

# **'It didn't seem to be like that when I was there': ethical dilemmas of representing lives**

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In any biographical account, there are at least two points of view, and multiple representations of one life story. An agreement is made at the outset of the dialogue to represent the 'truth' in the story. But what if the truth is equivocal or disagreeable? Current ethical recommendations urge the review of transcripts by the individual, providing an opportunity for change and clarification. But beyond that, what rights does the subject have over the story and in what ways should the researcher address the possibility of pain caused by representing that individual?

Annie and Judith trod this delicate path when Annie, who was researching the lives of colonial women in East Africa, interviewed Judith. Judith subsequently attended a conference where Annie gave a paper on her research. What ensued was an emotional dialogue around portraying and being portrayed.

This experience raised ethical questions about research participant's anonymity and the use of voice and pseudonyms. The re-writing and presentation process highlighted temporal and authorial issues as well as shortcomings in current ethical practices. This paper is a collaborative venture exploring the co-authors' attempts to represent a life and the mutual shaping of ethics and truth.

## **Introduction**

This paper traces the journey of a research relationship between a participant, Judith, and a researcher, Annie, and the many factors shaping this relationship.

We focus on the ethics and complexities of telling a life story, in the way we experienced them. We also discuss a third party, the 'listener,' since our paper was triggered by what transpired on an occasion when part of Judith's life story was presented by Annie at a conference. This change in listener to a conference audience highlighted how collective memory (in this case surrounding colonial history) impacts on a person's experience of telling their story.

We are each going to describe what happened to us from our own perspective. The 'findings' we present are the result of many conversations we have had, retracing the considerations, decisions and expectations that guided us. Our discussion will draw out the elements of the research relationship that are often hidden or become an automatic, unconscious process of carrying out 'ethical' social research. We therefore hope to highlight the value of making more involved ethical decisions by demonstrating how these decisions can impact on those we represent in research. Whilst our discussion is interspersed with possible interpretations of our encounter we have retained the main dialogue as a story, which is followed by a conclusion that considers some of its wider implications.<sup>1</sup>

Before beginning our own stories however, we will discuss the ethical guidelines governing research in our fields, which allude to the relationship developed between a researcher and the participants they represent. They critically emphasize the events in our story: As researchers, we are bound by these codes of conduct and generally assume that if followed, we are conducting an ethical project. We suggest that these ethical guidelines have been developed from a research paradigm that is not necessarily suited to the specific needs of biographically based narrative research. The danger here is that researchers might automatically comply with these recommendations, taking their ethics for granted without fully considering their implications.

Firstly, in engaging in informed consent, it was assumed that the confidentiality and anonymity of participants should be maintained unless specific directions are given otherwise.<sup>2</sup> In practice, seeking permission to use personal data can be complex and the difficulty arises that researchers do not always know in advance exactly how and why data will be used. At what point of the research process can 'informed' permission therefore be sought by a researcher, or waived by a participant? If instead, consent is seen as a process rather than a given and is therefore renegotiated over time, we can see the beginnings of acknowledgement that the representation of research participants is not only about communicating information; it is also about creating relationships. (Gergen and Gergen, 2002: 12; Graham et al, 2007: 7) Precisely because of the ongoing and unpredictable nature of research, we feel that open-ended negotiation of consent over time is perhaps the most viable solution.

(Sin, 2005)<sup>3</sup>

Even if we consider that consent should be negotiated with participants, guidelines still warn us of the intrusive impact that research can have on their

lives. For some, this might be positive and enlightening, however for others can disturbingly create 'uncalled for self-knowledge.'<sup>4</sup> An impact is even more likely in this type of research since narrative is a vehicle by which people (re)construct their identities. (MacIntyre, 2007) Clearly every effort should be made to alleviate any distress for participants for as Denzin (1989) suggests:

...the lives and stories that we hear and study are given to us under a promise, that promise being that we protect those who have shared with us...we must remember that our primary obligation is always to the people we study, not to our project or to a larger discipline. (83)

This emphasis on participant harm hints towards a sense of protectionism and begs questions about which participants would be deemed capable (or not) of making decisions about their participation and consent. (Sin, 2005: 180-1) Further dilemmas are thrown up for the researcher: how do we negotiate issues that participants might not want to confront? And how is social research to have some effect without impacting on the lives of participants?

Bearing in mind this possibility of causing disturbing self-knowledge that we are warned of the final guideline that perplexed us was how, or at what point, researchers should (or even could) clarify the extent to which participants are to be involved in research.<sup>5</sup> This relates to suggestions that participants see transcripts of their interviews and become involved in the interpretation process. Following our experience, we would ask how and when the researcher is to clarify these elements. If consent is a negotiated process, at what point can a researcher judge whether they feel participants could evaluate their interpretations of fieldwork they have conducted with them? Inevitably, the reviewing of transcripts will result in self-knowledge, so in what ways can researchers ensure this does not become 'uncalled for,' or anxiety provoking?

A recent government study into participants' responses to ethical issues in social research has raised concerns that strongly relate to our experiences. (Graham et al, 2007)<sup>6</sup> It acknowledges the benefits of approaches such as ongoing negotiation of consent and increased involvement of participants, however expresses reservations over the routes taken to achieve them. The report highlights that lack of information and experience in giving informed consent can make the appropriate engagement of participants difficult. This suggests that in order to conduct research in an ethical manner, researchers require a skilled understanding of the nuances of the ethical issues involved in order to suitably address them.

With biographical and narrative inquiries involving unpredictable and sometimes ambiguous directions, its emotional impact cannot necessarily be controlled. Narratives can, 'confront interlocutors with unanticipated emotions and ideas and ultimately with unanticipated selves.' (Ochs and Capps, 1996: 37) This is equally as important when representing such work, as it requires

the emotional engagement of its readers. (Erben, 1998: 4) The reader therefore also warrants greater acknowledgement within ethical considerations; and should participants be warned of the unpredictable turns and outcomes of this type of research?

Research is an unpredictable and revealing activity. Sin (2005) suggests that researchers should, 'engage in an open-ended moral conversation' throughout their research and we acknowledge that our conversations are still ongoing. (290) In a similar approach to the dialogue between Bochner and Rushing, (2002) we hope to 'demystify' some of the processes involved in representing a person's life. We feel that including the awkward moments or conflicts that occur in research encounters and within research accounts, provides valuable material for the interpretation, reconsideration and revision of research guidelines, as well as for the interpretation of research itself. We do not suggest that this is a closer representation of truth. The nuances within our dialogue are only a further reminder of the constructed and partial nature of all representation. (Fontana and Frey, 2005: 718) And so we begin...

#### Annie:

I will begin my story by giving some of the background which led to us writing this paper. It starts with my PhD research on women and colonialism. I have been conducting oral history interviews with women who lived in colonial east Africa aged between 50 and 90, and I compare these with other representations of those women from different sources, including books and archives documenting that period. I use oral history to access and consider alternative versions of history; but also want to explore how individuals present their oral histories in the light of these different representations that are often seen to be quite critical of colonial lives.

A little information about my personal motivations behind the research is also relevant here. I was born in Indonesia when my parents were living and working there on a Voluntary Service Overseas project. Though we did not stay for long after I was born and I do not remember it directly, it has been a big influence on my family's life and my identity. We were living there over 30 years after Indonesia's latest colonial period and I had never thought of my family's life there in terms of a colonial presence. When I began researching the field of East Africa however, there were elements from other people's stories that I recognised within my own family. The photographs in Figures 1 and 2 have formed some of my memories and they demonstrate how I have constructed my own story of that part of my life. One of the strongest associations I have with Indonesia is my mother carrying me in a batik selendang (the sling in Figure 1). She also carried my younger brother like this much later when we lived in London, so it became incorporated into our family routines. Figure 2 is a photograph of me being carried by our family servant, Patima. Much like

Judith when recalling how she felt about a photograph picturing her with the family cook (shown later in Figure 4), I too had always thought this demonstrated some connection or closeness between Patima, Indonesia and myself.



Fig. 1 Annie being held by her mother in a batik selendang, Bandung, Indonesia, 1980.1980.



Fig. 2 Annie being held by the family servant Patima in the same selendang, and pictured with older brother, Bandung, Indonesia, 1980.

At the beginning of my research, I felt many anxieties about working with these women. They related a lot to what I perceived to be a lack of knowledge and experience, and questioning how I could represent something that I had not lived through. I found that I began to use the Indonesian part of my own story to convey a sense of understanding for participants' lives abroad; of implanting quite a culturally different way of life in a foreign country and of developing relationships with Indonesians, albeit with some in their capacity as servants. Sometimes this helped to overcome the situations I had no control over, such as age or generational difference which would usually imply that I had little understanding of the women's past way of life. By using my past to convey a sense of empathy, I managed internal and external aspects of my 'self' to influence the relationships I formed with participants and interpret the narratives I have collected.

#### Judith:

It was by chance that Annie and I met. We were attending an educational research seminar in Southampton. I had to move to be able to see the speaker

and I sat next to Annie who told me that she was gathering the stories of older colonial women for her PhD research. Being an 'older woman' brought up in Kenya I fell into conversation and found myself, within a couple of weeks, being interviewed about the impact of my colonial upbringing on my subsequent life. Annie is an engaging and encouraging person and I relished the opportunity to tell my unique story. Also, I was embarking on my educational doctorate and was studying autobiographical methodology so I thought that this would be an opportunity to learn more about interviews first hand. I happily recounted tales from my childhood and reflected on the type of person I was today, as a result of those experiences. That took an hour and I even asked her if she would like to come back as I had more to tell!

I had given verbal and written consent for my story to be used in her research and even agreed, without hesitation, to a copy of the audiotape being archived, for the use of future researchers. I wasn't ashamed of my story and if it helped others understand a particular lived life, I was happy for people to access it, tears, joys, ponderings and all. Indeed, I was proud of my story and gave no thought to what would happen to it, or to myself in its subsequent telling. The extent of my thinking at that time was that it would simply become part of a 'paper exercise' with excerpts used anonymously (for that is what I thought the consent form had guaranteed) alongside other histories to explain or refute some theory Annie was exploring. With a sense of self-importance, I hoped I would be quoted frequently, and by that I also mean favourably.

Annie sent me a hard copy of the transcript and a CD of the audio recording and asked me to review what I had said and make changes if I felt it necessary. Far from being intrigued and excited to read and listen to what I had said, I found that I did not like to listen to my voice (it sounded very strange to me!) and I found the transcribed verbal fumbblings embarrassing. I therefore skipped through the story and assumed that the transcript was accurate. Anyway how could I change it? That is what I had felt and said at the time. Indeed, I was being given the chance to 'sanitise' the script but I obviously could not change the audio tape. Failing deleting parts, it was there for posterity! And anyway I wondered about the ethics of re-presenting myself at this later stage. In a funny way however, I did feel disappointed. This was a 'warts and all' representation created by myself. I certainly wished I was a better storyteller and wondered how Annie would be able to pull themes and succinct excerpts out of all the verbiage (17 pages of single line spacing and font size 11 writing!) My expectations of being a 'hero' in her story faded.

It was not until a year later when Annie told me she was writing a paper for a women's history conference that I even thought about my interview again. Given the work that I was doing for my doctorate, I said I would like to come along to hear her presentation. Annie, bravely I thought, acquiesced and sent me a rough draft of her paper, asked my opinion on what she had said and requested to play a recorded extract from my story. Not being from a social

science background I have to say that I found reading Annie's text quite a complex undertaking. Therefore, despite having been given the draft it was not until I actually heard the paper at the conference that I started to recognise the focus and use of my story. It was at this stage that the agreement I thought I had made for using my story was challenged. I hadn't signed up to have my life judged, and my story ridiculed!

#### **Annie:**

I had used a consent form intending to seek 'ethical' participation with reference to all of the guidelines we mentioned earlier. This also acted as a copy-right form, with the faint hope of archiving my interviews after I had finished using them. I also thought that this helped them to be seen as an asset in themselves and not just for use in my own research.<sup>7</sup> Although I had attempted to address some of these complexities through the consent form and discussions with Judith, presenting the work in public with her present suddenly upset the foundations that I had tried to establish through implicit agreement and formal consent, emphasising the shared nature of the story.

Still, I was determined to try to present the 'full' story of Judith and the other woman the paper was about. I knew this was going to be difficult but I wanted to understand and represent the narratives in a 'faithful' way. I had always felt that typed transcripts can easily remove the authority of the narrator and so to address this problem I sometimes use the recorded voice when presenting my interpretations (where I have permission). This also implies however, that I believe recordings are a more accurate expression of life experience and of the shared research encounter.

Playing the extract did mean however that it would not be possible to maintain Judith's anonymity. Still, agreeing that the recording would bring something important, we decided that since she was going to attend the conference, the most flexible way for me to do this was to use a pseudonym of her choice, 'Peggie', which would allow her not to be so easily identified. This, of course, has its own ethical and practical implications. (Baez, 2002; Grinyer, 2002; Nesper, 2000) Playing the recording brought additional layers of meaning, but I was not expecting there to be any big surprises for Judith, having already shown her the paper and tried to incorporate some of her feedback. In fact, my anxieties were mainly self-centred, about presenting at a women's history conference but not being trained as a historian myself. I didn't want Judith to witness the audience saying my paper was a load of rubbish. My anticipation was in terms of the 'correctness' of my interpretation of her story, rather than the limited or patchy ways I had represented it, which later became the biggest issue. As research becomes more of a public and involved activity, questions about academic interpretations of personal life stories become increasingly relevant, as do those concerning the authority and identity of the individuals involved.

In the paper that I gave, I used Judith, or Peggie's story, alongside that of a woman called Mrs Travers, forty years her senior, who had also lived in Kenya at the same time. I had suggested that coming near to the end of her life, Mrs Travers was attempting to present more of a complete story of her success as a settler-farmer. She was not so prepared to challenge the colonial foundations of that life, by asking questions about how it would be viewed now. I was trying to use Judith's story to demonstrate how someone much younger had actually asked these questions of her past; she brought contemporary interpretations of colonialism into her story whilst others left their stories in the past, unchallenged alongside present day attitudes. With the best intentions, I was perhaps not so successful at presenting this interpretation.

### **Judith:**

Prior to the conference, Annie and I joked about how it would be for her to have me sitting in the audience listening to her telling parts of my story. I said I was nervous too. I anxiously hoped that my story would be 'good enough' for Annie's paper; that it would be a good illustration of the message that she wanted to convey. I was pleased that she had chosen the bit with, 'It didn't seem to be like that when I was there', because I felt it showed that I was aware of the difficulties of trying to tell what actually happened in my life so many years ago to a present day audience.



*Fig. 3 Mount Kenya. Judith contributed this photograph for Annie to use in her original paper.*

The opening slide with its picture of Mount Kenya sent me off on a memory trip (see Figure 3). I disengaged with the first few minutes of Annie's talk. Then I forced myself to listen. When I heard her say my name 'Peggie' a tear sprang to my eye. I was surprised at my heightened emotional reaction. Perhaps I should not have used my mother's name as my pseudonym. After

all, it was not her story, although of course she was part of it. Sadly she would never be able to tell her story. I thought then that I had been lucky to have been interviewed and been able to tell my story. So I settled back to listening to the paper. The photographs in the presentation were exciting, as were the voiceovers when Mrs Travers was talking. You got a really good feel for her. A feisty woman. 'Typical colonial' I felt myself saying.

Sometimes I had difficulty hearing Annie's voice; what she was saying was lost as my mind thought about Mrs Travers' story. Then it was time for my excerpt. Wow, what would people think of me?! Gosh I sounded so 'posh'... and hesitant. Oh dear, it sounds so disjointed. What was I trying to say? Then, as I concluded, I heard a sharp in-take of breath and saw two women looking at each other in an 'eyes rolling' way. 'That's meeeee', I wanted to scream, 'and you're judging me! But it's not really me; it's only a small part of my story! Unlike Annie, you haven't heard or read the five minutes of personal reflection and deliberation in the interview that led up to these jumbled comments. If you had been aware of the original context it may have made it more understandable to you'.

### **Annie:**

Words are all that a biographer has to represent someone's life in narrative and we acknowledged earlier the need to do justice to the stories that participants have entrusted to us. As stories are represented, this trust is also expected of the reader. In this case, it was difficult to do justice to the past context being represented; 'to come to come to terms with the complexity of representation' contained in Judith's words. (Scott and Usher, 1999: 147) She had used words that historically were appropriate to her past life and experiences, however in and of themselves they were not acceptable to an audience with a different memory of colonialism.

Below is the excerpt that I played, which caused disquiet amongst the audience and challenged the assumptions we had made in our research agreement. We do not want to provoke the same reaction now by reproducing it. Rather, we want to consider why the audience at the time lost the emphasis that I had intended and how this impacted on our research relationship.

### **Judith:**

This time I do have a chance to add that despite my apparent confusion in the excerpt, I want to leave you in no doubt that my moral values have adapted over the years.

And you know you think well those people should be accountable because they were horrendous atrocities, but it was only twenty years maybe even ten years before that, that the Brits were doing the same to the Mau Mau so, why shouldn't they be account-

able. And you think, oh no, there's got to be two ways of looking and judging the system. Because it didn't seem to be like that when I was there. And I do find myself getting quite defensive, in fact I have difficulty engaging in arguments about it because I can see that, probably some of the stuff that we did was terrible, brutal.

And when you think about how we kept our servants, you know in these mud huts and things like that. But it was actually a whole lot better than them living on their reserves, in poverty and, you know we at least, allowed them, to see a better life. Oh, very difficult, it's very difficult...

**Annie:**

After I played it, the excerpt hit the audience in different ways, leaving questions about how we build up the picture of the narrator for an audience in the limited time and space in which we have to present a paper. Experience or inexperience of presenting someone's life story would also have a bearing on how well someone's life is represented. Did my inexperience contribute to the audience's reaction? We also suggest however, that the audience's own memories of colonialism were a part of that reaction: the research context had a life of its own as a result of the ambivalent collective memory Britain has to its imperial past. Since readers interpret stories through the filter of their own life, (Denzin, 1989: 26) we suggest that audiences should be prepared in ways that are sensitive to their decontextualisation. We can never tell a full story when representing someone's life so perhaps it is more a question of minimising the damage caused by attempting to.

**Judith:**

The overwhelming feeling that I was left with was a sense of being judged. In telling part of my story in this short excerpt, my whole life was judged by the audience. Judged for something that I did not do; for someone who I really am not now...and by people who did not know what it was like when I was there. I felt I had been judged and found myself wanting.

I now feel angry at myself for not being more articulate at the time of the interview. In retrospect, I am upset that I spoke from the heart rather than giving more thoughtful responses. I am irritated that I was unable to put across more fairly the life led by a colonial, so that a present day audience would be able to comprehend the lived lifestyle, the dilemmas faced in an emerging, colonial power-based society; so that they would understand, not judge.

But that was how I told my story at the time. I only had one chance to tell it. I felt disappointed that I 'didn't get it right'. Why had I not changed things when I got the transcripts? Should I have adjusted my words for the contemporary audience? If I had, the story might have been more accessible to them,

but it would not have been how I remembered it. It now strikes me how many of my memories are based on the language of the past. (Schiff et al, 2006: 358) I also felt, as I have mentioned, that I could not change the original transcript. My thoughts about the expression of my life and views had already moved on from the time of telling, through the act of telling, so being asked to read and react to the transcript and paper was difficult: I was already in a different mental place and I knew my story would not be the same. Firstly, the interview had allowed me to explore ideas and values that were now firmer in my mind and second, I would be more prepared and less diffident in my presentation. I asked myself the question: 'What is the meaning and value of an original story and what does it mean if people are allowed to change it?' I went to Annie and asked, 'How many times can someone re-write their story and which one is "true"?'

All these feelings of inadequacy had come about, not from telling Annie my story, but from the involvement of an audience. When I first told my story, Annie was my 'audience'. I had built up a relationship with her through the interview and felt that it did not matter how I expressed myself – it was my story she wanted. I had not given much thought to the readers or listeners of her work. Naively, I presumed that they would listen with the same level of interest and respond in the same way. As Annie has already stated, hearing my voice was much more powerful than just reading what I had said, because the vacillations and the accent were more vivid. The pictures in the presentation also contributed to exclusive interpretations. The innocent contribution I had offered Annie for her doctoral work was suddenly being judged by others. My life story was not being valued.

If I had not been at the presentation however, I would not have even heard or seen the audience's reaction. Does that mean then that I would not have been hurt or embarrassed by the reaction I perceived people had to my story? As it was, I felt humiliated that they saw me as a patronising, privileged, white upper middle class woman. I remember once hearing Kate Atkinson say that she sounded, 'elite and old but didn't feel like either'. I felt ashamed, and was glad that Annie had suggested using a pseudonym, so that people at the conference might not actually recognise the story as mine. I just wanted to hide.

**Annie:**

As Judith has said, if she hadn't been present at the conference, these questions wouldn't have arisen for either of us. Not using the audio recording would also have had a different impact. Should I have avoided playing the recording to alleviate this anxiety-provoking effect? While ethical guidelines are often focused on protecting participants, there is clearly also value in 'empowering' participants by involving them in research decisions. (Turnbull, 2000) I felt that Judith's inclusion in the decision over the threat to her anonymity caused by playing the extract had been important. Clearly anonymity makes sense in

many cases, particularly from the perspective of protecting participants; however automatically reverting to it could be seen as an easy avoidance of the fine line that exists between informing, involving, protecting and empowering.

In that paper, we were fortunate that the use of a pseudonym served the purpose of protecting Judith, allowing her to remain anonymous. In other parts of my research however, I am very aware that anonymity has served me more than my participants. Dembour, (2000) who has researched colonial territorial officers in the Belgian Congo, faced many issues similar to mine and suggests that, 'rather than giving the interviewees freedom to talk, the primary object of anonymity may well be to give the researcher freedom to write'. (105) This is because it removes some of the accountability we have for what we write about, or with participants. Participants might potentially be harmed through their involvement in research; however involvement is a shared journey, not a one-off decision. There is a balance between applying anonymity and removing some of the accountability or potential upset you could cause.

In my research, the more privileged or powerful position of the participants perhaps makes the negotiation of an agreement to play the interview recording less ethically problematic. But what does this mean for the participants of research generally, and what implications does this have for audiences? Had I not played the extract, the audience might have skimmed over the content of Judith's statement. Questioning Judith's response to the reaction of the audience has only highlighted the fragility of the story someone gives of their past in anticipation of its reception. We could say that Judith's involvement resulted in 'uncalled for self-knowledge,' but had she not been there, we might never have encountered these revealing issues. The tenuous nature of this agreement demonstrates how ethical agreements are a constantly ebbing and flowing relationship where authority is exchanged between participants, researcher, and audience. We feel that much can be gained from the inclusion of such dialogues within qualitative research and guidelines.

### Judith:

Researchers offer anonymity. At the beginning when I was an 'innocent' participant, I actually wanted my story to carry my name. Having gone through this experience, I would be more cautious about using my name. If participants know they are going to be identified, they may, like me, fear being judged on their past and might alter their story. The past involved in this part of my life story, colonialism, strongly influenced its reception.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps that collective memory will act in all of Annie's presentations; but when I agreed to the interview I was unprepared for this perception. Well, what did I sign up for? When I heard Annie's paper it appeared that my story was being used in a different way to what I anticipated when I gave her it. My preconceived idea, given Annie's explanation, was that my story would give

readers an insight into a colonial history; but I did not expect to have my words judged. Using a small excerpt and having the story put in a different context provoked reactions and emotions that I did not expect and I felt that I had not agreed to that particular use of my story. Would I have participated in the interview if I had anticipated being judged? Probably not. Would I have agreed to being more involved in the research by coming to the conference and then discussing my reactions? Not if the subsequent emotional journey had been anticipated. But then neither of us could have guessed at that time that we would be writing this today.

### Annie:

For me, I can see connections between what I was trying to say and what I did in the conference paper that Judith saw, but my own understanding is heavily linked to my own journey as a researcher, which is an organic process. I did not know what I would be doing at the time I got consent and this experience would follow other suggestions that consent should be negotiated over time. I still cannot claim to have a complete understanding of my research context or interviews and I am still not sure that I ever will!

When discussing this with Judith, I questioned my trustworthiness and often related back to the story of my own past, as if it could prove the legitimacy of my intentions. I remember showing Judith the photograph of me with my family servant in Figure 2 and comparing it with one that Judith had shared with me, shown in Figure 4. It was as if I thought my own story legitimised or demonstrated my 'altruistic' intentions. Pillay (2005) confronts this problem by proposing that as researchers we must not hide behind 'seemingly altruistic' research relationships that obscure our power. (546) We must question what motives lie behind the inclusion (and exclusion) of participants in inscriptions of research and how blanket assumptions about 'ethics' influence those decisions.



Fig. 4 Judith's family servants, with her seated in the foreground being held by Mpishi, their cook.

**Judith:**

I have questioned my motivation to be involved in Annie's research – I wanted to contribute to an understanding of a unique heritage. But undoubtedly my motivation was to portray myself and my family as good people, particularly as we lived in a time and place currently under scrutiny for its apparent mismanagement of people and resources. Plummer (2001) suggests thirteen reasons as to why someone might be willing to disclose their life story. Certainly, one of my motives was to paint a good picture of colonial life, of the harmony that presided in our lives, not the discord that is so frequently recorded in the analysis of colonial life.

It gave me a chance to show that it was not an easy life for colonials despite the seemingly privileged lifestyle of servants and space. However, in this situation, my story 'blew up in my face'. I came across as an elitist usurper of the African people in the small extract that Annie had chosen because the audience had not heard my full story or learnt the context of my narrative. (Borland, 1991: 63) On the other hand, had they heard it all, would they have still come to the same conclusion?

Nonetheless, this experience has given me an unexpected chance for self-reflection. Maybe I have never accepted or fully appreciated the privilege of my upbringing, because the knocks outweighed the advantages. Although it might not be apparent, even in this paper, I do not think like that now. But my story is my story, then and now. My story was all about telling the past as I experienced it, yet even I was viewing it with modern day interpretations. It was all about trying to live a normal life in the midst of a changing country. And harsh things happened, which, when judged by today's standards, are unacceptable. History has judged this colonial period by its extraordinary happenings and I was trying to capture what it was like to live in an unassuming, day-by-day ordinary life. Interestingly, by sharing photographs used in the paper the audi-



Fig. 5 'Bahati House' where Judith lived with her family during their final years in Kenya.

ence's response reinforced the collective judgement of that period. The mud huts I talked about in the extract were incongruous with the plush colonial home shown on the slides, as the photograph in Figure 5 demonstrates. And the concept of servants and Africans living on reserves (an outdated, politically incorrect word) did not correspond with 'us' having 'allowed them, to see a better life.'

The throw away line 'It didn't seem to be like that when I was there', grapples with the complexity of looking back on my past with the values and thoughts of the current day. What I mean by this is that people (including the narrator herself) judge the past with the understanding gained by the passage of time; both in my maturation and ageing, and in the way society has evolved since that time.

**Annie:**

In the colonial setting of this research, participants' desires to 'sanitise' a story are crucial to the relationships I am exploring between the past and the present, and representations of the past in the present. Many participants wanted to give their own story about their life at that time as a result of what they felt were unfair portrayals of how people assume they lived, to address the homogenising effect that history has had on them. There are different stages at which people might want to change their story, both in terms of what parts of it people do or do not want to tell, as well as later in the process of interpretation if a transcript or extract unsettles a person's sense of clarity or ability to articulate, as Judith felt. This links strongly to biographical theories and the tendency to look back on events differently when narrating a life story, as well as the desire to present a more favourable, coherent version of it. (Linde, 1993)

If Judith had changed her words to suit a contemporary audience, her story loses a strand. Is there not a risk of eradicating certain memories that could actually inform and protect the future from the past? (Ricoeur 2004: 455) But where do these memories and identities fit in today? As researchers, we have to give credence and respect to the memory of the life lived; (Czarniawska, 2004) but how is this achieved within an audience that finds it difficult to listen? It would be very easy to pick up on and critique the 'colonial' elements of any of these stories, however we need to give space to what are assumed to be stories of the privileged and powerful to look at how those stories are told today, and what has and can be done with that history.

Returning to some of the problems previously mentioned about using the voice of participants, we may try to represent a 'real' person but this can reveal elements that they do not want to be revealed. In some of my cases for example, I have no doubt that racist comments would be 'erased,' were I to negotiate with participants to the extent I have with Judith. This case has highlighted for me the emotional impact that feeding my writing back to participants can



have on their self-perception. Should Judith be able to change her story? Well, a story is never going to be fully told. (Andrews, 2008; Riessman, 2004) And likewise, what right do I have to choose or erase parts of these stories, given their value in understanding the past? After all, history is always incomplete; no end point exists from which we can judge the signification of the past, or its representations. (Ricoeur, 2004: 336)

### Conclusion

Through presenting this story of our research process, we have attempted to illustrate the inherent challenges in representing a life story and the ethical considerations it involved. Attempting to give a piece of life, rather than a piece of writing results in a need to more fully embrace the journey undertaken and requires greater recognition of the role of the reader or audience in the dissemination of the story. The dynamic exchange of authority between all three parties at different points is greatly affected by the ethical approach ceded to. Reviewing our experience has also highlighted many implications for ethical practice in autobiographical, narrative and life history work.

Narrative is used by many researchers as a conduit to access the past, which raises questions about the representation of memories and interpretations that inevitably develop over time through the research process. Bruner's (1986) distinction between the life lived, experienced and told emphasises the disjunction that occurs when representing life stories. Though memories are based on past life experiences, the life told is expressed through the lens of the life matured and in (re)telling the story, perceptions of it change. Judith felt unable to make changes to her original script however, she is increasingly aware of not being the same person now as when she first gave her story. She was left with questions about why she said what she did; why she picked those particular memories for her story; and how well that actually represented what it was like when she was there. Narrative employs, and is restricted by, the use of language. (Denzin 1989; McCormack, 2000) Judith also felt that her memories were constrained by her use of language and was subsequently concerned that the vernacular she used may have represented her historical experience of life in Kenya, but did not help to get her story across to a modern audience, especially given the limited selection of parts in Annie's paper.

Considering this distinction between these elements of the life story, Ricoeur (1992) refers to a 'play of double determination' which we feel helps to unpack the problem of moving between parts of a narrative; and the life it represents. (158) He explains that this play, which influences the reading of narratives, relates to the hermeneutical interpretation of a text as it exchanges 'between the whole and the part'. (158) As Judith discussed, not only was her interview narrative just one telling of her past experience (an experience that she would now interpret differently), but the 30 second extract limited it yet further. Hence

setting the context of a story in time and place is imperative when presenting extracts. (Czarniawska, 2004) Remaining open to this displacement between the life lived, experienced and told – between the past being represented and the context of the telling – is important: It has become part of our story. As Ricoeur acknowledges lives (and time) cannot ultimately be fully represented, but the methods through which they are approximated – by which their singular and universal features are approached – need to involve the heritage of stories from which culture is woven and from which individual feeling derives its contours. (Erben, 1993)

The researcher's position further complicates the narrative. The researcher's own experiences impact on the way in which that story is interpreted. Annie's own 'postcolonial' background, discussions with other East African women and exploration of analogous documents are all parts that might be included or excluded. (Coffey, 1999) The presentation was Annie's research. There was an implicit understanding that she was using Judith's (and Mrs Travers') stories to her end and so she chose the pieces that best represented the points she wanted to illustrate. Annie had complied with routine ethical procedures by letting Judith see the script and had sought approval for her use of the voice-over. Beyond that, neither of us expected any ethical repercussions.

Our experience would suggest that much social science research could place more emphasis on the recipients of research. Conventionally, research is carried out, the results are published and the elementary expectation is for the receiver to change their attitude or practice according to recommendations postulated by the researchers. However, through their engagement at an emotional level in this type of research, readers become involved in the research relationship and their interpretations need to be more carefully anticipated alongside participants' life stories. It is not often that a participant has the opportunity to listen to the responses of a third party, the consumers of the research. On hearing the reaction of some audience members to her extract, Judith had felt she herself was being judged by them; that her story was being misinterpreted. We have identified three reader-related issues here: Firstly, the audience were using a modern perspective to judge a historical life; secondly they weren't giving credit to the evolution of that life over time; and thirdly, they were judging the whole of that life from just a part of it.

Biographies give the illusion that selves represented are consistent with present and future selves. (Stanley, 1992) Judith's response to the audience's reaction was a result of this assumption that this extract was in fact her presenting herself at that moment. She felt that her words had failed her, however life has to be 'gathered together in some way'. (Ricoeur, 1992: 158) The resulting narrative has an illusive quality of alluding to a whole person and has profound implications for the unwary audience. Jackson (2002) points out that although this 'illusion of fixity' authorises ideal interpretations for stories, they are still 'inevitably revised in memory and reworked as they pass through the hands

and minds of a community'. (231) For him, this interleaving of stories and their re-imagined offspring provides an interesting area of inquiry. Certainly in this case, the reception of stories has been an important element.

Absorbing a narrative is a complex task. Bearing in mind Ricoeur's (1992) concept of 'double determination', the reader is constantly moving between the text (which represents only a small part of the life story) and the whole person that they are trying to imagine, to hermeneutically comprehend the story. We cannot expect readers to recognise this concept and exercise caution in their reading; however in what ways can the researcher control this reading? Liebllich et al (1998) acknowledge that it is far from true 'that we have a static text of narrative material', which we can then separately read and interpret. (166) Whilst they rightly apply this to the responsibilities of the researcher, our experience has demonstrated a need for continued consideration of the interpretation process throughout dissemination to new audiences, particularly where participants are involved. This needs to be incorporated within the ethical decisions governing such research.

Conventional ethical practice, governed by utilitarian thinking and sanctioned by university review boards centres around 'basic themes of value-neutral experimentalism', which Christians (2005) states appeals to 'individual autonomy, maximum benefit with minimal risks, and ethical ends exterior to scientific means'. (146) This encourages researchers' engagement in ethics as a once and for all occurrence. Annie, engaging in the zeitgeist practice of participant inclusion, ventured to employ the more recent proposals of the feminist communitarian model of social ethics (Christians, 2005) by returning a written and audio copy of the interview to Judith and involving Judith in reading her interpretations. In practice this was a messy process, complicated by the difficulty of clarifying and communicating the fragmented and changing ethical implications resulting from her involvement in the research (a point emphasised in Graham et al's 2007 report).

Denzin (2003) advocates that:

participants have a co-equal say in how the research should be conducted, what should be studied, which methods should be used, which findings are valid and acceptable, how the findings are to be implemented, and how the consequences of such actions are to be assessed'. (257)

This viewpoint is embraced in a recent NHS initiative INVOLVE, (Steel, 2004) that instructs researchers on how to collaborate with participants. However, protection of those participants, researchers and audiences to be involved has yet to be developed to the same degree as the existing recommendations for practice: The two paradigms have to meet. Christians (2005) strongly urges the creation of new guidelines for this more involved communitarian approach so that the vulnerabilities and desires of both the participants and their researchers may be addressed. To this, we would also add those of the

reader. New guidelines could never eradicate the unpredictable, fluid nature of this type of research however, they do need to embody the myriad of issues impacting on ethical narrative practice.

Ethics committees are one step taken that emphasise the minimal risk approach often taken to ethical decisions. Merely filling in a form and gaining approval however, doesn't make research ethical. Mention needs to be made that a narrative perspective carries with it a deeper concern for ethics than the tick-box protocols of research councils and university departments. What is at stake here is not a watered-down version of distributive justice or individual rights but a narrative process which is concerned with a developing (if never completed) mastery of the self. (MacIntyre, 2007) Ongoing consideration within the field can guide any ethical decisions made and reflections from the field can highlight important lessons to be incorporated into research practice. There is an imperative need for a better training and support of researchers in this field to achieve a better understanding of the ephemeral research process. Funders of this type of research could also encourage the consideration of these issues so that consistent and ongoing education, training or support is advised. The credence of biographical and narrative research has been demonstrated and is now more accepted than ever however, development and acknowledgement of these issues will further support the authority and rigour of narrative research and strengthen its position within social science.

Developments in media technology are going to result in increasingly powerful representations of participants and decisions surrounding the archiving of such work will make the need to reflexively include participants more apparent. (Richardson and Godfrey, 2003) Keeping track of and reflecting on our emotional dialogue has been crucial to the decisions we took at different stages. Our dialogue has perhaps raised more questions than answers, but it has pointed to the wider benefits of reflecting on the complex ethics involved in representing a life.

## Notes

1 We are very grateful to our reviewers for their encouragement in developing this section.

2 Section 23 of the *British Educational Research Association Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research* (2004) states: 'The confidential and anonymous treatment of participants' data is considered the norm for the conduct of research. Researchers must recognize the participants' entitlement to privacy and must accord them their rights to confidentiality and anonymity, unless they...specifically and willingly waive that right'. This emphasises the importance of the Data Protection Act (1998) and continues that participants have a right to know: 'how and why their personal data is being stored, to what uses it is being put and to whom it may be made available. Researchers must have participants' permission to disclose personal information to third parties'.

3 Section 25 of the *Statement of Ethical Practice for the British Sociological Association*

(2002) does state that: 'In some research contexts, especially those involving field research, it may be necessary for the obtaining of consent to be regarded, not as a once-and-for-all prior event, but as a process, subject to renegotiation over time'.

4 Section 27 of the *Statement of Ethical Practice for the British Sociological Association* (2002) states: 'In many of its forms, social research intrudes into the lives of those studied. While some participants in sociological research may find the experience a positive and welcome one, for others, the experience may be disturbing. Even if not harmed, those studied may feel wronged by aspects of the research process. This can be particularly so if they perceive apparent intrusions into their private and personal worlds, or where research gives rise to false hopes, uncalled for self-knowledge, or unnecessary anxiety'.

5 Section 23 of the *Statement of Ethical Practice for the British Sociological Association* (2002) recommends that 'interviewers should clarify whether, and if so, the extent to which research participants are allowed to see transcripts of interviews and field notes and to alter their content, withdraw statements, to provide additional information or to add glosses on interpretations'.

6 This report is also available online at [www.gsr.gov.uk/downloads/professional\\_development/ethics\\_in\\_gov/ethics\\_social\\_research\\_participants.pdf](http://www.gsr.gov.uk/downloads/professional_development/ethics_in_gov/ethics_social_research_participants.pdf)

7 It is increasingly common now to consider the possibility of archiving qualitative work when seeking consent. Along with many local and national archives, ESDS Qualidata is a service provided by the UK Data Archive (see Corti et al, 1995) that encourages all social scientists to consider its use. The archival of qualitative research data however, results in many new contexts for its re-analysis. A number of studies have highlighted the complexities that the archival of research data brings to the negotiation of consent. (see Corti et al, 2000; Leh, 2000; Parry and Mauthner, 2004; Thompson, 2000; Thomson et al, 2005)

8 Britain's colonial history is increasingly being explored in the British media at present. Programmes and books such as Niall Ferguson's *Empire* (Channel 4, 2003), his subsequent book *Empire: how Britain made the modern world*, (2004), *Victoria's Empire* (BBC, 2007), and *Empire's Children* (Channel 4, 2007), are all examples of this 'popular' turn to re-assess the colonial past.

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