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### Original Citation

Downs, Yvonne (2009) Ethics and Narrative Research – A Contradiction in Terms? In: Narrative, Memory and Identities. University of Huddersfield, Huddersfield, pp. 21-30.

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# 3 Ethics and Narrative Research – A Contradiction in Terms?

YVONNE DOWNS

## **Introduction**

In April 2007 I began my dissertation towards an MA in Educational Research at the University of Sheffield. Entitled ‘An evaluation of the experience of doing life history research: A case study’ its purpose was to confirm (or otherwise) my ‘hunch’ that life history would allow fidelity to my professed research philosophy. I will elaborate on this later but the thinking that underlies all my research endeavours is to do feminist research with an ethical aim, a moral purpose and a reflexive impetus. I had been introduced to the notion of ‘narrative research’ in the taught components of the above MA and felt that that this was for me. By ‘narrative’ I mean a particular type of discourse, that is ‘the story’, ‘the type of discourse that draws together diverse events, happenings and actions of human lives’ (Polkinghorne, 1996:5). On this understanding it dawned on me that I had already unconsciously undertaken such research years earlier for an MA in Women’s Studies (Novakovic, 1993) but had failed to grasp this fact because I was working with letters rather than with oral accounts.

So I will first spend some time setting out why I was powerfully drawn to doing narrative research. Then I will mark the points where this brought me into potential conflict with concerns over research ethics, including a more fundamental consideration of the compatibility of narrative research with ethical practice. Finally I will sketch out how a life history methodology provided a way to address, but not definitively resolve, these issues.

## **Why Narrative Research?**

I cannot remember a time when I did not use stories as a medium to make sense of the world. It is a practice I learned as a child, listening to the stories my parents told and later realising this was how they strove to make sense of their experiences, to reconcile who they were (and what they might have imagined they would be) with the reality of their lives. I suspect storytelling served also to anchor them in a world they, arriving in England from post-war Europe, often found alien. As an undergraduate, a linguist and student of

literature, my struggles with German history became a more evenly matched fight through the reading of stories rather than of the set texts, although I didn't tell anyone that is what I was doing because I thought it would be considered somewhat 'lightweight' and unscholarly.

I was also drawn to narrative research through Emihovich's (1995) assertion that narrative can link reason and emotion, as I had at the time begun working on a rejection of that particular 'vicious binary', as St Pierre (1997:176) would call it, a rejection that has been sustained by the work of Martha Nussbaum (2001). Nussbaum takes a cognitive/evaluative view of emotion, based on close attention to the narrative of experience and understands that emotions themselves have a narrative structure and are 'cognitively-laden' (2001:65). Sikes (1997) maintains that telling stories is also a fundamental form of human communication and that they 'let us know we are not alone, that other people have gone through the same things and have felt like we have' (1997:23). Telling stories is therefore inherently social, which I would say makes it a fitting method in social science research. As Plummer observes, 'stories gather people around them' (2000:174).

### **Narrative Research and Ethical Practice**

Early on in my consideration of the narrative approach I encountered a problem. It was not that I was concerned about the suggestions of fiction and fabrication inherent in the term 'story', although I have never evaded an engagement with Phillip's question 'will any old story suffice?' (1994:15). Indeed I suggest that narrative's saving grace here is its potential to broaden and deepen the reach of understanding by raising the question 'what if it were true?', encompassing the possibility of what Goodson and Sikes (2001) call 'alternative lives' and revealing the how narrators actively engage in the reshaping of the past in order to align it with the present (Ricoeur, 1991). After all, I had heard my parents do this often enough. Indeed narrative research can make explicit the role of stories as interpretive representations rather than records.

So this was not my problem. My problem arose out of a consideration of research ethics and began with a troubling of notions of (specifically) researcher identity. I mentioned at the start of this paper that my research *philosophy* was to do feminist research with an ethical aim, a moral purpose and a reflexive impetus. However, it is clear that this may also be read as a statement of my researcher *identity*. Yvonne Downs *is* someone who does feminist research with an ethical aim, a moral purpose and a reflexive impetus. By inscribing my researcher identity as words on a page the impression is given that it is fixed, stable, knowable and express-able, which in turn relies on

a particular Cartesian notion of selfhood. Seeking to understand the interplay between race, class and gender led me to a more nuanced understanding.

I came to understand that it is possible for the researcher to maintain an identity external to the self. This is done by fixing in place an immobile 'Other', using mechanisms such as 'reflexivity', 'giving voice', and 'empowerment'. I am not saying here that the researcher does this knowingly, although there is disagreement as to the degree of complicity in the employment of these mechanisms (Pillow, 2003). Nor am I suggesting that 'Others' are powerless victims who are all accepting and non-resistant. I am arguing that it can be difficult *not* to constitute your researcher self thus, for to do so may involve chafing against established academic and institutional norms. It may even be that alternative ways of re-presenting researcher and 'researched' are simply filtered out. Lather and Smithies (1997) for example explicitly tried to avoid such 'fixing' and had problems getting their research on women living with HIV/Aids published.

So my problem was growing and now involved a disturbance of some of my taken for granted assumptions. For hadn't the very mechanisms used in authorising the researcher self been used by feminists not only in research but also to make political claims? However, I could not ignore, for example, Skeggs' robust critique of reflexivity, 'the telling of research stories' that 'not only enables the researcher to be identified as 'real' but also grants the spurious authority of authenticity' (2002:364). Likewise I came to see that 'giving voice', which is commonly read as an act of inclusion, also contains notions of exclusion. Trinh (1989, 1991) and hooks (2000) argue that it is not so much a matter of whether 'Others' are silenced or given voice but how it is that some can *choose* to speak (or not), whilst 'Others' are *allowed* to speak or not, or indeed as (Skeggs, 2002) argues, are *forced* to speak.

However, I was so far only skirting the foothills of the problem. For it was not just in the minutiae and the mechanics of narrative research that the problem resided, but in the very heart of narrative research itself. After Cosslett, Lury and Summerfield (2000), Skeggs also argues that subjectivity is a product of autobiographical practice and does not precede it, that it is the 'method that is constitutive of the self, not the self of the researcher that always/already exists and can be assumed in research' (2002:348). More specifically, and drawing on the work of Steedman (2000) she also maintains that a key method in this process is appropriating the stories of others. Stories thus become the intellectual property of the researcher self, a resource that can be mobilized for the display of cleverness, a mechanism for the 'manifestation and maintenance of difference and distinction' (2002:350) and a way 'to shore up the composite of the academic self' (2002:361).

I cannot overemphasise the degree of my dismay here because the inference is that narrative research, turning as it does on the stories others tell, may be a fundamentally unethical enterprise. It seemed as if my strong

commitment to narrative research and my equally strong commitment to ethical research were being brought into conflict. Was ethics and narrative research a contradiction in terms?

### **Reconciling Ethics and Narrative Research**

I must say I was not at this point tempted simply to give up on the notion of narrative research. All research has the potential to 'other', to colonise or to do harm. It is patently absurd to stop doing research because of the potential challenges it presents. I therefore proceed with life history methodology to reconcile, somewhat messily and uneasily, my ethical intentions with my desire to do narrative research. I must emphasize that my desire is always to situate myself in a wider research context by acknowledging that others do not hold the same views as me (Tierney, 2000:539). Nor am I advocating 'how to do ethical narrative research in seven simple steps', although I also hope of course that others may find merit in what I say.

So what do I mean by my ethical intentions? Ricoeur describes ethical intention as '*aiming at the "good life" with and for others in just institutions*' (1992:172, original emphasis). This is particularly relevant to life history research, hinting as it does to a connection between the personal, relational and social. My ethical intentions also encompass Bhavnani's (1993) suggestions that feminist research should not re-inscribe those being researched into prevailing representations, nor should it valorise or romanticise them, nor downplay structural subordination. It should, however, address issues of difference throughout the research process and make the micro-political processes that suffuse the conduct of research explicit. But the difficulty of translating intention into practice was brought home to me by Fine, Weis, Weseen and Wong (2000) who write about the challenges of honouring their commitment to ethical research whilst heeding Bhavnani's words in the rocky terrain of real world research.

Before I go on to give my account of how I trod this rocky path I will outline what I thought life history research was, or should be. I concur with Bertaux (1981) that life stories may be contained within life histories but not vice versa because life histories are themselves life stories placed within broader contexts, the view taken also by Goodson and Sikes (2001). I would go further and say that the connections between contexts (plural) and the life lived are integral to the story. By contexts I conceive of three non-hierarchical and inter-connected dimensions. The first is the (changing) social, political and historical circumstances in which the life is lived. Within this broad context are 'prevailing discourses', shaped by and shaping those broader circumstances in which they are situated and impacting on the expectations of individuals. Last but not least is 'the script' (Goodson and Sikes, 2001). Passing through the

filter of historical circumstance and prevailing discourse, ‘the script’ influences and impacts on the way a person comes to take their place in the world. Structural factors such as race, class, gender and ethnicity are variously located in and flow between each of these contexts. This conceptualisation thus meshes together C. Wright Mills’ (1959) biographical, historical and social with a blurring of the edges between each.

Whilst lives are played out against a background script, it is erroneous to conceive of this script as individually authored. The script is instead itself a product of broader historical and discursive factors. As Smith argues, ‘how people speak of the forms of life in which they are implicated is determined by those forms of life’ (1988:188). And Goodson and Sikes contend ‘the life story individualizes and personalizes; the life history contextualizes and politicizes’ (2001: 87-88). The story is not therefore individually authored but ‘collaboratively generated’, an outcome of the complex interactions between the individual and their circumstances.

Thus the garnering of individual stories to authorise oneself as a researcher becomes at the very least a slippery enterprise. Indeed Skeggs’ criticism that the researcher’s story ‘is based on their identity which is usually articulated as a singularity and takes no account of movement in and out of space, cultural resources, place, bodies and others but nonetheless authorizes itself to speak’ (2002:360) clearly has no foothold within this view of life history.

### **Practical Philosophy**

How then did I translate these understandings into a methodology could serve as the lynchpin and touchstone of ethical practice? Dollard (1935), interpreted by Polkinghorne (1995) provides useful guidance here and I will therefore touch briefly on each of his seven principles, girding each with examples taken from the transcripts of two interviews I did with my sister Kris about her education and schooling as part of the MA dissertation referred to above. (Further discussion of the reasons I identify the participant here can be found in Downs 2007. Suffice it to say here, I do not advocate this as a general practice but as something that always requires specific consideration.)

### **Dollard's Principles for the Crafting of a Life History**

*Attention is paid to the cultural contextual features that give story meaning*

The focus here is on 'values, social rules and meaning systems and languaged conceptual networks (and) assumptions about acceptable and expected personal goals' (Polkinghorne, 1995:16). It thus occupies the ground between discourse and script.

Kris told me how she has always felt constrained by what she saw as 'acceptable' and 'expected' even though she knew 'how to play this game'. She also elucidated the personal costs involved in 'taking different paths'. She wonders if her difficulties are due to her 'personality'. Taking account of cultural contexts here offers the possibility of other analyses and interpretations. It avoids re-inscribing her into prevailing representations, such as 'deviant' and/or interpreting her actions as 'pathological'.

*Attention is paid to the embodied nature of the storyteller*

I have always seen how we look as an important factor in the unfolding of my sister's life and mine, influencing amongst other things the roles we were ascribed within the family. Being placed in binary opposition, 'the pretty one'/'the clever one' was, we both feel, an influential factor in our subsequent trajectories.

*Attention is paid to the importance of other people*

In both interviews Kris and I refer to the role of others in her life. It was her friends who shielded her from the worst of her difficult times at school. Being sisters is also a constant reminder of the connections between people but also of the limits of their influence and the role of other influential forces/contexts. Here the relational aspect of life is also emphasised, mitigating once again the possibility of 'a' story being appropriated to authorise the researcher.

*The storyteller is an actor who alters the scene not a pawn buffeted by events, in other words there is interaction between the storyteller and her or his setting*

I tell Kris in the interviews that I see her as 'resourceful'. She also relates that 'finding out ..... I'm quite capable' has made her feel 'like I'm a millionaire'. Therefore, whilst contexts can be constraining, the storyteller is not inactive within those constraints. This addresses the charge of determinism in life history research and re-casts relativism as a strength. Individuals may experience the same events but will not deal with them in the same way. Life

history is about how and what happens because of and at the point of this interaction.

*Attention is paid to social events the storyteller has experienced as a member of an historical cohort in the context of understanding how the storyteller works to shape a future undetermined by the past*

This criterion engages with the interaction between the script and the broader historical context focusing on the ‘struggle to change habitual behaviors (sic) and to act differently’ (Polkinghorne, 1995:17). Kris never loses sight of her membership of an historical cohort and uses the pronoun ‘you’ to intimate membership of that group, ‘*in those days* at school *you* didn’t talk to parents’. Later she uses ‘I’ to indicate how she acted within this context (‘I broke my own perception really of how I should be’) to gain what she interprets as ‘freedom’. She thus disturbs easy distinctions between individual agency and circumstances.

*The story takes place within a bounded temporal period*

This could be the storyteller’s entire life (Chanfrault-Duchet, 1991) or a portion of it but the story must have a beginning, a middle and an end. This can be more problematic than it first appears. Kris struggled to find a beginning to the story of her educational trajectory, and has also complained of ‘too many beginnings’ in her life. Women’s lives are also generally more ‘episodic’ than this structure allows for (Smith, 1988). Thus whilst there is a need for boundaries there is also the need for considering how the *particular* temporal boundaries chosen influence the story itself.

*The story has to make ‘sense’ ie. be plausible and understandable*

This, for me, addresses Phillip’s question ‘will any story do’. Moreover, a story meeting this criterion forges a link between the storyteller and others. For example my sister recounted waiting for my mother to wave to her as she passed by her classroom window on her first day at school. Despite our very different educational stories I also did this and immediately understood that we were ‘not so different that we do not recognize each other’ (Mahoney and Zmroczek, 1997:5).



### **Ethics and Narrative Research Reconciled?**

Whilst the presence of the researcher cannot and should not be forgotten, it is not the researcher but the contexts and the individual's place within and negotiation of these contexts that matter. The participant cannot, within this conceptualisation, be fixed, because so much is relational. In this respect it connects to the 'relational ethics' advocated by Ellis (2007). Nor do the stories provide warrants for researcher privilege. Indeed as Goodson and Sikes contend there is the potential to disrupt 'normal assumptions of what is known by intellectuals in general and sociologists in particular' (2001:7). The fact that a life history methodology allows for alternative ways of making sense of a life other than through the lens of 'personality' and individualized response gives it, I would argue, the *potential* to be a profoundly ethical enterprise.

However, there is no happy end. That I still have a statement that can be read as expressing my researcher identity is not a sign that I have found 'the answer'. I keep it there rather as a 'prickle under the skin'. It reminds me that having some idea of what I am about as a researcher might be necessary, but this is and should not be a straightforward matter.

### **Acknowledgement**

I am indebted to Professor Pat Sikes for her critical reading of an earlier draft of this paper.

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