Much has been written about lifehistory research in recent times. It has been paraded as a counterculture to the traditional research canon, and celebrated as a genre that promotes methodological pluralism. However, lifehistory researchers have an obligation to transcend spurious claims about the perceived merits of the methodology and extend the debates around how the genre simultaneously problematises and responds to the competing challenges of Epistemology, Methodology and Representation.

In conceiving of each of the chapters from an epistemological perspective, the authors focus on how their individual work has crossed or expanded traditional borders of epistemology and ontology; of how the work has satisfied the rigours of thesis production and contributed to changing conceptions of knowledge, what knowledge gets produced and how knowledge is produced when we make particular methodological choices.

Since any methodological orientation is invariably selective, and the researcher is always involved and implicated in the production of data, the authors focus on what selections they have made in their projects, what governed these choices, what benefits/deficits those choices yielded, and what the implications of their research are for those meta-narratives that have established the regimes of truth, legitimacy, and veracity in research.

Knowledge production is inextricably linked to representation. In the process of articulating their findings, each author made particular representational choices, sometimes transgressing conventional approaches. The book explores why these choices were made and how the choices influenced the kinds of knowledge generated. The book provides theoretical justifications for these transgressions and reflect on how the experience of representation helped disrupt the authors’ essentialist notions of research production and for whom it is produced.

This book is not another celebration of lifehistory as a counterculture. The book hopes to be a deeply critical contribution to disrupt notions around epistemological authority, voice and power and how these are mediated by the delicate relations of the researcher and researched. The problematises and complicates the assumptions that frame this genre with a view to highlighting the potential hazards of the method while demonstrating its potentiality in shaping our conceptions of Ethics, Methodology and Representation.
Life History Research
Life History Research
*Epistemology, Methodology and Representation*

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INTRODUCTION

It is no coincidence that a book of this sort emerges out of the era of intense redefinitions of selves within post-apartheid South Africa, 15 years after the first democratic elections in 1994. In anticipation of another wave of changes in the political and socio-economic landscapes expected to be ushered in by the 2009 elections, the book reflects on opportunities to author our own lives in the wake of political liberations, in the optimism of new policy terrains which were aimed at fertilising our expressions of our freedoms and justices, and redefining our roles as researchers and academics. The book demonstrates that such redefinitions are enabled and constrained by the dominant hallmarks of (educational) academic research. It yields key conceptual interconnected issues which have always been part of the research enterprise: issues of epistemology, methodology and representation.

The book makes explicit how these explorations unfolded and intersected within the unique socio-historical, political and cultural context of South Africa, but does not confine itself to a narcissistic preoccupation with this context. The contributors to this book explore the need to speak within and against themselves in developing new theoretical insights into the phenomena they chart: a responsibility that researchers worldwide must embrace. This is especially relevant within a hegemony of knowledge production by the economically powerful, and the privileged academic researcher.

This book draws on the collaborative culture of research that emerged amongst a group of doctoral students and researchers within the former University of Durban-Westville in South Africa, now merged within the University of KwaZulu-Natal. As students and supervisors, we found ourselves to be valuable resources (challenges?) to each other as we engaged with common (often troubling) concerns about our research contexts, spanning multiple disciplines: the professional education of teachers; the disciplinary dilemma of health practitioners; the troubled world of non-governmental organisations embattled by the econometric splurge; of researchers challenging social justice considerations; of researchers scripting the lives of teachers; and of researchers prefiguring and orchestrating our understandings of the HIV and AIDS epidemic in South Africa.

The authors of the chapters of this book have all moved beyond their original contexts both geographically and structurally: the authors now assume the role of academics in Australia, as scholars in the United States of America, as readers of the surrounding war-conscious tyranny and the relatively benign world of the United Arab Emirates, as policymakers within the politicised bureaucracy and the national Ministry of Education, as deputy vice chancellors, and deans of higher education institutions, as managers of new curricula for teacher education and educational research, as leaders of departments forging new conceptions of health sciences research and professional education, as researchers of macro systemic
issues within national studies. Our new vantages have given us telescopes and sometimes microscopes to look forwards and backwards on our doctoral studies, aiming to reflect on what contributions we are making and have made to academic research.

We were all grappling with how the lives and views of our research participants featured in our research reports. We were inspired by the possibility of experimenting with novel ways of re-presenting our reports – how we, as researchers, re-told the lives of our participants. This resulted simultaneously in questions about what constituted the data? Whose data is it? What are the ethical boundaries being traversed as the researcher and researched negotiated understanding of themselves, their roles and their agendas? Whose report is it? For whom? For what purpose?

Many of the researchers in this book chose to use a life history approach in producing data aimed at capturing at a deep level, the insights into their contexts through the lived experiences of their participants. Complexification of the research context, an understanding that provides thick, enriched awareness rather than reductionism, was accepted as a necessary value of such research.

Much has been written about life history research in recent times. It has been paraded as a counterculture to the traditional research canon, and celebrated as a genre that promotes methodological pluralism. However, as life history researchers we have an obligation to transcend spurious claims about the perceived merits of the methodology and extend the debates around how the genre simultaneously problematises and responds to the competing challenges of Epistemology, Methodology and Representation (the title of our book).

In conceiving of each of our chapters from an epistemological perspective, we focused on how our individual work has transgressed or expanded traditional boundaries of epistemology and ontology; of how the work has satisfied the rigours of thesis production and contributed to changing conceptions of knowledge, what knowledge gets produced and how knowledge is produced when we make particular methodological choices.

Since any methodological orientation is invariably selective, and the researcher is always involved and implicated in the production of data, we focus on what selections we made in our projects, what governed these choices, what benefits/deficits those choices yielded, and what the implications of our research are for those meta-narratives that have established the regimes of truth, legitimacy, and veracity in research.

Knowledge production is inextricably linked to representation. In the process of articulating our findings, each of us made particular representational choices, sometimes transgressing conventional approaches. We explore why we made these choices and how the choices influenced the kinds of knowledge generated. We provide theoretical justifications for these transgressions and reflect on how the experience of representation helped disrupt our essentialist notions of research production and for whom the research is produced.

When challenging established canons, we expose ourselves to intellectual culpability, which compounds our ethical vulnerability. This book highlights the ethical demands that accompany the complex set of interpersonal and power relations
between researcher and researched. We record our dilemmas in dealing with issues of authorial legitimacy; how we came to terms with concerns such as validity and reliability, identity, truth, structure and agency, emotionality and neutrality and the influence of competing voices in research production.

WHAT TO EXPECT FROM THIS BOOK

The early era of the new democratic government in South Africa was characterised by a colossal undertaking to attempt to provide a “healing of the nation” through the establishment of the now famous Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) 1998). In this commission, public hearings were set up throughout the land to gather the stories and experiences of those who had suffered either as perpetrators or as victims of injustices during the apartheid regime. These injustices extended not only to stories of physical violence (meted out by the prisons and police), but also to revelations of economic fraud, social crimes, political compassion and conviction, and exposés of the devious machinations that entrapped South African citizens who campaigned to liberate its society from oppression. People from all sectors of society, soldiers and sportsmen, priests and criminals, teachers and students were encouraged to testify.

These TRC stories were beamed daily via live broadcasts into the living rooms of homes with TVs, into mud huts over radio, into small town halls of rural villages, into the print media nationally and internationally. The nation stared in horror at the brutality and intensity of those who once stood on opposite sides of the political spectrum, but now were asking for forgiveness and reconciliation from each other. The prize for such revelation was amnesty from the legal courts. More recently, a TRC for academics has been proposed!

It is within this climate that we need to ask what kinds of truth we as researchers are attempting to produce. This question steered the doctoral studies of each of the authors of this book. Our researches became an exploration not only of the phenomena we chose to study, but also an endeavour to understand the mission and goals of researchers in a rapidly evolving society, attempting to dislodge the grips of constraint imposed by racist, sexist, classist and paradigmatic methodologies and epistemologies.

The TRC identifies four kinds of truth in their summative report released at about the time when we as researchers began our inquiry:

1. Forensic truth
2. Personal truth
3. Dialogical truth
4. Restorative truth

**I. Forensic Truth:** was referred to as a truth that could be treated as “objective facts”/“scientific truths” which could be validated through “empirical processes”. This was sometimes referred to as “legal truth”.

Within the tradition of life history research this kind of truth-making is referred to as capturing “lives as lived”. Life historians would argue that
Documenting this “legal truth” is not their intention. As life historians we are concerned with more that simply whether a particular recalled event “actually happened”. We are more than our legal identity.

2. **Personal Truth**: was referred to as a truth based on the lived experiences of the individuals reporting events. It pointed to a “narrative truth” which understood that it could be infused with the hallmarks of nostalgia and public memory. It was seen as a kind of truth that drew on the constructed nature of meaning-making which allowed individuals to assemble personal images of their victims and perpetrators.

Within the tradition of life history research this kind of truth has dominated since it captures “lives as experienced”. It provides the qualitative interpretation individuals make of their lived circumstances and events. It shows how individuals make meaning of their lives. Its interpretivist and phenomenological roots are evident.

3. **Dialogical Truth**: referred to a “social truth” that drew on the way in which public understandings of groups and individuals (“insiders and outsiders”) were fuelled through the reporting within the public domain, in public rallies (oral discourse), in the spoken and written media (radio, newspapers, magazines, public notices).

Within the tradition of life history research, this kind of truth deconstructs the telling of lifestories within the data production moments. It captures the fragility and power of “lives as told” with all its potential and limitations.

4. **Healing Truth**: this truth was seen as being driven by the agenda of restoring dignity amongst both the tellers and the listeners. Its agenda was to privilege the act of telling as having possibilities for reconciliation between the victims and perpetrators. It had an agenda to build new relations between not only the participants involved but also the wider public who were exposed to the stories.

This kind of truth-making is relatively underexplored within the tradition of life history research. Its roots are embedded in a campaign to understand the “lives as capable of being reconstructed”. It seeks for means to move beyond the structural (political/social/cultural/economic) constraints imposed on individuals and instead celebrates the power of agency.

“Narrative research methodology” therefore became not just a methodology for researchers in the ivory towers of academia working within an interpretivist, constructivist frame (telling stories of lives), but a public enterprise with a national agenda (telling stories as an act of realising the national agenda of justice for all). For us as researchers the choice of the methodology is not co-incident. We wanted to tell the lived experiences of the research participants we worked with. Their stories had been silenced as irrelevant and unavailable for theorising. But our methodologies of data production became intricately bound with the agenda of
reconstructing previous relationships, negotiating expectations and responsibilities about ethical choices, about a wider social justice project. Hence, our methodological processes themselves had to promote democracy. Life history research provided a means to tell the muddy story with all its triumphs and pitfalls. The research process (and its thesis product) became concerned not only with the relationship between the researcher and the researched, the research participants and her social interactors, but also a catalyst for the broader society and the audience for whom the research was intended. Each of us was committed to the belief that doctoral studies cannot be only about credentialing by writing for an external examiner.

Our own identities were also being recast in the process: who we are cannot be denied or edited out of the research process. We are raced, classed, gendered, historical beings with positions of difference on a variety of levels: political, religious, social, cultural, linguistic, etc. As researchers we are individuals with diminished or enhanced power which has been entrenched through our positionalities within society. Nevertheless, our positionalities are not a solidified set of “psychological traits”. We simultaneously hold multiple identities which react in dialogue with the forces around and within us. We construct our identities in the act of the research processes as we negotiate our relationship with the participants with whom we work, including our audience who co-constructs us.

The terrain of life history research that we present spans beyond simply telling the life history of individuals (e.g. the lives of people who stutter). The methodology has been transported to provide an analysis of the career lives of teachers during their training, and within the different stages of their careers. The methodology has extended to examine the experiences of professional education of individuals within the higher education curriculum (in different professions outside teacher education). The methodology has been extended to look not only at the lives of people, but also the “institutional lives” of organisations, providing an alternative glimpse of how an evaluation of organisations might be conducted.

This book is not another celebration of life history as a counterculture, another “victory narrative within the redemptive culture of the social sciences” (Cary, 1999, 2). There are too many of those around. The book hopes to be a deeply critical contribution to disrupt notions around epistemological authority, voice and power and how these are mediated by the delicate relations of the researcher and researched. We want to problematise and complicate the assumptions that frame this genre with a view to highlighting the potential hazards of the method while demonstrating its potentiality in shaping our conceptions of Ethics, Methodology and Representation.

The book is organised in a broad clustering of chapters, and could be read in collective units. However as a reader, a fluid inter-reading across different chapter clusters is to be encouraged as common and divergent insights into our research context could be said to emerge.

Chapter One, Two, Three and Four constitute the first of the chapter clusters. They focus broadly on the life history research approach from a conceptual point of view, focusing on the role of the researcher. Chapter One by Michael Samuel represents one of the early doctoral studies using a life history approach at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. The chapter defines the nature of life history
research showing why it is more than simply the telling of tales about individuals’ lives. It aims to explore, analyse and interpret the gaps and silences, biases and exaggerations of the tellers of the tales; it is produced within particular discourse settings which in themselves shape the telling. The research approach is framed with the overall intention of developing new theoretical insights beyond a simplistic reductionist explanation of “the truth”; it uncovers the complexity of knowing, and the complexity of the process of illuminating understandings of the world of “alive human beings”. The world which comes to be represented in the “stories of the research participants” is infused with the spaces which they inhabit, percolated through their interpreting and re-interpreting their real and imagined experiences. Life history research becomes as much about the researcher as the researched, about the experienced worlds of the past and of the future, about the confined and confining world, and the world of possibility.

This chapter draws from an in-depth research study tracing the experiences of student teachers that are in the process of developing their professional competence as teachers of the English language. It uses a life history approach to collect data about their various stages of developing competence in the English language over different periods in their lives: within their homes, families, schools, university education, and within their school-based teaching practice courses. The study uses various creative data collection methods in an attempt to move beyond the verbal interview to include students’ construction of their own autobiographies, as well as graphic and video representations of their experiences. It is located within the research tradition of “teacher thinking research” and shows how a grounded theory approach was used to develop a model for understanding teacher development. The force field model of teacher development highlights the complexity and depth needed to understand the process of teachers developing their professional identities.

The chapter focuses on what we learn about curriculum design of teacher education programmes from a life history research approach. It provides an exemplar of how choices of methodology in research influence the nature of the knowledge that is produced in the study. It foregrounds throughout the methodological descriptions the kinds of ethical considerations that are negotiated between the research and the research participants. Attention to these ethical considerations results in the production of a particular way of knowing the problem being explored, namely the process of becoming a teacher: coherent, contradictory and complementary challenges co-exist as (novice) teachers negotiate their identity.

Michael Samuel is now the Dean of the Faculty of Education at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. He has served on the Ministerial Committee on Teacher Education which was instrumental in introducing the new national policy framework for teacher education.

Lives and their histories are very complex by nature. It stands to reason that multilayered life history data demands an equally complex analysis process. In Chapter Two, Harsha Kathard explores the issues and processes in generating a first level analysis of life history data. The chapter reports on a study which sought to illuminate the processes of self-identity formations of people who stutter using a narrative life history methodology. The points of discussion include:
INTRODUCTION

- The obligations of the researcher using a narrative methodology with people who have been traditionally constructed as having communication disorders
- The possibilities and pitfalls of creating new knowledge within a Bakthinian frame
- The problematic nature of crafting and representing and analysing personal truths.

The discussion is supported with case examples drawn from the research study and concludes with a critical commentary about the nature of knowledge generated in the context of life history research.

Harsha Kathard is now Head of Department at the University of Cape Town’s School of Rehabilitation and Health Sciences. Her challenge of operating within the dominant empiricist and positivist paradigm of the medical profession continues in her work.

Chapter Three, by Mershen Pillay, demonstrates the privilege that researchers occupy both methodologically and theoretically. This he locates within an understanding of the situatedness of academic researchers within the broader social systems. He writes as a minority with a responsibility to read the world of others in the context of conventions which command capitulations to dominant theoretical “greats”. Other lay readers of the world are arguably constrained by other normative conventions. His text is itself a resistance to such capitulations in the manner in which he shows how as authors (and linguists) we have the privilege to read and write the world in more authentic (creative) (and epistemologically rich) ways. His study draws on a wide range of resources including from inside and outside formal academe, developing a case for juxta-, inter-, intra-, and trans-disciplinary ways of knowing; from inspirational fictional literature; and from the confidence of heightened self-reflexivity (which is representative of its variety of sources) recontextualised as data for empirical imaginative elaboration. He argues,

Blessed with this rare chance to do virtuous and noble things, we allow participants to, for example, unconventionally – but [common] sensibly – tell stories of their lives. We make them our own heroes (Ourselves, we place as morally superior to our Bunsen burner brothers in the labs). However, as I tap into my bleeding heart, strum a liberal tune, and dance in the lush sense of a person lucky to facilitate such privilege, I must remind myself of a truism: With any research, it is the researcher’s voice that is always more privileged (more free?). In as much as we focus research participants’ liberations, we also need to re-focus research onto ourselves: How do we deal with our liberation, our privilege in – what is – our research? Theoretically? Methodologically?

His chapter makes a strong case for understanding the biological apronstrings which enable our unique epistemologies. This argument is evocatively developed in theorising his own bio-epistemology as an identical-twin; his coining of “I-visibility” which celebrates the confidence in one’s epistemologising; his encouragement to be more aware of the multiple resources for theory building that emerge from within, between and outside of (empirical) data production; his demonstration of using one’s biological and social and cultural selves in one’s intellectual practices. Nevertheless, his chapter makes the case for a de-liberation: the process which
could help us re-understand our own intent, morality, and faithfulness to (less empirical, and perhaps) more critical ways of knowing.

The second part of the chapter deals with the way in which these above theoretical considerations were drawn into the research design of his study. He refers to this as the “process-product” considerations which make explicit the sources for interpreting and analysing “the data”, for producing new data from empirical data collected, from imagined data. His chapter develops a model for theorising these levels of analysis and interpretation. The chapter makes explicit the use of “critical conversations” as a data production strategy defining it as theoretically different from interviews and discussions. He shows how these ‘methodological issues’ are deeply connected to the kind of epistemology that he intended to produce in his doctoral study.

One wonders whether the author’s current location in the middle of the United Arab Emirates, dislocated from his South African roots, yet connected to a globalising discourse of “othering” fuels these present reflections on his doctoral studies.

Chapter Four, by Renuka Vithal explores the notion of the necessary coherence that should be developed between the methodological approach used and the theoretical intentions of the research process. If democratic development is the expressed intention of the research study, then it behoves the researcher to understand how this democratic principle infuses into the ways in which we produce the data for the research study. The study looks at how such a principle of democratic participation should become one of the hallmarks of validity when evaluating the quality of a research project. The author develops the notion of “democratic participatory validity” to become a means of integrating the theoretical, methodological, ethical and epistemological considerations when designing and reporting on research. The study draws from the exploration of how the world of practice speaks back to the world of theory-making drawing from a study of mathematics student teachers in an initial teacher education programme engaging with a political, social, cultural approach to their classroom pedagogy.

Renuka Vithal is now Deputy Vice Chancellor of the newly merged University of KwaZulu-Natal, which brings together the worlds of the former University of Durban-Westville and the University of Natal: two apartheid-constructed higher education institutions. Is a new democratic space being forged as competing conceptions of research are drawn together in this merger?

Chapters Five and Six (the second cluster of chapters) tend to concentrate on the construction and representation of the “research report”, showing how this influences methodological and ethical choices. Underlying these choices is nevertheless a consideration of what kind of knowledge is being produced in the research processes. (Of course, the role of the researcher and the researched in the production of the report is again picked up in this cluster.)

Written at the time of overseeing the doctoral studies of many of the authors of this book, Chapter Five, by Michael Samuel, explores the landscape of research production within the academic terrain, suggesting how the constraints of representation promote particular one-dimensional ways of knowing. The chapter encourages researchers to explore new ways of representing research products, not
simply as an ornamental feature to enhance readability of the research product, but as a means of exploring new epistemological possibilities. The paper nevertheless points to the limitations of exploring these alternative forms of representation within the world of research production and the conceptions of “research rigour” that characterise the academic/research production “business”. Many of the researchers of this book have had to make these decisions in terms of how their research study reports were represented. Notably, many of the external examiners of their work commented favourably on the freshness of the representations of their reports, deeming that the representational choices made were fundamental to the kind of epistemology they were exploring.

Chapter Six, by Ruth Beecham, now located within a rural Australian university setting (Charles Sturt University), explores the notion of trust in the development of narrative knowledge creation. While she accepts that motivational pluralism (Sober and Wilson, 1998) governs the initial thrust of the narrative research project, she also believes that trust-in-the-truth-of-the-word-of-the-other is the primary moral condition for its success as a research method. She examines the idea of trust as an ethical condition for a research approach, linking this to three groups of danger. Firstly, she outlines the dangers within trustful speaker/hearer/listener collusion and how trust itself can establish “insider-outsider”, “us-and-them” polemics within and between the three-way narrative research relationship. Secondly, she talks about the dangers inherent in a non-trusting research relationship; in particular the status of words that are spoken, heard, interpreted – and later denied. And thirdly, she discusses those dangers that arise from trusting in the linguistic skills of the researcher who simultaneously mediates and creates the conditions for narrative truth-making. The first of these dangers concerns the ability of skilled fictive wordsmanship to both market and manipulate emotional response; while the second concerns the potential exclusivity of a research approach that is so dependent on skills of writing-as-fiction (and particularly English language writing-as-fiction) in order to promote its claims of knowledge creation. Because of the significant issue raised by these points, the final part of the chapter links the practice of narrative research to an additional danger within the method: of trusting-in-the-notion-of-equity.

Daisy Pillay, the author of Chapter Seven, is a creative painter trained in the visual arts and a teacher educator at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. In her doctoral studies she spread her empirical wings, exploring how some teachers remained passionate and committed to the enterprise of teaching, in a general environment of declining morale and increasing disillusionment. She explores how teachers’ lives are constructed in the dialectical relationship between their unique personal experiences and the broader social political terrain of reconstruction of South Africa. She draws on her knowledge of cubism as a movement in art to develop a heuristic device to understand the multiple layers of complexity that could be analysed to interpret the lives of these “successful teachers”. Her study explores how a cubist-narrative of teachers could be told with different imagined audiences in mind and how the audience and their intentions also help shape the construction of narratives. She shows how the choice of authorial presence of the researcher in
the narratives could yield different insights into the data within a narrative research tradition. The narratives, constructed in first and third persons, allow different spaces for different interpretations. This approach resonates with her desire to represent the lives of teachers in a way that permits multiple interpretations, no one version being more privileged than another. The sources of influence for professional development of teachers are thereby advanced and this no doubt influences the way she now designs her professional development courses for teachers, at both school and university level.

Chapters Eight, Nine and Ten (the third cluster of chapters) consider how data is used methodologically in the research process: firstly, as an exemplar of alternative forms of representation of “research reports”; secondly, as a political tool and, thirdly, beyond the scope of individual life history research boundaries into organisational identity research.

Chapter Eight draws on the metaphor of the research process as a joining together of many instruments within an orchestra. It provides an exemplar of the kinds of alternative forms of representation that could characterise research reporting. The chapter is presented in the form of a drama script involving three actors: the researcher and two of the research participants. It aims to capture the interactive questioning and probing that epitomises the research process and shows that the participants are simultaneously negotiating several different layers of meaning-making as they make sense of the world of becoming teachers of the English language. The chapter provides the data set of the research study, which is described in the opening chapter of this book, providing the reader with a practical representation of how visual and verbal (written) data could be organised in the reporting of research. The immediacy of the narrative itself is created by attempting to represent as closely as possible to the told story of the research participants, including the uniqueness of the dialect of English the three participants use to ask and tell of their involvement in the research process.

Chapter Nine extends the problematic nature of what constitutes data in research. While the study does not use a life history approach, it is still deeply concerned with the same considerations of ethics, representation and epistemology that plagues research into HIV and AIDS. In this chapter, Labby Ramrathan focuses on the context that shapes research agendas. It attempts to frame, profile and interrogate the context for particular research agendas. In this respect it argues that the construction of research agendas at macro-level, whilst motivated by worthy epistemological considerations (such as a knowledge of the prevalence of HIV and AIDS within the society), can and is manipulated by political interests. The interest to direct resources towards HIV and AIDS interventions drives researchers to choose particular data production methods to fuel their agendas. Research on HIV and AIDS is used as a medium to explore the notion of “data as agency”. By interrogating HIV and AIDS researchers’ responses to the data they produce within a critical discourse analysis framework, they expose their positionality. Critical discourse analysis allows one to explore how researchers use and read data against a defined context that exposes their biases and agendas.
INTRODUCTION

Labby Ramrathan at the time of the writing of this chapter was the Director of the School of Educational Studies at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, and became part of a large national team of researchers investigating through a direct epidemiological testing the prevalence of HIV and AIDS amongst teachers. He is presently the Dean’s Assistant in the Faculty of Education at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

Chapter Ten extends the use of the life history approach to the field of “evaluation research”, showing how an organisational ethnography can be used to understand organisational behaviour. However, using the approach is necessarily complicated by considerations around methodology, representation and ethics in the process of constructing new knowledge.

During the latter part of the last century, empirical research has been characterised by an expansive proliferation of alternative paradigms, each claiming its space as a legitimate research genre in relation to the enfranchised positivist canon. The acceptance and popularisation of feminist methods and methodologies have encouraged researchers to resist speculative definitions and binary logic and to privilege narrative theorising. However, to date, the practice of narrative research has been largely confined to exploring individual identity as a window to other epistemological and ontological concerns. While its popularity in ethnographic studies as a tool for documenting the lives of marginals and subalterns, as well as communities and societies, is on the increase, the use of this approach in the study of organisations has only recently gained in popularity.

This chapter explores the value of appropriating the foundational principles of Empowerment and Illuminative Evaluation (which have their roots in an anthropological conception of organisations and institutions) as a tool to excavate organisational identity and behaviour. It interrogates the value of an organisational ethnography and its capacity to satisfy the intellectual curiosity of the researcher, while simultaneously providing illuminative insights for members of the organisation to revisit their praxis.

Engaging in an organisational ethnography enables a neo-institutional challenge to the structuralist-functionalist conceptions of organisational theorists such as Weber and Durkheim who view organisations as having a tangible material existence rather than being founded on an “ontology of becoming”. In a mode of critical self-reflexivity, Rubby Dhunpath revisits the methodological wisdom of engaging in an institutional biography, providing insights into his journey as a researcher, highlighting critical episodes, as he appropriated a non-conventional approach to document the institutional memory of a non-governmental organisation (NGO). He touches on some of his insights and learnings, while putting up for scrutiny what for him were some of the unresolved theoretical and methodological dilemmas that served to disrupt his essentialist notions of narrative research. In particular he challenges the practice of member-checking as a necessary but potentially constraining exercise in narrative research.

Rubby Dhunpath, at the time of writing this chapter, was a Rockefeller post-doctoral Fellow at the University of Illinois’ Centre for International Studies. His experience and position as Senior Research Specialist within the Human Sciences
Research Council in South Africa has tracted him into expanding the usually individual micro-level potential that life history methodology offers, and he argues now more forcibly for a hybridity of research approaches and the potential of life history approaches to expand into broader macro-level studies. He is presently the Director in the University Teaching and Learning Office at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

THE ORIGINS OF THIS BOOK

This book has its roots within a community of researchers associated with the School of Education Studies at the former University of Durban-Westville, now known as the University of KwaZulu-Natal after its merger in 2005 with the former University of Natal.

The project was conceived as a post-doctoral activity to disseminate graduates’ completed research, many of which were recommended for publication by the examiners. In mid 2004, 10 graduates and their supervisors participated in an authorship development workshop hosted by the Faculty of education to generate a book on innovative research methodologies.

During the authorship development workshop, the central idea of the book was conceptualized as falling broadly within the genre of life history research. Each of the authors’ central thematic focus was extensively interrogated over two days, after which authors went on to develop their chapters which were collated into the 1st draft manuscript by the editors.

Over the following months, these chapters were reviewed by the doctoral supervisors, and refined by the authors leading to the 2nd draft. In 2005, the chapters were presented as papers at the first international conference on Qualitative Enquiry, held at the University of Illinois, Urbana Champaign. Having received valuable comment and critique from renowned scholars attending the conference, authors then developed their chapters further, leading to the 3rd draft. In 2006, this draft was circulated amongst the ten authors for interrogation and reworking, culminating in the 4th draft.

The 4th draft was sent to Prof Patti Lather of Ohio State University and Prof Norman Denzin of the University of Illinois who offered further critique and comment on the manuscript with suggestions for revisions. In 2007, the amended 5th draft was submitted to Claudia Mitchell of the University of KwaZulu-Natal who offered additional comment and recommendations. The 6th draft was then submitted to Dr Betty Govinden, for final comment, leading to the final draft which was accepted in 2008 for publication by Sense Publishers. Sense Publishers then subjected the book to its own rigorous editorial processes until completion.
INTRODUCTION

1 Many outsiders still marvel today at the “miracle” that post-apartheid South Africa demonstrates in the lack of overt racism and tolerance that many reveal in the agenda to move forward beyond our painful histories. Can this be attributed to the TRC? Or are we just a forgiving nation? A stubborn horse to subjugate? This of course does not mean that all vestiges of injustice have been removed.


3 This article was first published in Perspectives in Education: Volume 18, Number 2 (1999).

REFERENCES


The photograph on the cover page is an adaptation of the painting of Pablo Picasso, ‘Les Demoiselles d’Avignon’ (Arnason 1986, 154).
PART ONE: CONCEPTUALISING LIFE HISTORY RESEARCH
  EPISTEMOLOGICALLY
1. ON BECOMING A TEACHER: LIFE HISTORY RESEARCH AND THE FORCE-FIELD MODEL OF TEACHER DEVELOPMENT

Any attempt at describing or evaluating the complex human social condition is prone to distortions, omissions, reductions and elaborations. All we hope to achieve in understanding the human condition is likely to be limited, little more than a glimpse through the window of research. Stories are one means by which human beings attempt to make sense of that complex human condition: to create some order out of the chaos of competing and contradictory experiences; to bring into dialogue the world of the real and the world of the imagination; to stand Janus-headed, looking backwards and forwards into past life experiences and anticipating the future.

MacIntyre (see Gough, 1998) argues for the critical role of narratives in practical reasoning and ethical thinking, suggesting that

…we can only answer questions about what we should do if we can answer prior questions about the story or stories that we are caught up in, including the cultural myths and mythologies that we help to perpetuate.

Notably, telling stories about one’s life is a process – not of documenting the truth of what exactly happened. Instead, the act of telling the story is a process of recording how the teller of the tale presently sees her position in relation to the subject/topic being discussed. Stories about one’s lives therefore encapsulate the past, the future and the present. The story that is produced in the telling (the verbal or written text) also encodes the kind of authorial relationship that the teller wishes to establish in relation to the subject matter being discussed. The composer of the story chooses to frame herself as an assertive, ambiguous or passive believer in the explanations, interpretations and memories she offers. She creatively and constantly chooses (unconsciously or not) appropriate positionalities in relation to what she is telling. These positionalities vary in relation to the strength of her belief and confidence in the different aspects of what she professes. Her telling is a constant internal dialogue with herself.

The teller of the tale also creatively chooses the kind of relationship she shares with the listeners of the tale. The teller decides how she wishes to be seen. In this sense, the listeners/audience co-construct the tale and the telling. The ensuing narrative text represents that lived moment of the composer fictively, actively and creatively engaging with choices about how to represent the relationship between
herself as composer and the audience whom she has conjured up as the prime listeners of her tale, balancing the memories and interpretations of her experiences.

Whilst it might seem that the writer/composer of the tale is in supreme control, her telling of the tale is framed within the specific conventions of how tales are told, read and listened to in the cultural context. She is thus at the mercy of the social conventions of telling stories. Of course, she may choose to flout these conventions, but she does so as a constant foil/counterpoint to the existing convention, and she runs the risk of making the immediate accessibility of the text more difficult for the conservative reader. It may also be argued that the text that is produced is capable of being interpreted in a myriad of ways. The strength and weakness of language (verbal or written) is that it only has “potential for meaning”. Listeners are therefore free to interpret what they will from the rendition of the story.

Given the promises and perils of life history research, it emerges as an approach responding to the stories that people habitually tell in everyday life. The life history researcher attempts to structure the process of the telling of stories to yield rich, in-depth details about the specific life experiences, memories and interpretations that the individuals produce. She aims to analyse and interpret these “told” memories, experiences and recollections of individuals in a systematic and ordered fashion, allowing other readers to decide on how credible, authentic and trustworthy the stories appear in relation to their (readers’) own life worlds. Connelly and Clandinin (1990, p. 2) argue that education therefore is the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories since teachers and learners all live “storied lives” which are ways of making sense of the world in which they live.

However, unlike the storyteller habitually constructing her stories, the life history researcher chooses to demarcate the realm of what is to be investigated, what realm of one’s life is being researched. The researcher chooses to identify some specific dimensions of social reality that she wishes to illuminate. For example, the life history researcher may choose to focus on one’s family experiences, one’s career trajectory, one’s sexual relations. The storyteller provides the ingredients for understanding more in-depth and in interconnected ways how the researcher’s specified domain is reinforced, subverted, challenged in relation to other realms of the person’s lives. What emerges in the life history approach thus is a relating of the complexity of the human condition, a representation of the fullness of life against the backdrop of some underlying interpretative or critical framework. As a representation of life, it is never the fullness itself but merely one glimpse in through the window into that fullness. That fullness, too, is never completely static, but evolving and dialoguing with itself. To some, a complete fullness cannot exist.

This creative process between the life history researcher and her research subject weaving an interconnective net to hold all the representations of fullnesses, stands in strong contrast to the processes of traditional researchers whose goals are to attempt to establish the veracity of certain truths. Life history research does not aim to test out a pre-formulated hypothesis. Instead, the life history researcher is
one who encourages herself to be surprised by her data, to be thrown off track from her original thoughts, to veer into territory that she did not anticipate, to find data that is contradictory. The life history researcher aims to develop an understanding or illumination of the specific realm under scrutiny in its complexity rather than in its reductionist abstraction; she does not expect to provide an explanation of the truth regarding that realm. The interpretative and critical framework is often offered as multi-dimensional illuminations of the phenomenon being investigated. The life history researcher’s goal is to be generative of alternative ways of seeing, knowing, understanding and interpreting life experiences. To research is to look again with new eyes.

RE-SEARCHING STUDENTS TEACHERS IN SOUTH AFRICA

This chapter reflects on a study that attempts to understand the process of becoming a teacher of the English language. The study was conducted with a group of my student teachers within a teacher education programme at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. It attempted to document the life experiences of student teachers over different periods of their lives as they journeyed through apartheid schooling into tertiary education and back into the classroom as novice teachers of the English language. Of the 82 potential students from the Special Method English course, which I taught, I purposefully selected nine students who typified the diversity of learners encountering English language teaching and learning in post-apartheid South Africa. Their ability to articulate lucidly their reflections was also a criterion in their selection.

My intention was to get students to look back on their own English language teaching and learning in their homes, families, communities, primary and secondary schooling. Whilst this reflected some more distant recollections and memories, the research design enabled me to probe more deeply into how they experienced learning English during their undergraduate years at the university. Having registered to become teachers of the English language in a Postgraduate Diploma, they were asked to document (tell their tale) their reflections on becoming teachers. The storytelling process included an attempt to bring into dialogue their own past experiences (home, families, schools), their present experiences (undergraduate education, student teacher programme) and their future (teaching as a professional career). The process of telling the story for each of the students encapsulated an overt and conscious process of documenting and representing during a one-year period their emerging views about English language teaching and learning. This approach is located within the tradition of “teacher thinking research” (Kennedy, 1991; Freeman, 1996). Here, the emphasis was not exclusively on what the teachers’ actions were, but more importantly on how the student teachers made sense of their own and others’ actions in the educational process.
DATA COLLECTION APPROACH

The aim of this paper is to document the rigorous process of data collection that was undertaken during the process of gathering insights into the life experiences of these student teachers. The intention of such a description is to suggest that life history research should not be seen simply as a vainglorious glamorising of the research subject’s own individual life experiencing (see Reddy, 2000 for an explanation of what life history is not). The process of data collection attempted to develop as in-depth a way of knowing the life experiences of the research subject as is possible within the genre of telling stories.

My Positioning

In setting up the research process, I was consciously aware of my own privileged position in the research process. I could not escape my simultaneous roles as their teacher educator, a life history researcher and also a member of the faculty’s management structures. As the researcher, I was fuelled by the exigencies of timeframes for data collection and deadlines for reporting on the study. My interest in their experiences was for the purpose of better understanding how English language teaching and learning could be improved, and the public renditions of their life histories in the research process became a way of fulfilling my role in preparing them to become teachers. My agenda and research questions filtered into their prescribed assignments for the course. As a manager of the university curriculum development process, the insights I gained from students allowed me to infuse a more sensitive awareness of how our student teachers were interpreting the curriculum that was being designed for them. I became aware of their own limited involvement in what and how they were being taught. This alerted me to how I was influencing the managerial decisions I was making as I attempted to develop quality control over the curriculum.

I was also aware of my own “disadvantage” in the position I adopted. I was not a novice English language student teacher, although I once was. My own more experienced status predisposed me to ask particular questions, looking at the classroom in specific ways. These ways did not necessarily coincide with what excites or troubles a novice student teacher. It was clear that in developing the life histories of my research participants, I would have to allow my self to be dislodged, to allow the students to feel comfortable with producing and revealing their own joys, desires, hopes and fears.

Negotiating Entry

Negotiating my entry into the worlds of the student teachers meant that I had to be quite explicit in mapping out the details of what my study was about and what the possible options for participation were. However, telling them about confidentiality and authenticity without showing tangibly how I wanted to hear their voices is insufficient. My data collection process had to disclose explicitly the “stance” that I wished to frame, i.e. what kind of relationship I anticipated in relation to my
research (Freeman, 1996). I was interested in participants seeing themselves as the directors of their stories rather than pandering to the expectations of what I as researcher wanted to hear. I wanted them to realise that my own role in challenging and contesting their worldviews about teaching and learning English was also a part of my role as teacher educator. I wanted them to know that I saw them as active critics of the course and my own actions as teacher educator or researcher. The space within which the data was to be produced was guaranteed to be a cauldron of competing fiery voices, where both the researcher and the research participants felt confident to fuel the fire with their own opinions because we were all complicit in generating the data.

DATA GENERATING STRATEGIES

Who am I?
The first exercise focused on getting the students to be able to choose a means of representing who they are to the rest of the class. The exercise was designed over two weeks: the first week involved preparation and planning, and the second a report back to a plenary session. Surprisingly, it became evident that the students were only vaguely familiar with others in their class cohort. The groups were characteristically resistant to the exercise, expecting that the teacher education programme will be “demonstration lessons on how to teach”. The class was set the task of pairing off with a person unfamiliar to them: using the racial, gender, cultural and geographic categories as the first demarcations of “difference”. Identifying the differences/similarities proved interesting as students began to realise more similarities between their experiences/backgrounds than they initially expected. This was especially so across the race groups. Students were then asked to collaboratively develop and administer an interview schedule to construct a biographic text of their English learning and teaching experiences.

Another group of students was asked to work on designing a biographical form to capture the diversity of the whole class (82 students) and to present a written report a week later on the responses to the designed biographical questionnaire. This came to be recorded in a strongly quantitative representation. Another group was asked to enact an oral discourse of a critical incident in their schooling. The class was also asked to identify whom they considered to represent the “diversity” of the students in their class. After many debates, five students were selected. I then chose to interview these students about their expectations of being a teacher of English in a multicultural society. My own interview with these students was semi-structured. In the interview, I also focused on the students’ expectations of the Special Method course. In the report back session, I was surprised by the level of openness and enthusiasm that students revealed in this early stage of the course.

In preparing for the report back session in the second week, the class and I began to negotiate the sensitivity of public disclosure of their biographies. We talked about the risky business drawing on Melnick’s (1997) and Harris and Furlong’s (1997) comments on the use of biographical work in the classroom.
We talked about the highly personal nature of the data – that data once revealed is public information; that individuals might be offended by the comments that classmates make about their worldviews; that the teacher cannot guarantee that insensitive remarks would be passed by student colleagues; that the researcher cannot protect the individual tellers of their stories from the consequences of what their revelations present. For example, if the storyteller reveals a criminal history, then the teacher educator/researcher cannot protect him/her from the social consequences of attitudes and inter-relationships that colleagues might show towards him/her. The need for a climate of co-operation and confidentiality was thus stressed.

Whilst this climate of trust is one that evolves over time, the sharing of their experiences proved to be a kind of restorative healing process, as I became aware that students wanted someone to hear their stories of pain, suffering, or triumph over the apartheid system. The mere fact that someone was listening to them proved to have the effect of making the other colleagues in the class more respectful of the teller. I am convinced that these early sessions helped create the climate of critical open discursive spaces between myself and the research participants, since the session proved to be one which allowed individuals to ask probing and critical questions. For many, the exposure to the lifeworld outside their own “tiny cocooned world” was a good educative experience. Above all, it created a feeling that the Special Method class was a community, more respectful of each other in their similarities and differences.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Having written a reflective biography of another individual, students were then tasked with documenting their own autobiographical account of their experiences of learning English within the contexts of their homes, families, communities and schools. The detailed assignment handout urged students to include in their written report reflections on their prior experiences and beliefs about English language teaching and learning, a critical analysis of these beliefs, and experiences and an explanation of how these experiences might influence them to become the kind of teacher of English that they would like to be.

The assignment requested students to include memories and impressions of former teachers and themselves as learners. The critical analysis aimed at tapping their current level of understanding of how individuals learn languages. They were asked to identify roles and practices that they would like to reject based on these reflections.

The assignment proved difficult for those students who had little experience of autobiographical writing. Many students, despite them having completed an undergraduate degree in English literature, had a poor (less developed) repertoire of reading experiences outside of their prescribed textbooks. Exemplars of written autobiographies of student teachers reflecting on their schooling experiences (e.g. Karen Johnson: Pennsylvanian University) proved to be useful in boosting their confidence.
As students progressed with the assignment, I became aware of the need to develop more sophisticated writing skills to “concisely and crisply” document their narratives. I was fairly satisfied with the detail of information (propositional content) yielded from each of the students in relation to the quality of their English language teaching experiences, but perhaps less pleased about their relatively under-developed writing skills. I became aware of the need for an alternative form of representation beyond the written words. I had in the early forms of data gathering relied exclusively on the oral mode (cf. “Who am I?” sessions described above). It was then that I introduced the collage.

Collages

My own interest in the use of visual collages inspired me to think of getting students to develop a collection/assemblage of different material/texts, objects of different styles codes, mediums to reflect their life experiences with English language learning and teaching. The development of the collage was to serve as the cover page of their autobiography. I provided an initial introduction to the medium of collage-making, which also serves also as a design tool for organising and developing curriculum units. The collage allowed students the opportunity to collect photographs or draw/assemble visual representations of themselves at different stages of their lives: at home, in the community, in primary and secondary school. A visual feast of A5 collage renditions accompanied the final hand-in of the autobiographies.

It is evident that in this approach to life history, I was consciously allowing the author to choose the best form of representing him or herself. Nevertheless, the visual texts do not necessarily speak for themselves, and needed to be mediated to me, the life history researcher. With the collage as a stimulus, I asked students to reflect on why they had chosen to represent their life experiences through the particular images on the collage. In fact, their collages themselves became the interview schedule, probing for more clarity about the choice of size, shape, position of the images, etc. These interviews with students about their experiences of English language teaching and learning sometimes spanned over two-and-a-half hours.

Reflective Journals

Drawing on the work of Schon (1987), Elliot (1985), Carr and Kemmis (1986), the Faculty of Education designed a teacher development programme which consciously encourages teachers to self-reflect on their own development as professionals. This reflection is not confined to a mere psychological interpretivist reflection on the successes and failures of one’s development as a professional but also explores how one’s own role as a professional contributes to the development of social justice within the contexts in which one operates.

As part of the research project the students were asked to reflect on their past and present experiences during the Special Method course. This allowed them the
opportunity to record their changing/evolving sense of the theoretical and practical input that they were receiving during their teacher training. As a teacher education tool the reflective journal was a means of consolidating what was being learnt. It was also a useful tool to gain insight into what sense teachers were making of the experiences of the courses (my own interest as researcher). These reflective journals were periodically “marked” by the faculty during the on-campus component of the course. However, during the field-based Teaching Practice session where students were placed in schools, the formal expectation was that the student had to keep a daily record of his/her involvement in the school. These journals provided an invaluable source of data for my research.

**Student Assignments**

During the School-based Teaching Practice sessions the student were set the assignment of investigating the “lived language policy at the school”. In the absence of a formal written language policy in most schools at the time, the students were expected to document a detailed description of how different languages were taught, learnt, experienced, reinforced or challenged at their schools. The students were grouped in teams of four to five and were assigned different dimensions of establishing the status quo regarding language usage. This data, it was believed, would assist students to understand the specific localised problems regarding language teaching and learning. Students were encouraged to locate official documents, interview teachers of different grades, as well as talk to different learners across racial and linguistic heritages. A formal written report of their involvement in understanding the lived language policy at the school also constituted part of the data for the study: revealing how students interpreted what constituted the challenges facing language teaching and learning at a systemic level within the school as an institution.

The students were also asked to develop a planned intervention in terms of addressing an identified problem of English language teaching and learning. The students were set the task of engaging in an action research project. They worked in collaborative teams with mentor teachers, lecturers and student teachers. The students were asked to record in their daily reflective journals their reflections on the success of these efforts. At the end of the project the student were expected to assemble a portfolio of all the interventions they had engaged in, in the form of a packaged Curriculum Unit. Besides developing the students’ ability to design materials, it also provided the school with a useful set of materials. In addition, the curriculum packages served as data for me to interpret how student teachers experienced and understood English language teaching and learning.

**CLASSROOM TEACHING: OBSERVATIONS, REFLECTIONS AND EVALUATIONS**

During the School-based Teaching Practice (SBTP), I was also involved in supervising the student teachers whose life histories I was documenting. I took the opportunity of working with these nine students in their schools. This entailed
ON BECOMING A TEACHER

detailed interviews as we discussed their lesson preparation, their action research projects and their reflective journal comments. It also included visits to the classrooms to observe the student teachers teaching. Some of these lessons were videotaped and played back for collaborative viewing between the research subject and myself. In this second viewing of the videotape immediately after the lesson was taught, the student was asked to pause the videotape to comment on any aspect of the lesson that s/he considered appropriate for reflection. This second interview involving stimulated recall was also recorded, providing rich data about the relationship between the teacher and the classroom world. In the stimulus recall interview the focus was on getting students to provide a rationale for their actions and/or the reactions of the learners in the classroom. In this way, I was able to probe deeply into the numerous contemporaneous concerns that the novice teachers were dealing with during their teaching.

During the course of SBTP, students were encouraged to sit in on each other’s lessons, producing a set of written reports for their peers. At the end of SBTP the student team members were asked to write detailed peer review evaluations. Students were also tasked with writing self-evaluations. These evaluations were added to the assigned mark awarded for the SBTP session.

After School-Based Teaching Practice: Summative evaluations

As a form of consolidating or confirming the kind of growth experiences that the students had undergone, I designed a focus group interview which was conducted at the end of the course just prior to the final examinations. The purpose of the interview was to get the students to look with hindsight at all the kinds of activities that they had engaged in during the course and comment on their usefulness in shaping them as teachers of English. Present in the room were all the artefacts that they had produced during the course of the year, including artefacts from an excursion that they had organised. These included lesson preparation books, action research reports, evaluation reports, charts produced, etc. The interview was video-recorded. Another summative assessment/record of their growth was the final year examination script that each student produced.

DATA GATHERING

The purpose of this detailed account of how data was gathered is to demonstrate that the methods attempt to go beyond simply extracting an individual’s life history record using exclusively verbal interview data. The range of methods used to generate life history data is rich and varied. The data itself exists in many different modes: verbal data, visual data and written data. The data itself is written at and about various stages of the individual’s life and therefore contains a developmental feel over the one-year data gathering process. The audience for the production of the data in each of the cases varies slightly. The producer of the data (the story teller) is placed in many different positions of telling in many different research contexts: in the lecture classroom; in the researcher’s office; in the audio recording
room; in the art classroom; in the school classroom, reflecting after one’s teaching at school; in the examination room, reflecting on a range of aspects related to becoming a teacher.

I would like to acknowledge that in the gathering of this data, I as researcher am very much part of the data that is produced. My role as teacher educator further compounds this since many of the discussions about English language teaching and learning were a consequence of the stimulus that I myself may have inspired or referred students to. This is the nature of teacher education and this is what I was researching: how do student teachers make sense of the input from their lecturers? Do they value them? Feign respect for them? Use them or discard them?

I consider that the process of generating the data was collaborative, but shaped by my own agenda. The student teachers were assigned tasks, which involved them engaging with their theoretical and practical understandings of being a teacher. It may be argued that the research participants saw my detailed probing as an extended form of teacher preparation which encouraged them to be more highly reflective and critical of their own engagement with the teaching process. Their willingness to participate was clearly evidence of this.

DATA ANALYSIS

I believe that the data analysis process for this study began from the very start of the project. I believe that the research participants were always aware that I was attempting to verbalise and make sense of their actions and thoughts. This is evident in the tape recording of our discussions where I constantly probed deeper to help the students and myself understand what it is that they were explaining. The process of data collection involved my having to “enter and re-enter the field”. Over time, the process of data collection became more refined and sophisticated. As the study unfolded, new methodologies for data collection were designed. This process of constant refinement of the data collection strategy constituted the first stages of data analysis. The approach that was used may be regarded as an “iterative” rather than a “linear” data gathering process (Freeman, 1996).

Another consideration about data analysis is when and how the categories for the analysis emerge. In an “a priori analysis” the categories are determined in advance of the data collection and the analysis proceeds in relation to the pre-specified categories. This approach is akin to the hypothesis testing kind of research evident in most empirical studies. On the opposite end of the continuum of data analysis is the approach which allows the categories of analysis to emerge from the data with minimal a priori expectation: The grounded theory approach is akin to research aiming at generating hypotheses as the outcome of research. Two in-between analytical categorisation processes could be envisaged: a “negotiated analysis” and a “guided analysis”. The first entails the categories and analysis being developed by the researcher with the input of the research participants, and the second involves developing categories in an a priori way, but subsequent analysis guides the categories to be modified through interaction with the data.
In my study, the approach adopted tended to be located toward the end of the continuum related to a grounded theory approach of analysis (see Figure 1 below). Nevertheless, I believe that my own perhaps unarticulated theory of teacher development could have served as some form of *a priori* categories that guided the analysis. My approach relied almost exclusively on privileging my own interpretation of the data, since the student teachers had already left university by the time I engaged in the final stages of data analysis. Although access to students was difficult, I was able to get them to look at the represented stories that I had constructed to document an analysis of their lives. I do therefore believe that my own data analytical stance hovered along the continuum below.

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**Figure 1. Data analysis and interpretation (Freeman, 1996, p. 372) Adapted**

**THE FORCE FIELD MODEL OF TEACHER DEVELOPMENT**

Whilst it is not the intention of this chapter to reveal a detailed analysis of the data yielded, it is necessary to summarise briefly the findings of the research. This will inform the discussion concerning the use value of the life history research approach, especially in two spheres: in the sphere of curriculum development; in the sphere of policymaking.

The findings of the study postulated that student teachers find themselves pushed and pulled by various competing, contradictory and complimentary forces as they try to negotiate their identities as professional teachers in post-apartheid South Africa. It is argued that a stable or fixed identity is not possible (nor desirable) in a multicultural, polyglot society. The student teachers’ own rich biographies of experiences of English language teaching and learning developed during their formative years in their homes and communities predispose them to approaching the formal learning of English with hesitation. For some, the expectation is that English will yield the passport to better life opportunities;
nevertheless, they simultaneously and contradictorily anticipate the subversion of their own linguistic heritages in their homes. Schooling represents the transition to the loss of this dimension of their home identity. The specific racial, biographical and class positions of different individuals each yield unique interpretations of what it is to learn English which is related to how consonant the cultural world of the home and the school are. Some interpreted English (and schooling) as the deliberate escape out of their everyday lifeworld outside school. Some individuals choose their linguistic suicide willingly because of the economic prosperity it is professed to yield. Others revisit the abandonment to the forces of the colonising influence of English in their worlds. This questioning, however, is more an activity of hindsight.

These biographical forces are nevertheless mediated further in relation to the quality of institutional forces that were presented into the lifeworld of the individual. The quality of teaching and learning of English is interpreted by the research participants as strongly dependent on their school teacher’s own conception of what language learning is and how it ought to occur. Different school teachers’ often unexpressed theoretical understandings of language acquisition and learning filter into their classrooms. Often, second language classrooms in African schools were characterised by repetitive and behaviourist interpretations of language learning accompanied by several reported cases of physical punishment and rewards systems to drive learning English. Most learners reported poor experiences of learning to communicate the language, which ironically motivated them to choose language teaching as a career.

As learners entered the tertiary education world, they experienced the teaching of English as the study of English literature which in many respects they found not directly related to their own goals of improving the quality of the poorly developed language competence. Their exposure to alternative theories and practices of English language teaching and learning in the teacher education programme is regarded as only remotely connected to their own schooling experiences. They remain ambiguously sceptical of the potential of alternative approaches, yet convinced that they are the new generation of English language teachers who potentially could make a difference.

The experiences of school-based teaching practice destabilise again the student teachers’ conceptions of becoming a teacher. They are exposed to the world of schooling again through the lens of the new theories they have been exposed to and through the lens of a largely disillusioned teaching force which is having to cope with the demands of enacting and interpreting a new curriculum (Curriculum 2005). Resident teachers are sceptical of “new fangled theories and approaches” and attempt to co-opt teachers into their routines and rituals of teaching and learning languages.

All of these forces compete for attention as the teacher attempts to negotiate his/her identity. The novice teacher is thus pushed or pulled into adopting certain value systems or practices. The dynamism of being different, true to what one believes, is chosen by only those few who are able to resist the temptation to “flow with the stream”. Even in choosing to flow with the stream, the internal dialogue of
what one “could be” as opposed to what one “chooses to be” persists in the novice teacher of language. As novice teachers progress during the course of their training, they become more circumspect of the theoretical world of academe, choosing instead the pragmatics of what works best in the situated specific classrooms they teach. They do not necessarily abandon the “crutch” of theories debated and discussed in their university lecture halls, but come to develop their own interpretations of what may be called a “personal working theory”. This personal working theory is reliant on their teaching practice sessions having presented sufficient opportunities for contestation, challenge and debate.

REPORTING THE RESEARCH STUDENT

What appears in the descriptive of the Force Field model above seems commonplace. This is because in the choice of the representation of this summary, it is necessary to generalise, create abstractions and gloss over the nuances and subtleties of meanings. Hence, it is important that one considers specifically how life history research is to be reported. (Issues of representation are explored in Samuel, 1999.) In my study, I chose to represent the telling of the tale in the form of narrative stories about the lives of particular individual student teachers. In the first two stories, I represent the story in first person narrative to evoke a sense of immediacy of the teller. I also chose in doing so to reflect as closely as possible the unique dialectical variation of language usage of the particular participants. Therefore, I chose to remain close to the direct transcript records in the telling of the story. In the remaining seven stories I resorted to a third person narrative which allowed me the opportunity to critically comment as omniscient narrator on the plot of the story as it unfolded in the lives of the different individuals.

As can be seen from the above brief description, the representation of the text of the storied life history is important. The presence or distance of the storytellers and the life history researcher can be creatively manipulated through the choice of the quality of the text displayed as the outcome of the research process. The degree of interactivity that the writer of the life history intends with his/her potential audience is also enhanced through the use of different modes of data, and having generated valuable visual data, this was included in the presentation of the students’ represented life history.

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FOR LIFE HISTORY RESEARCH?

My view is that life history research is unlikely to have any direct one-to-one influence on the research context/academic worldview unless the life history report/story is ingested through a slow process of diffusion into the consciousness of the users. Too often, curriculum developers and policymakers are anxious to be directed with some degree of certainty into action as the consequence of having been presented the research’s “hard facts”. Users of research often want to be inspired with some concrete action to follow the presentation of “the report”. Unfortunately, the aim of life history research is not to provide such certainty. Life
history research presents an opportunity to its users to be able to think and look at the world for its blurry bits, its complexities and complications. The world is not capable of being reduced into simplicities. The writers of life histories should hope only to have presented fresh illuminations of the phenomenon being investigated.

Stories are meant to be told to allow readers to be able to see others and themselves in new ways. What those new ways will be are not always controllable by the author of the story. Nevertheless, the telling of the story in a particular sequence, in a particular form, with particular representation, is more likely to conjure up particular kinds of responses. The life history approach, therefore, is only useful in that it can provide another lens to interpret the complexity of the world in which we live.

The storytelling process is thus a process of understanding the myths and mythologies that our life experiences have harvested. It is an opportunity to challenge those myths, to make decisions about which dimensions of the myths we wish to endure, eradicate and/or alter. However, it is unlikely that one researcher’s descriptive and evaluative account of the life experiences of teachers is likely to fundamentally open up the box of mythologies. It is by drawing comparisons across several different storytellers that the mythologies can come to be examined. The authors of the stories should be diverse in their origin and outlook, so that various vantages on our mythologies are illuminated. The decision of what use to make of all these repeated contestations, confirmations and consolidations of the mythologies is thus the role of the policymaker.

On a smaller scale it is likely that the life history approach could help the curriculum designer as has been the case in my study. In the study located in the realm of understanding student teachers’ experiences of a curriculum (English language teaching and learning), I have, together with the students, come to understand more deeply the decision-making process which impinges on the development of an identity for novice student teachers. I am now much more acutely aware of the many pushes and pulls impacting on the student teachers as they negotiate their identity. I am more aware of the ability of student teachers (all teachers perhaps) to strategically mimic a chosen preferred identity in relation to specific audiences, contexts and purposes. I am aware that teachers need to be supported to be confident to share their somewhat schizophrenic responsibilities to many masters: the department of education, the school management, the parent body, the pupils and their own personal working theory of teaching. I am aware now more of the deep internal dialogue that teachers need to be able to engage in as they refine their personal working theories. I am aware that teacher education programmes need to be designed in such a way that does not simply involve the replacement of old orthodoxies with new fashions. I am aware as a teacher educator that teachers are deeply rational professionals negotiating simultaneously several competing forces which pull or push them in different directions. The naïve idealism that I once had of “altering teaching practices” in English language teaching and learning is now more tempered with an understanding of the specific dynamics of the rich and challenging world that teachers negotiate everyday in their actions in localised contexts. Nevertheless, I am now more certain of how I
present my own voice into that world to be seen and heard as another of the competing possible influences in the lives of teachers. Such insights are the benefits of a life history research study of the kind that I have described. Other readers would have to choose what inspires them after listening attentively to what the stories have to offer them.

NOTES

1 It should be noted that the students who were involved in the study were both first and second language speakers of English and were largely from the so-called “Indian” and “African” race group.

REFERENCES

HARSHA KATHARD

2. PERSONAL TRUTH MAKING: A CAUTIOUS CELEBRATION

In this chapter I draw attention to the researcher’s responsibilities and ethical dilemmas in the life history research process by reflecting on a study of self-identity formations of People Who Stutter. I begin with a rationale for appropriating life history research into the Speech-Language Pathology profession (henceforth referred to as “the profession”) as a means of challenging and expanding the dominant canon of research practice within the profession and signalling alternative ways of knowing. While maintaining a celebratory agenda, I argue for researchers to be vigilant of their ethical responsibilities, particularly their non-innocence in the research enterprise. I raise issues that troubled me during the research, alluding to my attempts at resolving them. However, my intention is not to offer resolutions but rather to invite debate around three critical issues:

− The obligations of the researcher using a narrative methodology with people who have been traditionally constructed as having communication disorders
− The possibilities and pitfalls of creating new knowledge within a Bakthinian frame
− The problematic nature of crafting, representing and analysing personal truths.

CELEBRATING LIFE HISTORY RESEARCH: WORKING AGAINST THE GRAIN?

Life history research is interested in exploring personal truths. The need to engage with personal truths is well known in many disciplinary fields such as education, sociology and psychology (Cole & Knowles, 2001). However, when life history methodology is newly appropriated into a profession, the onus is on the researcher to clarify issues about the relevance of the methodology and the kind of knowledge it has the potential to generate. My study (Kathard, 2003) explored self-identity formations of People Who Stutter (PWS) using a life history methodology. The participants’ life experiences of stuttering, a communication impairment affecting speech fluency, were explored with seven adult participants through a process of prolonged engagement. First, let me provide a rationale for engaging with the methodology.

The impetus for my inquiry arose from my dissatisfaction around the dearth of knowledge around the personal, experiential dimensions of stuttering in formalised
research. This knowledge gap can be explained by critiquing the profession’s historical location. The profession of Speech-Language Pathology was established in the 1920s and over time constructed its identity as scientific by developing an alliance with Medicine and Linguistics, appropriating their methods of science. As a consequence, the majority of research on stuttering has been generated within a positivist frame as it simultaneously excluded the personal dimensions associated with the discipline. Such reductionist knowledge is problematic in a discipline that offers personal interventions involving real people and complex lives. Silverman (2001, p. 4) explains:

The Method of Science with all its assumptions about reality from a human perspective including the need for objectivity of the so-called observer, linearity of experience and the uses of inferential and descriptive statistical analyses to interpret observations simply can not, at this point in space-time, generate information completely useful to modify behaviours of multitasking, complexly functioning human beings. Personal, more than impersonal, knowledge is required.

The positivist science combined with the influence of the medical model has resulted in negative stereotyping of PWS by speech-language therapists. As a consequence of their professional knowledge base, therapists’ negative attitudes are strong and resistant to change (Snyder, 2001). Restrictive professional knowledge has constrained clinical interventions because it has typically promoted symptom reduction (be more fluent) with intention to fix the deficit without sufficient attention to issues of people living with stuttering in their complex life-worlds. I argue that People Who Stutter have been studied as objects and subjects, and have been constructed as subaltern. However, when clinicians who have recognised the limitations of traditional knowledge are interested in the disorder rather than the person living with it, they have shifted their practices towards narratively-based therapeutic methodologies (DiLollo, Manning, & Neimeyer, 2002). When our interventions demand engagement with personal, outside-of-a-deficit frame dimensions, it seems logical and important to create a different knowledge. In seeking new understandings, I was instinctively inspired by life history methodology. It had potential to produce a fundamentally different knowledge by admitting the personal and engaging a discourse of possibility.

As a first step, however, let us consider who is “subaltern”. According to Spivak (1988), it is not just a sophisticated word for oppressed, Other, or for someone who is not getting a piece of the pie. It refers to people whose voices have been sectioned out of the capitalist bourgeois narrative, or – in post-colonial terms – everything that has limited access to cultural imperialism is subaltern. Given the dominant research tradition and its courtship with the larger colonial narrative, Pillay (2003) described the profession’s use of a research science as “curiously coincidental” to the project of colonialism, a period within which its research was birthed and thrived. He cogently argued that both empirical, positivist research and empire are aimed at dominating, which includes creating knowledge about Other’s lives. Continuing this train of thought, I argue that PWS have been constituted as
subaltern – created as “Other” in the research domain as they have been constructed as voiceless objects of study. Their active participation in research processes cannot be described as equitable.

NARRATIVE METHODOLOGY AND THE RESEARCHERS’ OBLIGATIONS

What are the obligations of the researcher engaging with participants who have been constructed as subaltern? What was my obligation? The question raised by Spivak, “Can the subaltern speak?” is fitting here. Can the subaltern speak? Yes. The people on the margins (poor, black, women, children, disabled) and PWS, can speak and have spoken, outside of the research domain. They have stories to tell (St. Louis, 2001) but the mechanisms for acknowledging their voices do not exist in the dominant research tradition. PWS can speak and do speak. They speak with a stutter. Some may have great difficulty with the “fluency” of speech but are able to communicate. The problem is that they have had limited ear within the research arena. There has been little listening and dialogue to develop communication and meaning and knowledge of the worlds of PWS. Engaging in the dialogue does not mean that the researcher speaks for the participants or offers participants a voice. Spivak (1988) is adamant that no researcher who works in the interests of her participants speaks on behalf of them or gives them voice. I concur with this view. However, it raised critical questions about my positionality as researcher: Was I an activist trying to produce different knowledge? A leftist liberal? Was I was giving voice, giving ear or perhaps taking voice?

In the midst of such a quandary, Spivak’s (1988) advice is useful again. She suggests that the researcher should recognise that his/her privilege is also a kind of insularity that cuts off privilege from certain kinds of other knowledge. One should therefore strive to recognise these limitations and overcome them, not as a magnanimous gesture of inclusion, but to allow new knowledges to emerge. The way to do this is to work critically through one’s own beliefs, prejudices and assumptions to understand how they arose and became naturalised. At a practical level, it meant interrogating who I was, who I am, where my own knowledge base comes from, what my concerns are and how they have impacted on the research process. In this way, the researcher undergoes an obligatory process of self-discovery (Plummer, 2001), as he/she interrogates himself/herself as the instrument of enquiry. The process of self-discovery was no easy path for me and I share some examples of how I began to understand myself as complex, multifaceted, contradictory.

OBLIGATORY SELF-DISCOVERY

Professional Baggage...

In confronting my professional baggage, I was terrified of committing symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1999) by becoming unconsciously dominant during the research process by the very words I chose and issues I emphasised. My frame of
reference had been shaped historically by the medical model and there remained the constant threat that it would continue to be the dominant frame, channelling me to do exactly the opposite of what I intended: I could recreate the professional story and become oppressive in the very knowledge I produced. I had blindspots of which I was unaware, and therefore engaged fellow researchers to review how the interview was unfolding by listening to the audiotape and critique of transcripts, how I was enhancing and limiting the interview. For example, there was critique about the words I chose, the issues I expanded on, and the issues I left unattended. This was a challenge to my mindset – it was not about interview techniques. I was made aware that I probed aspects because I wanted to know more about a particular issue which was not important to the participant. For example, I asked about therapy experience in detail when it was raised only as a minor issue in the life of the participant. I learned that it was the participant’s story I had to value it as it was.

Living on the Margins

At another level, I also understood myself as an individual who could identify with the life experiences of PWS who have traditionally been constructed as being on the margins. My sense of being on the margins came from different sources. My life experience has been shaped by some degree of “voicelessness” growing up as a diasporic Indian female in a segregated apartheid South Africa. My sense of inferiority in a world aspiring to be White and West cannot be sectioned out of my existence. Added to this dynamic was my professionalisation which could be described as a cultural kidnapping through which I uncritically imbibed the practices of a profession. As a professional, I felt a “voicelessness” and an uneasy tension. I was a ventriloquist practicing the rituals of a different culture. Therefore, being on the margins was a part of my experience. Through these experiences I came to understand that there was a different story to be told, contrary to the authoritative, public story.

Privilege

However, I have also lived in a world of relative privilege as an English-speaking, university-educated, fair-skinned, middle-class professional accustomed to good food, restaurants, holidays and nice cars. I was introduced to the world of books almost before I was born and above all I possess “researchers’ privilege” – which carries a power and authority of its own in an unequal world that is knowledge-driven.

NEGOTIATING COMMUNICATION: PITFALLS AND POSSIBILITIES

How can you get someone who has a communication disorder to share a story? (Ask Stephen Hawking, Bauby, Sue Gilpin, Chris Ireland, People Who Stutter, deaf people). This is a question I have frequently been asked. Was it possible that I
would further threaten the participant by inviting him to be part of a process that privileges (verbal) communication as a means of meaning-making? It almost seemed an anomaly – a contradiction – trying to understand stories of people who have communication problems. Will the end of understanding personal truth be realised? The data was being produced narratively with people who repeat words, struggle, have blocks. While Samuel in Chapter One has pointed to the multiple and innovative ways in which data can be produced in a life history study, I want to attend to the narrative interview because it stands as the primary method of data in a life history study (Plummer, 2001).

I reiterate. People with impairments can and do communicate stories. People who stutter can tell stories and do tell stories. As a clinician, I have heard many stories from PWS in various settings. Creating meaningful communication is the first and fundamental step in restoring humanity, something we have not been successful in doing in the speech and language research arena because we have foregrounded the deficits of our “objects” of enquiry, highlighting what they cannot do (Kathard, 2001). What does it mean to create a context for meaningful communication?

The potentially disruptive influences of the stutter at the communicative interface were real for me. How would this disruption influence the quality of data being produced? What if the participant had difficulty speaking or I listening? What would I do in the moments of the long blocks and struggles and silences? Was there a story in the silences? There are great variations in the communicative styles of PWS. Therefore, it seemed important to negotiate with participants in an open and honest manner how communication could be enhanced, encouraging me to take an exploratory-learning stance in the research process. I discussed with participants how communication between us could be enhanced: What helped me, what helped them, what did not help. Participants offered different suggestions, each inventing guidelines to enhance communication. Our suggestions were not uniform or generalisable but could be described as specific to each interaction. Some suggestions included:

Don’t stare at me when I stutter
Where do I look?
Don’t complete the sentence for me
I will wait till you are done
Help me by filling a word in, if necessary
Write down a word if it gets too difficult
Ask for repetition or clarification
We will stop when we are tired

The challenge was to listen past the stutter – with the stutter – to the story. Given my background as a speech therapist socialised into the habit of counting and analysing the stutter, I soon realised the fruitlessness of the exercise. It did not help me to listen to the story. I had to engage with the meaning of the communication, listen carefully, and stay with the story. When I did not understand,
I asked for help. I paraphrased, asked for clarification, and used the available interview techniques (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) to maximise the communication. It took practice but gradually I was able to shift emphasis from the stutter to listen to the story.

However, I have only problematised one dimension of communication, that of fluency and stuttering. Communication is far more complex than mere fluency of words. People in general have wide-ranging communicative styles and strategies. My own style is fairly formal, perhaps too clinical and sanitised with no expletives or vulgarities compared to my colleague who cannot refrain from sexualised, lewd talk as part of his flavourful, communicative style. Is it possible that I, as researcher, could further alienate participants through my own idiosyncratic communicative style, “otherising” them? These dilemmas remain unresolved.

While the technicalities of communication can be attended to, the context of personal truth-telling relies on the creation of a trusting and honest interpersonal environment. If the participant doubts the researcher, it is unlikely that truths will be told. It is unsurprising that biographical researchers aspire to being sensitive, ethical, honest and sincere. However, always lurking in my mind was a more sinister issue. There is a different context that forces truth, another extreme. What of torture? It is well known that the powerful agents of wars, the Rumsfelds of the world, torture prisoners to extract truths. Ethically, researchers are obliged to do no harm. However, the very process of storytelling can be akin to torture, although masked by the congeniality of the process. I often felt that there were difficult spaces I disrupted, generating pain by going back to moments of terror. I felt like an intruder, somewhat impure and uncomfortable about how I probed their personal lives. While I had arranged for additional help and counselling, my concern was about the personal costs incurred by participants for telling truths. While storytelling in the research process can have a therapeutic effect, it also has potential to be destructive, and this cannot and should not be ignored by researchers who pronounce their practices to be ethical.

However, enhancing communication means that we also admit the many innovative strategies to share the personal story. Samuel, in Chapter One, describes multiple strategies such as the use of collages, visual data and journals and diaries. I add to this bouquet drama, poetry and mime. One participant in my study was a dramatist. On occasion, he would tell his story through drama. He would act out scenes he experienced in a classroom and through this presented what it was like to be publicly “outed” as disabled. He explained through miming what it meant to be silent, how he prayed to ancestors. He broke out into poetry and song where appropriate. Another participant told of his experiences about public speaking and then brought in a video-recording of the event to help tell his story. Participants communicate in ways in which they feel comfortable. My strategy was to invite communication in multiple ways, each encouraging a unique communicative style.

With these issues weighing heavily, I consider the issues of the interview as an interpretive act.
INTER-VIEWING

The intention of the interview is not just to hear participants’ words, but to interpret meaning (verbal and non-verbal) to understand life stories. In this respect, active interviewing is an interpretative act. To enhance the sensitivity of this interpretive act, three suggestions made by Anderson and Jack (1991) and Frank (2000) were particularly useful in listening to the “bigger story”. Firstly, it was necessary to listen to the participant’s moral language. When participants said, “I feel embarrassed, I feel like a failure, I work against the odds,” they were introducing a moral element into the discourse. These moral self-evaluative comments in turn provided an opportunity for me to explore the relationships between self-concept and cultural norms and general expectations of how society expects one to behave (Anderson & Jack, 1991). Listening to moral imperatives of what constitutes “good” and “bad” in context, and the choices participants make in their life worlds, allows the space to honour their individuality. As a researcher I felt that it was important to preserve and foster this freedom because it allowed me to understand how participants came to value, devalue and construct their experiences through their own stories.

Secondly, it was necessary to interpret the participant’s meta-statements. These are the places where the participant stops and reflects on what was said. I became sensitive to the participant’s analysis of the discrepancy between what should be done and what they did, or between what they thought was correct and what was society’s expectation. I gained insights into how participants can struggle with dominant frames of reference that construct them as people with pathology and their challenge or submissions to them. These conversations created the space for participants to construct and share their own frames to construct their identities rather than be restricted by public validation frameworks.

Thirdly, it was important to listen to the logic of the narrative with the intention of noting themes, internal consistencies and contradictions. For example, those who said they were living successfully with stuttering told stories that showed how they reached this point. However, I was also aware that because there were dominant and competing discourses, contradictions in the story were not a bad thing. Contradictions did not lead me to doubt participants but rather offered opportunities to explore the nature of such contradictions. This allowed me the opportunity to appreciate the difficult and complex spaces participants lived in and the choices they made. In this way the intersections between personal and social became more visible to me. The stories were not neat, coherent narratives and required that I probe various aspects with the intention of establishing coherence by linking different parts of our conversation.

While I attended to these issues, there seemed to be a far more critical shift in listening to the story – letting myself into the meaning-making process. Despite my great affinity for life history methodology, I still carried the baggage of the “objective” research scientist – the challenge was to engage with the process rather than remain an anonymous outsider.
Feminist methodologies (Anderson & Jack, 1991; Fine, 1998; Josselson, 1995) promoting empathetic meaning-making was useful in the research process. I use two constructs, “sensing” and “connecting”, to explain how I approached the refined nature of the interpretative process. Sensing is an interpretative practice that does not stop at listening but involves sensitivity to a combination of all sensory input. This might be regarded as an intuitive, extrasensory stance to interpreting conversations. My task was not just to listen to what participants were saying, but to be attentive to what they were not saying and, more importantly, to decipher what all of this meant. The tone of voice, emotions, silences, gestures, body language and words are all instructive, as sensing becomes a core aspect of the interpretative process. As I actively constructed meaning with participants, I fed the “sense”, the “intuitive-emotive-knowing” back into the research conversation for further discussion. Connecting with my participants during the process was crucial to obtain deeper insights into their stories. But to do this I first had to confront my own positionality. How was I doing this? On what basis? Did I want to negotiate this interaction on the basis of the theory that was floating in my head? Which theory – social theory which was beginning to inform my practice or speech pathology theory which defined the professional domain I was practicing in? I could not pretend to be a-theoretical. I felt I needed to use all of my resources to “connect” with the participant’s experience.

There was no simple way to resolve these dilemmas that continued to influence the interpretation process. I attempted to connect with their experience through my own multiple subjectivities. If I was intending an inter-subjective understanding, then I had to “let myself in”. If I expected participants to engage with my interpretation of their stories, it was important to shift away from being an objective outsider/spectator to one where I could stand “with” participants to foster an empathetic relationship. A useful strategy to “connect” was using a strategy of “imagining from multiple positions” (Josselson, 1995). As a researcher, I could occupy a variety of positions including female, mother, daughter, wife, university student and advocate, not just the singular position as clinical practitioner or educator. Peshkin (1988, 2001) recommends using a well-informed subjectivity to reveal the multiple personas of the researcher. My different subjectivities enabled me to admit a range of interests and beliefs as I engaged with my participants. In a similar fashion, the multiple subjectivities of participants also find space creating the personal story as a rich weave of multiplicity.

Fine (1998) described this relational stance as “Working-in-Hyphen”. She suggested that when working with participants we are always in multiple and improvised relationships in an effort to improve the quality of data. Working-in-hyphens means:

…creating occasions for researchers and informants to discuss what is, and what is not, ‘happening between’, within the negotiated relations of whose story is being told, why, with what interpretation, and whose story is being shadowed, why, for whom and with what consequence.
It is through this recognition of the interplay of the various parts that a story can be written and the researcher is in a position to “imagine the real” (Josselson, 1995, p. 42). Josselson (1995) is emphatic that we listen to all dimensions of the very personal, moral and social to do justice to the “whole” person in a way which embraces the essential message of a hermeneutic research stance, in which “to be human is to mean”.

CREATING NEW TRUTHS? LEARNING FROM BAKHTIN

The research emerging from the speech and pathology discipline has cast PWS with a passive, deficit discourse of suffering. The challenge for me, as a researcher, was to create a conversation outside of this frame, to create alternative conversations and self-identities. I draw on the work of Bakhtin (1981, 1984, p. 287) who has theorised the potential for discovery through dialogue:

I cannot manage without another, I cannot become myself without another; I must find myself in another by finding another in myself.

Bakhtin asserts that stories, as a means of accessing subjective experience, are never “just there” and “ready-made”, but are constructed via dialogic processes through which the researcher and participant create meaning. The construction is therefore *inter-subjective*. Against this background, it was plausible to assume that the researcher and participant co-create and shape the identities of each other in a fluid way. The dialogic process insists on mutual inter-subjectivity created moment-by-moment in a non-systematic, fluid way within a climate that is necessarily non-judgemental and open to possibilities for exploration, unconstrained by hierarchies. He presents communicating as key to the process of human becoming, of self-identity creation: “To *be* means to *communicate*” (1984, p. 287).

Human utterances are always in relation and open to possibility. Such interaction goes beyond give-and-take, story-listening and storytelling, to a mutual interaction in which the speaker, utterance and hearer are in unfixed relations to each other. Bakhtin (1984) also emphasises that because communication/interactive possibilities occur at many levels, a good story need not include words. The “languaging” of experience must go beyond words to include the paralinguistic communication that creates meaning.

Of great relevance is Bakhtin’s description of the dialogic relationship which is mutually-educative, and while it assists with discovery, it also *activates potentials – for researcher and participant*. Because nothing in the interaction remains fixed, unchallenged, or is without reconsideration, there is always a space for creating new potential and possibility. It has the potential to create *new selves*.

An independent, active, responsible discourse is the fundamental indicator of an ethical, legal and political human being Bakhtin (1981, p. 349).

As a researcher schooled within a research tradition that emphasised prediction and control, I found creating open-ended dialogues difficult initially. I had to become an explorer and learner and not a director. I had to negotiate new possibilities and
embrace uncertainty. The story often ran in directions that were never anticipated, creating new understandings, sometimes beyond my scope and experience as researcher. I began to flounder because I did not understand the story – some participants had well-developed philosophical viewpoints which I could not connect with. As an example, let me allude to one participant’s discourse on spirituality: I became a learner and asked participants to educate me about their lives, points of view and philosophies. I was mindful that researchers are people with restricted knowledge in limited domains. I knew I had potential to misinterpret personal truths. My strategy to let the story run, embrace uncertainty and willingness to be educated proved useful. It uncovered some of my blindspots and allowed me to see new identities (my own and that of the participants). I read new texts, watched TV programmes, read stories, biographies, and indulged in self-analysis and analysed conversations around me to enhance self-discovery as a precondition for the discovery of my participants.

RE-PRESENTING PERSONAL TRUTHS

The task of representing personal truths is challenging, requiring sensitive and delicate balances. In representing the data, the rich production of stories as biographies of each participant was constructed as an iterative process and formed the first level of analysis. The data analysis process was multi-layered, dynamic and iterative. Given the complexity of the data, I chose narrative analysis (Polkinghorne, 1995) as the first level of analysis. The choice of narrative analysis and story as a representation device requires the researcher to address many issues (Reddy, 2000) about the purpose of the story, theoretical location, textual representation and language, truth-value, the intended audience, voice, selections, style and artistic devices in constructing the story. A discussion of these issues follows. This process was a novel one for me and the part of the project I found both interesting and destabilising.

The purpose of the story, a biography, is to illuminate individual experiences of stuttering in their lifeworld by understanding how they form their identities and negotiate stuttering over time. The research story was therefore constructed with intent to answer the critical questions. As such, it is analytic-descriptive in nature because it addresses critical questions whilst providing the descriptive details of each participant in context. The research stories were structured chronologically to explain a particular endpoint in each biography. The connections with the research story were not necessarily linear but combinations and accumulations of events, responses and actions that explain a particular end. The product was reflective of a temporal ordering in which each part is given meaning via its reciprocal relationship with other parts, before and after, and to the whole. The plot functions to compose events into a story (Polkinghorne, 1995) by:

- delimiting the temporal range which marks the beginning and end of the story;
- providing criteria for the selection of events/issues to be included;
- providing temporal ordering and unfolding of events leading to a conclusion and;
- clarifying the meaning events have as contributors to the story.
In producing the narrative, the researcher therefore draws on her theoretical influences to make sense of responses and actions. The process required extensive engagement with the interview data and was influenced by the theoretical stances of the researcher. The research story, while resisting any specific theoretical location, had elements of varied influences: Foucault (power), Bauman (sociology), Spivak (postcolonial), Roy (activist), Dr. Phil (psychology). The story had a life history orientation with social, personal and temporal lenses actively appropriated in the construction. It was also theoretically slanted to reveal the intersections between the personal and sociological dimensions of experience in illuminating the issues of stuttering in society. I had an interest in an active story about living with stuttering with an ethical obligation to illuminate what participants thought was important to them and explaining why they chose to act in particular ways.

An immediate concern in writing a research story is the question of truth-value when translating data into the research story. I was interested in the personal truths of participants. However, these truths about the individual’s experience are manufactured within the context of the dialogic interview. Some narrative researchers therefore see their roles as similar to artists who reconstruct a situation to convey something about it (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman-Davis, 1997). Other researchers contest the issue or refer to truth-value by using terms such as believability (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman-Davis, 1997), credibility and validity (Polkinghorne, 1995; 2007), or fidelity (Blumfield-Jones, 1995). In what remains a debatable issue, I considered the plausibility of the plot and the issue of coherence in the story as two ways to reflect on truth-value. Firstly, the plot is constructed after the researcher has been immersed in the data and it is the explanatory potential of the plot I considered to be a means of gauging truth-value. Secondly, I was guided strongly by the fidelity of the plot with regard to what the experience was like for the teller of the tale, that is, as experience in the context of a particular life, showing (a degree) of faithfulness to the teller.

Another challenge is the responsibility of weaving the personal story against a complex set of social issues (Goodson, 1995). It is here that the issue of truth and fidelity becomes more complex because the researcher has the unenviable task of locating a personal narrative within a social context and while doing so, runs the risk of losing the original teller’s perspective. The task of bringing together both the individual story and social context is the challenge of writing an interpretive story (Goodson, 1995). In all research stories there was a deliberate effort (on my part) to locate participants within their contexts. I did this by gaining insights into the nature of contexts during the interviews and assembling them as a plausible plot. I highlighted the time period in which the story unfolded, the place/s in which participants spent much of their time and the significant sociopolitical events, social discourses, value systems, and participants’ interpretation of how these influenced them at a personal level. Although participants included the social context in their stories, they did not necessarily do so in an overt, interpretive or political manner. For example, they might have talked about how women were treated but did not necessarily interpret these issues in the same
The coherence of a story is an important consideration, especially for life history researchers who have the task to bring together a coherent story spread through time (Mishler, 1999; Plummer, 2001). The traditional notion of a coherent story as a single, neat, unfolding trajectory in which the actor acts consistently, has been challenged within poststructural theory. I agree with Mishler (1999) that the interpretation of coherence in a research story should be revised to admit multiplicities and non-linearity. It is this story which is more likely to be coherent within social and personal realities that are changing. A complicated coherence? Mishler explains that traditional notions of coherence have been challenged in text-centred linguistic domains by linguists, as they have moved beyond the structural features of discourse analysis. The researcher must have an “intuitive” understanding in reviewing different parts of the text, to create coherence from a seeming randomness. However, coherence cannot be limited to linguistic forms and meaning but that it should be understood within a broader context of social and cultural meanings evident in discourse. My interpretation of Mishler’s (1999) stance is that “coherence” should bring together disparate, multiple, shifting, contradictory and seemingly random elements of a story to create a “complicated” or “fractured” coherence within a social frame. This stance overlaps with Blumfeld-Jones’ (1995) understanding of fidelity. The story should be coherent within an approximate of the “complex” lifeliness establishing not truth but verisimilitude, the appearance of being true.

Stories are written using language as medium which offers opportunities for representation but which can be simultaneously constraining. The issues of textual representation have been debated in the domain of postmodern research (Abma, 2002; Lather, 1991; Rhodes, 2000). Lather (1991) uses Derrida’s deconstructive theory and explains that language cannot claim to “mirror reality”. The inner life of an individual is filtered through the glaze of language, signs and processes of signification. We are born into a world where language is available and we appropriate such language to construct meaning. Therefore, language in itself is not neutral but is a social vehicle for creating particular realities. The language used by participants was an important consideration in story construction because participants have a particular set of discourses available to them by virtue of living in a particular social world. The stories therefore do not mirror lives but create realities. Thus, in engaging with data, it was important to attend to the language the participant uses to get an impression of how the story links to the social world and make decisions about the language she uses to construct the research story.

However, language can also be constraining because it may not be able to adequately address some dimensions of human emotion such as suffering, which resists “knowing”. In the research contexts, participants say: “I don’t know how to explain this” or, “Words fail,” which are indications that language is also constraining. Frank (2001) argues that “knowing” is a positivist phenomenon and challenges the possibility that we will “know” the personal story. Instead, he takes
a hermeneutic stance and suggests that researchers should seek to show understandings.

The research story is interpretive in that it is not just a verbatim recording of words but rather a documentation of the meaning created through our multi-faceted conversations. The “languaging” of the story includes an interpretation of textual and non-textual cues in meaning-making. In the first version of the stories I wrote in the first-person, I did not attend sufficiently to the participant’s exact words and style. Participants tended to agree with the interpretation but were somewhat confused about the voice; it was their story but not as they would speak it or write it. I rewrote their stories relying closely on their words and style of speaking but keeping the interpretative element. In this way it sounded like them, speaking in their style and words. I was guided by Fairclough’s (1989) critical discourse analysis framework as a means of heightening my awareness of “how” participants speak, thereby integrating a presentational analysis with a representational analysis.

One of the key issues in writing narratives is about which voice it is to be written in. The options include first-person, and third-person narrator, with the researcher as the writer and the participant the storyteller. I explored two voices (first and third person) for the purposes of representation and discovered that they both have value and limitations. My initial draft during the pilot phase was written in the third-person, supported by direct quotes from the participant. I found this voice useful because the researcher’s voice is obvious as he/she analyses the story (Samuel, 1998). However, with the analytical story, the impact of the participant’s voice is lost. I then experimented with writing the story in the first-person account that accommodated the descriptive and analytical elements. This voice seemed more “authentic” because the participant’s words and style could be represented, making the research story more life-like. With this choice, however, the analytic voice of the researcher can be muted. However, I felt that the research story should remain close to the voice of the participant, especially because I had an interest in issues of self-identity formation in this study. It also seemed easier to read the story about self-identity formations when narrated in the first person.

The stories were then written by considering what was said: the content and how it was said, thereby combining presentational and representational elements. In the interview, participants talked about many things and it was necessary to select events and issues for inclusion in the research story. These selections were informed by what participants emphasised during the interviews. However, to construct the research story, I re-read each transcript many times over and carefully reviewed and revised the selections with the intention of responding to the critical questions. In this regard I actively selected aspects of the interview to create a research story with a plausible and coherent plot with the intention of answering the critical questions. Essentially, I was the storywriter.

A story is meant to be interesting and should engage the reader. What of artistic techniques? I felt that artistic techniques would help to illuminate the personal truth-value of a story. Blumfeld-Jones (1995) suggests that artistic representations can enhance the fidelity of the research story. I was enthused by the creative and
artistic suggestion made by Barone (1997) and the motivations provided by Richardson (1992) and Denzin (2000). They argued for interesting ways in which researchers can stage texts to provide interpretation and provoke discussion. I felt the “giddiness” Barone (2001) talks about when researchers are released from methodological straightjackets. I wanted the stories to be alive in the interests of enhancing scholastic potential (Abma, 2002) and therefore used common literary devices such as similes, metaphors, hyperbole, rhetorical questions, repetition, irony and understatement, purposely writing in the present tense.

Barone (2001) extended this interest in advocating the use of fictional techniques based on Maxine Greene’s persuasive stance on how imaginative literature can serve us well in understanding our lives. He argued that if all stories, including research stories, are fashioned by human beings, then they are all, to differing extents, fictional. He coined the word factional to blur the boundaries between fiction and fact. While the empirical story, the “inside” story, provides the “fidelity” requirement, or an honest version of the participant’s experience, there is the external story which can be fictional in that it contains a mixture of real and unreal (imagined) events. This is possible because stories are active creations between participants. There are often incomplete scenes that the listener “fills in by imagining” or makes sense of, based on her own experience. Could it have happened like this? When such dialogue is invented it is critical that it is done with the intention of serving a legitimate research purpose. The text should serve the end of generating conversation as good stories should invest in ambiguity and should not conclude.

Stimulated by Barone’s suggestions, I experimented with fictional techniques only at points where I felt that their use would enhance the significance of what was being said. For example, if a participant placed repeated emphasis on or spoke emotionally about some issue to convey its sense of importance, then fictional techniques were used to amplify the meaning. For example, techniques used included: re-creations of scenes, making them “full-blooded” through the use of imagery and choosing words which helped to convey the emotionality and ladenness of meaning. At some points there were nuanced elements in the story, or ‘throwaway’ comments that shaped the story in a significant way. These were also illuminated through the use of fictional techniques by recreating scenes in the story to offer clarity. However, I did not retain the fictional elements when participants felt such techniques did not enhance the meaning of the story or indicated that they were uncomfortable with them. In one instance, the participant insisted that the fictional and interpretive story was a better representation of her story than she could “say in her own words”. She therefore felt that her story should be retained using fiction techniques where necessary. Other participants differed.

Against the backdrop of fiction, the issue of credibility surfaces. Although the researcher is the writer/author and the participant is the storyteller, the data is jointly constructed between two unique individuals. Therefore, it is sensible and fair to suggest that the participant should also contribute to establishing the credibility of the research story. Participants were invited to review the research story and to influence it so that it was faithful to the meaning generated in the
interview process and offered analytic commentary. My sense of panic unfolded as I handed the stories over to participants. It was then that I realised the risks and dangers of writing another’s life. I did not know how participants would respond. I was anxious about whether I had understood and represented their experiences in a faithful and sensible way. Writing the story of another is a difficult political process. The contestation about personal truth unravelled when participants provided feedback. By this point, they were not reserved in their commentary and my role in influencing their stories was again challenged. Their comments raised the following issues:

− Some participants felt that telling their story and reading their stories were very different processes. Reading their lives was not a simple process because a whole life experience was summarised in few pages. As a consequence, the interpretative account was a “harder and sharper” account. One participant explained that reading the story was like “going back to the scene of the accident”. There was nothing that was untrue but it was vivid and sometimes “difficult to look at”. He suggested that some “sharp edges” be revised.

− The use of fictional techniques and other literary devices were received differently. Two participants described it as dramatic but making their story more “real” than less “real”. However, they also drew attention to the fact that it did not sound like their voices in some parts, while in other parts it was very close to how the experience unfolded. Five participants suggested that the interpretive story was a close, intuitive account. They recommended that the artistic techniques should be retained because it enhanced the meaning of their stories.

− The review process afforded the opportunity to extend the interview process to generate a more sharpened analytical interview, which produced additional data. I was able to revisit key issues and clarify aspects that needed further discussion. It also provided an opportunity for collaborative participation because participants were actively shaping the story and contributing to analysis and credibility.

− One participant requested that some words be removed although he had used them in the interview. He felt that the written story was more formal than the spoken word. He also queried my deliberate foregrounding of his race and socio-economic status. I explained that the stories were intertextual and required grounding in a social context. Therefore, issues of race and class had to become apparent in the story. After our discussion, he understood the intention and in recognising the importance, began to elaborate further, providing very useful additional information about the particular time period. Another participant requested that an incident involving his “failing” be removed, because it “spoiled” his story. However, when I explained that it was one of the incidents that shaped his life story, he agreed to leave it in since that this was a research story.

These discussions revealed that the writing process is not an innocent one. It was an occasion for me to reflect on the power of (MY) written word and how dangerous constructing research stories can be. On receiving feedback from
participants, I rewrote the stories using a significant proportion of actual spoken words and specific styles of speaking of the participants, attending to their comments and critique. Thereafter, I asked participants to comment on the revised version of the stories. However, despite these attempts, the contestations remained because personal truths are interpretations. It is unlikely that even with the most democratic process there will be complete consensual understanding. Therefore, as researcher, I declared the nature of the disputes between us so that they remain visible to the reader. Despite every intention to understand stories, I could never have claimed to stand in their shoes. I do not think that is possible. My intention was to get as close as possible to understanding their experiences.

I invited participants into the process of data analysis. While participants were generally comfortable with reading their stories (first level analysis), and offered general suggestions, they did not see it as their role to offer an in-depth analysis. Some participants were adamant about being constructed as “more than just PWS” and requested that I carry this idea into analysis. The (theoretical) analysis seemed to be an exercise which (un)comfortably sat within the realm of academics. While it is true that the participant always sits on your shoulder, the analysis at the theoretical/abstract second and third levels is the (dangerous) work of the researcher.

What have I done with the personal truths? Have I been true to my ethical and moral obligations in purporting to create new knowledge? I have constantly questioned: What is the nature of the knowledge I have produced? To what extent has it also created subalternity? Has the knowledge produced further sub-ordination? Who would judge this? Is this beautiful knowledge (ala Lather) dangerous knowledge, troubling knowledge, disrupting knowledge (and if so, who does it disrupt?). Having reached the end of the theorising process, my concern was about how to position myself – as expert? One who knows the story better than the participant who lives with it? Will I (re)create myself as expert professional who claims to know the inside story better than anyone else because she has a set of theoretical constructs to explain it? Is it possible I will have greater humility because I know the limits of my knowing? Is there authority on personal truth making?

These epistemological concerns are crucial because as knowledge workers we occupy potentially powerful positions in a knowledge-driven society. We have the power to transmute private knowledge into public knowledge domain. It could become official, contested, rejected, or marginal. Nevertheless, it remains in the public arena for debate. It is therefore my hope that such knowledge is always open to critique and interpretation in the interests of engendering further knowledge.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have illuminated the researcher’s dilemmas and ethical responsibilities in the life history research process. Firstly, I have raised the concerns that the researcher must attend to when appropriating life history methodology into a disciplinary field rooted in positivism. Whilst I have deliberated on the issues of
“communication impairment or disorder” in a specific way, the importance of engendering good communication as a basis for life history research is clearly apparent. Among the many obligations the researcher has, I have given particular consideration to understanding issues of subalternity, obligatory self-discovery and empathetic communication. Secondly, I have presented the potential and pitfalls inherent in the processes of discovering new knowledge through dialogue within a Bakhtinian philosophy. This philosophy has foregrounded the importance of open-ended dialogue which challenges the researcher to embrace the uncertain nature of the dialogic process. Lastly, I have considered the complex task of representing personal truths and generating analyses. I have highlighted the importance of attending to the multiplicity of issues of voice, style, ethics, credibility, truth value which underpin the processes of representation and analysis of the research story. I have endeavoured to present the truth-making process as political and non-innocent and signal a case for critical reflexivity of the researcher, explored further by Pillay in the next chapter.

While I have raised the issues and potential hazards in arguing for a cautious celebration of life history research, I want to clarify my stance around the need to produce different knowledges in the profession. My sense is that methodological risk-taking in producing new knowledge differently is worthwhile. We cannot afford not to proceed safely with tired and questionable factual certainties when we are charged with an obligation to create relevant practices in a complex, political and rapidly changing social world. Our research practice, through the knowledges we produce and methodologies we adopt, must aid this endeavour. Life history is one such methodology but there are many others. As we expand our methodological toolbox in innovative, risky but reflexive ways, I am convinced that our discipline will mature and we will create accountable practices we desperately desire.

REFERENCES


