



## **Thinking with Stories**

# **A Renewed Call for Narrative Inquiry as a Social Work Epistemology and Methodology**

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### Article abstract

As a relational epistemology and research methodology, narrative inquiry is one way that people come to know experience through story. Social workers are experienced in working with people's stories, yet there is a dearth of literature where both social work and narrative inquiry are discussed alongside each other. This paper highlights the particular ways that a researcher commits to living and understanding a narrative view of experience as they engage in research that is relational. It explains some of the language that narrative inquirers use to describe their work, and uses examples from a social work doctoral dissertation to demonstrate the methodological touchstones of a social work narrative inquiry. It concludes with an invitation for social workers to consider narrative inquiry as a process that can guide and advance both clinical practice and social justice work.

# THINKING WITH STORIES

## A Renewed Call for Narrative Inquiry as a Social Work Epistemology and Methodology

*Jessica Shaw*

**Abstract:** As a relational epistemology and research methodology, narrative inquiry is one way that people come to know experience through story. Social workers are experienced in working with people's stories, yet there is a dearth of literature where both social work and narrative inquiry are discussed alongside each other. This paper highlights the particular ways that a researcher commits to living and understanding a narrative view of experience as they engage in research that is relational. It explains some of the language that narrative inquirers use to describe their work, and uses examples from a social work doctoral dissertation to demonstrate the methodological touchstones of a social work narrative inquiry. It concludes with an invitation for social workers to consider narrative inquiry as a process that can guide and advance both clinical practice and social justice work.

**Keywords:** Abortion, storytelling, intersubjectivity, narrative, social justice, reflexivity

**Abrégé :** En tant qu'épistémologie relationnelle et méthodologie de recherche, l'enquête narrative est une façon pour les gens d'apprendre à connaître l'expérience par l'histoire. Les travailleurs sociaux ont l'habitude de travailler avec les récits des gens, mais il y a toutefois une pénurie de documentation où le travail social et la recherche narrative sont discutés en parallèle. Le présent document met en lumière les façons particulières dont un chercheur s'engage à vivre et à comprendre une

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vision narrative de l'expérience lorsqu'il entreprend une recherche relationnelle. Il explique certains des termes utilisés par les chercheurs narratifs pour décrire leur travail et utilise des exemples tirés d'une thèse de doctorat en travail social pour illustrer les pierres de touche méthodologiques d'une enquête narrative en travail social. Il se termine par une invitation aux travailleurs sociaux à repenser l'enquête narrative comme un processus pouvant guider et faire progresser le travail clinique et la justice sociale.

**Mots-clés :** Avortement, récit, intersubjectivité, narration, justice sociale, réflexivité

*EXPERIENCES—TOLD THROUGH STORY—* are central to how I think about my practice as a social worker. I believe that social workers have a vested interest in hearing, understanding, and working with people's stories. Stories link people to each other and help us to create either relationships, or social distance (Bury, 2001). Stories reveal connections between individual narratives and deeper cultural levels of meaning (Bury, 2001), and can guide and foster individual, social, and political relationships. Sharing stories is important so that the diverse and multifaceted experiences of people are not lost over time. Though stories themselves may be "unique and local," storytelling "is a universal human activity, found in all cultures" (Kvernbekk & Frimannsson, 2013, p. 571).

Often the first question that a clinical social worker will ask a new service user is, "Why don't you tell me what brought you in today?", which is an invitation for them to "tell me your story." Social work practitioners offer narrative therapy, and social work academics engage in storytelling when teaching classes and when writing about people's experiences. The social work literature that shapes a particular research landscape is another context in which stories emerge as influential in thinking, identity composition, and experience. Professionals, like social workers, compose themselves in relation to the professional literature, living, telling, reliving, and retelling stories of practice and self on this changing narrative landscape.

Especially because of all of the work that social workers do with stories, I find it curious that narrative inquiry is not more commonly used within social work research (Riessman & Quinney, 2005). In 2011, Staller wrote a book review in *Qualitative Social Work* where she wondered, "why shouldn't social work uniquely capitalize on [narrative inquiry as a research methodology] when it is so closely allied with our professional practices (p. 537)?" She concluded with the observation that,

There is enormous power in the 'single story' that can connect hearts and minds across geographic, political, economic, and cultural divides. Combining what we know from practice and what we can learn through

narrative inquiry might offer a very powerful weapon in promoting both our professional practice and our social justice agendas (Staller, 2011, p. 539).

Yet since that time, there has been little development in the literature about the close fit of narrative inquiry with social work, and few published narrative inquiries have come out of the social work field.

I propose that social work researchers ought to reconsider the reasons why engaging in narrative inquiry can align quite naturally with professional and academic goals. In this paper, I introduce the key touchstones of a narrative inquiry by using examples from my social work doctoral dissertation. In doing so, I also introduce some of the language that is typical within a narrative inquiry, language like “being in the midst” and “living alongside,” that might be unfamiliar to those who are new to the narrative inquiry process. It is my intention to have this paper serve as an introduction to how a social work narrative inquiry might be structured, and as an encouragement to other social workers who might choose to engage with narrative inquiry as they inquire into people’s experiences.

There are many different ways of thinking about what constitutes narrative research, and of how stories are understood and taken up in different fields and by different individuals (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998; Riessman, 2008; Willis, 2007). Occasionally when I am working with students or other qualitative researchers, the term “narrative inquiry” is used as a synonym for narrative research or for qualitative research more generally. However, narrative inquiry, as I conceptualize and actualize it, is a specific form of narrative research that is rooted in story as a relational way of knowing. In this paper, as in my research, when I use the term “narrative inquiry” I do not use it in the general sense of referring to a qualitative inquiry where narratives are analyzed. I refer to the epistemologically and methodologically specific form of narrative inquiry as described by Clandinin and Connelly (2000). They, in turn, credit educational philosopher John Dewey (1916, 1938) as having strongly influenced their work. Dewey was an educational theorist and pragmatist who argued that education (and life) is experiential; that is, the way we live, learn, think, and remember is rooted in experience and how we make sense of experience.

Narrative inquiry, or “the study of experience as story... is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 375). Stories are ubiquitous (Clandinin, 2013), and human beings are surrounded by many stories from childhood (or earlier) to death. Human beings are therefore practiced storytellers who live storied lives on storied landscapes (Sarbin, 1986), and it is through inquiry with these stories that researchers and participants together, can explore what it means to experience in certain contexts, in certain times, and with certain others.

The paradigmatic shift from thinking about stories to engaging with stories is a distinguishing feature of narrative inquiry. For me, as for other researchers and writers before me, storytelling is about more than conveying a substantive message (Abrams, 1991; Basso, 1996; Smith, 1999–2002; Wilson, 2008). Whereas thinking paradigmatically about stories positions stories as data that can be broken down and analyzed, thinking narratively with stories positions stories as a way of being in and engaging in the world (Bruner, 2004). Stories are the basis on which people create communities and societies, and are therefore valid organizing principles that require our attention (Sarbin, 1986; Freeman, 1994). Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) explain:

Human beings have lived out and told stories about that living for as long as we could talk. And then we have talked about the stories we tell for almost as long. These lived and told stories and the talk about the stories are one of the ways that we fill our world with meaning and enlist on another's assistance in building lives and communities. (p. 35)

In a narrative inquiry, story is both the phenomenon under investigation and the method of research (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007), and relationships comprise the context, process, and focus of storytelling (Clandinin, 2007). When we think, live, and research with stories, “we distinguish our commitments from research practices that use stories as data; view narrative and story as representational form, as content analysis, as structure; or treat stories as the phenomena under study” (Caine, Estefan, & Clandinin, 2013, p. 575). It is because narrative inquiry proceeds from an ontological position of stories as relational experiences that narrative inquirers must embrace relational epistemologies and methodologies (Caine, Estefan, & Clandinin, 2013).

In narrative inquiry, there are particular ways that a researcher commits to living and understanding a narrative view of experience as they engage in research that is relational. Narrative inquirers demonstrate the integrity of their research by including autobiographical information (narrative beginnings) that situates them within the research, and by constantly reviewing, reconsidering, and attending to the key touchstones of narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2013). These touchstones are also used to measure the rigour of an inquiry. As an end result, a narrative inquirer seeks to produce a final research text that is open to the subjective understanding of the reader, but is also as closely aligned with the participants' subjective understanding of themselves as possible.

In the following sections of this paper, I introduce the touchstones of narrative inquiry, and explain how I attended to them as I engaged in research alongside Canadian abortion providers. For further information on this particular form of narrative inquiry, I would direct you to the following texts: *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*

(Clandinin and Connelly, 2000); *Handbook of narrative inquiry: Mapping a methodology* (Clandinin, 2007); *Engaging in narrative inquiry* (Clandinin, 2013). Whereas there are many quality studies that would help orient someone with a new interest in narrative inquiry, the Clandinin and Connelly texts form the basis on which the other narrative inquiries in this style were built.

### Touchstones of Narrative Inquiry

My research, *Physicians with conscience: A narrative inquiry with Canadian abortion providers* (Shaw, 2015), took place between January 2013 and January 2015, after having received ethics approval from the Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board at the University of Calgary. I came to the research after having worked in the abortion rights field for nearly a decade, and after having completed other research that looked at abortion accessibility from the perspective of people who sought abortion care (Shaw, 2006). While the literature on abortion in Canada addressed some of the technical, legal, professional, and social aspects of abortion care, it did not tell me much about who abortion providers are, or how they shape, and are shaped, by abortion stories.

One of the main wonders that brought me to this research was: what are the experiences of abortion providers in Canada? I knew that narrative inquirers did not proceed into the field with defined questions, but rather with a broad orientation to experience, and with wonders about who people are in the midst of their experiences (Clandinin, 2013). Even though I knew some abortion providers, I wondered: Who are the people who perform abortions in Canada? I wondered about their actual experiences, and about how they are shaped in the context of the practices and policies that I had read about. I wondered about why they do the work that they do. I knew that my experiences were shaped by how I storied myself in different contexts, with different people, and in different situations, and I wondered how physicians might story themselves within and beyond the identity of “abortion provider.” Just as I experience my own intrapersonal and interpersonal tensions as an abortion advocate, I wondered how their experiences affirmed or challenged dominant stories of abortion provision. As I thought about these and other wonders, I turned to narrative inquiry. I recruited and worked with four main research participants, and included stories of experience from another five. Since a narrative inquiry is an in-depth research methodology that requires a sustained research relationship over time, having three to five participants is appropriate in order to be able to engage with each of them fully (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

In the next sections, I explain the methodological approach that I took to this research through the description of the touchstones of narrative inquiry. Clandinin and Caine (2013) describe a touchstone as

a “quality or example that is used to test... excellence or genuineness” (p. 169). There are 12 touchstones that a quality narrative inquiry must meet, and that researchers can use to judge the validity and rigour of the study. They are: recognizing and fulfilling relational responsibilities; being in the midst; having a commitment to understanding lives in motion; negotiating relationships; narrative beginnings; negotiating entry to the field; moving from field to field texts; moving from field texts to interim and final research texts; attending to temporality, sociality, and place; interacting with relational response communities; explaining justifications (personal, practical, and social); and attending to multiple audiences (Clandinin, 2013, p. 212). Narrative inquirers must attend to these touchstones if they are to engage in a narrative inquiry that is sound in its ethical and methodological components (Clandinin, 2013). As I address each of the touchstones in the context of my inquiry alongside abortion providers, I explain the methods of fieldwork that I used while conducting my research, and comment on the relational ways that my research participants and I travelled through this research journey together.

### *Recognizing and Fulfilling Relational Responsibilities*

As a relational research methodology, narrative inquiry requires that the researcher and the research participants develop and maintain a caring, respectful, reciprocal working relationship. With my (Shaw, 2015) research, I spent 18 months invested in the lives of my core research participants, and came to care for them deeply. I believe that when we tell stories of existence and experience, we share a part of ourselves, and while “our intent is to enter the relationships with participants as researchers, participants come to know and see us as people in relation with them” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 51). As I lived alongside my research participants, and as we shared the stories of our lives with each other, relationships developed in ways that were more common to a friendship than they were to the traditional understanding of a researcher-participant relationship. Of this, Clandinin and Connelly (1988) wrote:

In everyday life, the idea of friendship implies a sharing, an interpenetration of two or more persons’ spheres of experience. Mere contact is acquaintanceship, not friendship. The same may be said for collaborative research, which requires a close relationship akin to friendship. Relationships are joined... by the narrative unities of our lives. (p. 281)

While my participants and I did not become friends in the conventional sense, a friendliness between us as we researched alongside each other revealed a narrative joining between us. They shared stories of experience with me, and I in turn shared stories with them.

Within the context of a research relationship it is important for narrative inquirers to negotiate expectations, time constraints, next steps, texts, and outcomes (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Attending to relational responsibilities also involves attending to emotional needs of participants. Some of the ways in which I attended to the emotional needs of my participants included assuring them confidentiality, making arrangements with a counselling service that could be anonymously accessed as needed, and checking-in about their well-being and thoughts about the research. Akin to what Clandinin and Connelly (1988) wrote about the similarity between narrative relationships and friendships, I was also emotionally present with my participants as they experienced various life changes. The beginning of retirement, the death of a family member, the death of a colleague; for these and other important life events, I tried to support my participants in a caring way. I was conscious of maintaining the professional boundaries as set out by my faculty and research ethics board – I could not be both a clinical social worker and a social work researcher with my participants – but I engaged with my participants with care and respect.

I also attended to the relational needs of my participants by embracing their contributions, and honouring their time constraints. Though one of my main participants transitioned into semi-retirement by the time I began writing the final research texts, each was involved in this inquiry as a practicing physician. Their busy schedules meant that sometimes emails took a bit of time to answer, phone calls had to be carefully scheduled, and it was only on rare occasions that I would meet with a participant more than once per month. This was not upsetting nor was it unexpected. I embraced the time we did get to spend together, and appreciated that when we were not in conversation they were practicing medicine, performing abortions, and living more experiences to talk about the next time we met.

Finally, a discussion on the relational responsibilities of the inquiry would not be complete if I did not address the commitments and offerings that were extended to me by my participants. While it is possible that I entered into this inquiry with more of a vested interest in developing a relationship with my participants than they had in me, I certainly felt mutual care and support throughout the narrative process. I entered the inquiry with the desire and methodological obligation to sustain narrative relationships over time. Originally, most of my participants did not know what a narrative inquiry entailed. They assumed that we would be meeting for interviews sporadically over a period of six to 12 months. When I explained narrative inquiry to them, I focused more on my interest in open conversation and collaborative involvement rather than on developing relationships; but relationships developed anyway. As a way of attending to the relational responsibilities that I had to my research participants, I storied myself alongside them in the final texts



of my dissertation. This was a way to demonstrate the intersubjectivity of the writing that we produced; a way of recognizing that by telling their stories, I was also telling a story of myself and how I composed myself as a researcher.

### *Being in the Midst*

When I began my research, I was living stories of my life as a doctoral candidate, a social worker, an abortion advocate, a woman, a partner... (the list could go on). My participants were also living their stories of being mothers, daughters, partners, instructors, writers, yoga enthusiasts... (the list could go on). When we met, we were each "in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling, the stories of the experiences that make up [our] lives, both individual and social" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20).

The experience of life in progress is what narrative inquirers' call "being in the midst" (Clandinin, 2013). A researcher begins an inquiry in the midst, progresses in the midst, and concludes it in the same way. Given that my participants and I continued to live our storied lives beyond the end of the research – that is, the time at which I stopped asking for feedback on the content of my dissertation and submit the final text for defense – it was difficult to think about a narrative inquiry as having an ending. When I contemplated the ambiguity of both living in the midst and ending a narrative inquiry, I was reminded of Caine and Estefan (2011) who discussed how a narrative inquiry can exist and go on, even in the absence of a participant. Lives and stories continue. The coming together of researcher and participant can be understood as an amalgamation of individual and social stories that narrate the way that collective experience is shared. Research may (and must) come to an end, but people and their stories live on (Clandinin, 2013). Narrative inquirers resist the urge to neatly conclude stories of experience, because experience is always in flux, and stories and endings are complex and full of tensions (Caine & Estefan, 2011).

In my research, I attended to being in the midst by writing myself into the stories of abortion providers to show how we existed alongside each other. We each came to the research in the midst of living our own lives. We came together to share stories of experience and we parted ways after each meeting, and after the final submission of my dissertation, still living our own lives. In my final research texts, it was through the writing of narrative accounts, and through the development of narrative threads that I sought to show how lives lived in the midst contribute to understanding experience. I also sought to explore why part of being able to live in the midst is being able to understand that the stories we live and tell are of our lives in motion.

*Having a Commitment to Understanding Lives in Motion*

Stories are always partial (Caine, Estefan, & Clandinin, 2013), and therefore they can never tell a complete story of experience. As we worked together for 18 months, and as my participants and I storied ourselves in relation to abortion, and to each other, our lives beyond the research continued. Over the course of our research relationship, workloads shifted, family and friend compositions changed, and the abortion landscape in Canada changed. Each time we met, my participants and I spent time telling each other what had changed in our lives since we last spoke, what we had been thinking about, and what new thoughts we had. When we met, each retelling of our stories shifted the relational unfolding of our lives, and created the opportunity for new stories to be shared.

Within a narrative inquiry, retelling is not simply understood to be the process of telling a story again (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Rather, it is the reconstruction of a story as informed by new or different insights, thoughts, and experiences. Of retelling stories of lives in motion, Clandinin and Caine (2013) explained that:

There is no final telling, no final story, and no one singular story that we can tell. While this is troubling to researchers who rely on the truth or accuracy and verifiability of data, it is opening the possibility of narrative inquirers to continuously inquire into the social fabric of experience and not lose sight that people are always becoming. (p. 176)

When we began our research relationship, and when we ended it, my research participants and I were each living complex lives. Attending to the continuity of fluctuating experience guided the narrative inquiry, and guided the ways in which we negotiated how and when we worked together.

*Negotiating Relationships*

A researcher's ethical responsibility within a narrative inquiry is to care for their research relationships (Schulz, Schroeder, & Brody, 1997). This ethic of care extends beyond traditional ethical requirements and is built on a "concern and mutual responsiveness to need on both the personal and wider social level" (Held, 2006, p. 28). Rather than strive for impersonal relationships between researcher and participant, narrative inquirers attempt to develop a caring relationship with their participants. In addition to viewing this as more ethical, narrative inquirers also believe that all experiences are understood through relationship (Clandinin, 2007). It is therefore necessary that relationships form the basis of narrative inquiry. If we accept that we enter into narrative relationships in the midst, and we accept that we cannot be objective viewers of

experience, then we can think about how the research we do is research that occurs with participants; research that occurs as we continue to live our lives both separately and together. This narrative way of knowing is what inquirers refer to when talking about living alongside people (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

For the research, I did not literally live alongside my participants; I did not move in with them or follow them around while they went about their daily activities. When I say that I lived alongside my participants, I do so with a narrative understanding of what it means to live alongside each other—that is, how we lived within the narrative inquiry. As we lived alongside each other, we negotiated what our research relationship would look like. One of my research participants, for example, was partial to meeting on Skype, while others preferred to meet via the phone. I was able to meet with one participant in person, and because her time commitments were fewer, our meetings were more flexible in regards to start and end times.

How we met, where we met, and what we talked about, was negotiated with each participant. Beginning with securing informed consent, I tried to attend to the needs of each of my participants by asking questions about their availability (“When would be a good time for us to meet? Would you like me to call you, or is it easier for you to call me when you are ready?”). We also negotiated what to talk about, and what could be included (and what must be excluded) in the final research texts. For some, talking about their children was important to our conversations. For others, our conversations focused more heavily on professional experiences. These negotiations of time, place, and topic of conversation were not formal. We did not sit down together and bargain for what each of us wanted. Our negotiations were more subtle, and were facilitated by me by checking-in with how they were feeling about our conversations as we progressed.

### *Narrative Beginnings*

Narrative beginnings are autobiographical accounts of the “personal, social, and political contexts that have shaped our understandings” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 55), and are an important component of final research texts. These reflective narratives situate the researcher in relation to the topic, the participants, and the literature, and are revisited throughout the inquiry (Clandinin & Caine, 2013). Revisiting narrative beginnings is important, because as a researcher engages in narrative inquiry, perceptions and understandings shift. Autobiographical reflections on the self in relation to an inquiry can be detailed, lengthy, and deeply personal, but their inclusion is important. Though decisions have to be made about what to include and what to exclude from the reflections that are shared in final research texts (it is not a requirement, nor is it possible that every personal reflection is shared), narrative

beginnings do require the inquirer to engage with the reader with some level of intimacy.

Clandinin (2013) explained, “readers often understand an inquiry in more depth when they are able to see the researcher’s personal justification in the research texts” (p. 36). Narrative beginnings outline the positionality and subjectivities of the researcher, and by contextualizing the chapters and sections that follow, narrative beginnings invite the reader to better understand how the inquirer relates to the topic and to the research participants. In addition to relating readers and inquirers to each other, narrative beginnings also facilitate the reader being able to make judgements about how an inquiry relates to their own understanding of the world, and whether the research is valid. Validity refers to “various measures that aim to guarantee the ‘truth-fullness’ of research,” and in relation to qualitative research, validity evaluates how “accurately or truthfully research makes sense of the historical and social reality” (Saukko, 2008, p. 458). When a reader is able to consider how an inquirer’s understanding of the world either does or does not align with their own, they are also able to make personal judgements about the validity of the inquiry.

In relation to my research, I asked myself: who am I in this narrative inquiry with physicians who provide abortion care? Who am I as a woman who wants to study experiences with and around abortion? Who am I as a social justice worker? Who am I as an academic researcher? These questions helped me to write my narrative beginning to the research, to understand who I was in relation to those that I lived alongside, and to those for whom I wrote the dissertation.

### *Negotiating Entry to the Field*

It is important to understand the meaning of “field” within a narrative inquiry. The field where research takes place need not be a specific physical location; the term field refers to where experience takes place (Clandinin & Huber, 2010). Sometimes this will be in reference to a place with specific topographical features, but it does not have to be. Using a narrative understanding of experience, experiences take place within stories, and thus the field can also be a conceptual place where researcher and participant meet and engage. As explained by Clandinin and Huber (2010), “the field can be the ongoing conversations with participants where they tell their stories or the living alongside participants in a particular place or places. Being in the field, then, involves settling into the temporal unfolding of lives” (p. 438). For my research, I worked out with each participant what their preferences were for meeting and engaging with me. In my final research texts, I wrote about some of the tensions that I experienced as I negotiated entry into the field with my participants.

*Moving from Field to Field Texts*

Field texts refer to co-compositions between researchers and participants as they inquire alongside each other into experience (Clandinin & Caine, 2013). The term “field texts” is used by narrative inquirers to differentiate the intersubjective texts that come out of narrative inquiries from the research texts that are meant to be more objective and are called “data” in other methodologies (Clandinin & Caine, 2013).

For my research, I audio-recorded most of the conversations that I had with my research participants. Beyond audio recordings, I used the following types of field texts: field notes, voice memos, transcriptions of conversations and research interviews, letters, emails, documents, newspaper clippings, and diarised journal entries. Each of these field texts are described by Clandinin and Connelly (2000) as important for interpreting field experiences. While I initially did not imagine that I would have used such a range of field texts, each became naturally imbedded into the process of my inquiry. For instance, early on, as I was getting to know my participants, one suggested I read a document that explained the organization of her clinic, another expressed her desire to share transcriptions of voice notes she had made to herself over her years as an abortion provider, another was excited to share research articles she had written with me, and still one more preferred to converse via email. I embraced each of these modes of communication, and accepted them as field texts that would help me to more fully understand the different dimensions of the participants’ experiences.

As I moved from the field to creating field texts, I transcribed the recorded conversations I had with my participants, used the transcriptions to guide my reflections about our conversations, and used both the transcriptions and my reflections to ask my participants to reflect on their own words. They were involved in every stage of the research from initial contact through to the final research texts, and provided feedback and additional reflections on the texts we composed together. I also kept a research journal, which became one of the most useful field texts I used. Whereas my transcriptions were verbatim records of the conversations that my research participants and I had, my research journal was where I could reflect on what I was thinking and feeling during our meetings. The subjective reflections that I wrote in my research journal helped me to provide context to the transcriptions when I read them later. As I incorporated transcriptions, emails, shared articles, and voice notes with my research journal reflections, I shifted towards developing interim texts, which ultimately became the final research text that was my dissertation.

*Moving from Field Texts to Interim and Final Research Texts*

Within a narrative inquiry, interim research texts are composed as field texts are reviewed and reconsidered by the researcher and participants

(Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Interim research texts are narrative accounts of experiences from the field (Clandinin, 2013). Field texts reflect the experiential accounts of living alongside participants, and interim texts are the researcher's attempt to make sense of the field texts as they relate to the research puzzle. Interim texts are typically shared with participants, and are used to further the researcher-participant relational way of knowing. That is, interim texts are a way of engaging in retelling and reliving experiences through the continued involvement of participants in the co-construction of their stories (Clandinin, 2013). Final research texts may be traditional academic reports such as dissertations, journal articles, and books, and they may also be created for non-academic audiences in the form of poetry, theatre scripts, websites, and other forms of public texts (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Caine, 2013).

For my research, I shared transcriptions, interpretations, and reflective comments with my participants, and invited their involvement in making sense of what I had written. Sometimes they would respond with a quick note of approval, other times we would re-engage in deep conversation. For instance, when I sent one participant her narrative account to review and comment on, she wrote back to me and said, "Well that was an interesting experience—reading what you have written. It reminded me of watching myself in a video compared to seeing myself in a mirror. A completely different media/experience." We arranged to speak on Skype about her narrative account, and were able to talk about how she was used to being the one "in power," and how it was unusual for her to receive any sort of feedback about the things she says. We spoke for over an hour, and were able to add new insights to her account. After some back and forth of me sharing interim texts with my participants, they all affirmed their trust in me caring for their stories through to the final research text, and I started sending them fewer documents and asked for less feedback. In order to ensure they knew their collaboration was always welcome, I maintained our relationships through email and casual meetings. Though the time we spent together lessened, my commitment to caring for their stories did not.

Along with the academic references, stories, and reflections that I included in my dissertation, I also included what Richardson (2002) and Butler-Kisber (2002) refer to as "found poetry." Found poetry is the creative pulling together of words and phrases from field notes and research texts. Because found poetry uses the words of participants and is pulled together by the writer, it is reflective of the co-construction process that is so important to narrative inquiry. It can portray aspects of a person's story in an evocative way, while still maintaining accountability to the representation of people through their own words (Butler-Kisber, 2002). Perhaps this is why found poetry is becoming more common to see in narrative inquiries (Clandinin, 2013). By using people's words to represent them through poetry, researchers add another layer of

interpretation, and another layer of aesthetic form that compels the reader into “a world that is recognizable enough to be credible, but ambiguous enough to allow new insights and meanings to emerge” (Butler-Kisber, 2002, para. 8).

*Attending to Temporality, Sociality, and Place*

An experience is bound by temporality (it started sometime and ended or will end sometime), sociality (it occurred in relation to other people, or in relation to the self), and by place (an experience happens somewhere) (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). These “commonplaces” form what is known within narrative inquiry as a three-dimensional narrative space (Clandinin, 2013, p. 38), and all of these elements must be attended to at every stage within a narrative inquiry. Part of how I attended to these commonplaces was by looking forwards, backwards, and sideways to the experiences of my research participants as abortion providers.

In the field, the conversations I had with the participants occurred in places – in coffee shops, on Skype, or on the phone while we each sat in our own home or office. I also listened for and noticed how place was attended to in the stories the participants shared. Often, where an experience occurred was integral to the telling of an abortion story, and a participant would frame and tell their story with descriptions of place.

I found that in my research, looking backwards on experience was reflective. When my participants and I looked backwards, to their earlier experiences as abortion providers and as women, they storied themselves with insight that came from having lived through experience. Stories of experience carried our conversations from thinking backwards, to thinking forwards. For instance, as one participant explained what it was like to be a medical student who had an instructor that was anti-abortion, she looked forward to the kind of instructor she tries to be. Looking forwards was speculative and expectant. As we spoke about our futures and contemplated what experiences they might entail, we carried our past and present experiences with us.

Looking sideways is another way of thinking that narrative inquirers attend to (Clandinin, 2013). Looking sideways takes the focus off of the obvious, off of the focal point, and shifts our thinking to attend to experiences that are otherwise beyond our attention. Bateson (1994) described the significance of both focus and peripheral vision, which I understand to include sideways looking:

Concentration is too precious to belittle. I know that if I look very narrowly and hard at anything I am likely to see something new – like life between the grass stems that only becomes visible after moments of staring. Softening that concentration is also important – I’ve heard that the best way to catch the movement of falling stars is at the edge of vision. (pp. 103-104)

Bateson's metaphor resonated with me throughout my research, and helped me to think about sideways looking, and how it was relevant to my narrative inquiry. Within the study, several of my participants spoke about their experiences as mothers. It was in this act of sideways looking – towards their identities and experiences as mothers – that I was able to see aspects of their identities as abortion providers more clearly. For instance, as I heard about what it was like to be the mother of a daughter who had a planned teenage pregnancy, I heard about how abortion providers support all reproductive decisions. Looking sideways also allowed me to attend to what was not being said. I learned to listen to the silence between words, to both sit with the silence, and also to return to it. When I had a conversation with one of my participants about her own abortion, she trailed off as she recalled the difficulties she faced. The silence that filled the space between us spoke to me – and I knew that in silence, there was story. There were stories about legal barriers to abortion, and about her emotional and relational needs. These stories came out later, but they were present in our silence. In the intimacy of shared silence, our conversation and relationship deepened. Looking sideways, beyond the words that were said, allowed me to see that.

#### *Interacting with Relational Response Communities*

Relational response communities are people and places where a narrative inquirer can turn to contemplate and discuss their research. These communities are important and “often consist of people the researcher values and trusts to provide responsive, and responsible, dialogue about his or her unfolding inquiry” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 210). For this research project, my response community consisted of several different people and groups. For example, in 2011, before I had even taken a narrative inquiry course and was just beginning to think about the structure of my doctoral research, I spoke with the Canadian Director of the National Abortion Federation (NAF). We spoke about the Canadian research (or lack thereof) that existed on abortion, and discussed the notable absence of literature on the experiences of physicians who provide abortion services. She supported me in my research venture, and suggested that in the future I do more research on others involved in abortion provision, including partners and family members of physicians, counsellors, and other staff. She offered to distribute my research invitation to Canadian members of the NAF, and invited me to attend upcoming NAF conferences. Near the end of my inquiry, we met again when we were presenting on the same panel at an abortion conference in Prince Edward Island. Though we had not spoken in months, she immediately asked about my research and I was able to tell her about how things were progressing. In turn, she provided me with an update on some of the shifting conversations and legal advancements of abortion in Canada.



My academic advisor spent many hours with me, talking about theory, methodology, and content. He had extensive training and experience with narrative inquiry, and together we attended the Centre for Research for Teacher Education and Development at the University of Alberta so that I could engage in a Research Issues gathering. Research Issues is a “rich inquiry space for researchers to work collaboratively” and was created by Jean Clandinin (a formative figure to the theoretical and methodological development of narrative inquiry) to draw students, professors, research associates, and visiting scholars together (Steeves, 2004, p. 16). In addition to having the opportunity to meet Clandinin, I was able to see how a supportive relational response community works. Though I was only able to attend Research Issues once, this experience reconfirmed my commitment to the importance of relational ways of knowing, and strengthened my appreciation for narrative inquiry.

In addition to my advisor’s support, the rest of my doctoral committee provided feedback to me in the months leading up to my oral defense. I also went to several conferences where I presented my research, and spoke with other social workers and other abortion advocates about my work. From these conversations, I was introduced to new literature, new concepts, and new people who were willing and interested to talk about the work I was doing. Potential future research opportunities also extended from these conversations.

Beyond thinking and talking about narrative inquiry and abortion, I used my response community for self-care and to help me to adhere to a high standard of research ethics. When an issue came up that concerned or confounded me, I was able to turn to my response community for feedback and support. Also, because narrative inquiry is a deeply relational method, I turned to my response community to help me ensure I was navigating the relationships that I had with my research participants in safe and ethical ways. I turned to the community to guide me in how I cared for my participants, and to help me ensure that as my research relationships developed, I did not cross ethical boundaries.

### *Explaining Justifications – Personal, Practical, Social*

It is important to offer personal, practical, and social justifications for engaging in narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Caine, 2013; Clandinin & Huber, 2010). Clandinin and Caine (2013) explain that “our personal justification for this work also often fuels the passion and dedication to our work, and it is an important element in the long-term work each narrative inquiry calls forth” (p. 174). In order to personally justify a narrative inquiry, researchers create autobiographical narrative inquiries – or narrative beginnings – and include parts of them at the beginning of final research texts (Clandinin & Caine, 2013).

Practical justifications emphasize why an inquiry is important. In addition to offering a deeper understanding of experience, Clandinin and Caine (2013) explain that “a part of the practical justification [is for] narrative inquirers [to] consider issues of social justice and equity” (p. 174). Working towards a more socially just society is one of the core values of the Canadian Association of Social Workers (2005) and the National Association of Social Workers (2008), and was one of the practical justifications for my research. I have previously written about why abortion is a social-justice issue, and why social workers have an ethical obligation to advocate for abortion rights (Shaw, 2013), and I used my doctoral research to strengthen this argument (Shaw, 2015).

Social justifications can be thought of in two ways: how an inquiry can impact social policies and social change; and how an inquiry can contribute to new methodological and disciplinary knowledge (Clandinin & Huber, 2010). Sharing stories facilitates the emergence of new perspectives and new ways of understanding. From understanding, social change and the creation of new collective political narratives are possible (Shenhav, 2006). A story becomes political when the experiences relayed in it comment on the world as framed by politics (Shenhav, 2006). Abortion provision is political work because: it continues to be raised as a topic of debate in political settings (in houses of government and in court); because providing abortions allows women to be more politically and socially active (see Shaw, 2013); and because stories of abortion provision comment on the significance of abortion in a politicized society. “The dominant role of narratives in political discourse is... based on the centrality of narrative in the formulation and maintenance of worldviews” (Shenhav, 2006, p. 246). When stories are shared, worldviews change, and when worldviews change, new policies and procedures that reflect these changes are created. The everyday experiences of people shape politics, just as much as their experiences are shaped by politics.

Since narrative inquiry has been largely developed within the field of education, exploring how it fits with other disciplines is important to its further development and use (Clandinin & Caine, 2013). The theoretical contributions of my research included strengthening the link between narrative inquiry and feminist standpoint theory, and justifying the suitability of narrative inquiry for social work research.

### *Attending to Multiple Audiences*

Choosing what to include in final research texts is one of the most subjective aspects of a narrative inquiry, but it is also one of the most important. Final research texts are, as Clandinin and Caine (2013) remind us, “written with public audiences in mind” (p. 167), and what is shared in them is usually just a portion of the stories that were told and retold in the field (Clandinin & Huber, 2010). It is therefore important that

the researcher identify the process through which particular stories were chosen to be presented (Clandinin & Huber, 2010). In my research, I attended primarily to the relational experiences of four main participants, but brought in stories of other participants where I felt their words and experiences helped deepen my understanding of what it was like to be a physician who offers abortion care in Canada. I chose to share stories that I, and the research participants, felt helped to explain their identities and experiences.

### **The Affinity of Narrative Inquiry with Social Work Research**

Clandinin (2013) reminds us that even though “there are now some accepted ways of judging and responding to narrative inquiries... many audiences are still unfamiliar with criteria” (p. 211). It is for this reason that I presented the above twelve touchstones; they help to explain what – and how – narrative inquirers attend to when telling, retelling, living, and reliving storied lives. Before I began the research that I described above, I had already started to think about how social work was a relational storied practice. As I concluded the final chapter of my social work dissertation, I was convinced that social work was both relational and storied, and that there was a strong affinity between social work and narrative inquiry.

Within social work, narrative therapy is a practice perspective that uses story to challenge dominant discourses by re-storying experience (White & Epston, 1990), but thinking with stories is not always framed as a way of being or as a way of knowing. Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) contributions to the narrative inquiry field facilitate the ability of social workers to extend their narrative clinical practice into narrative research. Through the ontological, epistemological, and methodological commitments of narrative inquiry, social workers are able to engage with stories in a way that is more relational and contextual than other forms of qualitative narrative research.

Since narrative inquiries are deeply relational, the ethical commitments of narrative inquirers are especially important. Relational ethics are the ways that narrative inquirers attend to the needs of participants, and care for the researcher-participant relationship. Within the field of social work, practitioners are compelled to adhere to professional guidelines of ethical practice (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2005; National Association of Social Workers, 2008), which I believe primes social workers to engage in research in ethical ways. Like many social workers, narrative inquirers engage with research participants in personal ways that are sustained over time. As a research project progresses and the relationship between researchers and participants strengthens, inquirers are called to deeply consider what it means to live their research in ethical ways (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006).

As a relational practice, it makes sense to me that social workers also engage in relational research. Yet as a method of research, the Clandinin and Connelly (2000) approach to narrative inquiry grew out of, and is still heavily rooted in, the educational fields (Clandinin & Caine, 2013). Given the affinity of narrative inquiry with social work practice and values, I would argue that more social workers ought to familiarize themselves with the theoretical and methodological tenets of narrative inquiry. In 2011, Staller described narrative inquiry as a powerful tool that could deeply influence the practical, political, and research agendas of social workers. Yet since that time, there have been few additions of narrative inquiry to the social work literature.

In this paper, I introduced the touchstones of narrative inquiry, and explained how one piece of social work research was conducted according to them. The introduction was brief, and was not meant to act as a strict methodological guideline for future research. It was meant to demonstrate how social work research that is based in story and rooted in relational experiences can be held within a narrative inquiry. As I conclude the partial sharing of one story of narrative inquiry, I would like to extend a renewed invitation for social workers to consider narrative inquiry as a relational epistemological and methodological process that can guide both clinical and community-based social-justice work.

Research happens concurrently with life, it does not just happen consecutively after experience. As I move forward with my life as a social worker, I will also move forward with my life as a narrative inquirer. For me, the two have become inseparable.

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