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Using a bespoke, triad narrative analysis approach with Gen Z students: telling the story of their values

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an innovative narrative data analysis approach, used in a narrative research project exploring student values. The work of three different authors was drawn upon to create a novel, rigorous and synergistic analysis tool. A novel approach to data analysis, using the stories told by one Generation Z (Gen Z) student and the personal values elicited, which are drawn from Schwartz's theory of universals in basic human values is presented. This leads to a restorying of the data, from which the reader finds meaning. The participant was interviewed at the beginning of their first year as undergraduate and is presented as an example from the larger study of seven Gen Z students. How this approach is effective is examined, demonstrating that combining theory and the narrative analysis approach enabled the values of self-direction, security, benevolence and power to be exposed within the resulting restorying. This is a new and innovative approach to narrative analysis that can be applied in a wide range of contexts internationally and utilised in future studies.

Introduction

University students begin their undergraduate journey with a story. A story, or narrative, that tells of what has happened and mattered during the lead up to starting at university. This paper considers the story told by students and the personal values elicited, in relation to Schwartz's theory of universals in basic human values (Schwartz et al. 2012, Schwartz and Bilsky 1987). Using narrative inquiry as methodology, this study focuses on the year before starting at university. To gather this data, online short-story narrative interviews were conducted with Generation Z students (those born between 1995 and 2012) in their first semester. In order to analyse the data effectively, a bespoke approach to analysis was developed, combining the work of

three authors (Leggo 2008, Loseke 2009, Phoenix 2017) so that the data were sifted, questions posed to go deeper, and finally key terms identified and used to unpack the meaning within the stories. In order to enable rigour in data analysis, whilst retaining the distinct stories of each participant, the three-staged approach was used in preference to more traditional methods. The approach has been applied to several student stories, but this paper will illustrate the triad approach by exploring the story of one Gen Z student, to create a restoried piece illustrating their values. The innovative approach to synthesising theory has the potential to impact future studies by providing a novel and multi-layered model of data analysis.

Context and rationale

Higher education (HE) has changed in the latter part of the twentieth century due to massification and globalisation, meaning that in the United Kingdom (UK) today, participation exceeds 50% (Scott 2021, Tight 2019). Working in HE today is a dichotomy; it is a metrics-driven environment, whilst at the same time focusing on student experience (Tight 2018). Educators face additional new challenges with the arrival of students from Gen Z at university campuses. Gen Z is the largest proportion of the current and future undergraduate student group (with Gen Z defined as born between 1995 and 2012). This generation of students influences the ethos of universities with Duffy (2021) recognising challenges at this time as a result of the 2008 financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic. Duffy (2021) highlights that 'over a fifth of the latest generation of young people (22%) are starting out adult life with signs of a common mental health disorder, compared with 15% of Millennials back in 1998, when they were the same average age' (99). Duffy reports on research conducted across 30 countries to find the top and bottom five characteristics for each generation through the Ipsos Global trends survey (2019). The responses by the public in this survey about Gen Z are very negative. Whilst acknowledging Gen Z as 'tech savvy', the Ipsos survey shows that Gen Z are also viewed by people as lazy, arrogant, selfish and materialistic. Duffy (2021) notes from these findings that negative stereotypes about youth are common from one generation to the next. Earlier North American studies (Seemiller and Grace 2016; Seemiller and Grace 2017, fundamental convictions, ideals, standards or life stances which act as general guides to behaviour or as points of reference in decision-making or the evaluation of beliefs or action' by Halstead (1996, p.5)) explore the nuances and identifying factors of these emerging adults (Appleman 2015, Arnett 2000). Gen Z students are digitally surrounded, with Zorn (2017) arguing that they have 'one continuous online, computer-connected experience' (61). Seemiller and Grace 2016, 2017) identify what matters to this group through a survey of more than
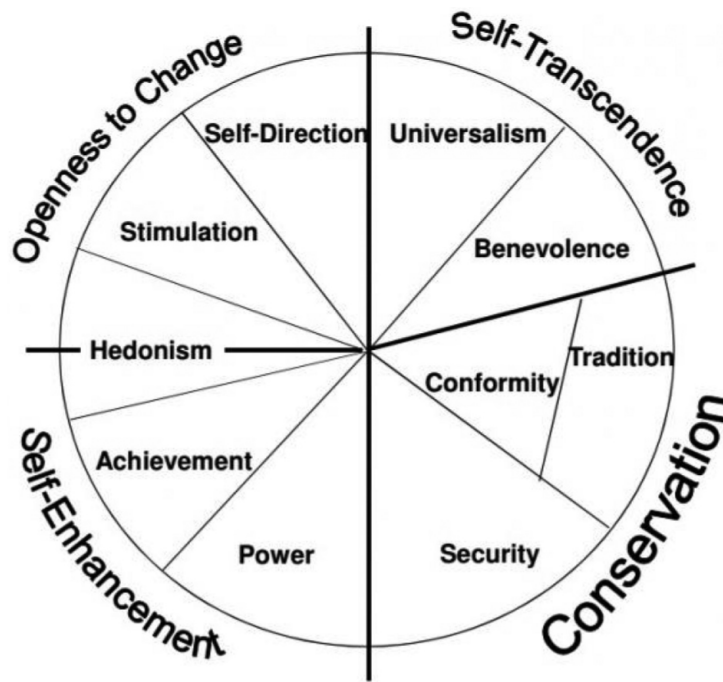
Figure 1. Schwartz's theoretical model of relations among ten motivational types of value (2012).

750 students from 15 institutions in the United States of America (USA), with additional material taken from other sources such as market research and polling data. Happiness, relationships, financial security and stability, meaningful work and helping others are seen as key factors that matter to this group. Gen Z are characterised as being relationally motivated to make a difference and not let others down. Values of open-mindedness, caring and diversity are also evident in Seemiller and Grace's (2016, 2017). However, the work relates to American Gen Z students and refers to college life. The reporting has a very positive presentation, which needs to be explored in a non-US context. This paper explores an example of the data from the first author's study on experiences and personal values of Generation Z students from an English university utilising narrative inquiry.

Defining values

Values can be referred to as principles, fundamental convictions, ideals, standards or life stances which act as general guides to behaviour or as points of reference in decision-making or the evaluation of beliefs or action' by Halstead (1996, p.5). Contextually, as environmental influences (such as being in HE) may affect value formation, therefore this study explores the values of students in a context, higher education. It highlights the role of the environmental components of personal values (Schermer et al. 2011). Schwartz's (1992), Schwartz et al. (2012 notable theory of universal values

establishes domains of values, or groups that embody the same value type, rather than single values. This is exemplified by the 10 values in the diagram below (Figure 1):

Schwartz's 10 values have been widely accepted by academics in the field (Schwartz and Bardi 2001, Ryckman and Houston 2003, Davidov et al. 2011).

Materials and Methods

Narrative inquiry

Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, is primarily a way of thinking about experience. Considered a relatively new approach, in narrative inquiry there is an acknowledged and subjective studying of people (Bruce et al. 2016). It is a relational methodology, with researchers hearing about ordinary lived experience and privileging it as unique and worth listening to for itself (Clandinin and Rosiek 2007).

Capturing stories of what matters to students (using Narrative Inquiry) is a research opportunity in the field of values. Prominent narrative research authors state that people's lives are storied, and this study follows this premise (Clandinin and Connelly 2000; Savin Baden and Howell-Major 2013). Applying social constructivist theory and Dewey's (1997) theory of experience, narrative research allows students' stories of experiences to be listened to and analysed. The importance of this is asserted by Leggo (2008), who explains: '[W]hat writers, storytellers, and artists of all kinds do is frame fragments of experience, in order to remind us that there is significance in the moment, in the particular, and in the mundane' (5).

Narrative interviews

Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) identify that there are three types of narrative interview: the short story, the life story and oral history. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) define narrative short story interviews (NSSI) as about specific episodes of time, with life story interviews asking for the perspective of the interviewee on their life, and oral history interviews considering the community history beyond the individual. NSSI was chosen for this study to capture the interviewees responses to the complexities of the research question, taking into account-specific episodes of time, or life episodes (Palaiologou, Needham, and Male 2016). In addition to Kvale and Brinkmann's three interview forms, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) and Clandinin (2013) use the terms annals and chronicles, a way to order and shape the narratives. Participants construct timelines beginning at a significant date. Annals

are memories and dates from within the timeline, and chronicles are then what happens around that timeframe as a series of events (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). Here, students as participants were asked to share their experiences about the period before starting university.

Narrative interviews seek to understand individual experience (Gaudet and Robert 2018). The NSSI method of narrative interviewing focuses on what the interviewee's experience has been, acknowledging that the interviewee is on a journey (Brinkmann 2017). Arguably, the narrative interview is a distinctive space for listening to the experiences of the interviewees, so thick description can be achieved to ensure the trustworthiness and transferability of the research findings (Armstrong 2012, Flynn and Black 2013, Lincoln and Guba 1985, 1986).

A major advantage of narrative interviews is that they 'place the people being interviewed at the heart of a research study' (Anderson and Kirkpatrick 2016, 631). This means that narrative interviews help understanding others' behaviours and experiences, seeking answers about a participant's life (Josselson 2007). The interview can focus on certain topics, events or experiences (Elliott 2005) and the research design has a nondirective approach. Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019) explain this subtlety as starting with a general, opening question, followed by prompts. Within the boundaries of the short story narrative time frame, described above, the interviewer then asks for the participant to relate their story, in annals and chronicles, telling their memories of a certain time. Prompts are improvised (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill 2019). The phenomenon being studied is not disclosed directly, rather the participant tells the interviewer about their life (Josselson 2007).

When a participant tells an aspect of their story spontaneously, it could turn out to be of interest to the interviewer (Czarniawska 2004). These aspects of the story provide insights into the world of the participant and make interviewing exciting for the interviewer (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). Several authors have used narrative interviews to explore the lived experience of students from middle school to HE (Clandinin and Connelly 2000, Goodson et al. 2010, Holton and Riley 2014). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) utilised detailed life stories as a way to look at student experience in a middle school. Goodson et al. (2010, 3) applied the life story narrative interview to gain an understanding of lifelong learning in HE; and Holton and Riley (2014) considered the lived experiences of HE students in their understanding of the cities they lived in, using walking interviews to elicit short stories from this time. All these studies, as with the one reported here, mirrored my intentions through investigating rich narratives of the topic investigated. This study used NSSI because it is an appropriately nondirective interview method to elicit deeper insights into students' values at specified times during their undergraduate degree.

The interview process: recruitment

As the intention of the study was to hear stories and gather rich, qualitative data, eight participants were sought. At the time of the research due to COVID-19, England was in its third lockdown, with universities mandated to teach online, except where courses required specialist input. An email invitation to participate was sent to potential student participants, via Department Administrators. The students were in the first year of undergraduate study across courses in Academic Studies in Education. From this call, initial responses came from ten students. Subsequently, three of the students were removed because they were outside of the Gen Z age range. The seven participants met the inclusion criteria and Microsoft Teams interviews were scheduled.

Following a successful pilot exercise to ascertain the preferred question approach, communication via email was undertaken to establish rapport and break the ice prior to the interview, acknowledging that building relationships is critical in narrative research (Josselson 2007). This follows the relational approach of narrative inquiry and the concept of space and place (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). The welcoming email was followed by an email the day before the interview, asking the participant to think about the short stories they might want to tell in response to the introductory questions noted below:

What is the beginning of your story of that time (when you decided you were coming to university)?

What reasons helped you decide to come to university?

Who was significant in your decision and why?

Did anything change during the time before you came to university and how did that make you feel?

Just before you began university, what were the things that mattered to you about being a student?

The interview

It was important to listen and respond carefully during the narrative interviews (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). It was also important to not interrupt (Mishler 1986). However, Josselson (2007) contends that it is possible that some stories may be emotional as the participant shares their stories and explores the research area, and therefore, an appropriate response was rehearsed to illustrate understanding and empathy in the online space (Iacono, Symonds, and Brown 2016).

After welcoming the participants on Microsoft Teams at the agreed time, there were a few moments of conversation to develop the relationship and settle the interviewee. I (Lead Author) chose to wear my LGBTQ+ Allies lanyard to demonstrate my inclusive-self and I wore a plain t-shirt to try and denote a less formal approach to my position as lecturer. The intention was to diminish the power imbalance and develop social interaction, a challenge of interviews (Clandinin and Connelly 2000, Cresswell and Poth 2018, Kvale and Brinkmann 2009, Lincoln and Guba 1985). The participants, as they narrated their short stories in response to the first question and prompts, took themselves back to the year before they commenced university, locating themselves in that time (Clandinin and Connelly 2000, Daiute and Cynthia 2004).

All participants referred to the questions they had received by email and used them to guide themselves through the interview. Occasionally, they required gentle prompting to move to the next question. Once they had finished narrating, a short break was taken as online interviewing can be intense (Morgan 2020). Narrative interviews need time for the participant to share their stories, and they can range from half an hour to several hours (Anderson and Kirkpatrick 2016). The reported interview below lasted 50 minutes. Follow-on prompts or secondary questions enabled the participant to develop the characters spoken about in their stories and to expand upon the episodes shared (Goodson 2013, Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). As such, the stories told moved inwards and outwards and backwards and forwards (Clandinin and Connelly 2000), as participants reflected back on the year before they came to university.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for this study was given by the University Research Ethics Panel. Beyond this procedural necessity, it was necessary to consider ethics throughout the research process, from its conception to its conclusion (Clandinin and Rosiek 2007) and to consider the ethics of the researcher in the role – from the research design and making sure the questions asked are ethical, to having an ethical strategy for sampling, to conducting an interview in an ethical way, to transcribing and reporting ethically (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009; Dhillon and Thomas 2019). As a professional in the institution, prior knowledge and experience of working with students mitigated for 'othering', as I knew the population well having worked in HE for over a decade. Having a prior understanding of the participant group in my role as lecturer enabled an emerging understanding of them and care for them (Caine, Clandinin, and Lessard 2022).

Being a member of staff was an additional consideration in this project and could have brought ethical issues and dilemmas (Dhillon and Thomas 2019). To mitigate this, data collection points were planned to ensure direct teaching of the participants was not taking place and conversations with a peer debriefer enabled reflection on this dichotomy of being an insider yet outsider.

Sensitivity and anonymity were therefore important and participants chose their own pseudonym to support anonymity (Goodson et al. 2010). However, as an insider-researcher who works in the university in which the participants study, I also recognised that anonymising the institution was challenging (Floyd and Arthur 2012). This furthered my intent to take 'relational responsibility' (Floyd and Arthur 2012, 176) and conduct the research with an ethics of care, from the interview to the data analysis.

Data analysis

Narrative analysis is shaped by questions of meaning and social significance (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). It investigates the story, asking: how is it organised? Why was it told this way? (Reissman 1993). Bruce et al. (2016) illustrate narrative analysis as considering storylines rather than themes because they reflect better the words of the participants, weaving in and out of time, shifting and involving multiple patterns. In addition, Gaudet and Robert (2018) discuss examining the organisation of the individual's narrative because values can be revealed through interviews. This relates to Feldman and Almquist's (2012) work which analyses the implicit in stories and emphasises that through narrative values can be conveyed.

A distinction of narrative analysis is that each interview is individually analysed for the lived experience, in all its layered and textured self, rather than seeking themes or broad concepts across the data set (Chase 2018, Etherington 2004, Reissman 1993). The way data are analysed and the inductive process undertaken means that patterns are identified, consistencies are seen and meanings uncovered (Gray 2013). Numerous authors have documented their approaches illustrating the range of narrative analysis available (Crossley 2000, Leggo 2008, Loseke 2012, Reissman 1993, Safford and Safford 1930). In fact, a number of authors (Reissman 1993, Cresswell 2007, Bold 2012, Cresswell and Poth 2018) comment on the different approaches that can be employed, outlining the challenge when selecting an appropriate analysis approach to use. For this study, a single narrative analysis approach did not meet the needs of the data or the research question, because although analysing for values, participants were not asked to state their values, instead they were carefully inferred through the stories they told. The work of three different authors (Leggo 2008, Loseke 2009, Phoenix 2017) was drawn upon to create a rigorous and synergistic
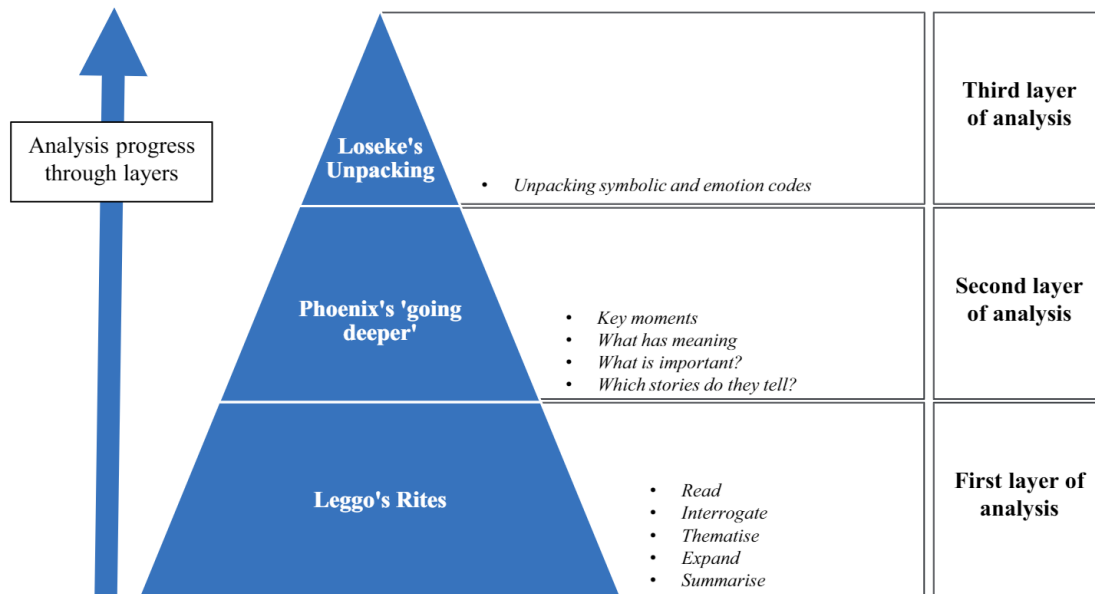
Figure 2. Triad of narrative analysis from sifting to precision, to the abstract (created from the three previous approaches).

analysis tool. The diagram below (Figure 2) illustrates the layers of analysis. The first layer using Leggo's RITES (Leggo 2008) is an initial sift of the data; going deeper with the second layer of analysis, focusing on precision (Phoenix 2013, 2013, 2017); and finishing with the third layer of analysis – unpacking symbolic and emotion codes (Loseke 2009, 2012) to consider the more abstract meaning in the data. The analysis at each of these layers is outlined in Figure 2.

Reissman (1993) suggests that the analytical approach should be coherent and visible so that the movement from raw data to analysis is explicit. Thus, the triadic approach illustrated responds to her statement, to provide coherence, visibility, and rigour (Lincoln and Guba 1985). In this study, analysis was initially by hand and on paper, subsequently presented as a table (see Table 4).

First layer of analysis- Leggo's RITES

Leggo's 2008 was chosen as it is very straight forward. Leggo (2008) considers this a simplistic tool to start narrative analysis. It follows five steps (Table 1):

The second step, *interrogate*, involves extracting words and phrases from the transcript in different colours that related to each of the questions (who? what? where? when? why? how? so what?). This interrogation enabled answering of the initial question from Reissman (1993): how was it organised?

Interrogation allowed for reordering of the narrative, so that episodes recounted could be connected to other episodes in the same interview where relevant. As this was a NSSI (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009) with defining boundaries of the year before coming to university (September 2019 to September 2020), analysing the data for 'when' allowed a chronological re-presentation. This chronological ordering of the story allowed for clarity even where the participant had moved in and out of episodes during their narrative (Clandinin and Connelly 2000).

Steps three and four, *thematise* and *expand*, involve reading the transcript whilst looking for the meaning that the participants had implied either overtly or through the behaviour they described. To aid this process, Schwartz's values theory (2006), drawn as a diagram with related behaviours linked to the core values, was used to infer values from the narrative (see Appendix A). The values were recorded in a table. This first shift of the data is demonstrated in Table 2.

Second layer of analysis- Phoenix's going deeper

The second layer of narrative analysis used the work of Ann Phoenix, an experienced narrative researcher in the field of 'psychosocial, including motherhood, social identities, young people, racialisation and gender' (Phoenix 2021). Phoenix (2013, 2017) recommends asking deeper questions of the narrative, which became subheadings on the analytical page: what are the key moments? what has meaning or what has importance? and which stories are told? These questions were drawn from Phoenix's work and when the process of analysis began, it was clear that the questions about meaning and importance were connected. Therefore, in this study, they became one question. The third subheading- *which stories are told?* - began to organise the narrative into clear episodes. Phoenix's questions gave clarity for the structure of the restorying (see next section).

This process was first recorded on paper then transferred onto the next column of the analysis table (Table 3).

Table 1. Leggo's RITES (Leggo 2008, 6–7).

Step one: *Read*	The researcher reads the whole narrative to gain a general sense of the story.
Step two: *Interrogate*	The researcher asks some basic questions: who? what? where? when? why? how? so what?
Step three: *Thematize*	The researcher reads the narrative again with a focus on a theme and spells out the parts of the story which relate to the theme.
Step four: *Expand*	The researcher expands on the theme by reflectively and imaginatively drawing connections and proposing possible meanings.
Step five: *Summarize*	The researcher summarizes the theme in a general statement or two in order to indicate clearly what is learned from the narrative.