

Ethical considerations in Narrative Research



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... the contemporary ethical position must recognize ambivalence, non-rationality, the aporetic, the non-universalizable, and the irrational... contradictions and tensions cannot be overcome, they have to be lived with in struggle and disagreement.

-Zygmunt Bauman *Post-modern ethics* (1993)

Ethics and the importance of reflexivity

What reflexivity ultimately means to me is a much greater social and self-awareness/consciousness of the whole intellectual/research process: of a) the subject of the research along with b) the social spaces in which the research knowledge is produced, as well as c) a much fuller sense of the spaces/locations – personal, cultural, academic, intellectual, historical – of the researcher in actually building the research knowledge....'research knowledge' only makes sense if we can acquire understanding about the active process through which such knowledge becomes produced.

Ken Plummer (2001)

Documents of Life 2

Seven key issues

- ownership and intellectual property rights – who *owns* the life being studied?
- Confidentiality – can this ever be really guaranteed?
- Honesty and the scandals of life stories (eg Burgos-Debray (1984) *I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian woman in Guatamala*)
- Deception – how to present our research focus to those who we study
- Exploitation – what do our participants get out of participating in our research?
- Informed consent – do people really understand what they are agreeing to?
- Hurt and harm – effects of misrepresentation for individuals and communities

Ken Plummer (2001)
Documents of Life 2

Plus a few more...

- Inequalities of interview relationship
- Hierarchical nature of interpretation
- Control over representation
- Potential for exploitation
- Deconstructing assumptions of 'empowerment'
- Moving from the private to public sphere
- Broader impact/unintentional consequences of research



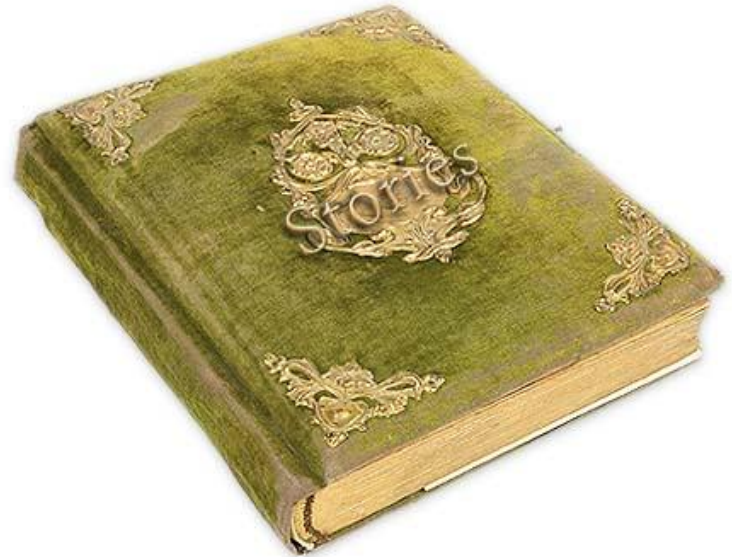
Situated stories of ethical problems and decisions are important – many of the key decisions which researchers make happen behind closed doors

Ethical questions in studying the lives of others

- By what right can an academic enter the subjective worlds of other human beings and report back to the wider world on them?
- Must our understanding of someone's life correspond with their understanding of their life? If they differ, what is the most responsible thing for us to do? Do our intellectual and ethical responsibilities pull us in different directions?
- Should we share our 'findings' with our research participants. In what circumstances would it not be desirable to do so?
- What is the effect of our probing presence?
- How universal are ethics?

Narrative questions

- How are stories structured?
- Who produces them and by what means?
- What are the mechanisms by which they are consumed?
- How are narratives silenced, contested or accepted?
- What are other stories which give this story its meaning (counter-narratives)?



Stories and selves:

what can and cannot be told, and to whom

- Even when stories are told by individuals, they are always located within a wider context; 'cultural stockpot of stories'
- Stories of the self changing over time
- Audience – for whom, and to whom, is this story told? Stories are always shaped by their 'listeners'
- Relationship between what is said, and is not, and perhaps cannot be said?



Telling and listening



- Which stories do we tell?
- Which stories do we omit?
- When do we start the story in this place? Why end it here?
- Who do we tell these stories to?
- What stories do we tell ourselves?
- How do we interpret the stories of others?
- How do we interpret their attempts to make sense of our stories?

Ethics in context: Some challenges

- Implicit exploitation of research enterprise
- Unrealisability of informed consent
- Questioning the questions
- Unanticipated emotional impact of research
- Negotiating interpretation
- Listening

Exploitation: terrority of the job?

Is it 'exploitative' to do documentary work, to arrive on a given scene, ask for people's cooperation, time, energy, and knowledge, do one's 'study' or 'project' and soon enough leave, *thank yous* presumably extended? How can we do such work honourably, so that those observed get more closely, explicitly connected with it? Should 'informants' be publicly acknowledged if they so desire? ... How do we communicate to others, called 'potential subjects' our artistic or social or political purposes, let them know what we have in mind, what we hope to do, and why it might be necessary to go to such lengths?

Robert Coles

(1997) *Doing documentary work*

Self-doubt and the researcher

I'll be sitting there in someone's home –I've interrupted their life, the nerve of me!- and I think to myself, this is wrong. Why don't I take a polite No politely, and leave? Why am I being so conniving... Why should that family let me hang around? I use that phrase as if it means I'll be a fly on the wall, and their already difficult life won't be made any worse, but it's not true, and I know it's not true, and they do, too. .. We do our' documentary work' and we get recognition, and we build our lives up, our careers – and they, there's nothing in it for them. They put up with us! Sure, we're trying to 'help' them in the broad sense, tell the world about their problems... I sure get a lot out of doing [the work], but I'm not sure what it all means for those folks out there I go visit...

Student quoted in Coles (1997) *Documentary Work*

Problematizing 'consent'



At the time of my testimony I had no idea what the consequences of 'public' could have meant in the context of public hearings. The fact that my testimony could be appropriated, interpreted, re-interpreted, re-told and sold was not what I expected..."

Serious thought needs to be given to the ethics of appropriating testimony for poetic licence, media freedom, academic commentary and discourse analysis. Arguing these lines and 'It's on the public record' are too easy a position to take since they do not address the rights of self-authorship and the intention of the speaker, the reclamation of one's voice and one's agency. This ethical dilemma also needs to be addressed as a meta-analytical and methodological question, by theorising the relationship of the layers of listening and subjective hearing positions (proximity, relationality), mediations, disseminations of testimonies and voices of listeners and readers

Yazir Henri (2003) "Reconciling Reconciliation

Research, reciprocity, and relationship



Bärbel Bohley: Key figure of East German Opposition

MA: Can you tell us, retrospectively, what would you do the same as you did before? What would you do differently?

BB: How, where, when?

MA: Well, in your life.

BB: I would do many things differently, wouldn't you?... What I suspect is, honestly, this is neither a question nor an answer... I suspect somehow, that the people in the West have not yet comprehended that the wall is gone. They have not yet comprehended that half of... yes, half of the world... yes, that an empire has collapsed. It has not fully penetrated people's awareness what this really means... It should really be that, likewise, people in the West are being asked questions. If you come here and ask me questions for two-and-a-half hours, that is meaningless. ... it is really I who should put the questions, I mean somebody from the West, somebody from the East. It should be more like a discussion. People from the West come and want to understand, but they do not want to understand themselves. They only ask us. Well, an empire has collapsed... there is something missing, do you understand what I mean?

Personal pain and life review

It was not easy to take this step for me because I knew what had happened in Germany... I was Jewish and I knew my mother would probably be missing and not be there any more. I had had some experience with the Nazis until I was seventeen... I found it very very difficult emotionally to return to that country voluntarily. But on the other hand we were told by our comrades "who else would be there to reshape Germany and rebuild Germany if it's not these few anti-fascists who survived or came out of concentration camps?" because a majority of the Germans had been with Hitler and supported him... and for that reason I thought it was my duty to return to this country



So I returned... I spent fifty years of my life on the wrong horse... [socialism] doesn't work the way I thought it would work, you see, it doesn't work, that's why I say I put myself on the wrong horse... Bitterness was for a long time my feeling. I was absolutely bitter after these changes. Usually, I thought to myself, my God, you have wasted, absolutely wasted your whole life, fifty years of your life you could have done all sorts of things ...

Whose life is it anyway?

Struggling with interpretation



Not being, myself, a feminist, the "female struggle" as such never bothered me in my life. It never occurred to me. I never thought of my position at all in this sense.... Feminism... was of no moment to me - none at all. Privately, it has always seemed ridiculous... So your interpretation of the story as a female struggle for autonomy within a hostile male environment is entirely YOUR interpretation... That it was never - by any wildest stretch of the imagination - the concern of the originator of the story makes such an interpretation a definite and complete distortion. .. The story is no longer MY story at all... it has become *your* story.

-Katherine Borland (1991) "That's Not What I Said"

Resisting the imposition of meaning

... we who were not there always look for something the survivors cannot offer us. ... it is our search for meaning which is disclosed, as if we had to be comforted for what they suffered If we learn anything here it is about life when the search for meaning had to be suspended: we are made to focus on what it was like to exist under conditions in which moral choice was systematically disabled by the persecutors and heroism was rarely possible

- Geoffrey Hartman (1994)

Holocaust remembrance, the shapes of memory



*Aristotle: ethical knowledge stems from
“experience of the actions in life”*

“To live an ethical life is a process of decision making in situation, drawing from culture and history, and not a pattern of just ‘following rules’”

Ken Plummer (2001)