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Debbie Rudman
Western University, drudman@uwo.ca

Rebecca Aldrich

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Discerning the social in individual stories of occupation through critical narrative inquiry

Debbie Laliberte Rudman^a & Rebecca Aldrich^b

^a Professor, School of Occupational Therapy and Occupational Science, University of Western Ontario, London, ON, Canada

^b Associate Professor, Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy, Saint Louis University, Saint Louis, Missouri, USA

Contact Debbie Laliberte Rudman drudman@uwo.ca

ABSTRACT

Calls to ‘transcend the individual’ in occupational science have emerged in recognition of the boundaries of individualistic perspectives and the drive to develop a socially responsive science. In this article, we contend that transcending the individual does not equate to neglecting how individuals make sense of and experience occupation; rather, it requires looking at individual constructions of experiences and occupations in critically informed ways that highlight the socio-political influences on those constructions. This discussion article considers how critical narrative inquiry can be taken up as a methodological approach to interpretively link individual ‘stories’ with social ‘stories’ or discourses, enabling further understanding of occupation as a situated and transactional phenomenon. Drawing on data from a study that is attending to transactions of policy, service, and individual perspectives of long-term unemployment, we illustrate how a critical approach to narrative interpretation highlights boundaries, resistance, contradictions, and tensions that provide insights into the situated nature of occupation.

Keywords: Critical qualitative inquiry; Narrative; Neoliberalism; Occupational possibilities

Given its Western origins, it is not surprising that occupational science has celebrated individual perspectives (Hocking, 2012). However, its large body of scholarship on individual experiences and meanings has sustained a limited conceptualization of occupational beings as autonomous, self-directed masters of occupational choices and engagement. Increasingly, scholars have problematized the discipline's overreliance on this individualistic focus (Hocking, 2000) and called for perspectives that more clearly foreground social phenomena (Gerlach, Teachman, Laliberte Rudman, Aldrich, & Huot, 2017).

Based on a reading of John Dewey's philosophical corpus, Dickie, Cutchin, and Humphry (2006) emphasized the need to discard the individual-social dichotomy when thinking about occupation. Scholars whose works helped elucidate their transactional perspective have also critiqued historical conceptualizations that artificially separated people from environments (Aldrich, 2008; Cutchin, 2004), asserting that such conceptualizations obscured how occupations represent relational and provisional situational responses (Aldrich & Laliberte Rudman, 2016; Cutchin, Aldrich, Bailliard, & Coppola, 2008). Since its introduction, a transactional perspective has been used to re-imagine a) independence as interdependence (Kirby, 2015), b) occupational adaptation as a socially mediated process (Nayar & Stanley, 2015) of place integration (Johansson, Cutchin, & Lilja, 2012), and c) occupational participation as more than just an individually motivated performance of *doing* (Aldrich & Heatwole Shank, under review), among other things.

Although transactional perspectives have illustrated how individual experiences and meanings are always and already shaped by social forces (Cutchin & Dickie, 2012), they have inadequately attended to power relations (Cutchin et al., 2008; Laliberte Rudman & Huot, 2013). The growing focus on justice (Durocher, Gibson, & Rappolt, 2014) and inclusion (Whiteford & Hocking, 2012), along with understandings of occupation as a human

right (Hammell, 2008) and political phenomenon (Pollard, Kronenberg, & Sakellariou, 2008), indicates the need to acknowledge social power relations to avoid complicity with oppressive mechanisms (Gerlach, 2015). Some scholars have attended to power relations by employing critical social theories, such as Black feminist thought, post-colonial theories, and Marxist thought, to understand how occupation is shaped within, and contributes to the shaping of, social, cultural, political, and economic contexts (Farias & Laliberte Rudman, 2016). In particular, this scholarship has theorized how power relations differentially shape occupational possibilities based on social attributes, as well as how occupation itself is a means for reproducing or resisting dominant power relations (Aldrich & Dickie, 2013; Angell, 2014; Laliberte Rudman, 2010; Ramugondo, 2015; Townsend, 1997). However, occupational science appears stuck in its capacity to employ critical theoretical perspectives to facilitate an activist stance and transformative action (Farias & Laliberte Rudman, 2016; Frank, 2012; Magalhães, 2012).

To mobilize these developments and enable investigation of occupation as a transactional and situated phenomenon, there is a need for methodological expansion beyond individually-focused interpretive approaches (Frank & Polkinghorne, 2010; Molineux & Whiteford, 2011; Wright-St. Clair, 2012). Some scholars have expressed that embracing socially-oriented theories and methodologies implies that occupational science “should abandon its valuing of the emic, individual, and subjective perspective on occupation that it has inherited from its humble, occupational therapy roots in order to assume a broader, more etic philosophical stance” (Pierce, 2014, p. 349). Other scholars have suggested that relying on qualitative methodologies reflects an early stage of disciplinary development, and that maturation will involve greater incorporation of quantitative methodologies (Clark, 2006). In parallel to the anti-dualistic arguments presented by transactional and critical perspectives, we argue that occupational scientists must think outside binaries such as emic and etic,

qualitative and quantitative, and individual versus structural, instead engaging with methodologies that “critically and creatively make connections between the personal, occupational ‘troubles’ of individuals and collectives...and public ‘issues’, such as the rise of neoliberal modes of governing or increasing income disparities within national and international contexts” (Laliberte Rudman, 2014, p. 380).

Critical qualitative methodologies provide a productive space for such methodological expansion given their roots in “connecting the everyday to larger political and economic questions” (Mumby, 2014, p. 252) and their commitment to challenging dichotomies that obscure the complex interplay between individuals’ ways of being and doing and the contexts through which lives are lived (Canella & Lincoln, 2009). For example, rather than seeking to study individual accounts or social elements, approaches that fit within this umbrella employ a critical lens to locate individual accounts and meanings within and in relation to social, cultural, and historical influences (Allen & Hardin, 2001). The field of ‘critical qualitative methodologies’ embraces different forms of inquiry held together by key ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions. One such assumption, based in a position of tentative realism, is that social reality – or what has come to be taken-for-granted as the way the world is – has been shaped over time through the interactions of social, political, economic, cultural, and other factors in ways that benefit some groups and marginalize others (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). A fundamental means through which social reality is constructed, and through which power relations are held in place, is language (Mumby, 2014). Thus, critical qualitative methodologies often involve de-constructing how language is used to form ‘realities’ in broader discourses and everyday talk, with the goal of illuminating the unnoticed ways power shapes everyday life (Mumby, 2014). Critical theory is used abductively to deepen the analysis of power, language, and social processes (Allen & Hardin,

2001), as well as confront oppression and enact a transformative research approach (Sellar, 2015).

To date, critical qualitative methodologies have primarily been used in occupational science to question and deconstruct assumptions about how occupation has been conceptualized and studied, while a more emergent body of scholarship has examined the production of occupational inequities, injustices, and possibilities (Farias & Laliberte Rudman, 2016). This discussion article adds to this body of literature by describing and illustrating critical narrative inquiry, a specific critical qualitative methodology that can illuminate occupation as a situated phenomenon and identify lines of action for addressing occupational injustices. We illustrate how we employed this methodology as part of a larger study of long-term unemployment, attending to its theoretical underpinnings and analytical approach.

Critical Narrative Inquiry: Methodology and Methods

Narrative inquiry encompasses a multitude of approaches to data collection and analysis (Chase, 2011). Within occupational science, authors have illustrated the usefulness of narrative inquiry for exploring inter-connections between occupation and identity; how the meaning of occupation is expressed and experienced in relation to time, space, and other features; and how people make sense of and negotiate everyday occupations and occupational transitions (Bonsall, 2012; Molineux & Whiteford, 2011). It has also been argued that narrative methodologies can be used to more fully address the situated and transactional nature of occupation, including how individual occupational identities are expressed in relation to social ideologies and moral ideals (Asaba & Jackson, 2011; Josephsson & Alsaker, 2015).

The form of critical narrative inquiry we illustrate is based on a constitutive view of language in which narratives are not seen as reflecting how lives have been lived or inner

worlds. Rather, narratives are dynamic, active, and fluid productions that are socially constitutive: they involve making sense of one's life as lived within a particular socio-historical context and accomplishing versions of the self that are intelligible within that context (Hardin, 2003). Narratives are also epistemologically constitutive in that 'reality' is seen as encompassing the self and contextual elements and is produced, reproduced, and reconfigured through narrative making (Tanggaard, 2009). Ultimately, critical narrative inquiry seeks to:

...question how narratives or stories are imbricated within relational plays of power, and how subjects re-authorize their own positions...Analysis moves between individual and sociocultural or historical levels without denying or discounting the words spoken by individuals. They are embraced as the site and evidence of agency, while avoiding reducing persons to individualistic agents. (Allen & Hardin, 2001, p. 176)

Study Overview

In our broader study addressing long-term unemployment, we implemented a critical narrative inquiry approach informed by Allen and Hardin's writings (Allen & Hardin, 2001; Hardin, 2001, 2003). Given the concern with how discourses create and perpetuate inequities, we drew upon critical narrative inquiry to make visible the conditions and resources that bound possibilities to take up, modify, and resist subject positions and occupations idealized within contemporary discourses. After discussing the socio-political and historical contexts of our broader study, we introduce how we incorporated this specific methodology and elaborate on the theoretical foundations that supported its use.

Socio-political and historical study context

The global economic recession that began in 2008 resulted in long-term unemployment – defined as being out of work for 27 weeks or more – being “a larger fraction

of total unemployment” (Grusky, Western, & Wimer, 2011, p. 4) than in previous periods (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016; Statistics Canada, 2016). In light of the increased pervasiveness of long-term unemployment in North America, we designed a two-site, multi-year study to understand how the situation of long-term unemployment is shaped at policy, organizational, and individual levels and experienced by both front-line support service providers and people who seek employment-related support services. Following ethics approval from our respective universities, we generated multiple kinds of data with a variety of participants (see Figure 1) based on theoretical foundations in the transactional perspective, governmentality theory (Rose, O’Malley, & Valverde, 2006), and Lipsky’s (1980/2010) notion of street-level bureaucracy (Laliberte Rudman & Aldrich, 2016). We intentionally designed our broader study to address the ways in which neoliberal modes of governing created discursive constructions that were taken up, perpetuated, resisted, and transformed by front-line service providers (Laliberte Rudman, Aldrich, Grundy, Stone, Huot, & Aslam, 2017) and people without work.

<Insert Figure 1 about here>

In particular, we used critical narrative inquiry in the study’s third phase to illuminate and situate the understandings of people who self-identified as being long-term unemployed. Given the neoliberal emphasis on individual responsibility and choice (Laliberte Rudman, 2013) and an understanding of service provision as a site where discursively shaped neoliberal policies get ‘made’ (Lipsky, 1980/2010), we sought to examine ways individual participants’ narratives reflected the influence of social forces and how occupation was negotiated in relation to such forces. To generate narratives, we used a two-stage process (Wengraf, 2001) to create space for individuals to establish the framework and structure of their narrative accounts. The first open-ended stage used the following prompt: “I would like you to tell me your story of how you have come to be experiencing long-term unemployment

and what everyday life looks like for you. If it is helpful, you can compare your current life to what you have experienced during periods of employment. I am interested in hearing your experience of becoming and being unemployed and what that means for your daily life. Please start wherever you like.” In the second stage, we further elicited storied data using follow-up questions and prompts to facilitate more detailed descriptions of events and actions within the narrative accounts.

Discursive context: ‘Good’ unemployed citizens within neoliberal rationality

During and following the 2008 recession, social policies and support services have been significantly reconfigured (Lavender & Parent, 2012; Olsen, 2008) to foreground activation measures and a discursive framing of unemployment as an individual problem and responsibility (Porter, 2015; Soss, Fording, & Schram, 2011). Shifting away from constructing unemployment as a socio-economic problem addressed via macroeconomic policy, “contemporary ‘activating’ approaches to unemployment place much more emphasis on modifying the behaviour and attitudes of unemployed individuals” (Laliberte Rudman et al., 2017, p. 50). Activation-based policies and practices aim to transform citizens viewed as being ‘at risk’ of state dependency into responsible, self-reliant citizens, penalizing those who fail to comply with the activity expectations associated with this idealized subject position (Grundy, 2015; Woolford & Nelund, 2013). In addition, there is an emphasis on ‘work first’ approaches that stress taking any available job as expediently as possible, with less emphasis on job quality, fit with skills, or sustainability. “Ideal” unemployed citizens are expected to attend workshops and job training to enhance their work readiness, with the goal of optimizing their labor market suitability and finding the quickest route to work possible (Lightman, Mitchell, & Herd, 2010).

Thus, “good” unemployed citizens in contemporary neoliberal contexts think and act in ways that underscore individual responsibility, self-reliance, and proactive, individualized

management of bodily, financial, and social risks through self-improvement and rational decision-making. However, such discursive framings marginalize structural aspects of long-term unemployment (Wiggan, 2012) and shift the emphasis of employment services to surveillance and disciplinary actions (Porter, 2015). Few studies have examined how actors are embedded within, understand, and act in relation to neoliberal unemployment discourses or the occupational implications of such discourses, and our use of critical narrative inquiry aimed to fill these gaps.

The methodological challenge: Linking discourse and narrative to transcend the individual

The methodological challenge we faced was how to link discourses – socially constructed and circulated systems of meaning regarding a discursive object (Hardin, 2001) – with narratives – the stories people convey to make sense of their experiences and actions and through which they construct who they are (Ainsworth & Hardy, 2004). We wanted to attend to the transactional space ‘in between’ discourse and narrative (Allen & Hardin, 2001) by “mov[ing] data from individuals beyond the level of the individual and into historical, social and cultural realms, thus making critical analysis possible on a social level” (Hardin, 2003, p. 544). At the same time, we sought to avoid the “binary of seeing the person as either the autonomous origin of his or her experience or the ideological pawn of social determination” (Allen & Hardin, 2001, p. 163).

We drew upon Foucauldian-informed governmentality scholarship to conceptualize discourse and its implications for occupational possibilities. A governmentality perspective views discourses as a technology of a government that produces and disseminates morally laden messages to shape how individuals govern themselves and are governed by authorities. Power circulates through discourses to shape people’s behaviours, desires, abilities, and goals and recruit them to take up particular strategies to address ideal goals (Nasedan, 2008). As a

form of social action, discourses are mobilized to align citizens' ways of thinking and doing with the aims and values of dominant political rationalities, thereby delineating "what is, and is not, socially, politically, and economically acceptable behavior and/or feasible action, transmitting favoured assumptions and values whilst obscuring vested interests and constraining opportunities for contestation" (Wiggan, 2012, p. 384). The discursive construction of particular categories of people, such as "the unemployed", outlines possible and ideal subjectivities and occupations to shape how people see themselves, who they should strive to become, and what occupations they view as possible and not possible (Ainsworth & Hardy, 2004; Laliberte Rudman, 2010).

Drawing on a conceptualization of bounded agency (Vickerstaff & Cox, 2005), we assumed that the narratives people tell are bounded within, but not determined by, the broader discourses to which they have access (Brodkin, 2011; Hardin, 2001). Thus, in conveying and constructing narratives, individuals are actors who creatively draw upon discourses but are also challenged to operate within and utilize the range of sensible, ethical, and ideal constructions about ways of being and doing that discourses put forth. Given that discourses are often not fully cohesive and that individuals are positioned in relation to a multiplicity of discourses, there is space for resistance, subversion, and creative reconfigurations of discourses within narratives and everyday life, although actors have varying resources and powers for such narrative negotiation (Allen & Hardin, 2001; Brady, 2014).

Analytic process and methods

Building from these methodological foundations, we developed and enacted an analytical process to inter-link discourses and narratives. Given the multiplicity of discourses individuals may negotiate, Hardin (2001) suggested that in any particular analysis, it is necessary to strategically temporarily fix a set of discursive meanings, analyze how those meanings are contextually deployed within narratives, and examine the effects of those

deployments. In this analysis, we strategically focused on how subjects positioned themselves in relation to discourses addressing unemployment and long-term unemployment. In addition, given our concern with the production of inequities, we critically attended to how varying conditions and resources bounded participants' abilities to negotiate subject positions and occupations.

Although many methodological texts address the aims of linking discourse and narrative, few concrete illustrations describe how these analytic aims are actually enacted. Based on the study's theoretical underpinnings and previous work done by the first author (Laliberte Rudman, 2015a, 2015b), we generated a set of questions to guide coding and interpretation of the narrative data. These questions included: In what ways does the informant position him or herself within the narrative?; What subject positions does he/she attempt to lay claim to, and how?; How do these ways of positioning relate to subjectivities (affirm, negotiate, fracture) constructed through dominant discourses?; How is occupation drawn into the narrative?; How are occupations drawn upon in relation to subject positions?; What 'normalizing' truths are brought into the narrative and/or contested to monitor, position and present the self and one's occupations? When coding the transcripts, the first author repeatedly returned to these guiding questions to inform code development; as one example, attending to the second question regarding subject positions led to codes such as 'activated job seeker', 'failed job seeker', 'devoted parent', 'older worker', 'resistant client', and 'long-time worker'. In addition, in the earlier analytic work completed by the first author, particular points and narrative linkages (Chase, 2011) within narratives were found to provide productive means to think about inter-linkages with discourse. This earlier analytic work involved a recursive, iterative process of reading narratives of retirement aimed at identifying aspects of form, structure, and content that enabled analytical connections to be made

between individual accounts and social discourses (Laliberte Rudman, 2015a, 2015b). Table 1 provides an overview of these points and linkages.

<Insert Table 1 about here>

Analysis involved searching for points and linkages within transcripts, which informed additional coding related to the significance of these relative to the overall narrative, the guiding analytic questions, and discourses of unemployment. Once the first author completed multiple, iterative layers of coding, both authors discussed inter-relationships amongst codes and developed categories, such as barriers to re-employment, survival strategies, definitions of long-term unemployment, and solutions to unemployment. Working from these discussions, codes, and categories, the first author continued interpretation through re-constructing analytic narratives for each informant that interwove aspects of their told narrative with the problematizations, subject positions, and solution frames dominant within contemporary discourses of unemployment.

To illustrate the potential of critical narrative inquiry, we provide two brief examples of analytic narratives. Within the context of this paper, we are not aiming to present our study results but are using these examples to illustrate how this methodological approach enables examination of individuals' identity negotiations and occupations in light of discursive constructions of long-term unemployment. In turn, this approach promotes examination of identity and occupation as situated, transactional phenomena.

Critical Narrative Inquiry: Illustrations from our Study of Long-Term Unemployment

Helen, a single mother of two children who lived on the outskirts of a Canadian city, had worked in various service jobs as a teenager before discontinuing work for 5 years after the birth of her second child in her early 20s. At the time of the interview, she had been

receiving provincially-funded welfare benefits for 4 years and described herself as constantly struggling and “*stuck in a whirlwind*”, indicating “*I don’t know what it is to hope anymore*”.

Within her narrative, Helen pointed to the limits of contemporary discourses that offer up solutions based on individual activation. While Helen described prioritizing self-reliance through work, she adamantly conveyed that her attempts to align with the activated, responsible unemployed citizen had not succeeded, despite her engagement in the “right” occupations:

I’ve tried and tried and tried for the last 7 years [to get secure work] and I cannot – I went to school [completed a college program in community services]. I spent 30 grand in student loans, I worked my ass off, I made sure I graduated with honours. I did everything right at my placement, did everything and where did it get me? Three years later and I still don’t have a job, I feel defeated... You get beaten down by society so bad that you don’t want to get back up.

Complying with service providers’ expectations, Helen had attended numerous workshops, but she questioned the homogenous solutions offered up through such activation programs:

I went through a bunch of programs that they do and it’s just the same BS [expletive] after BS after BS... It’s great that they have these programs and they do work for some people, but for other people they don’t work. And... they keep pushing you through them and, it’s ‘what’s the point?’

However, Helen’s narrative also highlighted the challenge of fully stepping outside the individualistic frame established in dominant discourses. Although she often narrated her experiences in ways that questioned contemporary discursive messages, at points she located the problem of unemployment in herself:

I revamped my resume 6 weeks ago with my employment counsellor...I sent out 54 resumes and not gotten one phone call.... So I'm obviously doing something wrong still. But I can't figure out what I'm doing wrong...I've even gone so far as to change my wardrobe and my appearance.

Helen's narrative also contained points of resistance, particularly in relation to the conflicting occupational demands of being a mother and active job seeker.

Like in reality I don't know how my kids are eating [for] dinner tomorrow night. Like to go through that every day and then to try to find – to try to find a job on top of that and struggle with everything else, keep appointments together. I don't know how these people [welfare workers] expect you to do this.

She also pointed to resource limitations that constrained her ability to obtain work experience through volunteering, an often promoted occupation within activation-based strategies.

Now it's volunteering and trying to volunteer but how do I pay for gas to get back and forth?... it's like 45-minute drive...every time I come to town it's \$20...So it's, how do I find work? How do I do this?

Helen concluded her narrative by stating that her active attempts to 'rise' out of poverty and unemployment in ways that fit with contemporary discourses were thus far futile.

I strive every day to teach my kids not to be like this [living in poverty], to teach them that there's a better way of life...that you have to work hard to get ahead. But I work hard every day, I work harder than most people and not getting anywhere.

In contrast to Helen, Scott was married, had personal savings and months of severance pay and benefits from his previous job as an executive, and still lived in a large house in the U.S. with multiple cars parked in his driveway. Although his re-employment

process was taking longer than he had originally anticipated, after 1 year out of work, he had not yet lost hope that he would eventually find employment. Scott noted that when he began searching for a new job, *“I quickly learned that I was out of date... my resume was out of date, my processes of getting a job, my networking was minimal... I found myself really unprepared for the environment that I put myself into.”* Scott took up the discursive framing of unemployment as an individual problem, noting that *“it’s a different world and I was ill-equipped to deal with that world.”* To address his deficiencies, Scott eagerly attended a multitude of workshops and networking groups to modernize his skills, uncritically assuming the subject position of an ideal and activated unemployed person. He narrated most of his occupations using “I” statements about marketing the self, such as *“I’m spending probably as many hours today looking for a job as I was spending at my job. It’s different in the fact that I’m trying to reach out to people.”*

Although Scott emphasized *“building my skills back up to really fit the job market”*, he was not unaware of the structural issues that influenced his situation. He noted, *“I think age and salary becomes more of a challenge when you step back”* from work, and he acknowledged that employers’ reliance on online applications meant that *“it’s really who you know and the people connection”* that determines how easily people get re-employed. He elaborated that:

if people aren’t educated and don’t understand how to use [online applications], you’re being eliminated before you even have the opportunity...If you don’t have somebody to put your name at the top of a pile, if you just go through the automated system. It’s a really tough process.

His description of the barrier that online applications posed ultimately framed this system-level feature in terms of individuals’ responsibilities to become educated about hiring

processes and make the right connections, with little questioning of who benefits from this feature and who might be disadvantaged by it.

The only tension Scott narrated related to his changed roles at home: because he was unable to find employment, his wife had to return to the workforce after being a stay-at-home mother so she would be eligible for insurance and benefits. Now that he was the one who was home full-time, Scott had to assume different occupational responsibilities, such as cooking, cleaning, and transporting their children, and he noted the challenge of trying to balance those “*distractions*” within his search for work.

I'm here so I should be able to do it, but I've – if I was at work we would be doing [these occupations] on the weekends...So you balance it out. And I just really try and stay focused on the job hunt between the hours of 8 and 5.

Discussion

Critical narrative researchers generate insights by examining the interplay of narratives and discourses. The insights gained through this process are essential to foster a radical sensibility of the oppressive and inequitable implications of the boundaries and contradictions inherent in discourses (Canella & Lincoln, 2009). In occupational science, such a sensibility can help scholars move forward to ethically reconstruct occupational possibilities, raising consciousness of how discourses shape ways of being and doing to benefit some groups and marginalize others (Laliberte Rudman, 2014).

Within our study, critical narrative inquiry enabled us to interpret narratives and the occupations they addressed as neither solely authored by de-contextualized individuals nor fully determined by discourses. Examining how informants actively positioned themselves relative to broader discourses illuminated how they enacted agency through negotiating occupations, illuminating their occupations as always relational phenomena that are situated within broader power relations. Some narratives in our study, such as Helen's, challenge the

dominant messages of “work first” by pointing to the complications presented by other occupations that people need and want to do, thereby highlighting ways that power relations can obscure and create challenges to occupations. Helen’s narrative also revealed the resources required to be an activated job seeker, such as adequate finances and transportation, pointing to the ways in which contextual forces shape occupational choices and possibilities. Other narratives, such as Scott’s, illustrated that the presence of adequate resources in a person’s life may contribute to a lack of questioning and reproduction of prevailing neoliberal discourses, such as those that locate the problem of unemployment in individual failings or narrowly promote certain occupations as means to regain employment.

The contradictions and fractures that became visible through our analysis inspired us to work against the dominant message that engagement in the “right” occupations will unproblematically lead to re-employment, and to raise awareness of the implications of obscuring the diversity of occupations that people need to do beyond job seeking. In working with a variety of non-academic stakeholders – including support service providers and policy makers – to mobilize our findings, we aim to work against victim blaming and the associated neoliberal assault on dependency that is both reducing support for and justifying increasing surveillance of so-called irresponsible or undeserving citizens, whose challenging negotiations of everyday occupations are being obscured (Aldrich, Laliberte Rudman, & Dickie, 2017).

Aligned with calls to develop as a more socially responsive discipline, this methodological approach is one means to facilitate occupational scientists’ critique and redress of structures, systems, processes, and practices that form and perpetuate occupational inequities and injustices. By understanding contemporary discourses of unemployment and other social problems as part of a broader political individualizing of the social (Brady, 2014; Laliberte Rudman, 2012), we can reveal how taken-for-granted messages shift risks and

responsibilities onto individuals, including those associated with occupation, and obscure the limits and tensions associated with the idealized, individualized subjects they promote.

Particularly for marginalized groups who are already vulnerable to risks such as job loss, poverty, or social exclusion, such shifting masks the differential availability of resources that facilitate or hinder occupational choices (Galvaan, 2015) as well as alternative possibilities for subject positions and occupations that are situated outside neoliberal values and aims.

Returning to the topic of this special issue, critical narrative inquiry enables transcending the individual by drawing analytical attention to the transactional space between narratives, as told by individuals, and discourses, as broader social stories. Within this transactional space, understandings of occupation as a transaction of person and place and as a situated, political phenomenon can be advanced. This methodology challenges the dualism of subjective-objective, such that subjective experiences of occupation are interpreted as not solely emanating from within individuals or as fully determined by outside objective factors, but instead as arising out of a continuous dialectical interplay of persons and contextual elements. At the same time, there are boundaries on what can be understood about occupation when using a method that relies on individual verbal accounts, given that there may be mundane, tacit, taboo and other aspects of occupation that are difficult to articulate (Dickie, 2003; Huot & Laliberte Rudman, 2015). In addition, individuals may not be fully aware of the power relations and contextual forces at play in their ongoing negotiation of occupations (Ramugondo, 2015). As such, we contend that critical narrative inquiry provides one entry point to advancing understandings of occupation that transcend individualistic conceptualizations, and that truly transcending the individual requires the use of multiple methodologies and theoretical underpinnings that challenge dualistic conceptual tendencies.

Conclusion

In this article, we have presented critical narrative inquiry as one way to answer the call to transcend individualism in occupational science. Located within the field of critical qualitative methodologies, this approach illuminates the situated nature of occupation by raising awareness of the discursive structures that govern people's everyday occupations, as well as the differential opportunities for individuals to take up, resist, or reconfigure such discourses in ways that align with the complexity of their occupational lives. Occupational scientists can play a vital role in maintaining awareness of how such structures are advanced and become embedded in taken-for-granted ideals about what citizens ought to do and be.

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Figure 1. Overview of study of long-term unemployment

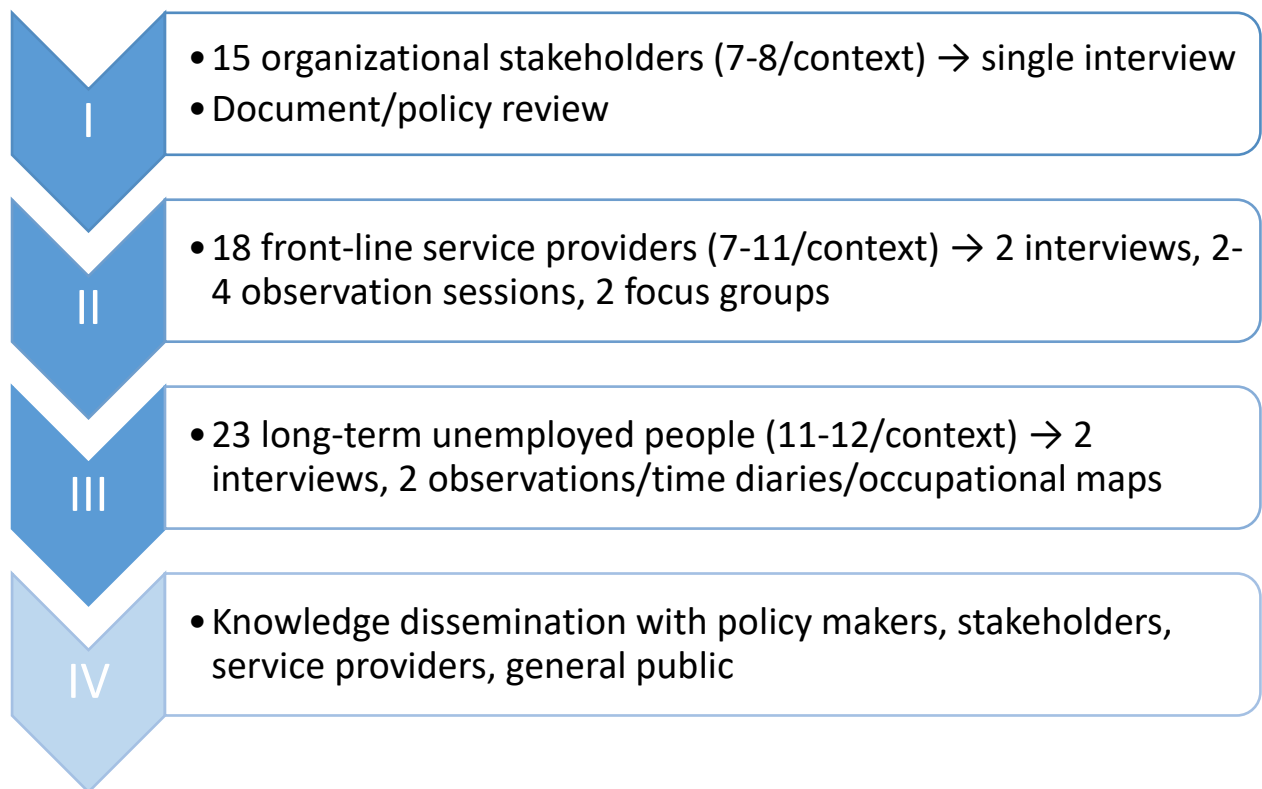


Table 1. Analytically linking narratives and discourses: Points and linkages

Type of point or linkage	Description	Example
Points of resistance	When a narrator explicitly articulates that she or he is doing or saying something “against the grain” or as not fitting with local or broader expectations	A person experiencing long-term unemployment resists explanations that point to his/her individual deficiencies as the reasons for prolonged joblessness
Points of contradiction	When a narrator positions him or herself at different points in the narrative in ways that appear contradictory	A person experiencing long-term unemployment confidently asserts engaging in activity expectations aligned with being an ideal job seeker, and later questions whether he or she is doing enough as a job seeker
Points of fracture	When a narrator refers to engaging in ideal practices and activities promoted within dominant discourses, but finds that such engagement does not materialize into idealized subject positions or expanded occupational possibilities	A person experiencing long-term unemployment describes engagement in employment service activity expectations as failing to result in job interviews or work possibilities

Points of tension	When a narrator positions her or himself and occupations, in ways that set up differences that result in marginalizing or blaming others, or points where informants express being positioned by others as having not taken up idealized subject positions and/or occupations	A person experiencing long-term unemployment positions others obtaining similar social benefits (e.g. welfare) as lazy, greedy or abusing the system, as a means to position her or himself as not fitting this typical discursive construction.
Linkages between “life lived” and resources and constraints (Chase, 2011)	When a narrator provides a rationale, often as a cause/effect link, to make sense of, and explain, his/her situation, identity and/or occupations	A person experiencing long-term unemployment addresses how the absence of a particular resource (e.g. affordable childcare) or occupational expectations (e.g. caring for grandchildren) mean that he or she cannot take up “work first” approaches
