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Life Story Interviewing as a Method to Co-Construct Narratives About Resilience

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Abstract

Human life presents many unplanned twists and turns. No one escapes this world without facing adversity of some kind. Therefore, the value in teaching and researching resilience cannot be overstated. This research explores how life story interviewing with interactive methods (also referred to as “elicitation techniques”) provides an invaluable approach to investigating and understanding resilience. Specifically, a stepwise framework is offered for researching resilience as a co-constructed, relational phenomenon. Upon applying this framework through teaching an undergraduate senior seminar, I offer thematic observations of my students’ interviewing experiences to show how life storytelling promotes (a) embodied understandings of resilience, (b) an appreciation for others’ unique differences, and (c) strengthened relationships between interviewees and interviewers. These findings show promise for future teachers and researchers interested in exploring the relational benefits made possible through creative storytelling methods. The methods proposed in this study not only provide a means for exploring conceptualizations of resilience; in and of themselves, they enact resilience.

Keywords

life story interviewing, elicitation techniques, qualitative methods, resilience, relational, narrative

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I offer gratitude to my students for their generous effort towards learning and demonstrating such sincerity throughout the process of our research together.

Life Story Interviewing as a Method to Co-Construct Narratives About Resilience

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Human life presents many unplanned twists and turns. No one escapes this world without facing adversity of some kind. Therefore, the value in teaching and researching resilience cannot be overstated. This research explores how life story interviewing with interactive methods (also referred to as “elicitation techniques”) provides an invaluable approach to investigating and understanding resilience. Specifically, a stepwise framework is offered for researching resilience as a co-constructed, relational phenomenon. Upon applying this framework through teaching an undergraduate senior seminar, I offer thematic observations of my students’ interviewing experiences to show how life storytelling promotes (a) embodied understandings of resilience, (b) an appreciation for others’ unique differences, and (c) strengthened relationships between interviewees and interviewers. These findings show promise for future teachers and researchers interested in exploring the relational benefits made possible through creative storytelling methods. The methods proposed in this study not only provide a means for exploring conceptualizations of resilience; in and of themselves, they enact resilience.

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Introduction

Human life presents many unplanned twists and turns. No one escapes this world without facing adversity of some kind. As a teacher-scholar, I seek opportunities to engage my students in experiential learning about life’s hardships. Therefore, I became interested in developing a course about *resilience*, a concept I find particularly relevant for understanding growth through difficult circumstances. Viewing learning as a phenomenological process, I prioritize human experience as the center at which meaning, understanding, and relational connection intersect. I encourage students to take seriously their role as meaning-makers. Like many of us, they are not fully aware of the presuppositions they embody that may inhibit them from recognizing what enables them and others to persist during life’s most difficult moments. How, then, do we create learning experiences for viewing human struggles through a different lens, one that provides a means for observing and understanding resilience? I invite readers to join me in exploring life story interviewing as a qualitative research approach to investigating and teaching what resilience means and how it happens.

The current study details the process of teaching students applied qualitative methods that render both experiential and conceptual understandings of resilience. I combined life story interviewing with elicitation techniques, which involve the use of “visual, verbal, or written stimuli to encourage participants to talk about their ideas” (Barton, 2015, p. 179). Adding elicitation techniques to life story interviewing provides research participants with more options to communicate about their experiences (through photos, objects, timelines), and thus

creates the conditions for more robust dialogue. With these methods in mind, I designed and implemented a praxis-based approach for students to co-construct meaning for resilience through witnessing their interviewees' stories. By researching another person's life, my students had the opportunity to explore stories that revealed how their participants made sense of struggles and identified relationships, resources, and individual qualities that enabled their change and growth. As such, life stories, which I emphasize in the forthcoming pages, promote students to become collaborative meaning-makers; this collaboration between student researchers and participants leads to mutual learning for both parties.

In what follows, I first highlight the value of teaching and involving students in the practice of qualitative methods. I then discuss how storytelling benefits the relational connections and meanings researchers and participants develop together. Subsequently, I propose a methodological framework that combines Atkinson's (1998) life story interviewing approach with elicitation techniques. This framework is followed by qualitative observations rendered from examining my students' research experiences, particularly regarding their learning about resilience and relational growth throughout the process. Lastly, I probe broader interests concerning how resilience is examined, construed, and practiced for pedagogical, research, and applied purposes.

Designing Qualitative Methods for Student Engagement

Qualitative methods in general provide rich potential for teaching students about resilience. Interpretive practices evoke an active role through encountering complex questions and seeking creative techniques to answer them. As such, when designing a research course on communication and resilience, I wanted my students to investigate the conceptual dimensions of resilience while also cultivating stronger—resilient—relationships with others through their research practices. Such practices supported my overarching aim for viewing human experiences differently through uncovering the strengths and resources that create the conditions for living resiliently. Frey (2009) inspired this aim further through his call for researchers to think critically about how their studies make “a difference not just *from* but *through* research” (p. 206). He underscored the value of seeking applied methods that directly involve individuals, families, and/or communities in research practices, thus allowing them to learn *through* their engagement in the research process. Similarly, Cooper et al. (2012) demonstrated how students, when engaging in hands-on experience through their qualitative research, see greater value in the methods, develop a deeper connection with the knowledge they pursue, and perceive their learning experience as transformative.

Not only do applied qualitative methods enhance students' individual learning; they also create opportunities for students to impact others' learning outside of the classroom. Focusing on the educational setting, Kahl (2010) encouraged involving students in applied research methods, claiming, “If students learn how to apply and conduct research that makes a difference, they can become the vehicles to take that research from the academy to society” (p. 298). Research of this nature is a living, breathing practice, generative in the very processes through which it unfolds (Simovska et al., 2019). Recognizing this significance, I decided to incorporate a life story interviewing project into my seminar on resilience.

Life Story Interviewing with Elicitation Techniques

Life story interviewing allows student-researchers to engage others in dialogue, practice their listening skills, and develop insightful questions that assist others in creating meanings for their lives. While Fisher (2009) described us as *homo narrans*, born storytellers, it is often the case that, “Telling the story of our lives is so basic to our nature that we are

largely unaware of its importance” (Atkinson, 1998, p. 1). People slip into patterned ways knowing, often missing opportunities to examine their experiences deeply. Yet, when speaking with others, especially when encouraged to do so in more intimate ways, people, together, may explore nuances in their narratives (Rosenthal, 2003). Through life story interviewing, the researcher focuses intently on creating conditions most promising for participants to share their experiences and make discoveries along the way. Different from most interviewing techniques, this approach encourages posing the least number of questions necessary to be more “in the moment” with and responsive to the interviewee’s words (Atkinson, 1998). Questions emerge as the interviewer listens closely to what the interviewee shares and uses probing techniques only when further explanations are needed. This process encourages participants to become observers of themselves in stories they never expressed openly, much less interpreted as significant. Atkinson (1998) concluded:

Story makes the implicit explicit, the hidden seen, the unformed formed, and the confusing clear.... It highlights the most important influences, experiences, circumstances, issues, themes, and lessons of a lifetime. As such, a life story narrative can be as valuable an experience for the person telling the story as it is a successful research endeavor for the one gathering the data. (p. 7)

Life story interviewing provides many constructive benefits for participants. Concerning the significance of being heard, Miller (1996) explained, “In addition to being heard, there also seems to be a co-equal or even deeper wish of being understood” (p. 132). He added that, “Interview-based research affords people the opportunity to explore themselves, to increase their awareness, to find meaning, to be understood, and to be understood within the context of a relationship” (p. 133). Such research composes a “quintessential ethical project,” one that inherently involves people entering conversations that change how they understand their lives and their relationship with one another (Miller, 1996, p. 131). This process lends to therapeutic benefits for both the interviewee and interviewer. The interviewee has an opportunity to express their stories and receive affirmation in return. The interviewer experiences a sense of trustworthiness as they receive another’s willingness to openly share personal stories. This reciprocal process of giving and receiving edifies both parties.

Meanwhile, life story interviewing is not without its challenges. For instance, despite its therapeutic benefits, the interviewer does not assume responsibility for advising storytellers in the way a therapist might. A key difference between therapy and life story interviewing resides in their primary aims. While the therapist prioritizes therapeutic benefits as the end goal, for the life story interviewer, therapeutic benefits are a potential outcome that manifests through the pursuit of a research endeavor. Therapists focus on the individual for the individual; life story interviewers focus on the individual while also questioning how that individual’s story gives rise to and/or connects with broader understandings about human life. These differences aside, the interactive process for a therapist and life story interviewer are strikingly similar in the ways they involve intimate disclosure, intensive listening, and emotional engagement. As such, when teaching life story interviewing, it is vital to acknowledge the relational rigor associated with their interviewer role. Lillrank’s (2012) observations support this importance in the ways she advocates interviewers to think reflexively about their role, participate in active listening, offer a “helping voice” to guide interactions, anticipate witnessing and experiencing vulnerability, and engage explicitly with emotion. The ways interviewers acknowledge and allow space for expressing emotions (those of their own and their interviewees) as well as reflect on their meaning throughout the research process impact the researcher’s ability to grow intellectually, develop coping strategies, and create conditions that lead to mutual therapeutic outcomes. The relational and emotional elements of these

practices require time, space, and vulnerability in ways novice researchers, especially students, may not be fully prepared for at the onset of their studies.

Given these observations, I devoted considerable time to planning opportunities for my students to learn about and practice their interviewing role. When developing the seminar, I incorporated in the syllabus texts such as Atkinson (1998), Kiesinger (1998), Lillrank (2012), Miller (1996), and Rosenthal (2003) for my students and me to discuss the emotional experiences involved in a project of this nature and responsibilities of their role. Furthermore, I created pre- and post-reflective prompts for them to contemplate their interactions and emotions prior to and after their one-on-one interviews. These reflections enabled them to become more aware of their own emotions in advance while also anticipating how their interviewees might experience the interview. Following the interviews, these reflections provided a space for my students to express their observations and emotions through a constructive outlet. I also made myself available to discuss their reflections and support them in their learning.

I imagined that my students would value learning about practices for facilitating in-depth conversations, particularly if their interviewees were not very talkative. Recollecting details and shaping stories throughout the interview process does not come easy for all individuals. Unless they routinely practice self-reflection or are inclined to disclose intimate life experiences often, many people may struggle feeling confident and/or capable of recollecting elaborate accounts of their experiences. Interviewers can become discouraged when conversations fall flat, especially when they rely on what participants share to develop further questions. Meanwhile, Barton (2015) explained,

Lack of elaboration, however, does not necessarily indicate lack of knowledge, nor does it signal mild opinions or lack of interest. Participants may know a great deal about [their lives] and have a great deal to say, but special tasks are sometimes necessary to bring their ideas to the surface, as well as to encourage them to articulate those ideas in deeper and more complex ways. (p. 181)

This consideration led me to explore elicitation techniques as a means for encouraging robust dialogue. Practices involving timelines, personal and abstract images, meaningful mementos, and so forth leverage participants' agency during interviews (Barton, 2015; Gerstenblatt, 2013; Kolar et al., 2015). These techniques probe multi-sensorial experiences through audio, visual, and hands-on activities that awaken individuals' memory, curiosity, and discovery modes (Liebenberg, 2018). For instance, timelines serve as "memory aids" and provide "visual maps" for participants to share their life stories in ways authentic to how they understand them (Kolar et al., 2015). Visuals foster a more interactive environment by providing both the interviewee and interviewer with shared artifacts for making observations and asking questions (Barton, 2015; Gerstenblatt, 2013). Elicitation techniques position individuals to not only reflect on their lives, but also discover new ways of seeing and understanding them. Therefore, I combined these techniques with life story interviewing to position my students in a creative wheelhouse for generating meaningful conversations with their participants.

While these methods are appropriate for exploring many concepts, they are particularly relevant for examining resilience. Scholars have observed that favorable human interactions may lead to experiences of resilience in the very act of talking about and constructing meaning for this phenomenon (Afifi, 2018). Therefore, it is important that individuals, in their relationships with others, seek opportunities to reflect on their lived experiences to re-co-create meaning of their pasts that they may apply to their future lives. The current study questions:

How do we teach student-researchers life story interviewing methods in ways that effectively engage their interviewees in sharing reflective accounts of their lives (in this case, such that interviewees discover meaning for resilience through their lived experiences)? Furthermore, how might this co-constructive process cultivate meaningful interactions between student-researchers and interviewees, such that these interactions become a living practice of resilience?

Implementing a Methodological Framework

The steps outlined below demonstrate how I designed and guided students through their life story interviewing projects on resilience.¹ I provide this template to equip readers with ideas for their own research and/or teaching. This process took place over a 15-week semester in an undergraduate capstone course (however, this process is easily adaptable to graduate seminars and/or individual research endeavors). Our in-class discussions focused on pulling insights from literature about resilience as well as recognizing ethical practices involved in eliciting in-depth, personal stories from others. We also spent significant class time interviewing one another in pairs to practice elicitation techniques and exercise keen listening skills.

Any educator developing this kind of course may need to go through their university's institutional review process (IRB). For my institution, I provided significant explanation for and examples of the reading materials, course assignments, and practice sessions included throughout the seminar to demonstrate the extensive preparation my students would receive throughout the semester to prepare them for one-on-one, in-depth interviewing. I also explained the value of researching the process by acknowledging the need for more published research on the *process* of teaching students about life story interview methods, especially as a means for learning resilience. After working closely with the IRB chair, my students' individual projects as well as my research on their learning experiences received approval.

Selecting Interviewees

As a class, we discussed at length how to identify a specific person to interview. This person was to be: (a) someone with whom the students wanted to grow closer, (b) of 18 years of age or older (in order to consent to the study), and (c) likely to demonstrate a commitment to interviews throughout the semester. Many students chose their parents or grandparents, some selected close friends, and one identified a mentor. Once making their selections, students received instructions for contacting their interviewees, explaining the process of the project, soliciting their consent, and establishing an interview schedule. The schedule included four separate interviews, each ranging between 90-120 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded; some were conducted online through a privacy-protected connection whereas others were held in person. The interviews were sequenced to promote deeper, more in-depth disclosure over time, thus allowing students and their participants to establish a rapport and gather preliminary observations before diving into more depth with their stories.

Preparing students with language best suited for their invitations complicated this process. Many were concerned about their potential participants being overwhelmed with the time commitment. Some students doubted certain individuals' willingness to be vulnerable while others questioned, "what if they don't believe they are resilient?" Many of these concerns were reduced when we imagined ourselves on the receiving end of this invitation. As we found

¹ Full assignment descriptions of these steps for classroom use are available upon request from the author.

out, most people felt honored when selected for the project. (A select few declined the opportunity due to potential time constraints they foresaw that might have interfered with the interview schedule.) Students described the interviews as “in-depth conversations” when explaining the process to their interviewees, considering this language as less formal and perhaps more invitational for storytelling. Moreover, they framed the purpose for the project around enhancing their relationship, thus placing emphasis on their interest in the person more than the project itself.

Practicing Interviews

Each of the four interviews was practiced in the classroom setting before my students conducted them with their participants. These practice sessions encouraged students to anticipate their role as interviewers, while simultaneously experiencing the role of an interviewee. Occupying both positions in dialogue with their peers prepared them to imagine the gratifications and challenges their interviewees might experience throughout the project. These practice sessions eased students’ concerns about conducting interviews on their own. Moreover, these interactions cultivated closer relationships between and among the students in the class, thus encouraging them to realize the significance of these interviews and the personal and relational growth they foster. (Note: For readers interested in promoting diversity and inclusion in the classroom, these interview practices provide meaningful opportunities for students to develop relationships with each other that enable a sense of community to form.)

Keeping Reflexive Logs

Throughout the project, students consistently tracked their observations and chronicled reflections in a reflexive log. Specifically, this log contained pre- and post-reflections on both the in-class sessions and project interviews. In their pre-reflections, students anticipated what they intended to accomplish in their interviews and identified methods for best reaching their goals. Post-reflections involved chronicling insights and epiphanies that occurred during the interviews as well as questions left unanswered. These reflections provided useful reference points for developing forthcoming interviews. Shorthand observations during the interviews were also documented. These logs along with the transcriptions gathered from their interviews comprised the texts that my students analyzed and interpreted for writing their participants’ life stories.

Designing and Facilitating Interviews

Outlined below are descriptions of each of the four interviews conducted in a bi-weekly timeframe.

Interview 1: Making Past Present

The goal of establishing a rapport guided this first interview. While most students knew their participants well, the notion of “being interviewed” can be intimidating. Therefore, this opening interview played a significant role in setting the tone for the duration of the project. Using Jones’ (2015) arts-led interviewing technique, students asked their interviewee in advance to identify three objects to share during this interview. These objects needed to represent meaningful parts of their lives that they wished to share. They could select from objects, personal photos, images, and songs. For instance, some interviewees might bring in jewelry passed down to them from family generations. Others might share a baseball to

represent their connection with sport, or a key to resemble when they first lived on their own. Whatever the case, allowing participants to choose their own items enabled them to bring content to the interviews as well as have time in advance to reflect on parts of their lives that they wanted to share. Furthermore, the items they selected created opportunities for them to discuss their values, thus empowering them to punctuate certain meanings in their lives without being prompted.

Interview 2: Timeline

While the first interview provided participants with the opportunity to identify meaningful snapshots of their lives, this second interview involved interviewees reflecting on their whole lives through timelining. Timelines provide traction for our experiences, giving them shape that enriches our capacity for examining our lives wholly and (re)constructing understandings of who and what have enabled us to endure over time (Kolar et al., 2015). Not knowing how familiar students would be with constructing timelines, I had them generate their own to become more comfortable with the process. We began by viewing our lives multi-dimensionally, generating lists of our relationships, events, challenges and successes, and values and morals. This process alone took several days as we reflected on and recounted memories that did not surface in one sitting. After creating these lists, students designed their own timeline, some illustrating their lives through metaphors (such as a board game or heart monitor) and others through a more basic line. Some also chose to include images.

Seeing the variation among their peers' timelines equipped students with ideas to offer their interviewees when explaining how to create a timeline. Practicing a one-on-one timeline interview with a classmate allowed for gauging how in depth to go with certain parts of the timeline. Because timelines provide a visual map for both the interviewer and interviewee, both parties have access to an assortment of ideas for discussing and questioning. Thus, these interviews are highly interactive by involving both parties in conversation and even adding to the timeline throughout the conversation (Kolar et al., 2015). Through practice, students not only gained insight into how to perform this dynamic role; they also generated useful questions to keep in mind when speaking with their interviewees outside of class. Among the most useful of questions were those developed for concluding the interview such as:

- What role have relationships played in your life? What relationships do you consider as being most impactful?
- At what points on this timeline do you feel you experienced the biggest transitions/changes in your life? How so? How did you endure those changes?
- As you reflect on your life, would you have expected it to unfold as it has? What would you consider as being the most unexpected happenings/outcomes in your life that have led you to become the person you are today?
- What do you imagine for your future—beyond the timeline? Is there anything more you want to experience in life? Are there challenges you are preparing to face? How has your life equipped you thus far for embracing these experiences and/or facing those challenges?

Interview 3: In-depth Storied Experiences

Learning about their interviewees' life stories through the visual timeline provided points of departure for venturing into greater depth with specific events, relationships, and understandings. This third interview required students to reflect on their previous transcripts and identify specific content they wanted to explore further. Prior to the interview, they

encouraged their participants to do the same—reflect on their personal experiences and identify what they were most interested in discussing in depth. Using the work of Atkinson (1998) and McAdams (2008) for our reflective preparation, we developed a list of topics to consider when examining previous transcriptions gathered:

- Turning points
- Most impactful moments in childhood and adulthood
- Values and the most memorable experiences that shaped them
- Most meaningful relationships
- Highest and lowest points in life
- Greatest challenges (i.e., health, loss, failure)
- Life aspirations and how they evolved over time

From this list, students selected one or two topics to guide their observations and create questions best suited for eliciting in-depth storytelling.

When preparing for this interview, students spoke with a classmate in class about a particular life experience in depth. This opportunity provided insight for sustaining a conversation at length and questioning details often dismissed in common talk. To the students' surprise, they found these conversations both rewarding due to the depth they rendered and challenging given the degree of presence they demanded. As such, these third interviews tended to yield the richest material for speaking about and co-constructing meaning for how participants experienced resilience.

Interview 4: Final (Re)Collection

Whereas the previous interviews centered on the interviewees speaking, this final interview involved interviewers sharing the ideas and interpretations they gathered throughout the previous interactions. Prior to this interview, students composed drafts of storied accounts drawn from previous transcriptions. They did so to share these accounts with their interviewees and invite their feedback. Composing drafts of these storied accounts also revealed gaps, areas where students saw a need to ask further questions. Thus, this interview created space for interviewees and interviewers to speak explicitly about the interpretations they gathered throughout their previous interactions; these conversations were more *interpretive* in nature (see McCormack, 2004), focusing less on *what* and more on *why* certain events, relationships and experiences had a significant impact. At times, interviewers' and interviewees' interpretations differed. My students were primed to see resilience in their participants' stories, whereas their participants were less inclined, at first, to see their lives as having resilient moments. In this fourth interview, when both parties shared their interpretations of resilience with each other, they observed first-hand how meaning-making is a dialogical process that can lead to growth in understanding and relational connection. For instance, Roy² wrote in his final reflection,

[My friend] has described this process as therapeutic. By recounting his life, he learned that not only has he been a lot more resilient than he thought, but that resilience takes place whether or not we are cognizant of it. Our friendship has definitely grown due to this process.... It reassured me that he will be there when I need him, which within itself is an example of resilience through others.

² Pseudonyms are used for all students' names appearing throughout this manuscript.

Another student, Julianna, explained how her interviewee, a close friend, experienced many invalidating relationships throughout her life and explored how these hardships, when storied, evidenced strengths she did not recognize prior.

By being a part of this intensive experience it allowed [my interviewee] to open the possibilities of trying to understand how her experiences shape the person that she is today... This was an opportunity for us to build a different foundation of trust between each other. By having [her] trust me through this, her vulnerability has brought us closer as friends. Our relationship has changed for the better because this experience sparked an open dialogue between each other. By hearing about [my interviewee's] early life, I was able to understand how it may affect the way she sees herself.

Hence, these final conversations favored both parties in learning from each other's perspectives to develop a more comprehensive understanding of how resilience may be experienced and understood.

Reflections on Findings

At the semester's end, my students brought forth many conceptualizations of resilience and attributed the four-part life story interview process in the course as the basis for their learning. Many also acknowledged experiencing significant relational growth throughout the interviewing process. Such acknowledgments inspired me to revisit the notes I took during our class discussions throughout the semester as well as my students' final written reflections on their research experiences. I wanted to examine the overlaps and differences in how resilience took shape through the various stories told. Using a grounded theory approach (see Charmaz, 2014) I analyzed these observations by developing themes and organizing my data accordingly. My initial themes, drawn through an *open-coding process*, included: relationship growth, spiritual connections, definitions of resilience, resilience as persistence and resistance, meaning negotiation, and knowing versus embodying resilience. The diversity of social contexts and demographics among my students' interviewees gave rise to several personal and cultural differences, each requiring unique interpretations of and responses to their circumstances. I took these differences into account as I interpreted and refined my initial themes through an *axial coding process* to focus on the conceptual and relational understandings of resilience developed through life story interviewing. The following reflections, which address these themes, are not by any means exhaustive, but rather, illustrative of the ranging ways resilience can be defined and experienced through interpersonal storytelling. My aim here is to inspire readers by sharing findings that reveal the value of teaching qualitative methods, such as life story interviewing, for enhancing student-researchers' learning outcomes and impact on others. I first provide examples that illustrate how my students encountered and conceptualized resilience through their research. Second, I share their accounts about the ways their relationships grew through life story interviewing when exploring resilience.

Conceptual Understandings of Resilience

Resilience seems commonly associated with grandiose achievements, or at least, this was often the case in what my students observed of public news stories. This observation became even more apparent when my students approached individuals to participate in their studies. When beginning the project, many of my students' participants downplayed their experiences, suggesting that they were not worthy of being studied. Heather explained, "At

first, [my friend] was reluctant, not because she didn't want to participate in the project, but rather because she didn't see her life as 'interesting enough' to qualify as resilient." Despite the diverse backgrounds of their interviewees, most students described their participants as unable to see resilience in their lives, or at least, would not qualify themselves as a "resilient person." Perhaps the popularized projections give it the appearance of an extraordinary virtue, one that only select people exude. Once the interviewees had an opportunity to share their stories, they were able to see how they endured many challenges and began to witness strengths such as faith, determination, etc. that enabled them to survive, grow, and/or heal. Even so, the word, resilience, was not readily embraced.

When articulating their struggles, individuals in general seem more inclined to describe themselves as "getting through" them rather than "being resilient" in the process. For instance, one student, Julianna, who interviewed a first-generation college student, learned through her research: "It is hard for first-gens to initially see their resilience because they just see the way they navigate through life as a struggle. They think of their actions as more of a survival necessity rather than resilience." This case suggests that hardships, when occurring routinely, occupy attention that draws energy away from reflecting on what makes their survival possible. First-generation students, for instance, may feel inferior when comparing themselves to peers who may appear as more stable and/or thriving in their circumstances. Such may also be the case for individuals observing news stories and movies that acclaim individuals as the sole agents behind their triumphant success within bounded time (where we see only one story from beginning to end rather than the grander scheme of life in which new struggles follow triumph). These depictions downplay the messiness of working through distress while also reducing resilience to a single character performance (Gladwell, 2013). Getting to explore resilience first-hand promotes realizing how limited popular press stories about resilience often are; seeing resilience more systemically gives attention to the environmental resources and cultural conditions in persons' lives that provide thriving possibilities.

Given individuals' difficulties with seeing resilience operating in their lives, their conversations with others played a significant role in recognizing its presence. Mary explained,

After discussing this subject with other students over the past few months, I have noticed that interviewees tend to see more resilience in their interviewees than the interviewees see in themselves. This may be because, as interviewees, we naturally compare ourselves to our interviewees when listening and cannot imagine ourselves making the same sacrifices, accomplishing the same feats, or surviving their circumstances.

Perhaps interviewees have an "excess of seeing" (Bakhtin, 1990), a view that privies them to an outside view of others' experiences. This outside perspective adds another dimension to how individuals may see themselves, thus encouraging them to imagine other possibilities for interpreting their circumstances. Through interviewing, my students served as witnesses to others and responded with validation for the stories shared. While remaining committed to honoring the interviewees' perspectives, my students also shared with their participants how they were impacted by the stories told. For instance, Michelle explained,

During the interview when I was reading mom her story [that I was in the process of writing], she began crying, which I was unaware of until the end. I had been feverishly taking notes and filling in gaps and, in the moment, I didn't see what my words were doing to her. She said, at the end, "Did you know I was crying? I don't know how you see me the way you do—I always question who I am. Thank you." My heart broke when she said these words to me, as I

stood there thinking, “Well, of course mom. I have never seen you in any other light.” I know that this experience was impactful for mom, sitting down and talking to me about the struggles of her life. But, I hope, more than anything, that she can see what an impact she makes in others’ lives.

Many students shared similar observations, noting how grateful their interviewees were to have their lives written and spoken from another perspective.

Meanwhile, my students acknowledged that their interviewees did not always agree with their interpretations. When this occurred, it brought to life the taken-for-granted assumptions of what constitutes “shared” understanding and challenged students to reflect on possible reasons for the different interpretations resulting between them and their interviewees. Mary shared:

Whether it is a generational difference or simply a difference in the way we see the world, [my grandma] and I see what she has accomplished in her life differently. I see resilience in how she wakes up and makes others laugh when she is feeling the world and loss around her so deeply. I also see resilience in her moving in and out of the hospital around the time our conversations ended. Yet, she sees these examples as simply parts of life and not pieces to dwell on.

This observation among others not mentioned here led to a class discussion about the meaning of resilience and the significance of honoring different perspectives when defining it.

Recognizing limits in their sensemaking when challenged by their interviewees aided my students to better grasp resilience as an interpretive construct more so than a singular definition. Moreover, they realized that communicating with others about their understandings of this concept through life storytelling deepened their relationships and curiosity about difference. For instance, many students learned from their interviewees how resilience can occur through resistance. This was especially the case for individuals with marginalized identities. Roy’s interviewee, who identified as a black, gay male, described his adolescent experiences with navigating what he called a “dual identity.” Akin to Goffman’s (1959) frontstage/backstage theory, this participant explained the challenges of needing to conform to and perform in certain settings, including family, to hide his sexual orientation. Roy observed, “it was his fatigue with performing all the time that prompted him to want to live differently. Fortunately, for him, he had a family support his coming out.” Roy continued by recognizing that even with familial support, “he faces judgments daily for identifying as gay. Every day he resists dominant ideologies that suggest he should be otherwise.” Laney made similar observations of her friend who identified as transgender. This friend used artistic expression through writing as a means for “creating a language” for making sense of their life. When concluding her project, Laney stated, “Resilience is the resistance to injustice and the persistence to give voice to people and issues often silenced.”

While previous definitions of resilience often frame it as persisting through struggles, my students’ revelations led them to question what “persisting through” entails. All participants in their studies demonstrated a belief in something beyond what was happening in their present moment’s adversity; that is, they exhibited a capacity to see otherwise. Even while not always knowing how to actualize this other view, just the mere possibility of it kept them moving. For some, this movement involved resisting certain paths (rather than persisting through them) and accepting new directions for living, even when those new directions were not always supported by individuals in their immediate surroundings. For others, this movement entailed (re)connecting with their values and (re)defining their purpose and direction through such values. As such, (re)discovering a sense of direction and/or a value-oriented perspective cleared

a path for living in more edifying ways. Meanwhile, these observations led my students to continue asking from where these (re)claimed senses of direction and (re)connections with values come.

These observations caution us to remain vigilant of how complex and yet vital our lived experiences and interpretations of them are with respect to our human growth. Conversations with others are especially important for summoning reflective insights about our lives that open our capacities to see otherwise, appreciate difference, and reconceive how we attribute significance. I now turn attention to how life story interviewing encourages these opportunistic ways of seeing, being, and relating, all which condition resilient experiences for students.

Relational Understandings of Resilience

Many of my students began the project hoping to learn more about significant others in their lives. For instance, Mary confided, “Prior to this project, I had rarely spoken to my grandma herself about her past.” Others concurred, explaining how they commonly assumed knowing their friends, parents, and grandparents, despite having never asked them about their histories at length. Learning about their family and friends’ pasts revealed intimate layers of understanding. “This project enriched my life and my relationship with my grandparents in so many ways. I now have a much better understanding of how they grew to live by their morals leading to who they are today,” William wrote. He explained how interviewing his grandparents amplified his appreciation for them and raised his own moral consciousness. Similarly, Sean explained, “Because of [my father’s] willingness to share stories during our interviews, I was able to understand that the resilience of one can inspire the resilience in another.” Like Sean, many students were moved—inspired—by the stories they witnessed. As a result, they experienced changes occurring in their relationships. “Mom and I had always been close,” explained Michelle, “but this experience, through the vivid imagery, the details, and our conversations, changed the way I see her.” Knowing more about her mom’s past hardships exposed a new realm of understanding. While difficult to imagine her mom’s pain, Michelle underscored, “it certainly brought us closer.” Julianna also expressed a newfound closeness with her friend, noting that, “This was an opportunity for us to build a different foundation of trust between each other.”

The growth occurring in students’ relationships is consistent with Atkinson’s (1998) claim, “Storying and restorying one’s life provides opportunities to create new and possibly liberating narratives” (p. 13). Indeed, my students recognized differences happening in their relationships, which inspired them to look upon life through a novel lens. Some students began redefining their personal hardships as opportunities for, rather than barriers to, making discoveries about their lives. Others experienced spiritual connections, becoming more mindful of being part of something greater than themselves. For instance, Jeremy, when describing the project as a mosaic act of piecing together his father’s story, claimed, “While daunting at times, it was always reassuring for me to know I was doing a project that was much bigger than myself.” Feeling connected to something bigger, “was a gift,” Karen explained. She continued sharing, “The reflections throughout this project were empowering and therapeutic at the same time. They gave me strength to write eloquently about experiences in which I felt free to express my thoughts and emotions.” For many students, their research process evoked an embodied awakening, one that called their attention to their senses, relationships, and surrounding worlds in ways that escaped traditional learning barriers.

Getting to practice life story interviews with their peers, they learned more about each other on a personal level. As students grew more comfortable sharing their experiences with each other one-on-one, they developed a sense of confidence in their ability to be more vulnerable with the class during whole group discussions. No longer did they see each other as

peers in a class; they grew more intimate in their understandings of one another's lives and, as a result, the classroom became a space for connection and belonging. Daniele shared, "Co-creating as a class our knowledge about resilience made me feel connected to my classmates in a way that I'm not always able to, and the fact that I was interviewing my grandmother made me more invested in the learning." Hence, students "felt" resilience through the emotional, spiritual, and relational connections generated throughout the process of their research.

Life stories elicit meanings that theoretical understandings often dismiss. Atkinson (1998) explained that through these interviews, "Researchers gain fresh insights into human dilemmas, human struggles and human triumphs, as well as greater appreciation for how values and beliefs are acquired, shaped, held onto, experienced, and understood over time by studying life stories" (p. 14). These outcomes were widely observed by my students. Roy, reflecting on his discoveries, wrote, "It was one thing to read about resilience and see how scholars have defined it. But when listening to the stories of others, it seems that what we know about resilience is not the same thing as how we live it." Sean explored this "lived" notion in his accounts when learning how his father experienced divorce.

I saw so much more to my dad and resilience in a way that's hard to explain. The definition just doesn't seem to capture all that I experienced during these conversations. The feelings that come with it go beyond words.

Realizing resilience as embodied with emotional, relational, and situational elements prompted students to consider its phenomenological nature. Hence, knowing what resilience is constitutes only part of the learning process; interpreting the embodied senses that accompany resilience also play a profound role in understanding how it is lived. Melissa attested,

Overall, my main takeaway about resilience is that it is contextual. While it seems as though resilience is grounded in overcoming challenges, it is the unique embodiment of each person and in each situation that adds to the complexity of the puzzle.

Having the opportunity to witness stories told when using creative elicitation methods situated both student-researchers and their participants to learn from each other in ways that directly impacted their personal values and relationships. The discoveries provided greater depth than I, alone, could supply with course materials. As such, the unique learning experiences students had with their participants generated insights and questions for class discussion that led to rich, applied teaching and learning opportunities. This discovery aligns with findings from Cooper et al. (2012) who explained,

Stories constitute data, and students use story to frame what they are learning about research. Thus stories appear to weave throughout the lived experience of qualitative research students and are also essential to the meaning they make of their experience. (p. 12)

Through witnessing and interpreting stories of resilience, my students were able to see and experience resilience happening in their own and others' lives.

These experiences occurred through various realizations. For William, he began to understand generational patterns in his family that led him to develop a sense of connection with his lineage:

... this project enriched my life and my relationship with my grandparents in so many ways. I now have a much better understanding of how they grew to live by their morals leading to who they are today. I was greatly impacted by this assignment, in such a positive manner. Not only have I begun to self-reflect on my own resilience and morals, but I can now see how and why my father lives his life. His dedication to working hard and sticking up for what he believes in are so clearly stemmed from my grandparents. That is why life-story interviews, projects that promote communication for meaning-making and relationship growth are so important. This communication is essential for understanding and experiencing resilience.

Another student, Samuel, acknowledged the impact his research had on his understanding of family as well, specifically through building a relationship with his father after sharing the experience of divorce:

The process of conducting a Life Story Interview between my father and I impacted ourselves personally, as well as our relationship. As I mentioned in the Prologue [of the written life story], the time leading up to my parents' divorce was incredibly impactful on my life, but the time that followed was incredibly impactful on my relationship with my father.... My father showed me the true meaning of resiliency when he shared with me his adverse times that he has faced in his life. Because of the ability for my father to story-tell through the Life Story Interview, I was able to understand that the resiliency of one can inspire the resiliency in another. My father, through his actions throughout his life, proved that he was able to recover from failure and get back up with a positive attitude and eventually succeed at the task again.

In addition to acknowledging how they were affected by the interview process, my students also recognized how their interviewees experienced transformation. For instance, Heather recounted how her interviewee felt gratified upon reading the written story resulting from the project:

As [my friend] was reading the paper over she began to cry. I think to see a combination of everything she had gone through and everything she has achieved finally made her realize how strong she was. She told me that while she was reading it, she was overcome with a sense of pride in herself, and it helped her to realize that she truly was resilient.

These observations display how students and their interviewees acquired deeper understandings throughout the research process that materialized through the growth in their relationships with others.

Conclusions and Future Implications

Countering common conceptions of resilience as being an extraordinary quality, this essay demonstrates "the substantial contribution qualitative research can make to how resilience-related phenomena are studied and understood" (Ungar, 2003, p. 86). Exploring others' life stories unveils the breadth and depth of human circumstances, thus revealing that resilience is far more than a combination of individual traits and contextual circumstances. It is also a social construction. Therefore, the linguistic resources available in people's lives and

the opportunities to articulate their experiences inevitably play a significant role in their capacity to even conceive the existence of resilience. Through storytelling specifically, tellers represent stories of their lived experiences and listeners, and through bearing witness to such stories, they offer outside perspectives that can enhance the creation of new meaning. This process can lead to therapeutic benefits such as, but not limited to, acquiring a deeper understanding of lived experiences, seeing life as connected to a greater whole, recognizing values developed over time, and discovering a sense of coherence. These benefits occur through the relationships that grow between interviewers and interviewees (Atkinson, 1998).

My reflections suggest that individuals are unable to stand outside of themselves to view their circumstances in ways that fully reveal their individual strengths and circumstantial resources. Consequently, the stories we create individually are inherently partial and thus distort our awareness of unseen potentialities. Yet, when we are invited to examine our pasts through the appreciative eyes of others, we may see much more not just to our stories, but also to the very beings we are in our stories. Elicitation methods—those involving participants in imagining their lives through creative techniques—complement this way of seeing by offering multidimensional views of circumstances otherwise conceived in linear and/or singular ways. These observations suggest that *resilience is a reflexively construed phenomenon that relies heavily on the ways we attend to and construct narrative frameworks about life's challenges*. How might researchers and students of resilience continue implementing creative approaches to facilitate and explore storytelling processes that disclose resilience? And, when doing so, how might they navigate a meaningful balance between appreciative inquiry (appraising what stories illuminate) and critical inquiry (cautioning what partial stories constrain) regarding how resilience is told, received, and interpreted?

The synergy between resilience and narrative leads to edifying possibilities. The accounts shared in this essay showed how conversations about individuals' struggles encourage intimate disclosures that deepen interpersonal relationships. As such, these relationships may grow stronger—more resilient—through the very act of talking about resilience. Furthermore, these conversations facilitate a mutual experience of giving, whereby tellers offer themselves through stories, and listeners offer nuanced understandings for the tellers. Through this mutually giving experience, both parties experience an extension of themselves through “peak experiences” described by Goodall and Kellet (2004). Such peak experiences summon embodied senses of resilience that go beyond verbal exchange. My students, for example, connected with relational, emotional, and spiritual senses in ways that added meaning beyond words. My students became aware of these senses when talking with others. They observed how reading about the conceptual dimensions of resilience in scholarly work was helpful, but such literature made resilience seem more of an object than a lived experience. But storytelling, which introduces temporality, emotion, and context, brings this concept to life in ways that can be felt and imagined. The impact my students observed through their learning was almost always in reference to the connections they drew between intellectual and embodied experiences. Thus, *resilience is far more than a construct; it is also an embodied phenomenon that becomes particularly poignant in mutually affirming relational interactions*. In lieu of these favorable outcomes, we must remain aware of the underlying, rigorous practices involved in making meaningful dialogue possible. How we listen, interpret, and reflect on others' experiences in dialogue can be life changing—serious work (Atkinson, 1998; Miller, 1996). How do we teach and research in ways that honor the inherent vulnerability that stories of resilience demand of their tellers and listeners?

Recognizing these positive outcomes demonstrates the power narrative has for developing understandings of and applied approaches to resilience. The stories construed by my students depicted resilience through various dimensions, thus suggesting that this phenomenon is multifaceted, immensely contextual, and socially constructed. Unfortunately,

representative anecdotes appearing in publicly acclaimed narratives often fall short of acknowledging the circumstantial, relational, and linguistic resources that support individuals in moments of hardship. Thus, we are often misled to view resilience as a matter of individual strength alone, a highly reduced view that can leave individuals searching within themselves and assuming full responsibility for their successes and failures. In truth, individuals' successes are always supported by factors beyond their own control, whether those factors be supportive human relationships or serendipitous opportunities (Ungar, 2003). In any case, *if we more readily inquire about the "whole" stories behind resilience, we will understand more comprehensively our human potential not just as individuals, but also as relational beings.* This finding builds upon Gergen's (2009) notion that it is *through* our relationships with others that we experience ourselves as whole beings. How might we continue thinking creatively about our research and teaching practices to provide applied opportunities for co-constructing meaning with others in ways that bring wholeness to how we learn about and live through resilience?

Given that human relationships can aid others in realizing their fullest potential (Godden, 2017; Goodall & Kellet, 2004), perhaps a resilient way of living can begin with recognizing our responsibility in helping others realize their life's greatest potential. Most exciting about my students' findings was their discovery that through seeking what enabled others to endure difficulties, they cultivated an appreciative mindset. While searching for opportunistic viewpoints, they instantaneously began seeing more possibilities within their own circumstances, thus adopting conceptual, linguistic, and figurative resources for recognizing resilience operating within their immediate experiences. When we listen and look for what *is*, we become better positioned to encounter, resist, and/or go through our struggles because our attention goes towards sources of strength and support (Bushe, 2007). Thus, *bearing witness to and supporting others in their experiences with appreciative lenses are highly effective approaches to learning about and enacting resilience.* How might we embrace appreciative understandings and give voice to the diverse conceptions through which resilience takes shape not only in interpersonal contexts, but also community settings? These questions among others light a way for us to explore what awaits our future inquiry and revelations of resilience.

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