; Josselson, 2011; Riessman, 2008)*.

For instance, narrative scholarship has been particularly instrumental over time in illuminating how individuals make sense of illness *(Patton, 2015)*. In this type of work the focus is not so much the factual recounting of the illness, but how individuals found new sources of meaning in living with an illness that drastically changed their lives *(Riessman, 2008)*. Narrative scholars have noted that these stories are an especially potent means by which individuals repair a damaged sense of self, particularly in relation to experiences such as breast cancer or other life-altering illness. In my own research, I have documented how White college students construct narratives to guard against or repair the perceived damages that result from any accusations of racism *(Foste, 2017)*.

Coconstruction of Narratives

Narrative scholarship pays special attention to the relationship between researcher and participant. Although qualitative researchers generally hold this focus *(Jones et al., 2014; Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2015)*, those operating from the narrative tradition pay special attention to the researcher as a narrator *(Chase, 2010)*. Those preparing to engage in this type of work must consider their own autobiography, or their narrative, before entering the field.

Clandinin and Connelly *(2000)* refer to this process as composing narrative beginnings. Consistent with their notion that the narrative is a three-dimensional space, they recommend that researchers recognize how previous experiences influence their current standpoint, the ways in which the personal and social converge, and situate their narrative reflections within particular times and places. In turn, the researcher's engagement with any narrative must be understood in relation to their own standpoint *(Josselson, 2011)*. Interviews are not natural forms of talk, but a unique form of discourse *(Miczo, 2003; Mishler, 1986)*. Participants tell the stories they do because the researcher has identified them as important and prompted such a telling. Further, because narratives are used in a variety of ways, including to entertain, justify, or explain, participants can often attempt to pull the researcher into the narrative in a way that exacts a high level of engagement *(Riessman, 2008)*.

The narrative researcher must then be mindful of this relationship and pay particular attention to autobiographical considerations. As it relates to service-learning, scholars must consider their own assumptions, biases, and expectations about service, volunteering, and civic engagement prior to entering the interview setting. As I entered each of my interviews, I frequently reflected on my own biases, most notably my personal frustrations that resulted from White, middle-class students' desires to be understood as morally good and virtuous in my service-learning courses.

Examples From a Recent Investigation: Jackson's Narrative of Class and Gender

Having established some of the unique features of narrative inquiry, I now introduce Jackson, a participant from a recent exploration of college men in service-learning programs *(Foste & Jones, 2018)*. Given that college men tend to be underrepresented in service-learning programs *(Chesbrough, 2011; Sax, 2008)*, there was much to be gained from engaging those men who did participate in service work. Under the guidance of my doctoral advisor, I looked to these men for insight into their motivations to participate in service and how gender structured and informed their time in such programs. In doing so, we took up Chase's *(2010)* call to view participants not as individuals prepared to answer a predetermined set of questions, although we had those, but as people with complex stories of human experience to share. As the primary investigator and individual responsible for conducting interviews, it was my responsibility to create an interview context that would allow those stories to emerge.

Jackson's narrative illustrates how gender structured and informed both his motivations to engage in a service-learning course and how he experienced his time in the course. In particular, it provides a nuanced account of how gender and social class intersect to form an approach to service that is fundamentally gendered and classed. Jackson's narrative is temporal in nature and sensitive to multiple contexts. One can begin to understand how he interprets and makes sense of service work by looking backward in time to his rural, working-class, single-mother roots and the role they played in shaping perceptions of masculinity. These are the experiences that help us contextualize Jackson's sense-making around service-learning in the present. As Gubrium and Holstein *(2009)* noted, "no item of experience is meaningful in its own right. It is made meaningful through the particular ways in which it is linked to other items" *(p. 55)*. Consistent with the tenets of narra-

tive inquiry, it was our responsibility to account for how Jackson assembled his narrative within multiple layers of context, including social class, single-parent households, and larger societal narratives of working-class masculinity and gendered notions of "the man of the house." This approach incorporates a number of experiences throughout the lifespan *(Gubrium & Holstein, 2009)* and opens up our inquiry beyond the immediacy of his service work in college. As Riessman *(2008)* explained, this interpretive work requires imposing order on disparate and oftentimes fragmented stories.

"Man of the House": Looking Backward to Interpret the Present

Jackson's narrative begins in rural Appalachia, as the son of a working-class single mother providing for two young boys. After his father left the family early in his life, Jackson recalled feeling an intense pressure to serve as the "man of the house," noting, "I had to be able to make tough decisions. I had to be able to kind of console my mother when she needed it. I had to be like sound mind, a role model for my little brother." Such responsibilities meant that Jackson had to forgo many of the experiences his peers enjoyed. Without a father in the home, Jackson felt that he grew up much quicker than his friends. He explained:

> I think I skipped a few years in comparison to kind of all my friends around me. They would be 15 but I would feel like I was 18 or 20 because I just had to be the man of the house and I had to take care of my mom and I had to take care of my brother. . . . I had to be this stone wall, nothing really fazed me. I couldn't show emotion.

Both of these passages offer a considerable insight into Jackson's understanding of what constitutes appropriate manly behavior. When his father left the home, Jackson found it critical to replace the gendered labor, both physical and emotional, his dad previously carried out. It becomes clear that Jackson's understanding of manhood is greatly influenced by dominant narratives that suggest men are wage earners, emotionally distant, and protectors of the family *(Coltrane, 2010)*. In many ways these early experiences seem to contribute to Jackson's later interest in service.

Coming to college was the first time Jackson exhibited an awareness of his social class, a sense of self that would later become critical to his understanding of service and notions of giving back. Given the relative homogeneity of social class statuses in his home

Appalachian community, Jackson had rarely interacted with people who had more wealth and resources than his family. Matters of class, money, wealth, and status were relatively invisible to him. This all changed when he arrived on campus. He was now faced with a constant barrage of status symbols that reminded him of his working-class, single-parent roots:

> When I came to State University I didn't recognize it. Obviously I grew up and I didn't recognize what social class was because everybody was pretty much the same and nobody really talked about money and fiscal problems. It wasn't a big thing where I was from. I kind of never really thought about it until I came here and I was introduced to all of that stuff.

This is an important component of Jackson's biographical account, for it is this increased salience of a working-class identity that contributes to his interest in service. When Jackson left home for college, he was no longer able to provide for his family on a day-to-day basis as he had in North Carolina. Providing for his family was central to the construction of his identity prior to coming to college. Jackson recalled that once he was in college, multiple states away from North Carolina, that "I physically couldn't do anything for my mother and brother . . . but after weeks go by then I'd realize like, oh shit, I should probably check on them or call them. . . ."

"These are My People": Motivations and Meaning

Although Jackson could no longer provide for his family, he soon shifted his attention to his work in a service-learning course. Enrolled in a service-learning and leadership course, Jackson selected a local community house as his site of service for the term. The possibility of working with and mentoring children in poverty was incredibly appealing to Jackson. What other students understood as a requirement in order to pass a course, Jackson saw as a means of giving back in order to help children avoid the pitfalls he had faced earlier in life. In many ways it was an extension of his provider status in his North Carolina home. Jackson was particularly passionate about working with children to succeed despite the lack of resources necessary to apply to college. During his own high school career, he knew nothing about the SAT until the year he was expected to take the exam. Jackson described this as a real "slap in the face." He reflected on the ways in which his working-class roots served as a catalyst for his service:

> Growing up I recognized that the education system where I came from wasn't always the best and we didn't have all of the resources and all the different opportunities that other places . . . so I've always had that interest of just kind of helping kids realize that college is an option and give them the information or knowledge.… A lot of us had to go out of our way to research schools and figure out how we were going to pay for it and stuff like that. It wasn't a topic of conversation in my area. . . . I didn't know what to do about college until it was like a slap in the face my junior year.

Jackson saw his work at the community house as much more than service. In fact, he would go on to explain that the work he was doing did not feel like service at all. His work at the service site, similar to his time with his family in North Carolina, was understood as a means of providing for others. That is, Jackson's motivations to serve cannot be understood outside his working-class roots, notions of giving back, and a gendered perception that men should serve as providers. His motivations were defined by a "passion to provide . . . the passion of like, not wanting people to go through the same experience that I went through where I was in the dark. . . ." Jackson differentiated the work he was doing from other tasks that he might have considered service. These tasks included assisting in the construction of new homes or picking up trash on the side of the road. This work at the community house, however, was different. It was rooted in a fundamental belief that he needed to give back and provide a sense of mentorship to children in poverty, those children that looked like him. He explained that tutoring and mentoring children at the community house wasn't service because "it didn't feel like work."

This distinction was further highlighted when Jackson discussed the differences between his service site and the service-learning classroom. Social class was a frequent focal point of course discussions. These discussions only heightened the salience of Jackson's social class identity and, consequently, of his feeling at home at the community house. He quickly tired of the savior narrative that he felt permeated the class, insisting that students were out to save those in poverty:

> Then going into the service classes where it's like, "oh we work with lower social classes or we work with working class (people)." I'm just like, well I'm in the working class

and I don't feel like I need anything from somebody else. . . . So it's like when you introduce social class in like college courses and you have to think about the people that come from kind of that lower or working class that I guess myself being a first generation student. . . . We take the issue differently. . . .

His peers' constant commentary that defined communities through the lens of poverty prompted Jackson to reflect on his own upbringing. He shared his frustration about the ways other students spoke of the working class:

It kind of makes me think was me growing up like this an issue? Would my family require help, would my family benefit from help? Like I said, I don't think so. I don't think that we needed help by any means, but that's kind of what I've gotten from courses here at State U is that middle, upper class people have to turn around and kind of drag (the) working class out of (the) lower class.

Jackson's experiences in both his service-learning course and at the community house led to an increased emphasis on social class in the construction of his own identity. He described feeling frustrated that his peers failed to comprehend the experiences of those who live in poverty, explaining these students were blinded by their social class privilege. It was at his service site where he felt most at home. It was in the faces of clients, volunteers, and community members alike that he saw his working-class background in rural North Carolina. Jackson pointedly noted that when he went to the community house, "those are my people. Those are the people that I know because it doesn't seem different . . . we all know where we come from."

What Can We Learn From Jackson's Narrative?

For the purposes of this essay, I singled out one narrative in order to illustrate the potential of narrative inquiry in illuminating the complexity and messiness inherent in service-learning. At its core, narrative research is concerned with how human beings interpret and give meaning to a variety of life experiences through the act of storytelling. As Chase *(2010)* noted, narrative work is less interested in locating an objective truth but rather takes "an interest in the other as a narrator of his or her particular biographical experiences as he or she understands them" *(p. 219)*. As such, "any

narrative is significant because it embodies—and gives us insight into—what is possible and intelligible within a specific social context" *(Chase, 2010, p. 226)*. Jackson provided one of 10 narratives in our study on college men's experiences in service-learning. I utilized his narrative for this essay because of its complexity and richness, particularly as it relates to working-class masculinity and the increasing salience of social class to Jackson's sense of self. Now we can consider what exactly a reader might learn from Jackson's narrative, and how narrative investigators' interpretive work maps to the tenets of narrative scholarship introduced at the outset of this essay: temporality, focus on presentation of self, and the coconstruction of knowledge.

First, attention to the temporal nature of Jackson's narrative reveals considerable insight into his service-learning experience. It underscores an evolving awareness of social class and the ways early experiences prior to college shaped an understanding of working-class masculinity. In this context, one cannot understand Jackson's time in a service-learning course without accounting for these prior experiences. As his narrative makes clear, Jackson rarely gave attention to matters of social class prior to college. Upon coming to college, however, Jackson became vividly aware of his social class against a backdrop of wealth and status on campus. His working-class roots would become instrumental in motivating his service work. As he described during our interview, the work he performed at his service site never felt like service, but rather a process of relationship building and mentoring.

Moving back in time to Jackson's early understandings of masculinity also provides additional layers of complexity to his sensemaking of service-learning. His narrative highlights how growing up in a working-class, single-mother household shaped his conceptualizations of manhood early in life. It also illuminates a sense of class solidarity he experiences with those for whom he worked at the community house. This attention to social class identity also provides the context for Jackson's feelings of alienation and distance from his peers in the service-learning class. Our study set out to understand how college men experienced service-learning courses as gendered beings *(Foste & Jones, 2018)*. Although it is easy, and even tempting, to universalize the experiences of all men, Jackson's narrative illuminates the role of social class in defining a sense of manhood. Gubrium and Holstein *(2009)* noted the importance of narrative linkage, or the process in which multiple experiences are linked together and considered in light of one another. Utilizing narrative inquiry required that as researchers we employ a great

deal of interpretive authority in exploring how Jackson assembled a coherent narrative of the self in service-learning. A consistent theme that emerged is the way Jackson constructed stories around providing and giving back, both as "the man of the house" in North Carolina and at the community house for his service-learning course.

This recurring theme of providing and giving back highlights how Jackson wanted to be known in the interview setting. Scholars have emphasized the need to interrogate how participants assemble an account and their motivations for doing so *(Chase, 2010; Mishler, 1986; Riessman, 2008)*. That is, participants typically have some reason for telling a story in a particular way. They do so in part because the stories participants share are always situated within a broader social context. In the case of Jackson's narrative, his story could not be separated from larger societal narratives about gendered labor and the role of men in heterosexual households.

Although less apparent in Jackson's narrative than the first two tenets, the accounts provided in this essay cannot be understood without some attention to the relationship between the researcher and the interviewee. That is, Jackson offered the stories he did only because he was prompted to do so in the interview setting. One limitation of the presentation of data in this essay is that it does not include the researcher in the display of the narrative. Put otherwise, there is no trace of the researcher as an active part of a lively exchange. Narrative researchers frequently advocate for scholars to include their line of questioning in any presentation of data. Rather than simply providing an extended quote from the participant, many narrative methodologists believe it to be important for readers to see what types of questions were asked. Jackson provided the answers he did only because he knew the context of the study. He entered the interview setting, which itself is a unique form of communication *(Mishler, 1986)*, knowing the topic of the research was college men in service-learning programs. Had the interview questions been asked differently, or perhaps sequenced differently, Jackson's narrative would likely look very different.

Recommendations for High-Quality Narrative Inquiry in Service-Learning

Narrative inquiry holds great promise in revealing the complexities of student experiences in service-learning. This methodological approach has the potential to illuminate evolving conceptions of service, highlight the role of social identities in motivating

students to serve, and complicate understandings of learning and development in service-learning. When crafted with a careful eye toward a number of design considerations, narrative inquiry offers an incredibly useful means of enriching understandings among administrators, faculty, and policymakers alike. This is especially true because human beings are storytelling creatures *(Josselson, 2011)*. It is through stories that individuals interpret and impose meaning on experiences. As a result, narrative inquiry can speak to key stakeholders in a way that statistical analysis, or even more postpositivist qualitative approaches, likely cannot. Although findings from narrative scholarship should not be generalized to the broader population, they offer a useful means of enriching understanding within the context of one's own practice. Jackson's narrative offers a number of useful implications for conducting high-quality narrative scholarship.

Sampling

Qualitative researchers must make a number of decisions about sampling criteria so that readers have an understanding as to why some individuals were selected as participants and other individuals were not *(Jones et al., 2014)*. Although qualitative work is not intended to be generalizable to the broader population, researchers must still provide justifications for their samples. Our research was motivated by the fact that men tend to be underrepresented in collegiate service-learning programs *(Sax, 2008)*. The lack of men available for the study made participant recruitment difficult. Although it would have been easy to stray from our initial sampling criteria, we knew that doing so would jeopardize the trustworthiness of the study *(Jones et al., 2014)*. We sought men who had participated in a service-learning course during the previous six semesters. The courses had to have an explicit focus on matters of social justice and inequality and provide strong connections between service and academic content. An additional requirement was that the participants be especially reflective about their experiences. This was a judgment we left up to the faculty and staff who nominated students for our study. We specifically required students to be reflective of their service experiences because narrative inquiry relies on participants to be storytellers who can offer rich and descriptive accounts of experience. Interviewing for narrative inquiry cannot be a simple questionnaire that asks a series of one-off questions. Instead, narrative interviews should produce rich accounts of experience. Allowing anyone who had participated in service-learning courses, without a recommendation from an

instructor, could have left us with students who had very little to say in the interview context.

Data Collection

The researcher's approach to data collection is one of the major areas in which the distinctions between narrative inquiry and other qualitative methodologies become most apparent. As the primary data collector for our study, I began to notice an evolving understanding of the narrative interview as I moved through data collection. Perhaps most important in this evolution of understanding was the way in which interview questions were constructed and presented to participants. It quickly became apparent that research questions were not reaching their full potential in opening up stories. As noted previously, coconstructing accounts of experience is fundamental to narrative scholarship *(Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 2008)*. The implication of this assumption is that participants offer the accounts they do only because they are prompted to tell certain stories in the context of the research study.

Gubrium and Holstein *(2009)* describe a process of narrative activation in which researchers construct questions that invite detailed accounts of reality that have a temporal quality. They explain that narratives are not a collection of facts and memories stored away within the individual waiting to be told, but rather are constructed in the very specific context of the interview. Gubrium and Holstein position participants as architects of their own story, building and assembling the particulars of an account, but note that this process is performed through interaction with others, particularly the interviewer, in attendance.

Reflecting back on the present study, as the primary data collector I gained increasing familiarity with narrative scholarship as the study progressed. Most notably, follow-up questions shifted to inquiries about specific times and places, providing a certain level of structure for participants in offering up stories *(Riessman, 2008)*. For instance, when a participant explained that he felt service providers required the men to do physical or manual labor while their female peers worked directly with community members, follow-up questions would ask for specific examples. These questions were phrased in a way that attempted to invite a larger story, in turn providing insight into how the participant made sense of that experience. Language such as "Can you take me back in time to a particular experience when . . ." or "Tell me what happened when

. . .” was especially useful in inviting stories rather than formulaic answers.

Mishler *(1986)* has described the importance of regarding the interview as a process of eliciting meaning rather than the traditional stimulus-and-response approach to data collection. This is an important distinction that service-learning scholars should consider when designing interview protocols. A number of narrative scholars have documented the importance of opening up interview questions in a way that elicits topically centered and temporally ordered stories *(Elliot, 2012; Riessman, 2008)*. Our study was certainly enhanced with this increasingly complex understanding of narrative approaches to data collection.

Data Analysis

As has been noted throughout this essay, narrative scholars hold a great amount of interpretive authority in the presentation of participant narratives. Ochberg *(1996)* explained that this interpretive work “reveals that what one (the narrator) might say if only one could speak freely, but we can see this only if we are willing to look beyond what our informants tell us in so many words” *(p. 98)*. The predominant method of analysis within qualitative work tends to be grounded theory, where researchers break data into small chunks through line-by-line coding. While valuable, this approach is largely inconsistent with narrative inquiry’s focus on holistic, coherent narratives and attention to meaning-making *(Riessman, 2008)*.

Entering the study, I was largely familiar with grounded theory approaches to qualitative analysis. For the purposes of this research it became imperative to gain increasing comfort with narrative analysis. Service-learning researchers who wish to utilize narrative inquiry would be wise to do so as well, for the approaches can yield very different interpretations of the data. Riessman *(2008)* offers a conceptual roadmap for analyzing narratives. Her work was instrumental in our study, as it moved analysis beyond traditional conceptions of coding. Although a full review of her approach to data analysis is beyond the scope of this essay, I briefly highlight two approaches we believe service-learning scholars might find useful in their own work.

One approach Riessman *(2008)* offers is thematic analysis. The thematic approach, perhaps more than any other analytic approach within narrative inquiry, honors the words of the participants. Although prior theory is used to interpret and make

meaning of participants' accounts, thematic analysis is concerned with how participants experience and interpret a given phenomenon *(Riessman, 2008)*. The goal is to create a clean and coherent plot line that is structured temporally, offering a beginning, middle, and end. Thematic analysis involves examining stories and exploring commonalities and differences in the construction of identity. Preserving the sequence of stories, narrative scholars theorize across a number of cases by "identifying common thematic elements across research participants, the events they report, and the actions they take" *(Riessman, 2008, p. 74)*.

Thematic analysis was utilized in our study of undergraduate men in order to ascertain motivations for participation in service-learning. Using this approach, we uncovered three major motivations for service: social identities, a desire for structure and accountability, and social networking. This is a typical approach to thematic analysis, as the method is frequently used to create typologies of experience *(Riessman, 2008)*.

Whereas thematic analysis is concerned with the told, a structural analysis of narratives is focused on the telling *(Riessman, 2008)*. Utilizing structural analysis offers insight into how a participant constructs and assembles a given account. Drawing on Labov *(1982)*, Riessman *(2008)* encourages narrative researchers to consider six elements that form a complete narrative.

The first is an abstract. This serves as the summary or "so what" of the story. One might think of it as the larger point. Second, a narrative has an orientation, which offers context in terms of time, place, characters, and situations. Third is the complicating action. This serves as the turning point or main concern within the drama as told by the participant. Fourth, an evaluation of the events within the narrative occurs. In the evaluation the narrator steps back "from the action to comment on meaning and communicate emotions—the 'soul' of the narrative" *(Riessman, 2008, p. 84)*. Narratives end with a resolution, or the outcome of the plot, and a coda that ends the story and brings the conversation back to the present. Using this framework, the researcher codes clauses within the larger narrative based on these elements. The strength of this approach lies in the ability to examine who and what the narrator identifies as significant, the organization and sequence of such significant experiences, and an attention to other characters in the plot, no matter how minor. Both thematic and structural methods of analysis highlight the very different possibilities that exist within narrative scholarship.

Trustworthiness

Service-learning scholars wishing to utilize narrative inquiry must be able to convey some level of confidence in their findings *(Jones et al., 2014)*. It is critical that narrative researchers highlight the centrality of meaning to their work as opposed to notions of generalizability. Transferability often takes the emphasis away from claims of generalizability *(Jones et al., 2014)* and instead invites considering the researcher's work within the reader's own local context. Meaningful narrative inquiries "are judged to be important when they bring literary texts to be read by others not so much for the knowledge they contain but for the vicarious testing of life possibilities by readers of the research they permit" *(Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 42)*. Or, as Josselson *(2011)* notes, quality narrative inquiry allows the reader to explore a range of nuances and relationships in a way that enables the reader to consider them within the context of other situations.

Such trustworthiness can be reached largely through the use of rich, descriptive data *(Chase, 2010; Josselson, 2011; Patton, 2015; Riessman, 2008)*. Narratives are always partial and incomplete *(Riessman, 2008)*. Of the utmost importance is that the narrative researcher illustrate that they or their participants did not make up the stories presented and that inquiry was guided by adherence to a methodological and theoretical guide. The researcher ought to provide enough data to allow the reader to make their own informed interpretation and rendering of the narrative *(Riessman, 2008)*. Direct speech, or what we might consider raw data, offers a space for the reader to consider what is happening and draw their own conclusions that may be similar to, or different from, those of the researcher. Additionally, one can boost trustworthiness by illustrating areas of both convergence and divergence within the data *(Riessman, 2008)*. One might "identify points where individuals' accounts converge thematically (creating a community of experience), and other points where they split apart" *(Riessman, 2008, p. 191)*. The idea of highlighting divergence is similar to what others describe as the search for negative or discrepant cases *(Maxwell, 2014)*. Jackson's narrative underscored an approach to service that was uniquely informed by his working-class identity and thus very different from most of the other men in our study. These cases should not be written off, but rather probed for their own meaning and distinctive features.

Reliance on rich and descriptive data will not satisfy all academics, however. It is thus critical that the researcher provide a detailed trail leading up to the conclusions presented *(Maxwell,*

2014; Riessman, 2008). It is the responsibility of the researcher to be transparent, making every point of research design and data collection visible and accompanied by a corresponding rationale. This was particularly important in our own study, as we initially struggled to find participants who met our sampling criteria. As noted earlier, although it would have been tempting to revise our initial sampling criteria, we were patient in the recruitment process so that we stayed true to our initial intent.

Conclusion

The purpose of this essay was to illustrate how understandings of student experiences in service-learning might be enhanced through the use of narrative inquiry. A shared goal among most qualitative researchers is to uncover the role of context in people's lives. Maxwell *(2013)* explained that a major contribution of qualitative scholarship is in "understanding the particular contexts within which participants act, and the influence that this context has on their actions" *(p. 30).* As Jackson's account illustrates, narrative approaches to qualitative research firmly locate our participants in particular contexts. The temporal focus of narrative research reveals additional layers of complexity to the ways Jackson makes sense of his time in service-learning *(Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).* That is, it becomes clear that in order to understand how Jackson makes meaning of his service-learning experiences, we must account for his precollege environments, most notably his working-class roots and his gendered understandings of providing for others. The contribution of this approach, then, is in its potential to enrich, and even to complicate, our understandings of how students experience and make sense of service-learning programs. By opening up the interview context as a space for storytelling, Jackson offered a number of accounts that illuminated the meaning he made of his time in a service-learning class. Although Jackson's narrative is not in any way intended to be generalizable, this should not be considered a weakness or limitation. Rather, his account offered a departure from the other nine participants in our study, illustrating how gender and class intersected to uniquely inform the ways in which he moved through his semester of service. In this regard, Jackson's narrative underscores how narrative inquiry might open up new possibilities to understanding the complex and messy nature of service-learning in higher education *(Cooks & Scharrer, 2004).*

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