Illustrating the Narrative Process through Career Stories

Stephanie A. Jones
Georgia Southern University, USA

This article illustrates the methodology used in a qualitative research study that employed narrative analysis to examine the occupational choice of school librarians. The primary data collection method was through life story interviews. Narrative analysis resulted in the creation of first-person career stories which were interpreted using the framework of career construction theory. Procedures used in the study are described in sufficient detail to serve as a guide for researchers interested in undertaking a narrative research study. An excerpt from a career story is provided to show the narrative analysis research process.

Introduction

Over the past two decades narrative research has become an influential research methodology across all fields of the social sciences, including teacher education (Chase, 2005; Latta & Kim, 2011; Herman, Jahn, & Ryan, 2005). Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr (2007) contend that narrative research has great appeal to teacher educators because of “the comfort that comes from thinking about telling and listening to stories” (p. 21). However they caution that narrative inquiry is “much more than the telling of stories,” and researchers need to understand “the complexities surrounding all phases of a narrative inquiry” (p. 21). Researchers who hope to undertake this form of qualitative research will find that there are few explanations in the literature regarding the strategies involved in conducting a narrative research study (McCormack, 2004). This article was written to fill that need by illustrating the process of narrative research from data collection through data analysis. This example is one that other researchers may wish to consider as they design their own narrative research studies.

Narrative Inquiry

The study described in this article examined the motivations for choosing the occupation of school librarian. It followed a long tradition of studies examining the recruitment, retention, and retirement of the library workforce. The majority of these studies were conducted using survey methods resulting in large, complex data sets which provided “a sense of the scope and complexity of the workforce issues facing the field and the potential of research to inform workforce planning at all levels” (Marshall, Rathbun-Grubb, Barreau, & Morgan, 2010, p. 123). However, the heavy reliance on survey methodology constrained the “the range and nature of
variables that have been considered as well as the results that have been generated” (Brookhart & Freeman, 1992, p. 52). In the resulting aggregated data the story of the experiences of individuals is left undiscovered. Such insights are more likely to be obtained by using a qualitative research methodology which can reveal an in-depth understanding of human behavior and the reasons that govern that behavior (Merriam & Associates, 2002). One type of qualitative inquiry is narrative research which uses a “variety of approaches that are concerned with the search for and analysis of the stories that people employ to understand their lives and the world around them” (Bryman, 2004, p. 412). The feature that distinguishes narrative research from other qualitative methodologies is that the unit of study is some form of story.

The choice of narrative research for the study described in this article was based upon two bodies of literature; the first supports narrative as a way of understanding human experience, and the second advances narrative as an especially useful format for gaining understanding of the complexities of career development. In his seminal book Actual Minds, Possible Worlds (1986), the cognitive psychologist, Jerome Bruner, proposed that people have two different modes of thinking: paradigmatic and narrative. Paradigmatic cognition is the logico-scientific form of thought that functions to classify “a particular instance as belonging to a category or concept” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 9). This type of thought involves “abstract generalizations” (Baumeister & Newman, 1994, p. 676) and is “essentially the sphere of science, logic, and mathematics” (p. 677). Alternatively, narrative cognition “involves coherent stories about particular experiences,... best captures the experiential particularity of human action and intentionality, and it involves reasons, intentions, beliefs, and goals” (Baumeister & Newman, 1994, p. 677). According to narrative theory, humans understand their lives in a storied form; consequently, narrative is an appropriate way to explore their experiences (McAdams, 1996; Polkinghorne, 1988; Polkinghorne, 1995).

Career researchers from the field of psychology have advanced the “use of narrative as a paradigm for career research” (Bujold, 2004, p. 476). Bujold describes career development as a creative process full of unpredictability and requiring individuals to make multiple decisions as they deal with “obstacles, unforeseen events, various circumstances, chance, and inner conflicts” (p. 471). In contrast to the traditional, positivistic career development research that assessed independent variables such as “career interests, job characteristics, mentor behavior, career indecision, and career satisfaction” (Inkson, 2007, p. 228), narrative research provides “a more holistic view” (Cohen & Mallon, 2001, p. 52) of the complexities of careers. Narrative research methods can illuminate the how and why of individual decision making.

Cohen and Mallon (2001) conducted a study of 60 individuals experiencing career transitions that clearly illustrates the benefits of a narrative research methodology for career research. While conducting interviews, the researchers “noted that specific questions which aimed to interrogate the whys and hows of individuals’ career transitions yielded less rich data than expected. Participants seemed to find it difficult to articulate their reasons in the abstract, giving bland answers” (p. 54). However, one of the participants responded with an elaborate story that referenced both the work and non-work aspects of her life. Cohen and Mallon realized that in order to answer “questions about their career transition ... participants needed to situate that event within a meaningful context [that was] both temporal (the sequence of events leading up to the decision to leave the organization) and social (including the important people and events which were seen to influence the decision)” (p. 55). As Cohen and Mallon (2001) discovered, “explaining a major transition may require knowledge of the whole story, the story of the entire career; otherwise the experience may be like walking in on the last scene of a movie” (Inkson, 2007, p. 240). The study demonstrated that narrative methodology can produce “information-rich” (Polkinghorne, 2005, p. 140) data when the participants are enabled to tell stories that include any and all aspects of their lives that they deem relevant to their experiences.
An essential component of all research is the selection of an appropriate theory to guide the research process and focus the findings. The choice of the narrative research methodology for the study described in this article was strongly correlated with the underlying vocational theory, career construction theory.

**Career Construction Theory**

Career construction theory is a comprehensive theory that represents the what, how, and why of vocational behavior. Respectively termed vocational personality, career adaptability, and life themes, these three dimensions work together to explain “how individuals choose and use work” (Savickas, 2006, p. 84). Career construction theory states that “individuals build their careers by imposing meaning on vocational behavior” (p. 85). These meanings are revealed in career stories “that explain why individuals make the choices that they do and the private meaning that guides these choices” (p. 85). This narrative aspect of career construction theory was a key to answering the research question and guided the selection of the narrative research methodology, a form of qualitative research that “takes as its object of investigation the story itself” (Riessman, 1993, p.1).

**Conducting the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to identify and explore the reasons that five graduate students in a school library media program had for selecting the occupation of school librarian. Savickas’ career construction theory served as the framework for understanding the vocational behavior of the participants. The primary data collection method was through life story interviews. Narrative analysis was used to create first-person career stories for each of the individual participants. The data was also examined in relation to the three major components of career construction theory: vocational personality, life theme, and career adaptability. Lastly, a comparative analysis was conducted to locate commonalities across all the participants’ life stories.

**Ethical Issues**

To ensure that the participants were treated in an ethical manner, the study was designed in accordance with guidelines provided by the Institutional Review Board for the protection of human subjects. The participants’ rights to privacy and confidentiality were maintained throughout the study through the use of participant-selected pseudonyms for identifying the data. Identifying data such as specific workplaces, dates, and personal names, as well as any information that could potentially be of a sensitive or personal nature, were omitted from all subsequent publications and presentations.

**Participants**

Participants were recruited using maximum variation sampling which calls for the selection of participants with widely dissimilar attributes. Patton states that “for small samples, a great deal of heterogeneity can be a problem because individual cases are so different from each other” (2002, p. 235). At the same time the strength of this strategy is that “any common patterns that emerge” (p. 235) from the heterogeneous sample lend significance to the findings.

The participants included two men and three women ranging in age from 28 to 40. Three were teachers and two were full-time students. The participants were graduate students at a large research university seeking initial school library media certification. The rationale for selecting
school library media students rather than professional school librarians was the assumption that current students would be more closely tied to their original motivations (Van House, 1988) and the reasons for their choice would not be influenced by the passing of time or by working in the school library field.

**Data Collection**

As is typical for narrative research (Murray, 2003), the primary sources of data for this study were qualitative interviews. The qualitative interview continuum ranges from a series of tightly structured questions to a completely unstructured, informal conversation (Patton, 2002). There are a variety of interview types along this continuum, specifically designed to elicit certain data.

Flick states that researchers should select a data collection method “on the basis of the character of the material” (2006, p. 205) they want to collect. This method should elicit data that will best address the research question. In this study the research question investigated the reasons that individuals select the occupation of school librarian. In order to “comprehend the motivation and meaning (the why) that constructs careers” (Savickas, 2005, p. 58) a method that would elicit a fairly complete picture of each participant’s life in all its complexity was needed. The Life Story Interview (McAdams, 1995) was chosen as the primary data collection method.

A life story interview (Atkinson, 2002) is designed to generate the telling of an individual’s life story. The terms “life history”, “oral history”, and “life story” are often used interchangeably, although some researchers make distinctions due to emphasis or scope. Atkinson describes the life story in this way (2004, p. 566):

> A life story is the story a person chooses to tell about the life he or she has lived as completely and honestly as possible, what that person remembers of it, and what he or she wants others to know of it, usually as a result of a guided INTERVIEW by another … It includes the important events, experiences, and feelings of a lifetime.

The life story interview is the most extended version of the personal narrative interviews. It has as its focus the entire life of a person from birth to the present. The life story interview typically consists of a set of loosely-structured open-ended questions designed to encourage detailed, in-depth responses from the participant teller. The Life Story Interview as developed by McAdams (1995) was supplemented by Savickas’s Career Style Interview which was designed to “elicit self-defining stories” (Savickas, 2005, p. 60). The Career Style Interview is similar in many ways to the Life Story Interview protocol. For example, they both include questions about early memories and role models. Alternatively, the Career Style Interview has questions about favorite school subjects and hobbies that are not part of the Life Story Interview. In combination the interview protocol was designed to elicit a comprehensive picture of the participant’s life.

The number and length of interviews needed depend on the research purpose. Atkinson suggests that two or three interviews lasting from one to one and one half hours will provide “more than enough information to gain a good understanding of the person’s life or the research topic” (2004, p. 568). Polkinghorne (2005) argues that more than a “one-shot, 1-hr session” is needed in order for the interviewer to establish a rapport with the participant that will result in “full and rich descriptions necessary for worthwhile findings” (p. 142). Based upon these recommendations, the researcher conducted two to three 1½ hour interviews with each participant.

Each of the interviews was recorded with both digital and analog audio recorders. During and after each interview the researcher took notes recording initial impressions, and also to keep track of logistical details. Before the second and third interviews the researcher listened to the recordings and made note of topics to pursue in further detail with the participants. The time and place for each of the interviews were scheduled at the participants’ convenience. Participants were
encouraged to select a location that provided privacy so that they would feel more comfortable sharing their private thoughts and feelings. Most of the interviews took place in the participants’ homes, but some were held on campus or in empty school classrooms.

**Data Analysis**

The purpose of data analysis is to make meaning from the data. There are a “variety of procedures for interpreting the narratives or stories generated in research” (Schwandt, 2001, p. 169). These procedures are not formulas to be followed precisely, but are general guidelines that allow the researcher flexibility during the interpretation of the data (Riessman, 1993). For this data analysis, the researcher followed the narrative analysis guidelines described by Riessman (1993) in combination with those of Polkinghorne (1995) and Seidman (2006).

The goal in analyzing the data was to first examine the participants as individuals and subsequently to look across those findings for commonalities across the participants. In doing this the researcher followed the two stage process described by Seidman (2006). The first stage was to develop profiles of individual participants. Each participant’s life story was examined in relation to career construction theory. The second stage was to analyze the interview data looking for thematic connections. The latter method which involves finding codes, creating categories, and discovering themes is a common process in qualitative research. Polkinghorne (1995) also alludes to a two-step process. He states that researchers often present a set of individual profiles followed by a “commentary chapter in which the differences and similarities among the cases is highlighted” (p. 21). The data analysis in this study followed a similar process: first through analysis of each participant individually and then through analyzing the data to find themes that showed connections within and across the participants’ stories.

**Step one: Preliminary analysis.** The first step of data analysis was to organize and manage the voluminous amount of material generated during data collection. The data consisted of both digital files stored securely on a computer as well as hard copies in a locking, filing cabinet. A professional transcriptionist was hired to transcribe the interviews. This resulted in approximately 80-120 pages of text for each participant depending on the length and number of interviews. After receiving the transcriptions, the researcher listened to each of the interview recordings and edited the transcripts, filling in any missing words, adding punctuation, and correcting any typographical errors. Listening and reading the transcripts in this manner allowed the researcher to immerse herself in the data, which is a crucial step for data analysis. This process was repeated during the entire process of data analysis, allowing the researcher to envision the interview and recall the manner in which the participant told the story. The performance style of the participants’ storytelling which includes timing, volume, emphasis, pitch, and repetition, and body language (Riessman, 1993) is lost in the written transcripts, but is valuable as an indicator of the participant’s affective behavior. Understanding the participants’ emotions when telling their stories is important to interpreting those stories.

Data analysis requires the researcher to winnow the data in an effort to find what is of most significance and interest (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Seidman states that the “first step in reducing the text is to read it and mark with brackets the passages that are interesting” (2006, p. 117). During this step the researcher read the hard copies of the transcripts, marked interesting passages with a highlighter, and wrote notes in the margins. It was important during this initial coding to have an open attitude for what might emerge from the text. The goal was to eventually discover themes across the participants’ stories. It was at this point that the decision was made to concentrate on each of the participants individually.
The stories in the transcripts were identified using Labov and Waletzky’s (Labov, 2006) framework. Labov’s framework for narratives includes six components as outlined in Table 1 (Simpson, 2004). Each of these components has a function in the narrative that can be used in interpretation. The evaluation component was particularly important to highlight since it explains the importance of the story and indicates the meaning that the story holds for the participant.

### Table 1. Labov’s Framework for Narratives

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Narrative Category</th>
<th>Narrative Function</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>What was this about? Signals the story is about to begin and draws in the listener</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orientation</td>
<td>Who is involved in the story? Helps the listener identify time, place, location</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complicating Action</td>
<td>Then what happened? The core narrative element of the story</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resolution</td>
<td>What finally happened? The final key event of a story</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>So what? Functions to make the point of the story clear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coda</td>
<td>How does it end? Signals the story has ended and brings listener back to the present</td>
</tr>
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</table>

One complication in this process is that some of the narrative elements in the transcripts could not be classified as stories. Riessman in her seminal text on narrative analysis (1993) stated that the majority of interview transcripts are not in narrative form, but consist of “question-and-answer exchanges, arguments, and other forms of discourse” (p. 3). McCormack (2000) describes four types of narrative processes that tellers use in addition to stories (p. 286):

During an interview, a storyteller may become reflective—trying to work out the “why?” — attempting to theorize their experience. Often, as the interview proceeds, a storyteller will add information to stories already told, as the conversation stimulates recollection of additional story pieces (a process of augmentation). Sometimes the added part may not be part of an already told story, but may be an abstracted element from outside a story (a process of argumentation). Such elements bring to a story other factors the narrator feels add meaning to the story. Storytellers may also take the time to describe particular people, places, or things in detail. While these descriptions when read alone offer little in the way of interpretation or explanation, they do inform the listener by adding detail to the picture built up through other narrative processes.

McCormack’s categorization of types could be used in coordination with Labov’s framework to identify many of the narrative processes. The transcript was analyzed and appropriate sections of text were then labelled as theorizing, augmentation, argumentation, or description. These sections would later be used in the story construction process.

Another difficulty was that identifying individual stories in the transcripts seemed to fragment the data. Interpreting the meaning of those individual stories did not appear to shed light on the research question. For example, one participant told the story of her daughter’s birth. The story elements were present, but what did that say about occupational choice? The answer lay in Polkinghorne’s (1995) description of narrative cognition; Polkinghorne explained that “narrative cognition gives us explanatory knowledge of why a person acted as he or she did” and that “narrative knowledge is maintained in emplotted stories” (p. 11). Therefore, the explanation of
why the participants chose their occupation could be found in the narrative knowledge that was in their “emplotted” story. It followed that the type of analysis needed was that which corresponded to narrative cognition: narrative analysis. In narrative analysis “researchers collect descriptions of events and happenings and synthesize or configure them by means of a plot into a story” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 12). This process of plot construction is known as narrative emplotment (Ezzy, 1998). The solution to the dilemma was the realization that the individual stories that the participants told were only part of their larger story. That larger story could be located through using narrative analysis to create the emplotted stories.

**Step two: Narrative analysis.** The Seidman’s book on interviewing has specific guidelines for constructing “an emplotted narrative” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 15). Seidman (2006) recommends that one appropriate way to share interview data is through crafting first person profiles of individual participants. He states that “a profile in the words of the participant…allows us to present the participant in context, to clarify his or her intentions, and to convey a sense of process and time” which are “all central components of qualitative analysis” (p. 119). Because career construction theory is interested in the subjective career stories of individuals, the best way to represent those stories is by using the actual words of the participants. The use of first person voice rather than the third person voice can also lend credibility to the research. “Using the third-person voice distances the reader from the participant and allows the researcher to intrude more easily than when he or she is limited to selecting compelling material and weaving it together into a first-person narrative” (p. 121). Seidman also acknowledges that the crafted story “is both the participant’s and the interviewer’s. It is in the participant’s words, but it is crafted by the interviewer from what the participant has said” (p. 120). Seidman provides specific steps for crafting the profiles. Another strategy for “constructing an interpretive story from the many pages of transcript generated from an in-depth interview with a participant” (2004, p. 220) is outlined by McCormack. She developed an approach based upon Polkinghorne’s narrative analysis (1995) which she calls “storying stories” (2000, 2004). A combination of the strategies explained by Polkinghorne, Seidman, and McCormack formed the procedure for constructing first person profiles of the participants.

The first step was to create a chronological outline of the life story. Passages in the transcripts that gave demographic data such as number of siblings, year of birth, and places lived were identified. An outline of this information served as a beginning skeleton or framework for restorying the life story. Restorying is the process by which “researchers retell the stories of individual experiences” (Creswell, 2007, p. 234) resulting in a complete story with a beginning, middle, and end. Without meaning this framework would be nothing more than a vita or resume. What makes it a story is the purpose of the plot. Polkinghorne recommends that the researcher begin with the dénouement of the story and seek backward for the plot. The dénouement for each of these participants was the decision to become a school librarian. However it was still necessary to ponder what made this particular person “tick.” What was this person’s motivation for the making certain choices? Or in the parlance of career construction theory, what was their life theme? The life theme revealed the glue that held the pieces of the story together (Savickas, 2005). Discerning the person’s life theme (Savickas, 2005) was quite challenging, and required much contemplation and intense immersion in the data. However, when the life theme for a participant was discovered, suddenly all the choices and actions of the person’s life seemed to make sense. The final step in the story construction was to include the events and decisions which seemed to lead step by step to the dénouement of the person’s story.
The restorying process involved a recursive back and forth examination from the transcripts to the emplotted narrative. Seidman’s (2006) instructions for constructing the story are to present material in the order in which the participant told them, but that was not always possible. It was at this point that McCormack’s four categories of narrative elements were most useful. For example, even though they were in a different place in the transcript, passages that augmented a story or served to provide greater description could be inserted where appropriate because doing so did not change the participant’s original story, but only enhanced it. Both the theorizing and argumentation passages were significant to the story construction because they helped to highlight the importance of particular episodes to the participant.

Sometimes in constructing the profiles there would be missing pieces that seemed important to the story or items that needed clarification. At this point the researcher contacted the participants by email asking them for elaboration. It was also necessary at times to insert explanatory words to a participant’s sentence in order to have it make sense. Typically, the words added were taken from an interview question. For example when asked "What were your parents’ expectations for your future?" the participant might simply answer with a phrase such as "To go to college." In order to clarify that phrase parts of the question were inserted words in brackets in front of their phrase to make a complete sentence like this: [My parents expected me] to go to college.

Because data analysis involves reduction of the original data, it was vital to include only those parts of the story that addressed the purpose of the research. At times it was wrenching to exclude particularly interesting, albeit inconsequential, episodes because of considerations of length. In the end approximately 80 - 120 single-spaced pages of transcript for each participant was reduced to profiles that are approximately ten double-spaced pages in length. An example of this narrative analysis process is shown in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Line no.</th>
<th>Interview Data</th>
<th>Career Story Excerpt</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SD1</td>
<td>46.</td>
<td>I want to go back to work. I need a career</td>
<td>I want to go back to work. I need</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Interview Data

**SD1**

47. Well, I didn’t want to teach. *(Laughter)* My mother taught. She stayed home with us until she was about in the 4th grade, faced about the same decision that I’m facing now. My grandfather knew of a job at Henry County Middle, and got her a job teaching. She didn’t have a certificate or anything. She spent a year getting all of the stuff in place, taking the – gosh, it wasn’t even the PRAXIS back then, it was with TCT, and getting all that done, and then she taught. She just taught for 27 years and just retired this past spring. Never really wanted to do it, never really thought of it as her ultimate career choice, but it’s good pay and good hours and stuff for a small town, and she could work in our schools, and she wasn’t gone. We had our summers and things like that, but she would stay up ‘til midnight doing homework, and the kids that just didn’t care, and the parents that didn’t care more, and

48. I thought, “Oh, I just don’t want to do that, I don’t want to teach,” and then I was talking to my cousin about it, and she had taught for several years, and then decided to become a media specialist. She’s at the high school level in North Carolina. She said, you should do this, with your technical background and management skills, you should do this.

49. So I looked into it, and my mom said, “You should do that!” She’s like, “I can’t – we never even thought about telling you about that before, but that would be a great thing for you to do,” and so that’s how I kind of wound up in this career choice. I looked around – and now that I’m in the program, I think, “Gosh, I wouldn’t mind teaching a few years.” *(Laughter)* I mean, teaching might be kind of fun for a little while, but anyway, I guess that’s my life story.

### Career Story Excerpt

A career beyond being a mom. I think I have more to offer than just – than being a mom, which is a great job, no – nothing bad, but I also came to – we talked about it for several years, what was I going to do that wasn’t the 60-hour a week job downtown, which I’m sure I could go back and get if I wanted right now, and David said, “Well, you’re just going to have to teach.”

SD1 – 46. I probably wouldn’t be doing this [program] if I wasn’t a mother. I’d probably go back to corporate, or I would never have left the corporate environment I was in. I really enjoyed that, I was good at it. *(SD2 – 248)* But it isn’t just that I want to have the same hours as my kids. It’s also that I want to be involved in education, and that’s going to help me get them a better education. *(SD2 – 250)*

I’ve been struggling with what I was going to do for a long time. I knew I wanted to go back to work, and I knew I would need to go back to work. I just didn’t know what to do. Nothing clicked. *(SD2 – 154)* My husband also didn’t really care for me to go back to the 60, 70 hour a week thing I was doing. He kept saying, “You’re just going to have to teach.” And I said, “Well, I’ll do that, you know, if I need to that, I’ll do that.” I come from a long line of teachers. My mother, my grandmother on her side, my aunt on her side, all teachers. My grandmother on my dad’s side, a teacher. All of her sisters were teachers except for one who was a nurse. A couple of her brothers were teachers. One was actually a principal at one time. Just long lines of teachers on both sides of our family. Education’s always been a huge deal. *(SD2 – 251)*

Well, I didn’t want to teach. *(Laughter)* My mother taught. She stayed home with us until I was about in the fourth grade, faced about the same decision that I’m facing now. My grandfather got her a job teaching. She taught for 27 years and just retired this past spring. Never really wanted to do it, never really thought of it as her ultimate career choice, but it’s good pay and good hours and stuff for a small town, and she could work in our schools, and she wasn’t gone. We had our summers and things like that, but she would stay up

### The next is an important adolescence scene. Describe a specific event from your teenage years that stands out as being especially important or significant.

*The next is an important adolescence scene. Describe a specific event from your teenage years that stands out as being especially important or significant.*
Well, I’ve told you about a couple of ‘em. Heck, let me think about that, let me think about it for a second. When I – and this is going to sound so quaint – I don’t where your religious preferences are, but I’m a Christian, and I’m born-again Christian, and really rely on that a lot, believe in it even though I know it’s not something that I can really talk about in my job, and I never did talk about it in my job when I worked downtown much, but when I was 13 I really made a decision that, “Okay, I’m going to give my life to Christ. I’m going to be – this is the road I’m going to walk down,” and I was young to make that decision, and over the years I’ve had occasion to kind of recommit that, even though – I mean, we always went to church and I’ve always been involved in church, and I’ve always been involved with the Lord and everything like that.

When you get older, you reevaluate, I’m sorry; when you get older, you reevaluate, you say, “Okay, now that I’m in this part of my life, what do I need to do?”

If I ever – if something ever happens to me, you’re going to have to take that dog. My husband doesn’t care for him at all, so sad, he didn’t want an inside pet, but anyway, that was a significant memory. I remember doing it and where I was, at our church and everything like that. I remember who I was talking with, and I remember that it was very hard to talk to my parents about, even though they were Christians and went to church, and I’m sure – but I just – I kind of felt shy about talking to them about having made such a big life choice, but that, I think, really – and that has carried – that relationship has carried with me even to this day. Even to this day I pray about decisions that I make, and I look for signs that I’m on the right track and doing the right things. I teach the boys that – that sort of thing. I’ve heard people say religion is the opiate of the masses, and I’m like, “Right on!” (Laughter) That was it. Let me take him –

until midnight doing homework, and the kids that just didn’t care, and the parents that didn’t care more, and (SD1 – 47) I thought, “Oh, I just don’t want to do that, I don’t want to teach.”

Then I was talking to my cousin about it, and she had taught for several years, and then decided to become a media specialist. She’s at the high school level in North Carolina. She said, “You should do this, with your technical background and management skills, you should do this.” (SD1 – 48) So I looked into it, and my mom said, “You should do that!” She’s like, “I can’t believe I never thought about telling you about that before, but that would be a great thing for you to do.” So that’s how I kind of wound up in this career choice. (SD1 – 49)

But I still wasn’t sure whether or not I really made the right decision, because it’s a real career commitment. (SD2 – 156) I’m a born-again Christian, and really rely on that a lot, believe in it even though I know it’s not something that I can really talk about in my job. When I was 13 I really made a decision that, “Okay, I’m going to give my life to Christ, this is the road I’m going to walk down.” Over the years I’ve had occasion to kind of recommit that. We always went to church and I’ve always been involved with the Lord. (SD1 – 96) Even to this day I pray about decisions that I make, and I look for signs that I’m on the right track and doing the right things. (SD1 – 98)

When I went to take the GRE I remember I laid hands on the PC and I said, “Okay Lord, if this is the choice for me, have me do real well on this test. And if it’s not, flunk me bad.” And I did really well. I did better than I ever expected to do, and so I thought, “Okay, that’s a sign that I made a good choice, and this is going to be okay. And there’s going to be a job for me.” (SD2 – 158) It was a hard choice. I mean, it’s a career-long directional change. (SD2 – 159)
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<td>SD2</td>
<td>155.</td>
<td>And when I looked into this program, and I still – I mean, I liked it, not the program but being a media specialist I liked it, I liked what they do, you know, every job there are negatives to it, of course. I’m sure I’m going to pull my hair out, especially the first year. But I think long-term it’s going to be something I really enjoy.</td>
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<tr>
<td>SD2</td>
<td>156.</td>
<td>But I still, even I still wasn’t sure about – I know you’re going to laugh about this, but I still wasn’t sure whether or not I really made the right decision, ‘cause it’s a real commitment. It’s not just a two-year commitment in the Master’s but then it’s a career commitment. You know, you hate to get into the career and decide, “Oh Lord, I hate this.” But I did.</td>
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<tr>
<td>SD2</td>
<td>157.</td>
<td>When I went to take that GRE, which boy that was a – I hadn’t taken a standardized test in like ten, 15 years. I didn’t know how to – I mean, I was calling my 21 year old cousin who’s still at Georgia Tech and saying, “Okay, tell me how it is that you factor things. How do you find the square root of a three-digit number?” I just – I used to know how to do this, but you have children and you deliver IQ points, at least one of them.</td>
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<tr>
<td>SD2</td>
<td>158.</td>
<td>And so when I went to take the GRE I remember I put – I kind of laid hands on the PC and I said, “Okay Lord, if this is the choice for me, have me do real well on this test. And if it’s not, flunk me bad.” And I did really well. I did better than I ever expected to do, and so I thought, “Okay, that’s a sign that I made a good choice, and I’m going to – and this is going to be okay. And there’s going to be a job for me.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>SD2</td>
<td>159.</td>
<td>Now I’m starting to worry about the, “Will there be a job,” kind of thing. There’s going to be a job and it’s going to work out fine. So, I’m not at the end of that choice yet; I don’t know how that worked out, but I think it – it was a hard choice. I mean, it’s a career-long directional change.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Int2</td>
<td>247.</td>
<td>So, tell me how your relationships, your family, has</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>ID</td>
<td>Line no.</td>
<td>Interview Data</td>
<td>Career Story Excerpt</td>
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<tr>
<td>SD2</td>
<td>248.</td>
<td>Well, I mean, I’m one of those that wants to do – I probably wouldn’t be doing this if I didn’t – if I wasn’t a mother. I’d probably go back to the corporate, or I would never have left the corporate environment I was in. I really enjoyed that. I was good at it.</td>
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<tr>
<td>SD2</td>
<td>249.</td>
<td>Oh. Go ahead.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD2</td>
<td>250.</td>
<td>It’s all right. I enjoyed that, I was good at it. But it isn’t just that I want to have the same hours as my kids. That is a factor. I’d like for them to have their summers and me not have to spend a lot of time figuring, you know, “Okay, where are they going to go this week and who’s going to keep them that week,” and all that kind of stuff. It’s also that I want to be involved in education, and that’s going to help me get them a better education. So, you know, that’s a big factor.</td>
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<td>SD2</td>
<td>251.</td>
<td>My husband also didn’t really care for me to go back to the 60, 70 hour a week thing I was doing. He kept saying, “You’re just going to have to teach.” And I said, “Well, I’ll do that, you know, if I need to that, I’ll do that.” But that’s – and, you know, I come from a long line of teachers. My mother, my grandmother on her side, my aunt on her side, all teachers. My grandmother on my dad’s side, a teacher. All of her sisters were teachers except for one who was a nurse. A couple of her brothers were teachers. One was actually a principal at one time. I mean, I just – because back then a woman with an education could be a teacher or a nurse, you know. So, there really just weren’t – I mean, just long lines of teachers on both sides of our family. Education’s always been a huge deal. So, anyway, that’s.</td>
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**Step three: Member checking.** After each participant’s profile was completed they were given the opportunity to read it and provide feedback based on the following questions (McCormack, 2000):

- Does what I have written make sense to you?
- How does this account compare to your experience? Please feel free to correct any errors.
- Have I omitted anything that you feel is vital to the story? Please include these wherever you feel it is appropriate.
- Do you wish to remove any portions from this text?
- Please feel free to make any other comments.

Only one of the participants requested that some sentences be deleted. A few made minor suggestions to correct grammar. The most common response was one of dismay for the way their
oral language translated to print. Oral language is much less formal than written narratives because of the naturalness and spontaneity of speech which often includes colloquialisms. This reaction was expressed quite well by one participant who said “Everything looks good to me—except that I kind of sound like a doofus when you put my comments into text! I guess that is the difference between the spoken and written word.” Once the profiles had been approved by the participant, a peer reviewer read the profiles for readability and consistency in the story.

**Step four: Individual commentaries.** As a final step in individual analysis each person’s data was examined using the lens of career construction theory. The rationale for doing this was based on one of the important functions of career construction theory: its applicability to the practice of vocational guidance counselors. In his articles, book chapters, presentations and seminars, Savickas (1997; 2002; 2005) demonstrates strategies for counselors to use in helping their clients to successfully negotiate important vocational development tasks. During career assessment Savickas looks for specific things in the client’s stories that allow him to assess each dimension of career construction theory. All three dimensions are necessary for a complete picture of the client’s situation. Vocational personality tells how a person views his work interests, abilities and preferred occupations. Career adaptability tells how a person faces the transitions of school to work, and occupation to occupation. The life theme component explains why a person made certain choices and the private meaning that guided those choices.

Savickas begins counseling for career construction by using a Career Style Interview to “elicit self-defining stories” (Savickas, 2005, p. 60). “From these prototypical stories about work life, counselors attempt to comprehend the motivation and meaning (the why) that constructs careers” (Savickas, 2005, p. 58). Because the questions from the Career Style Interview were used for the same purpose, the data from the participants closely resembled the types of information that Savickas elicits from his clients (2005). Many of the strategies that Savickas uses to address his client’s career concerns were relevant to this analysis. The participants’ stories needed to be assessed, not for diagnostic purposes, but rather to determine the what, how, and why of their career construction. Instead of using the techniques as a counselor would, these techniques were used to examine the participants’ stories as they related to the three major components of career construction. Given the different purposes of this analysis, not all of Savickas’ career counseling techniques were relevant to the study. Also to effectively employ some of his techniques required professional knowledge and skills that the researcher did not possess. Nevertheless, Savickas’ sample case studies served as useful models for analyzing the life stories of the participants. The results of the analysis were written as individual commentaries that accompanied each participant’s profile. The profile and the commentary together formed the individual’s career story.

**Step five: Comparative analysis.** The second stage of analysis occurred after completion of the individual profiles and commentaries for each participant and development of the career story. The purpose of this analysis was to find the similarities for the participants’ reasons for their occupational choice. Polkinghorne (1995) cautions that the stories created during narrative analysis are not appropriate for paradigmatic analysis since they are constructed by the researcher. Therefore to ensure validity of the findings, the original interview transcripts were used rather than the first person profiles. This process of comparative analysis had begun prior to the development of the individual career stories and consisted of marking and highlighting sections of the transcripts and creating preliminary categories. Initially, when faced with mountains of data to code, the attempt at analysis had seemed overwhelming and unfruitful. However, the immersive process of creating the participants’ career stories and subsequent analysis with career construction theory proved beneficial to this next attempt at comparative analysis. The career
stories of each participant had revealed when, how, and why the individual had chosen to become a media specialist. This intimate knowledge of each individual allowed the researcher to more easily identify those commonalities and differences between the individuals and subsequently create a coding system. The codes were then organized into themes categorized according to the three components of career construction theory.

**Limitations**

One of the limitations of this study is the small sample size. As a rule, the numbers of participants in qualitative research studies are smaller than those in quantitative studies. In narrative studies they tend to be even smaller; sometimes only one participant is studied. This raises the issue of whether the results can be generalized to a larger population. Generalization is usually not the goal of qualitative research, and in this study, the goal was rather to understand “the particular in depth” (Merriam & Associates, 2002, p. 28).

**Validity and Reliability**

Riessman states that “traditional notions of reliability simply do not apply to narrative studies, and validity must be radically reconceptualized” (1993, p. 65). We must acknowledge that when people tell stories of their lives, they are selectively reconstructing the past in light of the present. Rather than looking for truth in the narratives, Riessman (1993, 2002) states that researchers should look for trustworthiness. Atkinson (1998) points out that there is not a formal set of procedures for determining validity in narratives because the process is highly subjective. Instead, he describes three standards against which the findings can be measured for trustworthiness. Taken together, the three measures of internal consistency, corroboration, and persuasion serve to enhance the credibility of the research.

The first and foremost of these is internal consistency in the life story. This means that what the teller says in “one part of the narrative should not contradict another part” (Atkinson, 1998, p. 60). In this study internal consistency was established through informal member checks. Several times during data collection and analysis, participants were asked for clarification regarding any misunderstood words or episodes in their stories. Participants were always willingly to respond to these questions.

A second standard is corroboration, often referred to as member checking (Atkinson, 1998; Creswell, 2007). Corroboration occurs when the storytellers read their transcribed and edited life story, and decide whether it conveys what was said originally. In this case the first person profiles were returned to the participants for review. One participant requested that some passages be deleted. Others made grammatical corrections. All the participants approved their final profiles.

A third measure is the persuasive quality of the life story (Atkinson, 1998). Does the life story seem plausible to the outside reader? Does it resonate or strike a chord with others who read it? Persuasion measures how reasonable and convincing the story is to others. The strategy used to account for persuasion was through peer feedback from a colleague who did not know the participants. The completed profiles were also read by a school counselor. Both individuals stated that the life stories rang true to them.

Additional measures taken by the researcher included maintenance of a research journal containing reflections from data collection and analysis; making explicit the steps taken during data analysis and the thought processes concerning the findings; and the inclusion of the actual words of the participants in the research report so that readers would have evidence to make their own decisions about the validity of the findings.
Discussion

The narrative analysis used in this study resulted in the development of individual career stories for each of the participants. The study benefitted from a narrative research methodology because it gave primacy to the participants’ stories. According to Polkinghorne (1988), in the process of articulating their stories people give meaning to their experiences, they “join incidents together in coherent wholes,” and “understand past events and plan future ones” (Inkson, 2007, p. 230). Career stories have been described as “the complex, baggy, sometimes contradictory, often circuitous accounts of their careers that people construct in the course of research conversations or qualitative interviews” (Cohen & Mallon, 2001, p. 50). This is true of the stories the five participants in this study told. Filtering the data during narrative analysis through the lens of career construction theory brought clarity and order to these stories and made it “possible to understand and gain new insight” (Moen, 2006, p. 7) into the reasons for the participants’ occupational choices. Using the theoretical framework of career construction theory allowed the study to extend beyond the mere telling of stories by providing a foundation for interpretation of the results.

Conclusion

This article described the procedures used in a qualitative research study that applied narrative analysis to explore the reasons for the occupational choice of school librarianship by five graduate students. The author acknowledges that the methods used in this study illustrate only one possible approach and may not be applicable to all expressions of narrative research. Nevertheless, considering that narrative research is a maturing field that does not have “a tight set of methodological and definitional prescriptions” (Barone, 2010, p. 152) this example demonstrates some viable strategies for coping with the complexities of narrative research. It also illustrates the potential of narrative research for giving rich insights into the human experience through the vehicle of story.

References


Authors’ Note

Stephanie A. Jones is an assistant professor in the online Instructional Technology program at Georgia Southern University, where she teaches future school librarians. She received a Ph.D. in Instructional Technology from the University of Georgia and a Master of Librarianship from Emory University. Her current research interests include the career development of school librarians, online teaching and learning, and storytelling pedagogy.