Methods and Ethics in a Life History Study of Teacher Thinking

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During the past decade, there has been an increasing interest in the use of life history and narrative approaches to study teacher thinking and teacher development. Unlike other forms of educational research, in which relationships between researchers and participants are characterized by business-like transactions that rarely extend into the realm of the personal, life history and narrative research can involve relationships that are personal and complex. Such research can also generate massive amounts of data--in the form of field notes, interview transcripts, and other documents--which are very difficult to synthesize. This article presents some of the methodological and ethical issues encountered by the author during a five-year life history study of an experienced urban high school English teacher.

Keywords

Life History, Research Ethics, Teacher Research, Teacher Thinking, and Methodology

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Abstract

During the past decade, there has been an increasing interest in the use of life history and narrative approaches to study teacher thinking and teacher development. Unlike other forms of educational research, in which relationships between researchers and participants are characterized by business-like transactions that rarely extend into the realm of the personal, life history and narrative research can involve relationships that are personal and complex. Such research can also generate massive amounts of data--in the form of field notes, interview transcripts, and other documents--which are very difficult to synthesize. This article presents some of the methodological and ethical issues encountered by the author during a five-year life history study of an experienced urban high school English teacher.

Key Words: Life History, Research Ethics, Teacher Research, Teacher Thinking, and Methodology

During the past decade, there has been an increasing interest in the use of life history and narrative approaches to study teacher thinking and teacher development (see, e.g., Carter, 1993; Casey, 1995; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Cole & Knowles, 2000, 2001; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Elbaz, 1990; Goodson, 1992; Witherell & Noddings, 1991). Consistent with this form of research, I was involved in a five-year collaborative research relationship with Anna (a pseudonym), an experienced high school English teacher at Windrow High School in urban Detroit. (Windrow, a pseudonym, is a comprehensive school with an enrollment of approximately 2400 students, 99.5% of whom are African-American.) Utilizing life history, ethnographic, and narrative approaches, I explored the history and evolution of Anna's beliefs about literacy, and how these beliefs were related to her teaching practices throughout her 25-year career.

The purpose of this article is to highlight some of the methodological and ethical issues that I encountered during my study with Anna, in the hope of informing the thinking and practices of other researchers who may wish to undertake similar kinds of life history studies. I begin with a brief overview of my research methods, followed by an explanation of my personal motivation for engaging in the study. Then, in order to contextualize the methodological and ethical issues that are the main thrust of this article, I summarize Anna's story, which has been published elsewhere in a longer form (Muchmore, 2001). Following this summary of Anna's story, and its implications, I present my solution to what was undoubtedly the most significant challenge that I faced throughout the project--namely, deciding which information to include, and which

information to leave out, as I attempted to transform thousands of pages of fieldnotes, interview transcripts, and other documents into a coherent and meaningful story. To solve this problem, I developed four criteria to apply to my work: relevance, accuracy, necessity, and ethics, with ethics taking precedence over the other three. Finally, in discussing these four criteria, I examine the ethical dimensions of my work and life history research in general--including the value of friendship, the problem with informed consent, the importance of avoiding harm, and the benefits of anonymity.

Methods

My study with Anna utilized life history and ethnographic methods (e.g., Denzin, 1989a, 1989b, 1995; Van Maanen, 1988, 1995; Van Manen, 1990; Wolcott, 1995). To learn about Anna's beliefs and practices, I conducted 10 formal interviews with Anna, plus dozens of informal conversations over a five-year period. I also made approximately 50 visits to her classroom in Detroit, assuming the role of a participant observer and recording fieldnotes. In addition, I spoke with some of her friends, relatives, colleagues, and past and present students--all of whom were familiar, to varying degrees, with her teaching practices and her thinking about literacy. Another source of information included a collection of 19 academic papers that Anna had written for various college courses she had taken throughout her career. In these papers, she regularly discussed issues related to literacy and teaching which provided many insights into her thinking. Finally, she provided me with copies of various professional documents--including newspaper clippings about her, past and present evaluations of her teaching conducted by various school administrators, and other professional documents. Taken together, all of this information enabled me to construct an in-depth narrative portrait of Anna's life as a teacher, with a particular focus on the evolution of her literacy beliefs and teaching practices.

Why Study Teacher Thinking?

My motivation for collaborating with Anna was deeply rooted in my own personal experiences as a public school teacher. As a teacher, I subconsciously thought of myself as a technician hired to implement the policies and curricula that were mandated by the school board or the public law, rather than as a respected professional whose beliefs, opinions, and expertise were truly valued by my employers. Many times, for instance, I felt compelled to engage in practices such as explicit reading skills instruction or formulaic writing assignments--practices that were contrary to my beliefs about the holistic nature of reading and writing and the natural role they play in the lives of children. Like Cook-Gumperz (1986), I believed that literacy was largely a social phenomenon through which individuals came to create meaning in their lives, yet the board-mandated curriculum tended to view it as a mere act of technical competence. As a result, I was continually torn between knowing what I wanted to do in my classroom and often feeling compelled to do just the opposite. But, at the time, I possessed neither the time to reflect nor the ability to name this tension.

Instead, I merely observed my students, noted their distastes, and with a sense of frustration continued to provide them with more of the same--just as I felt I was supposed to. I knew of no other way to deal with this internal conflict. Each day, along with many of the other teachers in my school, I became more and more frustrated with my inability to match my practices to my

beliefs--until gradually, I could feel my frustration being replaced by the cool indifference and heavy cynicism that I had often sensed among some of my older colleagues. I eventually began to view the contrast between my beliefs and my practices as simply "the way things were"-- somewhat of a deep and dark professional secret that every teacher knew about but which no one ever talked about.

Although I do not believe that my story is atypical, it is one that has seldom appeared in the research literature. Although researchers have long suggested that teachers hold theoretical orientations to reading and writing which guide their instructional practices (e.g., Barr & Duffy, 1978; DeFord, 1985; Harste & Burke, 1977), I was aware of no studies that had attempted to understand this issue from a teacher's perspective. What role do teachers' personal life experiences play in their efforts to match their instructional practices to their underlying assumptions about literacy? What strategies do teachers employ? And how do these strategies change or evolve over time? I believed that the answers to these kinds of questions had the potential to build theory and enable teachers' professional development.

Knowing Anna

I first met Anna in the context of a graduate university course in which we were both enrolled more than a decade ago. At the time, Anna was a part-time doctoral student, and a full-time high school English teacher in urban Detroit. The course was structured more like a working research group than a formal class; each week we explored issues concerning student writing, accountability, and portfolio assessment. Throughout our weekly meetings, we regularly shared our insights about writing, students, and teaching in general, and we grew to value the reflective wisdom that Anna brought to the table. With almost 25 years of experience as a classroom teacher, she exuded a quiet confidence in her teaching--and whenever she talked about her classroom, I never sensed any of the underlying dissatisfactions and frustrations that I had experienced as a teacher. As the semester progressed, I found myself wondering how Anna had gotten to this point in her career, and this curiosity gradually evolved into a formal study, with our pre-existing friendship forming the basis for a research relationship.

The following passage, taken from my "thickened" fieldnotes, introduces Anna and conveys the general mood and tenor of our collaboration:

It was a Thursday evening when I conducted my first formal interview with Anna. I had already visited her classroom several times and knew what she did in her classroom. Now, I wanted to learn more about her background as a teacher--including her beliefs about reading and writing and the life experiences that helped to shape them. The interview took place at Anna's house, a brand-new condominium that she had recently purchased. Greeting me at the door and leading me into the dining room, she cheerfully remarked that I was one of the first official visitors to her new home. She then gave me a brief tour before leading me into the dining room.

Anna is not an easy person to describe. Quiet, modest, and unassuming, she is not a self-promoter. She does not relish attention. She would much rather be characterized as an ordinary teacher who has spent her career fumbling around, trying to make things work, than as an expert who has all the answers. Genuinely embarrassed when talking about herself, she is difficult to

know. I have spent many months working with her--years even--yet she has remained an enigma to me in some ways.

On the surface, there is nothing extraordinary about Anna. She comes across as calm, good-natured, and easygoing, with a self-effacing sense of humor that might sometimes cause people to underestimate her. When she speaks, Anna often punctuates her sentences with soft laughter, especially when the conversation is about herself. In talking about her teaching, she evokes an image not unlike the classic television episode of I Love Lucy *in which Lucy and Ethel get jobs in a chocolate factory (Oppenheimer, Carroll, & Pugh, [1952]). Their assignment is to wrap each piece of candy as it goes by on a conveyer belt. The task is manageable at first, but the machine gradually speeds up, forcing the two women to stuff excess candy into their mouths, hats, and blouses in a vain attempt to keep pace. I think Anna sometimes sees her work as a teacher as being similar to Lucy and Ethel in the chocolate factory--trying to keep pace in a world where the conveyer belt is continually speeding up.*

Beneath this self-effacing exterior, however, lies a person with a formidable intellect--someone who is passionate about literature, poetry, and the written word and who has dedicated her life to their study. Anna reminds me of my late grandmother in this regard. Like my grandmother, Anna is a lover of books, a lover of ideas, and she has lived her life in pursuit of this passion. She has focused a great deal of her energy on teaching and scholarly interests. In addition to teaching English at Windrow High School during the daytime, she also teaches in the school's night program a couple of days a week, and she serves on various curriculum committees throughout the school year. During the summer, she coordinates a regional conference for adult writers in Michigan. In her spare time, she takes graduate classes at The University of Michigan, working toward her doctoral degree. Anna sometimes jokes that she has no social life, but she actually has a rich social life--one that is filled with the kinds of activities that she truly loves.

While I was setting up my audiotape recorder on Anna's dining room table and arranging a large pile of fieldnotes that I had recorded in her classroom, Anna was in the kitchen preparing a pot of tea. "I've been looking forward to this interview," she said, returning to the dining room. "This whole experience has been so enlightening to me. The odd thing is that reflecting on my work is not something that I don't do anyway."

"But you usually don't do it with someone else, do you?" I asked, sipping from the cup of hot tea that she had just poured.

"No, not with someone else and not in such a formal way," she replied. "You know, instead of just going back through my old papers and looking for ideas, I've started to look at how things have developed. And I wouldn't do that self-consciously." Anna paused to pour her own cup of tea while I hastily checked my tape recorder to make sure it was still running. Then, continuing, she said, "But I've always cared about what I think and how I came to think the way I do…."

Throughout the ensuing conversation--and the many that followed--Anna and I discussed many topics, ranging from her conceptions of reading and writing, to her approach to students, to her feelings about schooling and education in general. We also discussed elements of her life history, such as her family and early school experiences, her decision to become a teacher, and the evolution of her career as an educator. In the following section, I draw upon these conversations and other information to present an abbreviated version of Anna's life history in order to contextualize the methodological and ethical issues that I discuss later in the article. As stated earlier, a more detailed account of Anna's story has been published elsewhere.

Summary of the Study

Anna's beliefs about literacy were closely linked to her own life-experiences. Growing up with an extended family that included immigrant grandparents who had been sparsely educated and could neither read nor write, she was always very much aware that an individual could have worth and dignity without being literate. "My home experience taught me that people who didn't go to school could be good people and were good people," she said.

It wasn't school alone that made someone valuable. Literacy wasn't something that interfered with a person's moral development or ethical positions or intelligence. That kind of conflict was something clear and constant in my awareness of how adults would treat children in school settings (when they came) with different kinds of skills and non-conventional attitudes toward literacy.

Although Anna always viewed literacy in humanistic and utilitarian terms, her early teaching practices in a Detroit middle school reflected notions of literacy and learning that were more consistent with the official curriculum that she felt obliged to embrace.

In the early years I thought of the students in a deficit mode, that they were coming without skills, and coming without ways of doing the work they needed to do… I saw myself very traditionally as the person who was to mitigate error, sort of stand between these students' texts and the ideal writing… That was my personal model of learning and the way I had been schooled, and as I looked around at what some of my colleagues were doing--the experienced people that I highly regarded--I thought I needed to do the same thing.

Anna worked hard at making this kind of teaching work and was quite successful in the eyes of her supervisors and colleagues. However, she was never fully satisfied with the results. "I knew that kids sitting with that old *Roberts English Series* book in 7th and 8th grade and writing out those transformational grammar sentences was not (productive)," she said.

(The book) had nothing to do with the students. It had very little to do with me… The writing that kids were doing was just reproducing what was in the textbooks, completely remote from their lives. I had little interest in reading it, so we weren't making any connection at all. (But) when we would talk *after* class, kids were dying to tell stories, I was dying to listen, and I knew that there had to be a way to make *that* more central. We would read *other* people's stories and consider *that* legitimate. Why couldn't we listen to kids' own stories and make that a part of the classroom too?

Frustrated with her inability to make these kinds of connections with her students, after eight years of teaching, Anna took a leave of absence from her job in Detroit, moved to another city, and enrolled in graduate school. One year later, she returned to Detroit and accepted a new teaching position at Windrow High School, where she remained for next twenty years. Both she and her colleagues identified this one-year "sabbatical" as a pivotal moment in her career; it marked the beginning of a gradual shift in her classroom practices--a move toward student-centered practices that were much more consistent with her humanistic and utilitarian beliefs about literacy that were spawned by her experiences with her grandparents. "I think overall the

change was very slow and evolutionary. It probably started back with my own uncertainty way at the beginning of my career," she said.

But I stuck with a lot of bad teaching habits because I simply didn't feel able to make those changes. I was young and felt that I was responsible to a system, instead of responsible to children… As a mature teacher, who can look a little differently at systems and feel much less responsible to the system than to the individual students who show up at the door, I know that by serving them, I am being responsible to the system.

In summary, Anna's current pedagogical practices were closely related to her underlying beliefs about literacy, teaching, and students. However, the relationship was not always a close one. Early in her career, Anna possessed a variety of beliefs that arose from a combination of her childhood experiences in school and her university experiences as a preservice teacher. These temporary, school-based beliefs guided many of her early teaching practices. For example, she initially taught reading as a skill with lots of worksheets, and her writing assignments tended to be teacher-directed and formulaic. At the same time, however, Anna possessed a deep core of more permanent beliefs that were strongly rooted in her childhood and adult experiences outside school. For example, remembering her family experiences with her parents and grandparents, she strongly believed that reading and writing were exciting, dynamic activities that had utilitarian functions--but this belief had little initial impact on her early teaching practices. It was not until she tried to implement teaching practices based upon her school-based beliefs, and was dissatisfied with the results, that she gradually began to explore other ways of teaching. Over time, Anna either abandoned or reshaped many of her prior beliefs and drew upon other more stable ones in order to create a functional pedagogy. It was a practical move--one that she made in response to the demands of her job--and the transition was slow, haphazard, and idiosyncratic, with no definite beginning or end. The one thing that remained constant was Anna's desire to be a successful teacher and her commitment to be critically self-reflective about her beliefs and practices.

Learning from Anna's Story

Although an in-depth life history study of the beliefs and practices of a single teacher has little value for making generalizations about other teachers in a statistical sense, it can be extremely useful as a vehicle for elaborating an understanding of one's own beliefs and practices. Donmoyer ([1990](#)) makes a compelling argument for expanding the notion of generalizability to include the learning that people experience when they read about single cases. As a beginning teacher, for example, I would have greatly valued reading narrative accounts of others teachers who had struggled through situations similar to my own--if for no other reason than simply to have known that I was not alone. Teaching is a solitary profession in which practitioners have limited opportunities to interact with their colleagues. As a teacher, I sometimes went for days-- and even weeks--without ever having significant interactions with other adults. Within this isolated existence, reading narrative accounts of other teacher's experiences would have been at least one way that I could have overcome my feelings of isolation.

Narrative accounts of teachers' lives and careers can also serve as tools for self-reflection. Anna's story provides readers with a tool for reflecting upon their own beliefs and practices. By actively

weighing Anna's experiences against their own evolving life stories, readers may gain deeper insights into the underlying beliefs, assumptions, and experiences that shape their own teaching and research practices. Engaging in this kind of self-reflection has been shown to be an essential part of teachers' professional growth and development (see, e.g., Cole & Knowles, 2000; Dick, 1993; Ebbs, 1995/1996; Gustafson, 1993/1995; Holt-Reynolds, 1994; Knowles, 1993; Koivu-Rybicki, 1995/1996; Smith, 1994; Tann, 1993; Winikates, 1995/1996).

An indepth study of a single teacher can also be used to build theory. For example, some researchers have a tendency to view teachers' beliefs as uni-dimensional and interchangeable entities, that can be influenced through direct or indirect interventions (e.g., Bednar, 1993; Ginns & Watters, 1990; Laurenson, 1995; Lubinski, Otto, Rich, & Jaberg, 1995; Ojanen, 1993; Rueda & Garcia, 1994). The goal of such researchers, it seems, is to *change* the thinking of teachers in some way--a goal that they readily admit is extremely difficult to achieve. From my study with Anna, there emerges a theory that may help to explain this difficulty. Perhaps beliefs are not uni-dimensional and interchangeable. Perhaps they exist on varying levels. For example, Anna's beliefs seemed to fall into two broad categories, defined largely on the basis of their usefulness and longevity. On the one hand, there were temporary beliefs that arose primarily through her childhood experiences in school and her university experiences as a preservice teacher. These beliefs proved dysfunctional when she tried to put them into practice, and she therefore abandoned them. On the other hand, there were long-standing beliefs that were, for the most part, deeply rooted in her personal life experiences that transcended school. These beliefs, which had withstood the test of time, were the very essence of who she was as a person, and they were immutable to change. Over time, then, it was her teaching practices that gradually changed, as she made a concerted, career--long effort to develop a pedagogy that was consistent with her most deeply held beliefs.

The relative ineffectiveness of college experiences to influence the long-term thinking of preservice teachers has been well-documented. Zeichner and Tabachnick (1981) have observed that preservice teachers enter college with traditional notions about teaching and learning, temporarily become more progressive or liberal while in college, and then revert to their prior beliefs after they student-teach and enter full-time employment. Similarly, Holt-Reynolds (1994) has shown that preservice teachers often adopt the practices taught in their education methods courses without fully understanding or embracing the theories upon which they are based. They rely heavily upon their pre-existing belief systems, even though these systems may be diametrically opposed to the teaching practices that they are enthusiastically adopting. The story of Anna may help to explain this phenomenon.

If preservice teachers enter college with traditional attitudes toward teaching and learning, which gradually become more progressive while they are in college--but only temporarily--then perhaps it is because their teacher education experiences have not really challenged their existing thinking. My study with Anna suggests that authentic change occurs when one's beliefs have been challenged in some way and found to be lacking. It would seem that the responsibility of teacher educators, therefore, is to figure ways to highlight any acknowledged shortcomings and inconsistencies of preservice teachers' existing beliefs--not so that other beliefs can be mechanically inserted in their place, but rather as a form of self-discovery in which preservice teachers gain insights into their thinking and develop functional pedagogies that are both

theoretically-sound and consistent with who they are as people. In this way, teaching can be understood not as a science, but as an artistic form of self-expression.

Some Methodological Issues

Like many qualitative researchers, I was initially overwhelmed by the sheer volume of paper documents that my research generated. Deciding what to include in my final report--and what to leave out--was not an easy task. My initial impulse was to try to include everything. In the beginning, still heavily influenced by post-positivist notions about research that had been nurtured through my experiences in graduate school, I envisioned myself as a kind of container into which Anna was pouring out her story. I felt that it was my job to preserve and report everything exactly as I had received it. To leave something out, I felt, would be dishonest. However, as my understanding of life history research grew, and my thinking became more consistent with what Denzin and Lincoln (2000) have called the "sixth moment of qualitative research," I realized that this container metaphor was highly inappropriate. Viewing myself as a mere receptacle for Anna's story implied a degree of precision and a degree of certainty that simply did not exist. Anna's stories were much too fluid and changing for me to ever "capture" them in this way. No matter how hard I might try, they would always be incomplete; such is the nature of life history research (Cole & Knowles, 2001). Over time, I began to wonder whether it actually mattered if elements of Anna's story were left out inadvertently or deliberately? In both cases, something would still be missing--and I reasoned that it would be more honest for me to consciously edit Anna's story and reveal my criteria for doing so, than to naively present an inherently incomplete version of her life as if it were "the" definitive account.

Deciding what to include--and what to leave out

My criteria for deciding what to include in my account of Anna's story were based upon the following four questions that emerged throughout my work: 1) Is it relevant? 2) Is it accurate? 3) Is it necessary? and 4) Is it ethical? Failing to find adequate guidance in the literature on life history research, I developed these criteria on my own as a pragmatic response to the massive collection of papers, fieldnotes, interview transcripts, and other documents that lay before me.

Is It Relevant?

In deciding what was relevant, I continually reminded myself of the purpose of the study, which was to understand Anna's beliefs and practices regarding literacy. Thus, I was able to eliminate much extraneous data, which, while interesting, were not directly relevant to the study. For example, I gathered a great deal of information about the history of Windrow High School and could easily have written dozens of pages about its evolution from a modern, orderly, state-of-the-art institution in the 1950s to an aging, underfunded, and sometimes chaotic building in the 1990s where the faculty regularly faced challenges that the school's early teachers could never have imagined. However, such detail would have been far beyond what was needed to establish the historical context of Anna's career.

Similarly, I could have explored issues relating to race and gender. For example, being a white researcher in a school where more than 99% of the students were African-American, I could

have made race a primary focus of my paper. Or, being a male researcher working with a female teacher, I could have focused heavily upon issues of gender. I feel that race and gender are important issues that deserve to be studied. However, because my work with Anna did not evolve from a point of view that was conspicuously rooted in either of these issues, I felt that it was inappropriate for me to make them central to my research after the fact.

Is It Accurate?

In deciding what was accurate, I relied primarily upon my informed judgment, combined with input from Anna. One advantage of doing an in-depth interpretive study with one person which lasts for several years is that a researcher develops a heightened sense of what is true--an ability to see beyond initial impressions (Charmaz, 1995). By "truth," I am not referring to the correspondence of a set of facts to an objective reality that exists outside of human thought. Instead, I am referring to the correspondence of a set of facts to the subjective reality that was negotiated between Anna and me throughout our years of collaboration. And, beyond mere facts, I am referring to the internal coherence and consistency of her story and the extent to which it conveys some aspect of her persona. Does it sound like Anna? Does it accurately convey the mood of her classroom? Throughout our collaboration, these were questions that Anna herself continually helped me to answer.

Whenever I wrote something--whether it was fieldnotes, interview transcripts, or rough drafts of my paper--I always shared it with Anna and solicited her feedback. At the same time, however, I was mindful of her time constraints and the potential burdens posed by my requests. Thus, I generally left it up to Anna to decide how much she was willing and able to do, recognizing that there was a fine line between neglecting her input and demanding too much.

Is It Necessary?

In deciding what to include, I also continually asked myself whether or not particular pieces of information were necessary--both to the story that I was telling and to the overall quality of my writing. Because the effectiveness of interpretive research rests largely in the nature and quality of its presentation, I sometimes left out relevant and accurate information simply for the sake of rhetorical integrity. Paying careful attention to the craft of my writing, I tried to chose those stories or vignettes that best represented the developing themes that I had identified, and I attempted to weave them into what I hoped was a rich and compelling prose. For instance, when I described Anna's life and career, I excluded a great deal of information that was redundant or might otherwise have detracted from the quality of my writing due to its sheer volume. With hundreds of pages of interview transcripts from which to draw, I had to be selective, choosing representative passages to exemplify particular themes rather than trying to include everything.

Occasionally, the information that I included was influenced by my own human limitations. On some days I simply had more time and energy to devote to my work, and the fieldnotes that I produced on these days tended to be more thorough and complete. Thus, when crafting my writing, I often included excerpts from these more polished fieldnotes, and excluded others, merely because the quality of my writing made it easier for me to incorporate them into my work. Nevertheless, I often did go back and expand upon sets of under-developed fieldnotes at

times--especially when they dealt with important themes that did not appear elsewhere in my fieldnotes in a more polished form.

Is It Ethical?

Finally, in deciding whether or not it was ethical to include something in my writing, I was guided by Kant ([1785/1959](#)), who maintains that we should always treat people as ends in themselves, never as merely the means to an end. Following this tenet, I tried to show the utmost respect for Anna, her students, and her colleagues. This means that I did not include personal information that might cause someone undue embarrassment, and I did not include personal information that Anna asked me to keep "off the record." I also excluded the gossip about teachers, students, and administrators that I overheard while visiting the school, even though much of it was quite interesting and was even relevant to my study. Throughout my work, I always placed ethical considerations above the criteria of necessity, relevance, and accuracy--reasoning that there were enough interesting, relevant, and accurate stories for me tell without delving into issues that violated the mutual trust and respect that Anna and I had worked so hard to build and maintain.

Such a stance raises an important issue, however. If I deferred to the participants in deciding what to include and what to leave out, then what prevents there from being a muted, distorted, and diluted version of events? What confidence do readers have that they are getting the "truth?" Ultimately, I decided that this concern was unwarranted because it assumes that there is only one way to tell a story. It assumes a singular reality. I can tell a story that accurately conveys the tenor and ambiance of a situation without revealing *every* aspect of it with which I am familiar. As I learned throughout my work with Anna, it is impossible to record *everything*. Some things have to be left out, if for no other reason than there is not enough space to include them. Furthermore, researchers' choices must be informed by considerations beyond mere editorial concerns. They must be informed by ethical considerations, as researchers meticulously weigh their obligations to the participants against those to prospective readers. In the remainder of this article, I elaborate upon some of the ethical issues that are inherent in all life history and ethnographic studies and describe how Anna and I approached them.

Walking an Ethical Tightrope

Unlike other forms of educational research, in which relationships between researchers and participants are characterized by business-like transactions that rarely extend into the realm of the personal, life history and ethnographic approaches can involve relationships that are personal and complex. For example, what gave me the right to study Anna? Who was I to interpret her life as a teacher? What obligations did I have to Anna? …to her students? …to her colleagues? And what obligations did they have to me? These are some questions that I grappled with throughout the study.

There is no set of hard and fast rules for ensuring ethical behavior in life history and ethnographic research (see, e.g., Cassell, [1982](#); Clandinin & Connelly, [2000](#); Lincoln, [1990](#); Magolda & Robinson, [1993](#); Measor & Sikes, [1992](#); Punch, [1994](#)). There are only guiding principles. Because ethical dilemmas are usually deeply embedded within the contexts of the

situations in which they arise, what may be ethical behavior in one circumstance may not be ethical in another. For instance, it is not always ethical for a researcher to share with the participants "everything" that he or she has written, as I did with Anna. One of my colleagues once told me of an ethnographic study that he conducted on the organizational management of a large company. He entered into this study with the promise that he would help the company by sharing whatever he learned. When it came time to disseminate his findings, however, he realized that some of the information he collected--while possessing a great deal of value to the existing research literature--had little or no potential value to the research participants. In fact, given the politics of the workplace, he felt that it might actually be harmful. It had the potential to cause ill-feelings among some of the company's employees and perhaps damage their working relationships. In the end, he decided to exclude this kind of information from the report that he shared with the company, while including it in an article that he later published in a scholarly journal. It was not an easy decision, he said. On the one hand, he felt ethically obliged to share "everything" with the research participants, while; on the other hand, he knew that such a stance was hopelessly naive. He chose a compromise--one that he hoped would preserve the work climate of the company while simultaneously serving his need to publish (in order to gain tenure and thus keep his job).

The Value of Friendship

Anna and I began our collaboration as friends and colleagues and because our pre-existing friendship was based on ideals of honesty, parity, trust, and mutual respect, it was only natural that our research relationship continued with these same ideals. Anna was involved in every phase of the project, and we were fortunate to have never experienced any significant rifts in our friendship. Nevertheless, someone once asked me, "What if you had discovered during your research that you no longer liked Anna as a person? What if she had turned out to be completely different from the person you thought she was? What would you have done?" I responded, "It definitely would have changed my research--and perhaps even ended it. I am certain that if Anna had suddenly made this same kind of realization about me, then she would definitely have ended it. Even if we had been able to work through such a problem, it certainly would have changed the tenor of our relationship. It would have been much more difficult for me to write about Anna and share my work with her if I did not like her as a person."

Lee (2001) describes this same dilemma in her ethnographic study of an experienced elementary principal. While not basing her study on a pre-existing friendship like I did with Anna, Lee did admire the principal at the onset of her fieldwork, and tried to involve him as much as possible in the research process. Over time, however, she was shocked to discover that the principal was engaging in unethical and illegal behavior in his job. She responded by adopting a critical stance in her study, which she felt was within the bounds of the research relationship they had previously negotiated. The principal, however, felt threatened by these revelations and began to avoid Lee. While not officially withdrawing from the study, he did stop communicating with her--except to threaten a lawsuit when she attempted to elicit his feedback on a preliminary draft. Lee eventually completed the study, acknowledging, "both the researcher and the researched had fallen short of (their) ethical ideals" (p. 71).

The Problem with Informed Consent

Recognizing the importance of maintaining an open and honest dialogue throughout the study, Anna and I spent a great deal of time talking about the ethical dimensions of my work. She once told me about a conversation that she had with a mutual acquaintance, whom we both knew professionally. Several months earlier, when my research was just beginning, I had told this person about my work with Anna, and it had come up again in their conversation. Our friend was highly indignant about what I was doing. "How dare he!" she had stated to Anna, wanting to know what gave me the right to study Anna's life. Hearing about this incident forced me to stop and think about a difficult question. What did give me the right to study Anna's life? On one level, the answer rested with Anna herself. After all, it was she who has given me the right to study her life. It was she who has consented. But was her informed consent enough?

Under the guidelines of the National Research Act, a law first passed by the United States Congress in 1970, researchers in the United States are obliged to obtain the "informed consent" of those whom they study. This means that researchers must tell their subjects, in advance, about the risks and benefits of their proposed participation and advise them that they are free to withdraw from the study at any time. To ensure compliance with this mandate, hospitals, universities, and other institutions require that all studies involving human subjects be submitted to specially-formed Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) for approval. For me, this process involved the filling out of a rather lengthy form, which turned out to be much more of a bureaucratic hurdle than a truly useful exercise.

The problem was that the process was based upon a model of research which did not honor the kind of relationship that undergirded my work with Anna. For instance, I was required to complete a questionnaire that asked, among other things, how I had recruited my subjects. "Be sure to specify the exact wording of requests, notices, or advertisements." Since I had neither "recruited" Anna in the sense that was implied by the question, nor did I regard her as my "subject" in a traditional researcher/ subject relationship, I considered the question to be highly inappropriate--and even offensive.

Another question asked me to indicate whether my study involved the use of deception, punishment, drugs, covert observation, physical harm, and so forth…. The list went on, dealing entirely with the most egregious kinds of unethical conduct imaginable--none of which were applicable to my situation. Far more relevant to my kind of study would have been questions such as the following: What information will you share with the research participants? What information will you withhold? Why? How will you resolve disputes if the participants disagree with your findings? Will you disseminate them above their objections? Zeni (2001) provides a list of additional questions that may be useful to consider in planning and conducting this kind of research.

Finally, the IRB wanted to see a copy of Anna's signed Informed-Consent Form--as if such a document was all that was needed for my study to be deemed "ethically correct." In research where direct human contact is usually minimal and there is a high degree of certainty about what will happen as the study unfolds, obtaining informed consent is relatively straightforward and unproblematic. Life history and ethnographic research, on the other hand, typically involve the establishment of deep and sometimes prolonged interpersonal relationships that continually change and evolve over time. In this kind of research, there is often a great deal of uncertainty

about how a study will evolve and what kinds of risks the participants will ultimately face, and it is simply impossible to obtain informed consent through a single a priori encounter. Instead, as Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggest, it must be continually negotiated and re-negotiated within the context of a caring relationship between the researcher and the participant throughout the entire duration of the study.

IRB's could become more responsive to the needs of life history researchers, if they focused more on the unique and varied ethical issues that arise in human relationships, rather than on forcing compliance with legalistic procedures. However, given the history and tradition of IRBs as bureaucratic entities mandated by law, such a change in focus is unlikely. It is instead incumbent upon life history researchers to think deeply and continually about the ethics of their work, with the full realization that the IRB process may not be particularly helpful in this regard.

Doing No Harm

In agreeing to collaborate with me in a study of her beliefs and practices, Anna made herself vulnerable to several levels of potential harm against which I felt ethically obliged to protect her. It was conceivable, for example, that my research could have undermined her relationship with her students, created dissension among her colleagues, or even caused her to lose her job. Throughout our work together, I attempted to minimize the potential for these kinds of harm. On the first day of school, I introduced myself to each of her classes, telling them who I was and why I was there. I also carefully explained my research to any of Anna's colleagues who inquired about my presence at Windrow High School. I viewed myself as a kind of guest at Windrow, and I made every effort to treat my hosts--the students, the faculty, and the administration--with dignity and respect.

However, as Cassell (1982) notes, harm in qualitative research is most likely to occur not in the course of daily interactions between the research participants, but in the course of writing and dissemination. The literature is filled with instances of researchers who have caused anger and dissension among those whom they have studied simply because of the ways in which they have written and disseminated their findings (Johnson, 1982). In one such instance, an anthropologist studied a small, rural town in the United States and later wrote a book detailing his findings. Apparently, most of the town members did not fully understand his role as an anthropologist; they thought that he was simply recording the history their town. Thus, when the book was published, many townspeople were highly disturbed to see some of the most intimate details of their lives recorded in print. Even though the author had attempted to protect his informants by using pseudonyms, their true identities were easily recognizable to anyone familiar with the area. Fifteen years later, another anthropologist who visited the town was surprised to discover that the local library's copy of the book had the real names of all the individuals penciled in next to their pseudonyms (Johnson, 1982). Even after all those years, some of the community members were still visibly upset about the ways in which they had been portrayed.

While I have gone to great lengths to avoid such a scenario in my study with Anna, there are still issues regarding dissemination over which I have little control. For example, when I interpreted Anna's life, I may have done so with a sense of respect and responsibility, but once my work has been disseminated, I have little control over how someone else might interpret or use it. People

come to texts with all kinds of prior conceptions and agendas, and they may inadvertently (or purposely) cause harm or discomfort to Anna. It is possible, for instance, that she may be unfairly criticized--or, she may be lauded as an exemplary teacher, which is one outcome that she particularly wanted to avoid. She made it clear that she did not want to be held up as an exemplar, and I tried not to present her in this way in my writing. However, my good intentions will do little to prevent someone else from holding her up as an exemplar, or criticizing her unfairly.

To mitigate these kinds of risk, Anna and I decided to use a pseudonym instead of her real name. Even though it may be a thin disguise for her real identity, just by having a pseudonym, we felt that we would be sending an implicit message to anyone who reads my work that Anna was not seeking attention--and we believed that readers would then have an ethical responsibility to honor her desire to remain anonymous. While this stance may afford Anna some degree of protection from outsiders, we realized that the use of a pseudonym offers little protection to Anna, her students, or her colleagues from knowledgeable insiders. Colleagues, students, administrators, and other school personnel will ultimately know exactly who she is, no matter how well we try to protect her identity. Therefore, I depended greatly upon Anna herself to help minimize this risk. Because she knew the people and the politics of her work environment much better than I did, I relied upon her to critically read my work and tell me when she felt something might have been problematic.

The Benefits of Anonymity

Anonymity has traditionally been viewed as a fundamental component of any research involving human subjects. Long perceived as a valuable instrument for protecting research participants against possible harm, it is typically offered almost as a "knee-jerk" response, with little or no thought given to the ultimate consequences. Recently, however, some researchers, such as Schulz (1997), have begun to question the practice of stripping research participants of their true identities and thus depriving them of any credit for their contributions. From this perspective, anonymity is seen as a pernicious tool for marginalizing research participants, and Schulz maintains that it is a "matter of ethics not to ensure anonymity, but rather to give full naming credit to the co-participants in a study" (p. 104).

Anna and I grappled with this dilemma again and again throughout our work together. The reason that we originally chose to use a pseudonym instead of her real name was to protect her, her students, her colleagues, and her school from potential harm. Initially, however, I was much more concerned about this than was Anna. Not only was I concerned about the unknown risks that might emerge when my findings were disseminated, but I also felt that using a pseudonym was an important part of the research protocol--a well-established tradition that we ought not violate.

Over time, however, the issue became much more complex for us, and we vacillated. Did we really want use a pseudonym? Some of the early drafts of my work contained her real name, while others did not. Ultimately, we decided to stick with the pseudonym because we began to recognize that there were benefits to having anonymity beyond simply providing protection. For example, we recognized that using a pseudonym created a useful persona that enabled critique.

Because of the fictive nature of life history research, lives are not simply recorded verbatim. Instead, they are created and interpreted for public critique. Through her pseudonym of "Anna," the real Anna became a fictive creation that could be interpreted and re-interpreted as a text. As "Anna," she is subject to any reader's interpretation and revision, and she is available for public critique. In contrast, the real Anna is not comfortable in this role, and she does not invite critique.

Anna once told me that she felt much more comfortable reading about "Anna" than reading about herself when I used her real name. She explained,

You are creating the character that I play--the role that I have enacted as a teacher--but I am not limited by those descriptions. (Unlike 'Anna'), I can continue to grow and change. My beliefs about literacy will continue to evolve, (whereas Anna's will forever be frozen in the text.)

In this sense, the use of a pseudonym empowered the real Anna to move beyond the "Anna" that I had created in the text. It enabled her to feel at ease in the way that I had characterized her in my writing. In addition, this distance between the fictive creation of "Anna" and the real Anna--and the comfort that it instilled in her--empowered me as a researcher. I felt like I could take more risks without thinking, "I don't want to show this to her. What if it hurts her feelings? What if she is upset by it? What if she is so offended that she quits the study?" Knowing that Anna felt removed from "Anna," enabled me to explore her life and career in ways that I would not have felt comfortable in attempting if we had been using her real name.

Conclusion

Unlike other forms of teacher research--which are based upon an objective, logical-deductive view of knowledge characterized by hypothesis testing and statistical analyses--life history and ethnographic approaches are consistent with the belief that teaching is a complex, personal endeavor shaped by influences beyond those which can be identified through rating scales, surveys, and narrowly focused observations. Because life history studies typically involve the formation of human relationships that are far more complex than the limited, impersonal, business-like transactions that characterize traditional studies, their ethical dimensions cannot be effectively addressed through typical standardized procedures, such as simply using pseudonyms or obtaining the approval of an Institutional Review Board. Instead, ethical issues must be continually dealt with at every phase of a life history research project, with the recognition that every study is unique and there are no universal prescriptions for ensuring ethical behavior.

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