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Examining Undergraduate College Students' Experiences Participating in Longitudinal Qualitative Research

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Abstract

While many researchers describe the potential benefits to individuals if they opt to participate in qualitative research, it is not always feasible to empirically examine how engaging in a study influence the participants. Acknowledging this gap, we conducted a descriptive qualitative study to explore how 67 low-income students described their experiences as participants in a larger longitudinal qualitative research project that involved regularly submitting video diaries and participating in interviews over the course of three years. Overall, participants characterized their experiences as positive and highlighted unanticipated benefits of the project. Although many individuals were drawn to the project for the compensation, they found that regularly engaging in reflection with the support of a researcher they trusted to be beneficial. Participants often described their interviews as cathartic and as a place where they could make sense of their experiences in and outside of college. Opportunities for sustained reflection also helped participants increase their self-awareness. Additionally, participants described their videos as material evidence of their growth and development over time and indicated that this longitudinal project helped them develop their communication and time management skills.

Keywords

longitudinal research, descriptive qualitative methods, reflection

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Examining Undergraduate College Students' Experiences Participating in Longitudinal Qualitative Research

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While many researchers describe the potential benefits to individuals if they opt to participate in qualitative research, it is not always feasible to empirically examine how engaging in a study influence the participants. Acknowledging this gap, we conducted a descriptive qualitative study to explore how 67 low-income students described their experiences as participants in a larger longitudinal qualitative research project that involved regularly submitting video diaries and participating in interviews over the course of three years. Overall, participants characterized their experiences as positive and highlighted unanticipated benefits of the project. Although many individuals were drawn to the project for the compensation, they found that regularly engaging in reflection with the support of a researcher they trusted to be beneficial. Participants often described their interviews as cathartic and as a place where they could make sense of their experiences in and outside of college. Opportunities for sustained reflection also helped participants increase their self-awareness. Additionally, participants described their videos as material evidence of their growth and development over time and indicated that this longitudinal project helped them develop their communication and time management skills.

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Introduction

One component of ethical research with people involves articulating the benefits to the individuals and communities that agree to participate in a particular project (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). In doing so, scholars must identify what participants gain from the research beyond potential compensation for their time, energy, and contributions. Qualitative researchers in education often highlight the potential benefits to participants that are associated with engaging in reflection, sharing their experiences with others, and improving future practice and service to communities. However, these scholars may not systematically determine the actual benefits for individuals who participate in educational research unless those stated benefits are clearly linked to their research aims. In effect, the benefits of participation in research are often hypothetical, rather than clearly operationalized and assessed.

Longitudinal qualitative methods provide scholars with a unique opportunity to examine the actual benefits of participating in research given their sustained interactions with individuals and communities over time. For example, Baxter Magolda and King (2007) indicated that the longitudinal interviews associated with the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education (WNS) were more than a means of assessing undergraduate students' growth

and development in college. Given the design of the WNS interviews, they also had the potential to serve as a developmental intervention since reflection during “the interview [was] the stimulus for constructing meaning they [students] haven’t constructed before” (Baxter Magolda & King, 2007, p. 506). Baxter Magolda and King (2007) argued that undergraduate students in the WNS benefitted from engaging in reflection that helped them make meaning of their experiences since they were not often afforded this opportunity in their daily lives. Yet, some have argued that longitudinal research can also have costs to participants since they require a great deal of individuals’ time, can be intrusive, and may evoke negative emotions depending on the focus of the study (Derrington, 2019; Thomson & Holland, 2003). The end of longitudinal qualitative studies can also create distress or feelings of abandonment for some participants, particularly if they have developed close relationships with researchers (Derrington, 2019).

Despite the potential power of longitudinal qualitative research to create space for participants to be heard and to foster their learning and development (Baxter Magolda & King, 2007; Derrington, 2019), few studies have examined college students’ experiences participating in this form of research as it relates to the benefits and complications that may arise. Better understanding college students’ experiences engaging in longitudinal qualitative research can help researchers make informed choices about their methods with the idea that research should benefit rather than burden participants. Accordingly, this inquiry explored the experiences of low-income undergraduate students’ who participated in longitudinal research through digital diaries (i.e., video blogs) and interviews over the course of three years to better understand the benefits and challenges of participating in this form of inquiry. Our descriptive qualitative study sought to answer the following research questions: How did participants describe their experiences participating in longitudinal digital diary research? How did participants describe what they took away from participating in longitudinal digital diary research?

Review of the Literature

To situate our inquiry, we first provide a brief overview of the literature that examines how participating in research may affect participants. Currently, there is limited work that attends to participation in longitudinal qualitative studies. With this in mind, we draw from this literature and scholarship that examines participation in qualitative research more broadly. Specifically, we consider the aspects of the research process and interactions with researchers that can enhance or detract from participants’ experiences. Then, we examine the literature on digital diaries as a form of reflection to provide context for the exploration of our methods to follow.

Research Impact on Participants

Participation, Harm, and Harm Reduction in Qualitative Research

A critical question that all researchers must contend with, no matter the discipline, is how a study will impact its participants. This question is particularly necessary when studying vulnerable populations (Rivlin et al., 2012), which may include low-income and first-generation college students given their precarity in higher education. Accordingly, several scholars have explored the ethical issues and potential harm that can be done on vulnerable populations in the name of research. These scholars have noted the potential harm to participants who become emotionally charged or have trauma reactivated by certain questions or topics (Becker-Blease & Freyd, 2006; Derrington, 2019; Edwards et al., 2017; McGowan,

2018; Thomson & Holland, 2003). They have also highlighted the importance of researchers' abilities to appropriately respond when participants disclose sensitive information and to gauge when to report information to support participants' well-being (Becker-Blease & Freyd, 2006; Edwards et al., 2017; Kavanaugh & Ayres, 1998; McGowan, 2018). Additionally, Wolgemuth et al. (2015) noted that participants may experience harm through deductive disclosure during the research process, and that engagement with scholars may create pressure for participants to represent themselves and their communities positively. Since longitudinal qualitative studies create unique opportunities for individuals to build relationships over time, they may also have distinct implications for participants. Specifically, Derrington (2019) noted that participants may experience distress at the end of a study when their interactions with researchers change. For instance, ending a relationship that they grew to rely on and trust in can be difficult for participants who regularly shared personal information with a researcher.

Given the potential harm to participants in qualitative research studies, scholars have highlighted some harm reductions strategies. For example, Kavanaugh and Ayers (1998) described the importance of researchers' flexibility during interviews, particularly when discussing difficult topics. They noted that flexibility and compassion may manifest as recognizing and encouraging participant's coping strategies (e.g., walking around the room, crying, using humor) and adapting mode of data collection to meet participants' needs. Scholars have also discussed the importance of demonstrating reciprocity throughout research processes, which may come in many forms (Corbin & Morse, 2003). For example, while reciprocity may be framed as providing participants with financial compensation for their time, it may also include providing information and resources outside of the scope of the study (Corbin & Morse, 2003; Hallett, 2013) and honoring their agency to make decisions about confidentiality and privacy in the research process (Baez, 2002; Galvez & Muñoz, 2020).

Benefits of Participating in Qualitative Research

In response to concerns about the potential harm done through research, multiple studies have shed light on the benefits of participating in research. For example, participants have voiced appreciation for the opportunity to talk about their lives (Baxter Magolda & King, 2007; Rivlin et al., 2012). Interviews can validate participants' experiences and create opportunities for intimate conversations that are not a part of everyday life (Hiller & DiLuzio, 2004; Hutchinson et al., 1994; Wolgemuth et al., 2015). Qualitative interviews have also been described as cathartic or therapeutic for some participants when the interviewer demonstrates warmth, neutrality, and active listening (Felsher et al., 2018; Hutchinson et al., 1994; Rossetto, 2014; Wolgemuth et al., 2015). McClelland (2017) highlighted that interviews are particularly beneficial for participants when researchers demonstrate vulnerable listening, which "encourages greater focus on the affective and embodied aspects of listening, as well as potential ethical considerations to support those listening to participants" (p. 1). In effect, they called on researchers to focus on the relational aspect of interviews, which centers the needs and experiences of participants. For some individuals, participating in research interviews not only created space to be heard, but it improved their moods (Rivlin et al., 2012) or led to behavioral changes after talking about their actions with researchers (Rossetto, 2014). After engaging in reflective interviews, Hutchinson et al. (1994) highlighted that participants may develop a clearer sense of purpose and increase their self-awareness as well.

Factors that Inform the Benefits of Participating in Qualitative Research

While researchers' interview skills can positively or negatively affect participants' experiences (Corbin & Morse, 2003; Kavanaugh & Ayres, 1998; Wolgemuth et al., 2015), so

too can their positionality. Kerstetter (2012) explored the dynamic of being an insider or outsider when engaging in research and argued that there isn't a clear dichotomy between the two. Rather, they asserted that there is a "space between" [that] is usually characterized as a multidimensional space, where researchers' identities, cultural backgrounds, and relationships to research participants influence how they are positioned within that space" (Kerstetter, 2012, p. 101). Negotiating this "space between" requires trust building and an awareness of power dynamics based on socially constructed identities since race, class, gender, etc. influence how participants experience the study and what they are willing to share as a result (Kerstetter, 2012; Mizock et al., 2011).

For example, Mellor et al. (2014) found that participants were most comfortable being interviewed by individuals who came from similar social class origins. Similarly, Kerstetter's (2012) work indicated that participants were most at ease when working with researchers that shared their racialized and social class identities. In contrast, Archer's (2002) study illuminated how participants, regardless of racialized identity, were generally more comfortable opening to a Woman of Color researcher, in comparison to the White man researcher engaged in data collection. While participants may be more at ease with people who share their socially constructed identities, researchers can build trusting relationships across race, class, and gender when they are attuned to how power and identity influence their work as scholars.

In addition to a researcher's identity and approach to qualitative work, the length of time that a participant engages in a study can have a large impact on their experiences. Perhaps, the greatest benefit of longitudinal studies is that they can generate trust between the participant and researcher. While longitudinal studies can be demanding both in time and emotion, they provide a strong foundation for the researcher to build towards sensitive discussion topics slowly and intentionally (Derrington, 2019; Lloyd et al., 2017). Furthermore, when longitudinal studies come to an end, participants might feel a sense of accomplishment and altruism, knowing that their contribution to the study will help to improve the experiences of others (Derrington, 2019; Felsher et al., 2018).

Longitudinal studies are also unique in that they can facilitate an intensive process of reflexivity between researcher and participant (Derrington, 2019; Thomson & Holland, 2003). In other words, the extended length of time allows for both parties to foster a relationship in which layers of authenticity can unfold. In considering barriers that might exist within interpersonal exchanges across race, class, and gender, reflexivity is an important component of the research process. Through reflexivity over time, researchers and participants can better understand how their relationships has or has not developed and the implications this may have for the participant's experience and takeaways from the study.

Reflection and Digital Diary Methods

Reflection is tool of facilitating reflexivity, which may promote cognitive, psychosocial, and identity development (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Mezirow, 1990). The practice of reflection is a common pedagogical tool, used in both informal and formal learning environments (Jordi, 2011; Mezirow, 1990). Reflection can be understood as a range of activities in which "people recapture their experience, think about it, mull it over and evaluate it" (Boud et al., 1985, p. 19). Diary or journal writing is noted in literature as a means of monitoring and understanding students' reflective capacity. For example, Gleaves et al. (2007) discussed how digital, or paper diaries can help students develop a more accurate judgement of their work and take ownership of their learning through reflection. Similarly, Boud (2001) highlighted the importance of journal writing in sifting through often messy and confusing experiences and making meaning out of them. Therefore, diaries allow individuals to reflect on what has happened, what is currently happening, and what will happen in the future.

Digital diaries may be a particularly rich tool to foster reflection and reflexivity. In a longitudinal study using solicited audio journals, Monrouxe (2009) found that this method “opens up new insights into the way in which we make sense of the world of telling our stories to another and to ourselves” (p. 99). Similarly, Cashmore et al. (2010) asserted that using video diaries to understand college students’ transitions to college allowed them to:

Capture the various emotions, experiences, and insights that students are feeling at particular moments in particular personal and social spaces. In being able to reflect on their complete experiences, not only involving things happening at University but also at their family homes and in their relationships, the students are able to project a sense of identity that is not limited by their social status as students. (p. 107)

In effect, digital diaries provided participants with the opportunity to reflect upon and share their experiences in an authentic, holistic way in their daily contexts.

When used in a longitudinal study, video diaries also have the capacity to help researchers further understand participants’ emotional states and evolving understandings of their experiences (Cashmore et al., 2010; Jones et al., 2015). Since surveys only require a single response, Cashmore et al. (2010) noted they can often lead to researchers to assume too much about the participants’ life experiences. While one-time interviews can provide more in-depth information than survey data, conversations are driven by researchers and as such may not fully reflect participants ways of knowing and being (Cashmore et al., 2010). Videos submitted over time are advantageous since they provide students with the opportunity to have full control of the data they choose to share and researchers with a better understanding of participants’ thoughts and feelings as they emerge and unfold. This level of control is beneficial since several researchers have noted that not all participants are comfortable speaking to a video camera initially (Jones et al., 2015; Nash & Moore, 2018). Furthermore, video diaries may provide participants with the chance to retain some of their study data which may provide opportunities for reflection after the study has concluded (Whiting et al., 2018). Our study builds upon the diary methods and longitudinal research methods literature by more explicitly examining their benefits and limitations as when used with low-income college students.

Method

Our research utilized data from the Promoting At-Promise Student Success (PASS) Project, a mixed-methods longitudinal study of the Thompson Scholars Learning Community (TSLC), a foundation-funded, comprehensive college transition program at three University of Nebraska campuses (Omaha, Lincoln, Kearney). TSLC serves low-income students who have graduated from high school in Nebraska, are enrolling for college for the first time, and who have an estimated family contribution (EFC) of \$10,000 or less. Students who participate in TSLC receive a tuition scholarship for up to five years and two years of structured support (e.g., peer mentoring, shared academic courses, staff advising) to support their collegiate success. The goal of the larger study from which these data were drawn was to understand how low-income students, many of whom are also first-generation students, experienced and were affected by the combined scholarship and programming that comprise TSLC.

The PASS Project was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at our Primary Investigator’s university. Although PASS team members worked closely with TSLC staff and faculty over a five-year period, our research activities were independent of the program. In other words, TSLC staff and faculty did not conduct research (e.g., data collection, data analysis) as part of the PASS Project.

The qualitative strand of PASS Project used multiple constructivist case study methods to cultivate our understanding of the TSLC program (Hallett et al., 2020). Our data sources for the larger project included observational data, program documents, interviews with TSLC faculty, staff, and stakeholders, and longitudinal video diaries and interviews with students, which were used to develop an in-depth understanding of the TSLC program. Given the aims of the overarching study, the PASS qualitative methods were designed to examine the effects of the TSLC program on students.

Throughout the PASS Project, TSLC student participants mentioned they enjoyed their long-term engagement with members of the research team. This study emerged as a secondary line of inquiry and was designed to understand students' experiences more fully as participants in a longitudinal qualitative study. In alignment with the overarching PASS Project, we used a constructivist approach, which assumes that knowledge and understandings of reality are constructed as individuals interact with each other and the world (Crotty, 1998). A constructivist approach was well-suited to our work given our desire to understanding how student participants experienced their engagement with the PASS Project. Given the aims of this secondary line of inquiry, we used descriptive qualitative methods which are "focused on discovering the who, what, and where of events or experiences and on gaining insights from informants regarding a poorly understood phenomenon" (Kim et al., 2017, p. 23). Descriptive qualitative methods are also well suited for studies "designed to develop an understanding and describe a phenomenon (not to provide evidence for existing theoretical construction)" (Bradshaw et al., 2017, p. 2) as was the case in this study. Thus, descriptive qualitative studies may not begin with an explicit theory that underpins the research (Sandelowski, 2010) since the method is designed to provide "straight and largely unadorned (i.e., minimally theorized or otherwise transformed or spun) answers to questions" (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 337). Acknowledging the limited literature on the low-income college students' experiences with longitudinal qualitative research and desire to understand how participants experienced and made meaning of their engagement in the PASS Project, constructivist descriptive qualitative methods were aligned with our aims.

Digital Diary Overview

The digital diaries component of the PASS study was comprised of video blogs coupled with interviews that were designed to follow students over their first three years of college. Specifically, we followed students during their two years participating in the TSLC and their first year after completing the key requirements of the program. At each campus, members of the PASS research team recruited two cohorts of students, one in fall 2015 (cohort 1) and fall 2016 (cohort 2), by visiting required TSLC first-year seminars and sharing information about the study. Participants were purposefully selected (Patton, 2002) after initial screening interviews to create a compositionally diverse sample across socially constructed identities (e.g., race, gender) and experiences (e.g., commuters vs. residential students).

Across the three campuses in the PASS Project, 83 low-income students participated in the digital diaries. Our sample included 10 African American/Black, 5 Asian American and Pacific Islander, 27 Latinx/Chicanx, 32 White, and 7 Multiracial students, as well as two individuals who did not disclose their racialized identity. With respect to gender, 55 participants were cisgender women, 26 were cisgender men, and two were trans* or non-binary. Twenty-three participants spoke a primary language other than English and 41 had parents who did not attend or did not complete college.

Participants were asked to submit digital diary entries (i.e., video blogs) twice a month during their first two years of college and participated in semi-structured interviews two or three times a semester over the duration of the study. We provided participants with prompts

for each digital diary entry, though students were encouraged to share information and experiences that were salient to them at the time they recorded the video. We regularly asked participants to “Tell us about your past two weeks,” and then prompted them to discuss a specific topic. For example, we asked participants to create videos telling us about their experiences with proactive advising and attending specific programs that were required in the TSLC. We also provided prompts asking students to tell us about a challenge they had been navigating and about their support systems. Participants’ digital diary entries were generally three-five minutes in length though some students submitted videos if 20 minutes.

As participants’ needs shifted, the PASS team worked to be responsive to them. For example, we did not collect digital diary entries during participants’ third year of college based on participants’ feedback and their transition out of the TSLC. Specifically, students found it difficult to keep up with video submissions given the demands of lives and challenges uploading videos to the secure PASS Project website.

In addition to digital diary entries, participants engaged in 30–60-minute semi-structured interviews that further explored the information shared in their videos and their experiences within the TSLC and on campus more broadly. Members of the PASS research team used similar interview protocols to gather information about features of TSLC shared across the three campuses and psychosocial outcomes relevant to the larger mixed methods study. For instance, we created interview protocols to understand participants’ experiences in TSLC shared academic courses, career, and major exploration, and transition out of the program. Our semi-structured approach created opportunities to ask for campus specific information and for participants to discuss experiences that were important to them. Given the longitudinal nature of the study, participants were interviewed by the same member of the research team whenever possible to maintain continuity in relationships. This approach allowed to focus on developing rapport with participants early in the study, and to build on what we knew about participants as we continued to interview them over time. For instance, we were able to follow-up with participants when they shared an issue they were working through or something they were hoping to do in the future. During participants’ final interviews at the conclusion of the study (Year 3), members of the research team asked students to reflect upon their experiences in the study and what they had taken away from participating in the digital diaries over the course of three years; 67 participants completed this final interview.

In total, the PASS research team collected 938 interviews and 958 video entries across the three campuses over the course of the project. All interviews were professionally transcribed, and members of the research team summarized the content of video diaries. Participants were compensated with an Amazon gift card for each year they completed the digital diaries, and the amount of compensation increased over time to both encourage retention and to acknowledge the time students had invested (Year 1 - \$150; Year 2 - \$200; Year 3 - \$250).

Statement of Positionality

As researchers engaged in constructivist research, we are cognizant that our socially constructed identities and our lived experiences affect how we individually and collectively made meaning of these data. We are members of the larger PASS qualitative research team who were actively involved in collecting and analyzing digital diary data over the course of the study. We interviewed digital diary participants and followed their collegiate journeys over the course of three years, and as such are deeply familiar with these particular participants’ experiences.

The lead author is a middle-class, Asian American cisgender woman who was raised and educated within predominantly White environments. Her experiences sensitized her to the

experiences of participants who were racially minoritized and who were raised in immigrant families, while her work on multiple longitudinal research projects contributed to her understanding of cultivating relationships with participants. The second author is a first-generation college student and immigrant from Mexico. Growing up close to the Tijuana and San Diego border led her to constantly negotiate cultural, class, ethnic, racial tensions, and contradictions. While her cultural background differed from many of the participants, her dual perspective facilitated her engagement with their varied lenses and experiences. The third author identifies as a racially Black and ethnically African American/Japanese woman. She was raised in Los Angeles during a time of heightened Black and Asian racial tensions, while also attending a predominantly Latinx Spanish immersion school. Her life experiences navigating complex racial politics, relationships, and solidarity shape her lens and approach to working with participants -- particularly those who straddle contentious intersecting identities. Our shared experiences as Women of Color who have experiences working with college students in predominantly White campuses also sensitized us to the experiences of racially minoritized participants in our study. Collectively, our positionalities were resources as we developed shared understandings of these data and worked to understand participants' perspectives.

Analysis

Over the course of the PASS Project, multiple participants informally mentioned enjoying the digital diaries, looking forward to their interviews, and struggling at times to manage video submissions. As such, we more systematically collected data about participants' experiences and explored their feedback. To understand participants' experiences in the digital diaries, we focused our analysis on responses to questions during the final interview of the study where participants were asked to reflect on their engagement and takeaways from being a part of the research. After identifying our data sources, our coding process was inductive (Boyatzis, 1998).

During our first cycle of coding (Miles et al., 2014), each author independently and inductively coded three transcripts, one from a participant at each campus in the study, to identify an initial or provisional set of codes related to how students described their experiences and learning from participating in the digital diaries. As we did so, we identified illustrative quotes and took notes to document our insights and how we were defining each code assigned (Miles et al., 2014). Subsequently, we met to discuss our insights and came to a consensus about the codes we would use when we reviewed transcripts going forward (e.g., reflection, safe space, relationship with researcher). We then divided the remaining transcripts for the first cycle of coding and ensured that we were not assigned interviews we conducted. As we reviewed transcripts, we remained open to new codes and added them as ideas emerged across interviews (e.g., communication skills, feeling self-conscious).

Following our first cycle of coding, we compiled a master list of relevant interview excerpts with assigned codes and notes ($n=239$). During our second cycle of coding, each author independently reviewed the full set of coded excerpts to identify potential patterns or themes across all the interviews and we recorded our insights in a memo (Miles et al., 2014). Then, we reviewed each author's memo before meeting as a team to discuss the patterns we had individually identified during our review of the first cycle coding. During our team discussion, we came to consensus about the themes we observed across the data and used illustrative quotes to support our shared insights. To develop themes, we worked collectively to organize patterns in the data with narrative descriptions (Miles et al., 2014) that reflected shared experiences across many participants. As we developed our themes, our interpretations

were supported and further refined by using our coded materials to provide evidence of our insights across the data (Guest & MacQueen, 2008).

Limitations

Our study has several limitations given the design of the PASS Project and our analytic strategy. Although we were engaged in longitudinal research, we did not systematically ask participants about their experiences with and takeaways from the digital diaries project on an ongoing basis. Our interest in this topic emerged based on our informal observations as we interacted with participants, and it led us to ask them for their insights at the conclusion of the PASS Project. This approach provided us with some understanding of participants' overarching experiences and learning rather than how their perceptions and insights changed over time. Furthermore, our study only includes those who completed the final digital diary interview in Year 3, and we may have had additional insights if we had also gathered information from those who chose to exit the study early. Also, the frequent and intensive contact we had with participants which is not representative of many longitudinal qualitative research designs (e.g., annual interviews), and as such our findings may have limited transferability (Jones et al., 2014). Our intensive contact may also have led participants to answer in socially desirable ways to maintain relationship with their interviewer (Jones et al., 2014).

Trustworthiness

Given the limitations of our research, we used multiple strategies to enhance the trustworthiness of our work throughout the collection and analysis of these data. The credibility of our data was enhanced through the PASS research team's prolonged engagement (Bradshaw et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) with participants and with the TSLC over multiple years. The PASS research team, including the authors, participated in interview training, and met regularly through the data collection and analysis process to discuss our insights; these efforts added to the dependability (Bradshaw et al., 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of our data. While engaging in analysis for this inquiry, we met regularly to discuss our insights as we coded and made shared meaning of the data. Our efforts to triangulate our findings among multiple researchers and to discuss how our positionality informed our analysis contributed to the trustworthiness of our research (Jones et al., 2014).

Findings

Overall, our data suggest that most of the students who participated in the digital diaries (i.e., video blogs and interviews) had a positive experience in this longitudinal qualitative research project. While many were drawn to the project based on the compensation and opportunity to give back to the TSLC we were studying, participants reported that the opportunity to reflect on their experiences and to talk openly with members of the research team were benefits they did not anticipate. While challenging at times, some individuals described how participating in the digital diaries helped them develop their communication and time management skills. In the findings to follow, we explore these key features of students' experiences as participants in the digital diary's component of the PASS Project. Each section of our findings represents a theme we identified through our analysis, and we used pseudonyms for participants to reduce the potential for deductive disclosure.

Digital Diaries as Safe and Cathartic Space

Participants regularly described the digital diaries as space for them to reflect upon and to share their experiences, space that they were not afforded otherwise. While participants were encouraged to speak freely in their video diaries, they highlighted their interviews with the PASS research team as being particularly valuable. Given the longitudinal nature of the project, many participants were able to co-construct interview space with their researcher that they described as safe. Destiny, a Black woman, shared her experience building a supportive and affirming relationship with her interviewer, who is a White man:

I have never talked so much in my life [researcher name]. ... even with talking to you through a camera you made me feel so capable of, like being who I am, and not being afraid of explaining how I feel about certain issues, and talk about things without being defensive, or having to have my guard up and like defend my stance or defend myself. I think that was something I definitely appreciated because I don't get that from too many people. And I do appreciate that, and I thank you so much for it.

Destiny's interactions with this interviewer led her to feel like she could be herself and that she could share her experiences and viewpoints without being judged. Ultimately, this led her to be more at ease with her White interviewer than she was with most other White people. Destiny said she could "feel myself always changing who I am when I speak to [my White roommate]" but was "more capable of showcasing who I am without having to change myself" with her interviewer given the relationship they established over three years.

When participants established safe and trusting relationships with members of the research team, they were able to engage in honest reflection that some described as "therapeutic" and "cleansing," a practice that some wanted to continue beyond their participation in the study. For example, Kyle, a White man said:

I really like our meetings. ... This is actually weirdly therapeutic for me 'cause you guys just like – we sit – I don't talk about any of this stuff. I think I've told you before. No one asks me about this stuff. I don't tell anyone what's going on with my life. I kinda – my work – knows what I do there and [my internship] knows what I do there, and my family knows what I do with them, and my teachers know what I do with them, but none of those people are connected and I don't tell any of them about the other ones.

Participating in the digital diaries gave Kyle an opportunity to talk about his life in a holistic rather than compartmentalized way, which he characterized as "weirdly therapeutic." The time and space he was given on a regular basis to reflect and to talk about himself in a holistic way was valuable. Alexandra, a Latina woman, also found value in sharing her thoughts and feelings with her interviewer over the course of time:

I feel like, not all the times that I've talked to you, but some of the times I kind of just – I don't want to say rant – but it's good to talk to someone about your stress and what you're feeling during college. And sometimes it helps if you do it with someone that you don't know. So, I think that's been good. I think I enjoy doing that.

For Alexandra, the digital diary interviews provided space to decompress and to share her stress in an unfiltered way. In particular, she found value in sharing her thoughts with someone that she didn't know in the same way she did her family or friends. The idea of the researcher being at arm's length created a form of safe space where Alexandra could speak honestly.

When participants engaged in honest and supported ongoing reflection with members of the research team, they co-created space to be vulnerable. As Melanie, a White woman said, "I'm supposed to be honest with you guys, and so I was able to be more honest with myself, because a lot of times, you're going through a day and you're like, 'I'm fine. Everything is fine. The world is fine.'" In effect, establishing a relationship and working to cultivate a sense of safety helped participants be honest with the research team and with themselves. For Melanie that meant acknowledging her feelings and articulating that sometimes everything was not fine. The opportunity to pause and to engage in honest, sustained reflection with her interviewer allowed Melanie to explore her emotions in ways that were difficult when she was "going through a day."

Reflection Supported Increased Self-Awareness and Direction

Digital diary participants regularly described the value of engaging in reflection over the course of college. For example, Alex a Multiracial trans* woman described how the digital diary project created opportunities to pause and to think that were difficult to carve out otherwise:

I really enjoyed having time to be a little bit more reflective. I think that's hard for me. I don't have a lot of time to sit down and think, and process through the stuff that I'm going through, or what I'm thinking and feeling. So, just having that time to just sort of think about how this semester is going, and having to think about what were the things I'm grateful for? What were some things that were challenging? Or what were the highs, what were the lows of different points of the semester? I think for me, that was helpful in being able to understand where I was at...

Bayleigh, a White woman shared similar sentiments, noting that the project was "an awesome opportunity for me to set aside time in my life to reflect because I wouldn't have done that otherwise." Having dedicated time to reflect on a regular basis was beneficial in and of itself, but participants consistently noted that engaging in this reflection with the same member of the research team was particularly helpful.

After engaging in sustained reflection for three years with a researcher, many participants said the digital diary videos and interviews helped them become more self-aware since they had the opportunity to regularly think about themselves, their experiences, and how they had changed over time. In his final interview, Gabriel, a Latino man, described his increased understanding of what he needed to do to succeed as a student:

I think that's probably the biggest thing that I got from this whole project, the reflection part of it, looking back at okay, this worked with my studies, so I should keep doing that. These resources helped, so I should keep going to those resources. This didn't work, so I should stop doing it. So, I think the reflection, the analyzing what helped me succeed and what didn't, I think that was probably the biggest thing that I got from this project.

Engaging in regular reflection created opportunities for participants like Gabriel, and others who may otherwise not have the time or be prompted to do so, to consider how different aspects of their college experience influenced their development and pathways through college. In doing so, they learned more about themselves, their needs, and what contributed to their college success.

While students may have had the desire to reflect, explicit time and opportunity to make sense of their experiences through the PASS Project created a unique chance to engage in this practice which supported their learning. For example, Harper, a White woman, said that participating in the digital diaries helped her understand and negotiate the pressure she was putting on herself:

I really didn't realize how much I was overworking myself and the standards that I was setting myself to. And going through these years and like talking about everything I've been able to again reflect and see that what I was doing there, I was working my hardest and I was doing everything to the best of my ability, and maybe I was overworking myself a little bit.

Over the course of the project, Harper realized she created unrealistic expectations for herself to the detriment of her well-being. In response, she started to grant herself more grace and tried to create more humane expectations of success. Houa, an Asian American woman, also gained clarity during the digital diary project: "I'm learning about ... what I truly have passion for because ... for years I've just been doing what my parents wanted ... I just haven't had time to think about ... who I am, what I like to do." For Houa, the digital diary project was an opportunity to reflect on her identity and to negotiate the tensions of parental expectations.

As participants learned more about themselves, some developed long-term goals and accountability systems as a means of being more intentional about their academics, involvements, career-planning, and participation in the TSLC. Kyle described the plans he created for himself and the role the digital diaries interview played in supporting them:

These interviews are definitely a part of what re-focus me. So, a lot of times, after these interviews, because I've just reflected on everything... I sit down and map out my goals in the next couple of years... it kinda gives me a chance to step back and say, "All right. What am I doing right to accomplish these things? And what stuff could I cut out because it's not really going towards what I wanna do?"

Even though participants were not asked to create "action plans" as part of the project, several students expressed a sense of accountability to the researcher to follow-up on their plans. Others, like Joseph, a White man, considered how he might incorporate reflection into his future work as a teacher given the benefits he had experienced over the course of the project.

Material Evidence of Growth and Development

Participants regularly described the videos that they submitted as part of the digital diary project as "evidence" of their progress and development over time. Several participants saved the videos they created for the research project and would watch them at later points without being prompted to do so. Reviewing these videos highlighted to participants how much they had physically, mentally, and emotionally changed over the course of the project. Melanie, a White woman discussed rewatching her video entries:

I went back last summer and watched all of them, and in college, it goes so fast... So being able to go back and watch all those videos and see just how much my voice has changed, just how much my posture and countenance have changed, even the way that I dress, the way that I grew up – I got to go back and watch myself grow up in college, and I don't think very many kids have that opportunity... I get to see what I was worried about in the beginning and what I'm worried about now, and what I loved then and what I love now. And that was – that's really important to me about the digital diary projects. I'm gonna keep going with them. I still record myself on my computer.

The videos not only served their purpose as research data but were also personal artifacts that documented participants' growth and development. As Melanie and several other participants reviewed their videos, they made new meaning of their experiences. Mia, an Asian American woman described how her video diaries provided her with new perspective:

I think it's been a really cool experience to track how I've changed from freshman year until now. ... I think a couple months ago I looked back at a couple of [the videos], and it's just so weird to be able to look back and see what you're experiencing at that time. ... I don't know, just maturing and just my experiences and how I kinda look at everything has changed a lot. And I don't know, it's kinda sad, too, because I don't know, my freshman year was kinda hard, and just seeing how I talked about things I feel like is different. But I think it's cool to see that change, and how it's gotten better over the years.

Reviewing her videos highlighted to Mia how much her perspective had changed over time. Although the videos reminded her of past struggles she had negotiated, they also demonstrated to her how much she had overcome. Mia's digital diary videos confirmed for her that her experiences and perspective had shifted, and indeed things had "gotten better."

In addition to serving as evidence of development, some participants described how making the videos contributed to their personal growth. Several participants like Isabela, a Latina woman, initially found the videos to be awkward because "I'm just kind of talking to a screen." However, making videos and speaking with their researcher helped some participants cultivate their communication skills over time. Stephanie, a Black woman, described her increased confidence communicating with others at the conclusion of the project:

I feel like I'm not as shy anymore. I think I kind of even move towards my fears a lot more. ... I still struggle with speech, but that's working out. ... I mean, it's slowly improving, but just explaining myself verbally, that's one of my biggest struggles. But I think I – yeah. I face my fears a lot more.

While the process sharing her thoughts herself verbally was initially a challenge, Stephanie felt more comfortable and confident doing so with repeated opportunities to practice during the digital diary project. Addressing this fear also led her to feel more capable of responding to other things she was worried or anxious about doing. Samantha, a White woman, also described feeling increasingly confident sharing her experiences over the course of time:

I think looking back, I'm a lot more confident in myself now. I think – I remember at the beginning being like "Oh, what if I say this and they don't like it, or what if I say this and [researcher] thinks it's dumb Now I'm like, "Well, if [researcher] thinks that's dumb, that's fine, because it's my life, and she's

only here to document it.” Just being confident in myself ... It’s kinda cool ... to see what young Samantha thought.

Initially, Samantha was concerned her interviewer would judge her based on her videos, but over the course of the digital diaries, and as she continued to develop a trusting relationship worried less about how she’d be perceived by her interviewer. Her videos were not only evidence of her collegiate journey, but how her confidence had shifted over time. She became more comfortable sharing and claiming her experiences as her own and was less concerned about external judgment.

Some participants also described how the structure of the digital diaries project enhanced their time management skills and sense of responsibility. For example, Charles, a Latinx man, described struggling with time management initially: “I was really bad about that freshman and sophomore year. Just kind of anti-management.” But he recognized he needed to improve his time management and said he made “sure that you have time to do it [the videos].” Jackie, a Multiracial woman, also said it was hard to keep up with the videos but the project “reinforced that I do have responsibilities and I need to maintain them because other people were counting on me to make sure I was doing those things for [the] research.” Although the digital diaries were not explicitly designed to enhance students’ communication and time management skills or to foster personal accountability, submitting regular video diaries and keeping commitments to meet with members of the research team supported developing these skills for some students.

Participation as Paying it Forward

Finally, participation in the digital diaries provided students with the opportunity and evidence that they were giving back to the TSLC we were studying. Bella, a Latina woman said:

I feel like this is more than just, “Oh, we’re gonna get a gift card.” It’s important because [the TSLC] means so much to us, and we want to make it better and hopefully for the next generation, it’s just gonna be an amazing thing that people incorporate in other universities and things like that.”

Much like Bella, Emma, a White woman, appreciated what the TSLC had done for her and saw the potential to impact on other students through her contributions to the project:

I think I took away... This affirms the fact that [the TSLC] is a strong reason why I’m so successful. It affirms all of the time and energy that I put back into [the TSLC] as a mentor. That is worth it because it’s now going to be helping other students, too. ... it makes me feel more tied into [the TSLC] because I’m doing something that’s gonna benefit not only our learning community, but hopefully a lot of other campuses all over the country one day.

While some students were initially drawn to the compensation associated with participating in the digital diaries, many of them left with increased self-awareness and in some cases improved skills. Furthermore, many digital diary participants saw themselves as giving back to the TSLC and contributing knowledge that could be used to better support low-income students on campus and across the U.S.

Discussion

While institutions and guidelines from Institutional Review Boards provide standards and regulations that protect participants from any harmful consequences of participating in a study, they rarely articulate what constitutes benefits to participants. Accordingly, our study sought to understand how low-income college students described their experiences and takeaways from participating in longitudinal qualitative research. Consistent with prior literature, our findings suggest that participating in reflective activities across sustained interactions with a researcher can have positive and potentially developmental contributions to those who participate (Lloyd et al., 2017; Thomson & Holland, 2003). Our data support that students can benefit from engaging in reflection through research that allows them to make meaning of their experiences since they may otherwise not have an opportunity to practice it in their daily lives (Baxter Magolda & King, 2007; Hiller & DiLuzio, 2004; Hutchinson et al., 1994; Monrouxe, 2009). The longitudinal nature of our study had an added benefit of providing opportunities to engage in supported sustained reflection with members of the PASS research team.

Furthermore, we found that when participants in our study were able to co-create safe and affirmative spaces, this allowed them to share deep and honest reflections about their lives, goals, and development (Mizock et al., 2011; Rossetto, 2014; Wolgemuth et al., 2015). These spaces are not automatically created simply through repeated engagement with longitudinal researchers (Felsher et al., 2018; McClelland, 2017). Rather, trusting relationships such as the ones described by some of our participants were cultivated when members of the research team demonstrated care, openness, and active listening skills (Derrington, 2019; Felsher et al., 2018; Rossetto, 2014). PASS researchers also did their best to be responsive to participants' needs (Kavanaugh & Ayers, 1998) through flexible scheduling and ceasing video submissions as students' academic loads increased during their third year of college. When participants felt safe and cared for, they were able to be honest and vulnerable with PASS researchers and with themselves about their collegiate experiences. Notably, many participants indicated that creating video diaries and meeting with a researcher on a regular basis was therapeutic or cathartic for them (Hutchinson et al., 1994; Rossetto, 2014; Wolgemuth et al., 2015) and some sought similar opportunities for reflection outside of the research project given its benefits.

Our findings also highlighted that longitudinal qualitative research could create opportunities for individuals to cultivate self-awareness and a sense of direction (Hutchinson et al., 1994; Rossetto, 2014). Given the structure of the digital diaries, participants had the opportunity to learn more about themselves, their experiences, and their future personal, academic and career goals as they engaged in sustained and supported reflection as they made videos and participated in interviews. Enhancing students' self-awareness was not an intended outcome of the digital diaries, yet participants regularly noted that this was one of the greatest benefits to them. That being said, longitudinal qualitative studies can be developmental interventions that intentionally create opportunities for participants to engage in and to document self-exploration and reflection upon future goals that may help them increase self-awareness and their abilities to plan, track progress, and devise accountability structures.

Although we did not ask our participants to review their video diaries as part of the study, many people watched them at later points and noted that these research materials served as evidence of their growth and development over time. While Whiting et al. (2018) noted the potential benefits of allowing participants to retain video diaries, our study highlighted this as a direct benefit to students. Making videos and participating in interviews also contributed to some participants' personal growth as they developed better communication skills and improved their time management. This was not an intended outcome of the PASS project but was beneficial to participants, nonetheless. Thus, our findings highlight that longitudinal

qualitative research may also help participants develop tangible skills in addition to fostering increased self-awareness.

As we noted earlier, developing trusting and supportive relationships with participants was vital to sustaining the project and supporting students' learning and development (Derrington, 2019; Kavanaugh & Ayres, 1998; Kerstetter, 2012; Lloyd et al., 2017). While socially constructed identities were not frequently mentioned by students, we are cognizant that our positionalities as researchers may have influenced participant relationships and reflections given the context of each campus (Archer, 2002; Kerstetter, 2012; Mellor et al., 2014). The digital diary project had a predominantly White participant pool and five researchers who identified as Women of Color out of the eight members of the PASS team who conducted interviews. This dynamic resulted in many White students building relationships across race and gender with researchers in a safe, judgement-free space that they might not have otherwise experienced. Conversely, racially minoritized participants accessed relationships and support from researchers whose identities were minimally represented within the region and campus context. Our presence may have filled a gap for students who did not always connect with peers, staff members, and instructors who did not share their socially constructed identities. And for racially minoritized students like Destiny who met with a White researcher, there was the opportunity to cultivate a supportive relationship rather than to be an object of study (Archer, 2002). Furthermore, our roles as community outsiders or people at an arm's length, who established trust may have played a role in what students shared about their college experiences, whether it be related to racial dynamics, political climate, or community building on campus (Kerstetter, 2012). For participants such as Alexandra, our outsider identities created uniquely safe space to share thoughts and feeling that may not have been palatable in other settings. In effect, the research team was close enough to participants and the TSLC context to understand students' experiences and far enough way to be buffer.

Given our findings, longitudinal researchers should consider designing studies that allow for supported reflection over time since there are multiple benefits for participants. As appropriate for their study topic and aims, scholars should consider asking participants about how their identities, goals, relationships, etc. have changed over time since continuously reexamining these topics may foster the increased self-awareness and desire to track and achieve goals we observed among our participants. Additionally, intentionally asking students what they are learning or taking away from participating in educational research on an ongoing basis could be an opportunity to adjust prompts and interview questions to better meet participants' developmental and personal needs. As noted in our findings, students may have limited opportunities to engage in sustained and supported reflection and adjusting how a study is conducted may reap greater rewards for both participants and researchers.

Yet, to engage in the kinds of sustained relationships we highlighted as beneficial, researchers need opportunities to develop the knowledge and skills that support their capacities to co-create affirming space with participants. To hone their skills, researchers need adequate training where they can practice interviewing people, responding to difficult situations (e.g., participant in distress), and adjusting to best meet participants' needs. During such trainings, researchers can get feedback about how to improve their skills before they engage with participants and potentially cause harm. Longitudinal qualitative researchers should consider getting feedback from participants about the project so that they can make shifts as needed to support participants while concurrently advancing inquiry. Throughout the longitudinal research process, scholars should engage reflexive work (e.g., journaling, peer debrief) related to the research process. Regularly engaging in reflection alone and with others can help researchers identify areas of strength and potential growth when working with participants. Perhaps more importantly, reflection can help researchers identify what they should continue

and what they should change when trying to cultivate sustained, affirming relationships with participants.

Concurrently, longitudinal qualitative researchers should develop strategies and supports for managing the emotional labor of creating and sustain relationships with participants. For example, peer debriefing or reflexive journaling may be helpful as researchers make sense of their own experiences during the data collection process. These outlets may also help researchers identify when they need to set boundaries for their benefit and for participants' benefit. Much like participants (Derrington, 2019), longitudinal researchers may also feel a sense of loss at the end of a study. Developing strategies for bringing closure to relationships with participants and a longitudinal study can help researchers successfully transition out of one phase of their work and into another.

Since many participants enjoyed having "evidence" in video form that documented their growth and development over the course of our longitudinal study, researchers could consider ways that participants can retain research materials that can be valuable or personal to them such as similar videos, reflective writing entries, drawings, photos, interview transcripts, among others. These research materials can be a form of material evidence of growth and development, and they may help participants continue to make meaning of their experiences. As researchers recruit participants, they should provide information about the research materials that participants can retain or will be provided and their potential benefits. Researchers can also consider how they might support participants who revisit study materials that may be difficult for them to read, watch, and/or listen to base on their content (Derrington, 2019; Edwards et al., 2017; Kavanaugh & Ayres, 1998). Although our participants framed revisiting their videos as being a generally positive experience, the content of study materials may also be painful or traumatic for some individuals to review depending on the focus of research and the experiences shared. As such, researchers should be cognizant of the potential benefits and harm that may occur when sharing or revisiting study materials with participants.

In sum, our research highlights the potential benefits to low-income college students who participate in longitudinal qualitative research studies. While the PASS research team demonstrated reciprocity through compensating individuals for the contributions, they also co-created space for honest, ongoing reflection that was not afforded to participants in other parts of their lives. Participants consistently highlighted the benefits of sustained and supported reflection, which educators can build into their research and practice to the benefit of students' learning and development. Thus, longitudinal qualitative research is a rigorous way to study students' journeys and development during college, and it has strong potential to enhance individuals' self-awareness while helping them cultivate tangible skills (e.g., time management, communication).

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