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The Ethical Attitude in Narrative Research

Principles and Practicalities

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The gap between engaging others where they are and representing them where they aren't, always immense but not much noticed, has suddenly become extremely visible. What once had seemed only technically difficult, getting "their" lives into "our" works, has turned, morally, politically, even epistemologically delicate.

—Geertz (1988, pp. 130–131)

Narrative research consists of obtaining and then reflecting on people's lived

experience and, unlike objectifying and aggregating forms of research, is inherently a relational endeavor. Every aspect of the work is touched by the ethics of the research relationship. It is self-evident that narrative researchers have an ethical duty to protect the privacy and dignity of those whose lives we study to contribute to knowledge in our scholarly fields. But, in the particularities of practice, this self-evident principle is fraught with dilemmas of choice that attend ethics in all relationships.

In essence, ethical practice and ethical codes rest on the principles of assuring the free consent of participants to participate, guarding the confidentiality of the material, and protecting participants from any harm that may ensue from their participation (Kvale, 1996; Sieber, 1992; Smythe & Murray, 2000; Stark, 1998). But

these principles have no self-evident implementation. As I have wrestled with writing this chapter, I realize that the issues are too complex for me to be able to craft a cookbook chapter saying “here is exactly what you have to *do* to do this work ethically.” Instead, I mean here to define an *ethical attitude* toward narrative research, a stance that involves thinking through these matters and deciding how best to honor and protect those who participate in one’s studies while still maintaining standards for responsible scholarship. Like issues of ethics in life, often there are contradictory goods, and an ethical stance involves taking responsibility for choosing among them, minimizing harm.

The ethics of narrative research is in a state of evolution, deriving both from an adaptation of principles espoused for biomedical interventions, enforced by Institutional Review Boards, and arising inductively from accumulating experience of narrative researchers. In this chapter, I want to examine the complexities of the ethical reasoning that underlies a “best practices” decision-making stance as well as the situational “real practices” that require narrative researchers to make ethical choices in situ. Where possible, I offer some suggestions about the concrete, practice implications of the ethical attitude I try to describe. I recognize that narrative researchers engage in different ways with their participants. My discussion will draw primarily on my experiences with interview-based narrative research (because this is what I know best and struggle to help my students learn), but the principles and reasoning could apply to other narrative research designs as well. Narrative researchers do their work by (politely) intruding on people in the course of living real lives and asking them to help us learn something. We do this in hopes that what we learn will be of some benefit to others or will contribute to basic knowledge about aspects of human experience. Those people who agree to talk to us about their lives and/or allow us to observe them become our “participants.” The naive view might be that it is only a matter of obtaining “informed consent” from our participants and then disguising names and places in published accounts to be able to sleep soundly. After reviewing what others have written over the last 20 years about ethics in narrative research, I am struck by how thorny these dilemmas are. Indeed, nearly all writers say in one way or another, after arguing the various positions one may take, that there is simply no good general set of rules or guidelines that would ensure moral behavior in working with narrations about other people’s lives (Apter, 1996; Aron, 2000; Bar-On, 1996; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Ellis, 2004; Estroff, 1995; Kvale, 1996; McLeod, 1996; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patai, 1991; Punch, 1994). Ethics in narrative research, as many of these writers point out, is not a matter of abstractly correct behavior but of responsibility in human relationship. The actual ethical dilemmas of practice, however, the failures and regrets, are seldom written about (Price, 1996; Punch, 1994).¹

The essence of the ethical conundrum in narrative research derives from the fact that the narrative researcher is in a dual role—in an intimate relationship with the participant (normally initiated by the researcher) and in a professionally responsible role in the scholarly community. Interpersonal ethics demand responsibility to the dignity, privacy, and well-being of those who are studied, and these often conflict with the scholarly obligation to accuracy, authenticity, and interpretation.

Fulfilling the duties and obligations of both of these roles simultaneously is what makes for the slippery slopes. Perhaps the only solution is for the narrative researcher to demonstrate a clear recognition of the inherent dilemmas. In reflecting on the ethics of journalism, which shares predicaments with narrative research, Janet Malcolm (1990) says “The wisest know that the best they can do . . . is not good enough. The not so wise, in their accustomed manner, choose to believe there is no problem and that they have solved it” (p. 162).

In full recognition, then, both of the existence of the problem and that I cannot solve it, I intend to outline its contours by sequentially considering the ethics of the relationship, the ethics of the report, the ethics of the design, and the role of ethics guidelines and Institutional Review Boards (IRBs).

Ethics of the Relationship

The Contract: Explicit and Implicit

The essence of the narrative research approach, what gives it its meaning and value, is that the researcher endeavors to obtain “data” from a deeply human, genuine, empathic, and respectful relationship to the participant about significant and meaningful aspects of the participant’s life. This involves both an implicit and explicit contract. The explicit contract states the role relationships between researcher and participant (e.g., “This is who I am. This is the purpose of my study. You are free to participate or not. The interview will be tape-recorded. You may withdraw at any time.”) and is often fairly straightforward.² The development of the individual, personal, intimate relationship between researcher and participant rests on and contains an implicit contract, the terms of which are difficult to foresee or make explicit and the arena for differing assumptions, expectations, and contingencies. (See Lieblich, 2006, for an excellent, detailed exposition of the dynamics of the contracting phase.)

In that narrative research is founded in an encounter embedded in a relationship, the nature of the material disclosed is influenced not by the explicit contract but by the trust and rapport the researcher/interviewer is able to build with the participant. Thus, the participant is reading, not what has been made explicit, but rather the subtle interpersonal cues that reflect the researcher’s capacity to be empathic, nonjudgmental, concerned, tolerant, and emotionally responsive as well as her/his ability to contain affect-laden material. The “data” that result reflect the degree of openness and self-disclosure the participant felt was warranted and appropriate under the *relational* circumstances she/he experienced. Researchers try to build a research relationship in which personal memories and experiences may be recounted in full, rich, emotional detail and their significance elaborated. The greater the degree of rapport and trust, the greater the degree of self-revealing and, with this, the greater degree of trust that the researcher will treat the material thus obtained with respect and compassion. What constitutes respect and compassion in the minds of this researcher/participant pair is the nature of the implicit contract between them.

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Elsewhere I have written that I think that there is something oxymoronic about the idea of “informed consent” in narrative research (Josselson, 1996a). I don’t think we can fully inform a participant at the outset about what he or she is in fact consenting to since much of what will take place is unforeseeable. Thus, consent has to be construed as an aspect of a relational process, deriving from an ethics of care rather than rights (Gilligan, 1982).

Dilemmas of the Informed Consent Form

Most textbooks on narrative and qualitative research suggest that an ethical approach requires full disclosure of the nature and purpose of the research. In general terms, this seems straightforward enough, but like so much in narrative research, translation into specificities is what unearths the fissures and uncertainties in this minefield.

For most narrative studies, the ethical requirement to set out the general nature and purpose of the study must be balanced against the need not to unduly direct the participant’s attention to a particular phenomenon that the researcher wishes to study (Holloway & Jefferson, 2000). If one wants to know how a particular experience is interwoven in a participant’s life, narrative research technique often mandates asking about the life rather than the experience. In these cases, one must tell the participant what one is generally doing without being too specific. For example, Amia Lieblich (2006) wanted to investigate the long-term effects of being in a particular special high school program. She was interviewing midlife adults. As a matter of research design, she believed it was better to ask her interviewees about their life stories and then see on analysis how they included their high school experience rather than to make explicit that she was focusing on this particular program, which may have induced the interviewees to take an evaluative stance toward the program rather than allow her to observe the more subtle effects in which she was interested. When I was interviewing Ethiopian immigrants to Israel, I framed the study as being focused on relationships within non-Western cultures so as not to offend the Ethiopian sensitivity to being singled out as “different.” These choices, then, place the study in a larger context than is the more limited focus of the research. The statement of purpose is not untrue although it is a partial truth.

As a matter of practice, I think that the “scholarly good” of framing the study to the participant in a way that makes possible the kind of narration the researcher needs outweighs the “moral” good of telling the participant the exact nature of the study. But the statement of the purpose of the study should be as close to the researcher’s focus as possible. As a matter of good methodology, the researcher has to be transparent about his/her interests in order to make a research alliance with the participant. In other words, good narrative practice requires intense collaboration about the topic such that the participant can inform the researcher about the area of the participant’s life or experience that is of interest to the researcher. That the researcher is interested in a more narrow aspect of the participant’s experience than the initial statement of purpose states seems to me to be not unethical,

although it is ethically important to discuss with the participants at the end of the meeting the more focused areas of particular interest the researcher began with so that participants will not feel surprised or deceived later on if or when they may read the published report. One also has to bear in mind that the nature of the researcher's interest in the material may change as the study proceeds. Therefore, more general statements may be advisable in order to encompass the potential for discovery of avenues of exploration of the data unforeseen at the time of the interview or observation.

Some requirements of the explicit contract, embodied in the consent form, are unproblematic, and most of these are actually negotiated before the meeting. Usually, consent forms say that the participant is willing to take part in the study and is free to withdraw participation at any time. In the case of interviews, the consent form notes that the participant is willing to have the interview tape-recorded. The duration of participation should be determined before the formal consent form is signed—that is, in contracting with the participant, usually over the phone, one must specify what will happen, where the meeting will be held, and how much time is required. One must also tell the participant ahead of time if and how much material will be recorded; I think it unethical to surprise participants with recording devices as this may constitute undue pressure to consent to something unexpected. Most participants sign that they are willing to participate (otherwise why are they there?), but the thoughtful (ethical) researcher will also be alert to signs of subtle coercion (even if the participant endorses his/her willingness to participate). In particular, people who are institutionalized or vulnerable may be participating but not exactly freely. As a matter of good research practice, as well as ethics, researchers must always be thinking about what motives lead a person to participate in our studies (Corbin & Morse, 2003). And even when people consent, the researcher must be aware of vulnerabilities and consequences that participants may not recognize (Ely, 1991; Estroff, 1995).

Some have pointed out that signing an informed consent form actually compromises anonymity, especially because research material has no legal privilege (Lipson, 1994; Price, 1996; Warren, 2001). In cases where participants are illegal immigrants, for example, or members of legally marginal populations, a taperecorded verbal consent would preserve anonymity better. Then, no names need ever be used.

Ethical Practicalities of Consent Forms

The principle of assurance of confidentiality and privacy to participants is central to the very possibility of doing narrative research. Unless our participants trust that we will insure their anonymity, they would not tell us what they tell us. Therefore, we must do everything we can to safeguard their privacy. In an effort to be “procedural” about this, institutions are engendering rules for consent forms and thereby dictating practices that are often harmful to the research project and do not in any meaningful way protect the participant.

Most consent forms nowadays, under pressure from review boards, specify what will be done with the data—who else will listen to the tapes, when names will be changed, who else will read the transcripts, how the data will be stored, etc. The principle here is that we have to do everything possible to disguise and safeguard material so that participants will not be recognized by others. Exactly how we do that will vary, depending on the structure of the research project. I think we need to tell participants that we will do all that is humanly possible to keep material confidential. I don't think we need to tell them that we will keep their material in a locked file cabinet or promise them not to send data over the Internet, except through a secure line.³ (We may, though, specify to IRBs our safeguards in detail.) Some people ask their participants to make up names for themselves—and some have even gone so far as to address them by this false name. The former practice strikes me as a conflation of roles and the latter as a hindrance to the relationship, but these are not a matter of ethics.

As a practical matter, when keeping narrative interviews, field notes, or research journals, it is necessary to change ALL the names in these texts. Sometimes people just change the name of the participant. But since participants generally refer to family members, friends, or close associates by name, or they refer to places where they lived or companies where they worked, they could still be identified by someone who came across or read, for example, the interview text, unless every proper name in the interview is changed.⁴ This is why a codebook is necessary—so that the researcher, if necessary, can reconstruct the original data, and the researcher should double check the method of disguises before publication. Most breaches of the ethics of disguise come through clerical (or unconscious) errors. I remember one time when I was writing about a participant who, according to the transcript, lived in Los Angeles. I, therefore, in my write-up, placed her as living in San Diego. Only when I went to re-interview her years later did I realize she actually did live in San Diego. I had evidently changed the place name on the transcript and then forgotten I had made this change. (It is important to keep the codebook very separate from the transcripts. Do not store it on the same computer as the transcripts—keep a notebook instead. Organize it so only *you* could reconstruct it.)

In terms of who else will work with the material, it is, in general, good practice to make these parameters as wide as possible—“material will only be shared with people involved in working with me on the research project and then only with all names, places, and identifying information removed or disguised.” Too often, people write on the consent form, to impress the IRB, a very restricted definition of who can listen to the tapes, only to find that they want to have a research consultation with someone else but are now contractually bound not to. (Then what do you do? Call the participant 4 years later and say, Is it all right with you if I play your tape for someone I didn't even know at the time of the interview? This may be ethical, but it makes us look foolish as researchers.)

Institutional review boards are often asking researchers to state that the material will be destroyed after 5 years. This seems to me to be an indefensible requirement as one never knows when one might like to do follow-up or longitudinal studies, and I do not understand how it benefits the participant. (If anything, the

longer the data are kept, the less likely the participant is to feel attached to that particular version of self.) As long as data are stored so that the participants could not be identified on the transcripts and so that they are under the control of the researcher, I see no problem in keeping the material. (It is important, though, to keep in a separate place a codebook that allows the researcher to identify who was who.)

The freedom to withdraw participation at any time seems to me to be absolute. This sometimes strikes terror into researchers because it means just what it says—that even at the time of publication of the completed work, a participant can ask that his or her material be deleted. This is frightening, but I see no ethical way around it. If a participant no longer wishes to be part of our study, at any time, that person must be free to say so and to have us obliterate any public use of his or her material.

Consent forms also say that the material given by the participant will be suitably disguised to be used in published reports. This is such a big topic and so mired in enigmas that I will return to it later.

The Potential for Harm

Increasingly, I have seen IRBs ask that consent forms talk about potential harmful effects of the interview, usually insisting that the researcher include some caution that people may become upset talking about their own experiences and, if this should happen, will be referred for psychotherapy. These are standards that come from medically based consent forms (Corbin & Morse, 2003) and conflate harm and distress (Holloway & Jefferson, 2000). Within the narrative research arena, statements like this in consent forms set a relational frame for suspicion and, through the power of suggestion, are more likely to make the interview both an unpleasant experience for the interviewee and an unproductive one for the researcher. In general, people will only tell researchers what they want to tell, and it seems to me that there is no need to warn them that they might become upset. I believe it infantilizes and thereby denigrates participants to tell them that they might become upset while talking or that they may have some distress days later following the interview. Interviewees control what they share, and experiencing painful feelings in an interview, while distressing, may for them be in the service of integration and growth.

Affective expression is usually a sign of enough comfort in the relationship with the interviewer that the interviewee can relax her or his controls and defenses, and this level of self-disclosure can also lead to growth-promoting self-reflection for the interviewee (Birch & Miller, 2000; Corbin & Morse, 2003; Miller, 1996; Ortiz, 2001; Riessman, 1990). IRBs often make the questionable assumption that not to talk about painful experiences is preferable to talking about them with an empathic listener (Corbin & Morse, 2003). The challenge is for the interviewer to be able to maintain equilibrium, go on listening, and contain (i.e., calmly bear) the emotional experiences being recounted or expressed. In all my years of interviewing and

supervising students, I have never seen anyone fall apart as a result of a research interview.⁵ Nor have I found any published reports of such an experience.⁶ What is not stated on consent forms but is central to the implicit contract is that the interviewer be qualified to listen to and contain a wide range of human experience and that if, on some rare occasion an interviewee should become distressed to the point that he or she cannot resume his or her habitual level of functioning at the close of the interview, the researcher is prepared with a procedure for making a referral. I think it much more unethical for an inexperienced, anxious researcher to advise someone who cried during the interview to see a psychotherapist than *not* to warn an interviewee that they may feel some pain as a result of choosing to narrate difficult experiences in their lives.

Prior warning about harm that could come from the interview therefore seems to me to derive from institutional anxiety rather than to promote the interests of narrative researchers or to protect the participant.

Fine, Weiss, Weseen, and Wong (2000) discuss the ways the very *introduction* of the informed consent form may impinge on the trust and collaboration possible in the relationship in that it serves to remind the participant (as well as the researcher), early on in the relationship, of the power differential between them. The researcher must present himself/herself as part of an institutional framework to a participant often weary of the impersonality of bureaucratic forms. Thus, the act of obtaining informed consent itself becomes an aspect of the interaction with the participant, an interaction to be analyzed and considered as part of the context of all the material that is forthcoming in the interview.

In my own view, it makes sense to have two “informed consent” forms—one at the beginning of the interview agreeing to participate, to be taped, and acknowledging that the participant has a right to withdraw at any time. The second form would be presented at the end of the interview with agreements about how the material will be managed from that point on.⁷ If this occurs at the end of the interview, at least the interviewee knows what has been recorded and has the opportunity to specify certain sections of the material that he or she would not want shown to others or published. Even without a formal second consent form, consent has to be regarded as a continuing process, and the participants must be accorded the human right to bestow or withdraw the use of their material.

Ending the Interview

Ethical considerations are just as important at the end of the interview as at the beginning. Good interviewing practice means returning to less emotionally saturated ground than may have been present earlier in the interview (Corbin & Morse, 2003) and trying to end on a positive note. This is often a time of vulnerability for interviewees who have just exposed important aspects of their lives and may feel intimately connected to the interviewer, who they now realize they will likely never see again. Thus, the end of the interview in some ways encapsulates a termination process in psychotherapy, where it becomes important for both people to voice how they felt about the experience and to note its meaningfulness.

Interview studies should always end with a question such as “How was it for you to be talking to me in this way?” This is the equivalent of debriefing, inviting the participant’s reflections on the experience as a way of beginning the process of saying goodbye. At this point, the researcher should stay alert to any signs of hesitation or discomfort on the side of the participant and be ready to empathically process or clarify any ways in which the participant may have felt distressed by the interviews (or interviewer). Then the researcher should invite the participant to ask whatever questions he or she may have of the researcher. (“What questions do you have for me as we end our time together?”) In this phase, interviewers must say something human about their experience in the interview but should reemphasize their role as a researcher: “I appreciate your openness and willingness to share your experiences with me. I feel that I have learned a lot from you that will help me in my work.”

Another ethical dilemma the researcher must be prepared for is the participant who wishes to continue the relationship. Especially when working with lonely or vulnerable people, the special attention offered by the interviewer may be so gratifying that the participant wishes for its continuation (Booth, 1999). In such circumstances, the researcher must gently but clearly restate his or her role as having just a certain period to devote to each participant. With such participants, it is probably better to schedule an interview in a single sitting. Multiple interviews over time are more likely to encourage the fantasy of a continuing relationship. Where prolonged contact with a community is necessitated by the research, the researcher may be called on to continue the relationship in unforeseen ways. These become delicate matters of withdrawing gradually and gracefully in a way that leaves the participants feeling honored and not exploited (see Lieblich, 1996). There is, however, nothing unethical about the researcher who wishes to continue a relationship with the participant if this wish is mutual.

Reflexivity and the Ethics of the Relationship in Research Interviews

The nature of the relationship that develops in narrative studies is emergent and cannot be predicted at the outset, and here lie some of the murkiest and most subtle of ethical matters, realities that cannot be made explicit. People can give informed consent to participate in the *research* project, but they cannot give prior consent to participate in an open-ended *relationship* that is yet to be established. The researcher’s self, with its fantasies, biases, and horizons of understanding, is the primary tool of inquiry. Therefore, self-knowledge and self-reflection become necessary to the project to tease out what aspects of what is “observed” derive from the researcher, what from the object of observation (the participant), and what from the interaction between them. A full understanding of this is, of course, only an ideal, but an ethical stance in narrative research requires that such an exploration be undertaken as completely as possible. This is true in fieldwork situations as well as interviews (Hunt, 1989), but there are some dynamics that, because of the potentially broad and deep penetration into the experiential world of the

participant, may be especially in need of attention in the interview situation. That will be my focus in this section, and I leave it to the reader to apply its principles to other research designs.

All interviews are interventions. Unlike the therapy situation, where the task of the intervention is to effect change in the participant, the research situation treats the interviewee as the expert, with the task being to effect change in the researcher's understanding of the phenomena of interest. In other words, the therapeutic situation is constructed for the *patient* to learn something; the research interview is oriented to the *researcher* learning something. Nevertheless, the perceived power differential in the narrative research interview generally favors the researcher, who is often believed by the participant to be expert in something. Particularly if one introduces oneself as a psychologist or mental health professional, the fantasy (whether conscious or unconscious) on the part of the participant is that the interviewer "knows" the good of living one's life—whether this is cast in terms of morality or mental health. Or the participant assumes that the interviewer already has a narrative position or expectation that forms a template against which their own narrative is constructed. Thus, the encounter itself inevitably has an impact on the interviewee's life in the sense that it will lead to some rethinking or added meaning making as the interviewee, after the interview, reflects on her/his own words.

If we are good interviewers and the interview is intensive and extensive, people will often take the opportunity to articulate the most sensitive areas of their lives, the matters about which they are doubtful or ashamed. It is not uncommon for people to tell us things they have never told anyone else, and they are then exquisitely attuned to our emotional response.

Above all, this interpersonal dynamic requires that we be good containers, that we can listen empathically but nonjudgmentally, feeling from within the participant's emotional space ("That must have been very confusing for you" or "How painful that must have been") rather than from the locus of our own idiosyncratic reactions. Sometimes the participant will seem to demand a personal response ("What do you think of what I did?") At such times, I often respond by generalizing and normalizing, saying something such as "So many people, more than you imagine, have experienced something similar" or "You know, as a psychologist I know that there is no right way to handle this." One of my interviewees recently disclosed to me that she had been sexually abused as a child by her (now deceased) grandfather, that her therapist urged her to confront him with this, but that she refused and left therapy. She then began debating with herself about whether she had done the right thing, clearly inviting me into this debate. This was, I thought, one of those times where telling her (feelingly) that I believe that there is not a "right" way, that all choices have their benefits and costs, was the best response I could make, and it did seem to reassure her enough that she could continue with her narration.

Interviewers must be sufficiently in control of their own inner processes such that impossible binds are not created in the interview situation. The narrative interviewer has to be comfortable dealing with complex and painful emotions. My

experience is that the student who reports that the participant “didn’t want” to talk about something is usually reporting what he/she was unable to hear. Most participants will talk about whatever they think can be heard. We listen people into speech. I think that one of the most profound ethical problems in this work lies in inviting someone to talk and then subtly indicating that what they wish to share is too much for the interviewer to bear—or that it is boring or irrelevant. On the other hand, an accepting and sympathetic response to participants’ disclosures may lead participants to find their experiences less disconcerting or worrisome (Holloway & Jefferson, 2000).

The interviewer must refrain from overt and subtle judgment about the participant’s life. Students often think this is obvious but miss the myriad of ways they are doing just this in their interview. Interviewers who would never say “I think it is terrible that you behaved that way” think it is perfectly appropriate to commend and praise: Variants of “I think its wonderful that you did that” are also judgments that set up the question about why other actions reported by the participant do not merit the same response. Saying “that’s good” during an interview is just as judgmental as saying “that’s bad.”

I believe it unethical to provocatively use confrontation to elicit more data.

I once supervised a group of narrative researchers in a workshop where one researcher, interviewing women who had been abused by their husbands, challenged them about why they remained in the relationship by saying things such as “Why would you be so self-destructive as to return to him?” Her thought was that she would learn a lot from the participant’s response to this question. I agreed that the participant’s response would indeed tell her something about how the participant would defend herself in this situation but that this form of question was, on its face, unethical. Researchers must eschew trying to enlist, overtly *or* covertly, participants to embody some political agenda they may carry into the project (see also Patai, 1991).

Sometimes researchers might share something of their own world and experience with the participant, and there is nothing unethical about this. Self-disclosure, as long as it does not embarrass the participant, may encourage a sense of collaboration and build rapport. Its influence on the relationship and the material that emerges become issues of analysis.

Researchers must become sufficiently acquainted with the social and cultural world of their participants to be able to engage appropriately in interaction with them. This means knowing enough about their mores and expectations so as not to appear rude, insensitive, or intrusive—but knowing little enough to be able to inquire deeply about those aspects of the world of the participant one wishes to learn about.

We cannot foresee all the eventualities within the relationship that will unfold. Therefore, I think we have an ethical obligation to be aware of the implicit aspects of participants’ consent—all those unstated expectations they may have of us—and to manage these in the dynamics of the relationship we form with each participant, both during the personal contact and in our handling of the material thus obtained.

Ethics of the Report

In considering the ethics of the relationship, we have explored one side of the narrative researcher's dual role—the role of being in appropriately respectful relationship to the participant. Having gathered the material, whether through interview or observation, the researcher now resumes the role that instigated the research project, that of the scholar reporting to the academic community about what he or she has learned and how it advances knowledge in the field.

Assuming that all material has been suitably disguised, the researcher is now left to grapple with the problems ensuing from analyzing a narrative that has changed ownership. What was once the participant's story now becomes a co-constructed text, the analysis of which falls within the framework of the interpretive authority of the researcher (Chase, 1996; Smythe & Murray, 2000). New dilemmas arise when the researcher turns to the task of making a report of what has been learned.

The written word, at least in Western society, has a power far beyond that of words that are spoken. Thus, access to print and the authority to indelibly inscribe a point of view in regard to participants gives the narrative researcher special (even if unwanted) powers that must be acknowledged and ethically managed in a published report.

Interpretive Authority: Beyond Disguise

The interpretive process depends on the aims of the research. "Who should control the interpretive process in any particular case depends in large part on the aim or purpose of the research and thus what kind of material needs to be collected and what kind of interpretation best suits that material" (Chase, 1996, p. 51). There are differences among narrative researchers in terms of whether their research goal is "giving voice" to their participants or "decoding" the texts of their interviews at some other level of understanding (Josselson, 2004). Those whose research is designed to "give voice" struggle with the problems of faithful representation of the experiences of their participants and the constrictions of linear forms of presentation to fully re-present what has been told. Those whose research designs involve making use of narrative texts to analyze unconscious or socially constructed processes, issues latent in the text, struggle with the ethical problems of interpretive authority—the dilemmas that arise from participants *not* finding their manifest meanings represented in what is written about them.

When the narrative researcher construes the project as "giving voice" to underrepresented participants, the researcher conceives the role as being a collaborator and a conduit rather than an interpreter: The participant is the authority on the meaning in the text (Etter-Lewis, 1996). These researchers ground the ethics of the report in their participants being, in one way or another, coproducers of the published text (Ely, 1991; Mishler, 1986; Wengraf, 2001) and tend to collaborate with their participants in fashioning the published outcome.

Much narrative research, however, in its goal of advancing knowledge, involves some interpretive efforts at a conceptual level, excavating the intention and

meaning behind appearances (Holloway & Jefferson, 2000; Hoskins, 2000; Moustakas, 1994). Researchers report “what the text says to us” (Gadamer, 1975, p. xviii). This mode of narrative research involves the task of understanding a narrator differently than he/she understands himself/herself. Researchers who work from this point of view tend not to involve participants in the interpretation/publication phase of the project.⁹

Of course, many researchers work from both points of view, wishing to be both collaborative and interpretive. There is a wide range of (often heated) opinion about whether participants should be given transcripts for verification and/or final reports to comment on the interpretations.¹⁰ Some believe that participant concurrence with interpretation is an inappropriate principle on which to base either ethics or research practice (Chase, 1996; Holloway & Jefferson, 2000). Some, at the other extreme, go so far as to advocate that participants be encouraged to change what has been written (Ramcharan & Cutcliffe, 2001).

My position is that the primary ethical attitude in the report rests in the researcher’s authority, stressing that the report is the researcher’s understanding or interpretation of the text. The inherent ethics of narrative research lies in the resolute honesty of the researcher’s reflexivity, which states clearly the biases, aims, and positioning of the knower and the circumstances under which the knowledge was created, with the researcher taking full responsibility for what is written. From this point of view, the report is not “about” the participants but “about” the researcher’s meaning making.

The task of the narrative researcher is to relate the meanings of an individual’s story to larger, theoretically significant categories in social science, a task distinct from the individuals’ specific interest in their own personal story (Smythe & Murray, 2000). While the task of the researcher in the data-gathering phase is to clarify and explore the *personal* meanings of the participant’s experience, the task in the report phase is to analyze the conceptual implications of these meanings to the academy. Thus, at the level of the report, the researcher and the participant are at cross-purposes, and I think that even those who construe their work as “giving voice” and imagine the participants to be fully collaborative with them in the research endeavor are in part deluding themselves.¹¹ The researchers are interested in the research questions (and their careers). The participants are interested in themselves. Thus, there is a division between the personal narrative told by the participant and the “typal” narrative, a narrative that exemplifies something of theoretical interest, created by the researcher.¹² From the moment of arranging to meet, through the interview or observation, through the transcription, through the analysis, the researcher’s interpretation is omnipresent.

If there were some kind of impenetrable wall between the social world and the academy at this point, all would be well enough. The problem here arises when those who have participated in our studies may read what we have written.¹³ As I have phrased it elsewhere (Josselson, 1996a), we are then in a position of openly talking about them behind their back. What, then, to do with the ethical dilemma of the person who recognizes himself/herself—and may not like what we say about him or her? By writing about people, we stir up a welter of narcissistic tensions—in them and in us (Josselson, 1996a).

The question of the people themselves—people we once interviewed or observed but who are now our *dramatis personae*—reading our report has puzzled all who have taken it up (Chase, 1996; Ellis, 2004; Stacey, 1988). It is more complex than it appears. The self is multiple and evolving. The aspects of persons we write about are contingent and selective. Thus, the participant-self who is “reading” our report is related to, a part of, but not identical with, the participant we write about.¹⁴ Some of our participants are more cognizant of this than others, who may expect to find in our writings an exact mirror of the self they thought they presented to us or the self they feel they are at the time of reading. In addition, we may write about aspects of our participants unknown to them, unconscious aspects of their experience, structural aspects of their narrative, or socially constructed or linguistic elements of their discourse. Participants are unlikely to disagree with our presentation of the “facts,” suitably disguised, of their experiences, which is why “member checking” (i.e., verifying the transcript with the participants) doesn’t solve the problem. If they find our writing troubling, it is usually our interpretations they object to.¹⁵

Certainly, we must take care in our written reports to maintain our respect for the dignity of our participants as individuals, recognizing that what we are treating as an exemplar that illustrates a conceptual or theoretical point is a very personal narrative to the person whose story it is. If we choose to write about short vignettes, this is less problematic than when we use long case examples with extensive interpretation. It is when we make use of lengthy and detailed case material that we must confront the question of What if the participant does not agree with our interpretation?—or, worse, What if they feel narcissistically injured (i.e., insulted) by it? Every aspect of our report may have unforeseen idiosyncratic meaning to the individual we are writing about, no matter how careful we are. *Not* writing about someone we have interviewed can be wounding, as I discovered in my study of “ordinary” women, some of whom searched my book in vain to find themselves. After the meeting(s) with the participants, the text belongs to the researcher, and what we write is our interpretation of it. We take full interpretive authority for our understanding of it (Chase, 1996). I think it is foolhardy to foist our writings on our participants, although we should make them available. I think the best principle is that the more public the published work is to be, the more participant consent should be sought at each stage of the publication (see Lieblich, 2006)—that is, the ethics of publication consent are differently shaded when the material will appear in a trade book as opposed to a scholarly journal or a dissertation. (Most researchers have the experience that their participants are not that interested in reading journal articles in which their material appears or are unlikely to try to decipher the theorizing [Holloway & Jefferson, 2000]). If we do send our work to them, we need to caution the participants that our interest in writing was about the topic for which we made use of their material but that they are unlikely to find a faithful representation of themselves since that was not our purpose. As an ethical position at this point, we must be prepared to stay in relationship with the participant, to explain our purposes as fully as we can, to make transparent our choices in as kind a way as possible, and to be prepared to

contain whatever responses the participant may have. We can reassure ourselves that we are unlikely to permanently or seriously damage anyone although we do run a risk of hurting their feelings, surprising them, or influencing them (for better or worse). But here we enter the moral dilemmas of what harm is and what potential benefits outweigh the risks of harm.

Many critics of narrative research, it seems to me, write about their worries about how people *may* respond. We need to base our ethical practices, however, on our accumulating understanding of how people *do* respond and under what circumstances. Some researchers report that their participants treasure published reports about them and may use the distance of the researcher's interpretation of their lives to view themselves from an insight-producing new angle (Josselson, 1996a; Lieblich, 2006). Others report about participants who had disagreements or misgivings about what was written. Dan Bar-On (1996) reports that one participant in his longitudinal study of children of Nazi perpetrators was "hurt" by what he wrote and did not want to continue meeting with him.¹⁶ Terri Apter (1996) quotes one of her teenage participants as saying "I see how you got what you said. I'm not saying it's wrong, but when you read about yourself. . . . Well, it's me, but not me. It's really weird" (p. 31). Much more sophisticated about these matters than Apter's teenager, one of Carolyn Ellis's graduate students, an insider to writing about others, echoed the teenager's experience when she told Ellis on reading what she wrote about her, "Reading about myself through your eyes was a bit surreal" (Ellis, 2004, p. 315). The evidence at this point suggests that reading about oneself written through another's viewpoint and prose is unsettling, even more so than, but akin to, seeing a photo of oneself or hearing one's voice on tape. Written speech differs from spoken speech. A linear portrayal of a person is always flattened and thereby inaccurate—and it requires a certain distance from the self as depicted to understand that in being written about, one has become an illustrative character in the researcher's text.

In general, I think that it is difficult to represent the potential consequences of reading about oneself written about by another in a balanced way. Certainly, reading what someone has said about oneself has impact, but I see no evidence that there is significant harm or long-term impact except perhaps in the rarest of cases.¹⁷ There have, however, not been enough published reports about the actual responses of participants—most of our knowledge here is through oral accounts. We need a more extensive narrative ethics, the actual experiences of participants and researchers, to better understand the particularities of our moral duties (Nelson, 2001; Widdershoven, 1996).

Every narrative contains multiple truths. All selves are multiply voiced.

Therefore, whatever narrative emerges in the final report is a construction of the interpreter, and the writer needs to make this plain in the presentation of results. But this is unlikely to fully assuage those who find objectionable some aspect of how their material has been portrayed or understood.

A number of writers have tried to suggest ways out of this dilemma. Smythe and Murray (2000) and others have urged narrative researchers to clarify the issues of narrative authority at the time of the consent process. But this has potentially lethal

effects on the interview relationship if what is communicated is some form of “I want you to tell me about yourself but you may not like what I say about you when I write this up.” Smythe and Murray’s suggestion to have an interval of time between the consent process and the interview so that the issues of multiplicity of meanings and differing intent don’t unduly influence the content of the interview doesn’t seem to solve this problem. If anything, having a discussion with the interviewee at the end of the interview about the overall focus of the project may help the interviewee understand that the researcher is ultimately interested in the research question, of which the interviewee is but an instance. Such a discussion may help participants understand that the final report will not be a simple mirror of *them*. Some have suggested showing participants what is to be published and asking for their permission, but this has its own set of ethical quagmires. Here, the dynamics of persuasiveness, personality, and power cast their shadow on what might be hoped to be an authentic conversation. The researcher is writing as a psychologist, sociologist, anthropologist, educator, nurse, or other brand of scholar. The participant cannot possibly be expected to engage in the merits of the scholarly argument. The participant will, however, understand that it is of some professional importance for the researcher to publish whatever it is he or she wishes to publish and the participant’s consent will in part reflect the wish to please. Moreover, once what is written is shown to the participant, then whatever it says will have its impact, whether it is published or not.¹⁸ In other words, the participant who is going to feel offended or misunderstood by what the researcher has written will feel this way as much in response to the draft as to the published version. Therefore, the goal of sparing the participant’s feelings will not be accomplished, and the damage, if any, will already have been done.

I have been wrestling with this dilemma for many years, and I have come to believe, at least at this point, that the most ethical approach is to explain to the participant at the close of the interview that what I will write about his or her interview will depend on the general conclusions I make about the whole group. I tell them that what I will write will probably not feel to them as though it is fully about them since I usually highlight certain themes in the text to make whatever point about the whole topic seems to me to be important to make. I caution them, though, that although I can disguise them enough so that anyone who does not know that they are in the study would never recognize them, I cannot disguise enough so that those who know them well AND know they are in the study would not recognize them. Therefore, I suggest that they be cautious about letting others know of their participation. I offer to send them a summary of my general findings from the study if they would like to see what I have learned from doing the project. I then try to write about each person with great sensitivity to how they might feel if they were to read it,¹⁹ but I take some comfort in knowing that, for most participants, it is highly unlikely that they will ever read what I publish. If the published work will be more widely available, in a book of interest to a wider public rather than a scholarly journal, for example, then I offer, at the time of publication, to send the work to each participant. I remind them that if someone close to them knows of their participation in the study, they could be recognized despite my

efforts at disguise, and I therefore suggest that they give me a private address where receiving the work will not compromise their anonymity in the study. I then send the work with a letter explaining that of course I have taken liberties with the textual material to make general points and that I hope they understand that I have taken literary license with the texts I produced from their interviews and that my representation of them is an interpretation that is not intended to be any kind of literal truth about *them* as *they* are in their actual lives.

We write from a postmodern position, knowing the relativity of all “truths,” and I think that we cannot then approach our participants in a modernist frame and try to negotiate with them a shared single truth. It is better, I think, to take responsibility for our interpretations, even with our participants.

One of my participants, when I asked her 10 years later about her reaction to my previous book, said, “I remember I didn’t like what you said about me. I don’t remember now what it was. I didn’t let it bother me. I just decided to ignore it.” She went on then to tell me about her current life and how it has evolved. She understood her life in her terms, not mine. Participants have their own ways of dealing with the experience of being written about,²⁰ and in most cases the worry about potential harm is the stuff of researcher nightmares more than actual participant experience. But the nightmares keep us vigilant, and this is preferable to a complacency that might lead us to be inattentive to the potential for harm.

Another suggestion made to solve the dilemma of the ethical bind when participants read about themselves is to create composites out of several participants (Bakan, 1996). This, however, runs the danger of fictionalizing data. If narrative research lies in the close observation of people in the highly specific details of their lives, then cutting and pasting between lives destroys the integrity of the data. Thus, to stay in a pristine relationship with the participant, the researcher runs the risk of being in an unethical relationship to the scholarly field.

There is, of course, also good that may come personally to those who read what we write about them. For some, the narcissistic gratification of feeling important enough to be the object of someone’s close scrutiny and presentation can be empowering. For others, the opportunity to view their lives from a different vantage point can be enlightening and growth promoting (Apter, 1996; Atkinson, 2001; Josselson, 1996a; Lieblich, 2006). Some of my participants proudly showed what I had written about them to their children, partly in hopes of being better understood (see also Lieblich, 2006).

An ethical attitude requires that we write about other people with great respect and appropriate tentativeness and that we recognize that what we write may be read by the person we are writing about. The ethical thin ice is that we cannot predict or control all the reactions our participants who read our reports may have. Most people, as they go through life, are accustomed to others having a view of them that they do not share. They develop defenses against this through a recognition of the contingency of perception—adult versions of the “Says you” of the playground. On the one hand, we have enormous power and authority with our access to print, but we can also be easily dismissed as incomprehensible academics engaged in arcane and meaningless ivory tower pursuits. If we underestimate our power, we may

harm; if we overestimate it, we risk paralysis or the cessation of narrative research. Finding this balance is the challenge.

Anonymity Revisited in the Report

We must also protect the integrity of participants' ongoing relationships with those who figure in their stories. Sometimes the dangers of publication outweigh the potential benefits precisely because when we study people who know one another, people could be harmed by what others have said about them. Recently, I had an opportunity to interview the daughter of a woman I have been following for 33 years, a daughter the same age her mother was when I first interviewed her. This was a rare opportunity in social science and afforded me the opportunity to observe the parallels in identity formation processes between mother and daughter. Both gave me permission to interview the other and to write about the material. But the content of the daughter's interview was such that I believe that it would be unduly painful for the mother to learn about. I decided, therefore, that despite the fascinating nature of the material, I would not publish it. I don't, however, preclude the possibility that in another 10 years, as their relationship and their lives evolve, it will become less sensitive to both and that I may feel that, with their consent, which I would again obtain, I could write about it. Or perhaps I may just use what I have learned and find a way of bringing this knowledge into my writing without discussing them specifically.

Issues of privacy and confidentiality may recur at the level of the report when the research is conducted in small communities (see Lieblich, 1996) or on members of the same family (Mauthner, 2000). Where other people might be recognized (especially when participants tell others that they were in a specific study that may have gotten wide attention), the ethical problem is to protect those who are unwitting characters in others' narratives (Hadjistravropoulos & Smythe, 2001). We are ethically bound to consider how publication of the material might affect the person's reputation in the community were their identity to be revealed. Similar concerns emerge when participants are drawn from the same subcommunity (and could therefore be recognized by other members of that subcommunity, no matter how well we "disguise" them) or "snowballing" techniques of finding participants are used such that participants know the identity of the other participants (Chase, 1996). Amia Lieblich, who has done a good deal of such research, advises researchers in these instances to take great care to collaborate with participants about what will be published and to be ready to rescind any material the participant feels might be injurious to others or to their relationships with others.²¹ If we suspect at the outset that there is no way of doing the research such that the participants or the important others in their lives can be sufficiently disguised so as to be unrecognizable to others, then one simply cannot publish the research unless all those significantly mentioned read what is to be published and agree to its dissemination. This is, however, highly problematic in student dissertations and theses where publication of the research is mandatory.

Ethics of the Design: The Wider Social Context of the Research

Increasingly, qualitative researchers have been trying to articulate an ethics of design in terms of who benefits from the research. This involves the larger questions about the role of the academy within society and the relationship between basic and applied research (Christians, 2000; Fine et al., 2000; Greenwood & Levin, 2000; Punch, 1994). In line with this is also a consideration of the politics of representation. Here issues of research design, politics, and ethics interweave.

One pragmatic ethical question that arises focuses on a debate about whether it is ethical to gather people's life experiences for the sole purpose of understanding better what it is to be human and whether we need to define specific potential gain to a group of people. In recruiting participants for a narrative research project, we say either explicitly or implicitly that our work offers the potential of benefiting the population the participants represent. We take care, though, not to promise that participation in the research will help them personally (Chase, 1996). Usually, researchers claim that the experience of people who compose the group of which they are a part is underrepresented in the professional literature and the researcher's aim is to give voice to these experiences. What, then, is the ethical obligation to see that some benefit accrues to this group? These concerns may be more in the foreground in fieldwork where whole communities are involved, but they are also at issue in more individualized narrative research as well.²²

Those who argue for explicit benefits to participants are working in a social justice framework, hoping that their work will lead to empowerment of the participants and/or the group they represent and also engender better societal treatment of those whom they study. Those working from a basic science stance implicitly assume that greater knowledge of human experience will lead to a more humane society. George Rosenwald (1996) argues that a narrative psychology, based on the study of situated human beings, subverts the increasingly fragmented and mechanistic approach to the person within psychology and thus contributes to creating a viable social image of "wholeness" in the person. This, in his view, is the overarching ethical concern: What kind of human being is our science portraying?

To define a pragmatic ethical attitude of design, one must work from the conviction that the research carried out is, at least, not exploitative—that is, we study people to better understand them or the society in which they live; it is unethical to study people out of curiosity about what seems to be different or exotic with the intention of voyeuristic engagement.

An ethical attitude toward design involves deep contemplation about what it means to encounter and represent "otherness." This mandates that the researcher question personal assumptions about the normal, healthy, or desirable. Unexamined biases and prejudices may be injurious to participants both at the site of the data gathering, when attitudes are easily transmitted nonverbally in the form of disdain, contempt, or disgust, or at the time of the write-up, when, now physically distant from the participant, the researcher's values saturate the presentation.

An ethics of design necessitates sensitivity to the (sub)cultural values and framework of the participants and reflection on what it may mean to protect the community of which the participants are a part (Johnson, 2001). The researcher must be aware of the potential to stereotype or subtly denigrate others and the ways in which his/her own attitudes have been shaped by his/her own social positioning. (Thus, given that most of us have been socialized into a racist, sexist, ageist, homophobic society, an ethical attitude requires that one be aware of how one experiences and expresses these prejudices. I am never persuaded by anyone who declares that they are NOT racist, sexist, etc. If anything, I am more worried about their potential to abuse.) Examination of one's own social and personal horizons of understanding is of paramount importance and also particularly problematic for researchers working on politically sensitive topics.

Many writers who have focused on ethics have stressed the power dynamics inherent in the study and representation of the other and have pointed out that any representation has political implications (Christians, 2000; Fine, 1998; Punch, 1994).²³ The society is impacted by representations that might lead or add to social stereotyping, and one purpose of narrative research is often to present a counterstory that subverts an oppressive master narrative (Nelson, 2001). Indeed, any thoughtful analysis of these matters leads to questions about the political implications of scholarship itself (Denzin, 2000; Patai, 1991).

For decades now, anthropologists have been criticizing their forebears for paternalistic, imperialistic, or just plain insensitive portrayals of those they studied. But the objectionable viewpoints are themselves products of the cultural milieu in which the ethnographic work was written rather than matters of ethical oversight. Advances in the narrative understanding of human experience can only come through a good deal of error as the field endeavors to find the balance between observer and observed and discovers how otherness can be captured with appropriate empathy and minimal distortion, subject to the inevitability of our horizons of understanding.

Archived Material

So far, I have been considering narrative research where the researcher (or a research team) gathers the data. As narrative research, which is expensive in time and cost, proliferates, people are increasingly archiving their materials so that other researchers can investigate them further or differently (see Richardson & Godfrey, 2003, for a fuller discussion). This raises other ethical concerns. Should the participant be informed at the time of the data collection that their material may be archived? If they have not been, must their consent be obtained before archiving? Are there different standards of disguise since the material will now be available to other researchers who do not know the particularities of each participant's life circumstances?

I think that participant permission should be obtained before archiving and that participants should be given the opportunity to review whatever will be archived.

I think they should also have the right to ask that their material be deleted from the archive at any point they wish. In this sense, I believe that the text belongs to the participant at every stage (although the interpretive authority belongs to the researcher).

Ethics Guidelines and IRBs

The role of IRBs has become increasingly problematic for narrative research (Lincoln & Tierney, 2004). Wolcott (1994) identifies a confusion of rules and moral principles, noting that “‘Genuine ethics’ . . . are at risk of giving way completely to meeting the letter of the countless regulations promulgated by institutional review boards” (p. 403).

The dominant discourse that guides these boards is rooted in health/medical research and is often at odds with the discourse of social science research (Ramcharan & Cutcliffe, 2001). Unlike, for example, drug trials, narrative research investigates no specifiable effect nor is it likely to change a person’s life irremediably (and certainly not physically). Research rooted in experiment requires certain safeguards that protect participants by fully informing them of the potential risks and benefits of participation in the research. In narrative research, neither risks nor benefits can be fully articulated.

In some hypothesis-testing social science research, issues of deception move to the center of the ethics concern. Some research must be done covertly, and here ethics boards strive to balance the potential risks and benefits and try to solve the dilemmas by “debriefing” the participants afterward. In narrative research, initial purposes may be stated explicitly, but outcomes, being unforeseeable, cannot be specified in advance. What the researcher finds of interest and importance in a narrative study may be far afield from what was expected at the outset, and thus the analytic focus on the material may differ from what was initially stated to the participant.

Most narrative studies are only loosely designed at the outset because narrative understanding is emergent. Thus, for example, interview questions and approaches may change in light of emerging analyses of the data. Good narrative research is conducted inductively, modifying procedure in light of growing understanding, shifting strategies as themes develop (Ouellette, 2003). McLeod (1994) argues that ethics in narrative research should be more reflexive than procedural. As with the methodology, the work proceeds according to general principles, interpreted under local conditions, rather than fixed rules. This creates havoc for ethics boards accustomed to fixed designs, to wanting to know exactly what will be asked of and told to participants. Narrative research, with its contingencies and explorations, cannot be controlled at the outset by outside observers in the same way as hypothesis-testing studies.

Thus, ethics in narrative research requires commitment to certain ethical values rather than a priori behaviors and may be difficult for ethics boards to monitor. The imposition of clearly bounded rules, applied across the board, is what leads to the

outraged protest of narrative researchers who find their studies subjected to constraints that are either irrelevant to the research or may actually interfere with it. Some ethics and review boards work with values and principles rather than rules because it is impossible to anticipate every contingency a researcher might find (Stark, 1998). Ethics review involves, among other things, a determination that the researcher has obtained the necessary training to conduct an empathic, nonjudgmental and respectful interview (or other intervention),²⁴ has thought through and given reasonable consideration to the possible effects the inquiry may have on the participants, and is prepared to deal with consequences in an ethically sound way. Thus, a review board may well raise concerns about a researcher with no clinical training interviewing survivors of trauma and expect that researcher to demonstrate her/his competence in dealing with flashbacks or traumatized affect. The focus here is on the interviewer's capacity to contain and manage what might emerge. Or, a review board may raise questions about cultural sensitivity if a researcher from one subcultural group sets out to participate in and observe another.

In narrative research, there is always the potential for impact on the family and social networks of the person who participates. Ethical practice involves the need to respect the dignity and welfare of others, and this must be interpreted broadly by ethics boards. The focus must be on the *principle* of "awareness of and sensitivity to issues relating to power and vulnerability" (Stark, 1998, p. 203) rather than on specific rules that may themselves have paradoxically injurious consequences—to both the participants and the research itself. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) propose that we ought to be thinking, throughout the research, in terms of *relational responsibility*. Such a framework is more likely to protect participants than abstract (or worse, concrete) ethical principles.

Institutional review boards (whose primary task is often to protect their institutions rather than either the participant or the research) that wish to implement a procedure to insure that they are not culpable for the possibility of emotional harm to participants might require that the researcher inform *the ethics board* that she/he is prepared with referrals, should such become necessary. An ethical attitude mandates, for example, that the researcher tell participants that they may call the researcher if they have further reactions to the interview they wish to discuss and then for the researcher to be prepared to refer if necessary or to request supervision if uncertain about how the interview may have affected the participant. Thus, the IRBs may require that the researcher include on the consent form a phrase inviting such postinterview reactions with appropriate contact information.

The agreed-on principles that ethics review boards should enforce include the following: that participants not be coerced in any way into participation and that they have the right to withdraw participation at any time; that participants and researcher not be in dual relationships that might imply coercion (e.g., teachers interviewing their own students); that the researcher is adequately trained; and that the researcher will take unassailable steps to maintain the privacy and anonymity of the participants. Researchers are also obliged to satisfy ethics review boards that they are familiar with local laws that mandate reporting of instances of sexual or

child abuse²⁵ and that they would be prepared to deal with someone who indicates potential suicidality. These matters, in my view, should be managed between the researcher and the board and not between the researcher and the participant by way of the consent form.

Ethics boards tend to operate in the most conservative ways, maximizing the principle of eschewing any kind of risk. If some member of the board is able to imagine any circumstance where a participant might be harmed (“what if”), the anxiety introduced into the group will usually be sufficient to instigate an insistence on some kind of action to try to prevent the possible (regardless of how unlikely) event.²⁶ Institutional review boards are generally composed of researchers who have never actually carried out a narrative research study and have only fantasies of what is involved (i.e., how they personally might feel about having their “secrets” written about). I think it important that boards that review narrative research have at least significant representation from narrative researchers. Narrative researchers endeavor to conduct research *with* other people rather than *on* them. Especially where communities are the focus of the research, good ethical practice may involve consultation before the research is carried out on the interests of the community in the research. Assessment of benefit from the ethics board may thus involve demonstration of who is likely to benefit from the research, but even these benefits may be emergent, given the contingent nature of narrative research.

Reflections and Conclusions

Many, if not most, perhaps all, narrative researchers end their studies with some questions about the absolute ethicality of what they have carried out, although only a few have said so in print (Apter, 1996; Bar-On, 1996; Estroff, 1995; Josselson, 1996a; Lieblich, 1996). This seems to me to be the most ethical position of all. It indicates that the researcher is internally responsive to the tensions and dilemmas of this kind of work and is conversant with the ultimate complexity of moral choice when confronted with the situational particularities (MacIntyre, 1984; Nussbaum, 1986). Because we are dealing with the real lives of real people, we can never know *for sure* at the outset that we will not have an impact on them that could be in some way painful. We can never know that what we publish will not be in some way distressing to them. We have a lot of evidence that most people find our interviews with them healing, integrative, useful, and meaningful, but this does not guarantee that nobody will ever have a less sanguine experience. We have little evidence about the effects on people of what we write about them, but what we have seems to suggest that most people are not very interested in what we have to say and will be highly unlikely to read our scholarly articles and books. We researchers are preoccupied with our studies; our participants go on with their lives. Because of the time it takes to do a narrative study and publish it, those participants who *do* read what we write do so at a point in their lives different from the moment represented by the text we have analyzed. They may recognize some aspect of themselves in what

we say but will be aware that although we have “got” something right about them, we also got them wrong. Most people will not be very bothered by this or not for very long.

I can imagine that there are some ethicists who might protest and say, “Well, but even if one person feels wounded and wronged by the interpretation you make of them, doesn’t that make the whole enterprise morally suspect?” Ethics is always most difficult when there are competing goods. I believe that the benefit science can derive from studying whole human beings in context²⁷ outweighs the highly unlikely possibility that someone might become severely distressed as a direct result of participation. If such an eventuality should come about, I would think it morally necessary that the researcher offer that person consultation (even pay for his or her psychotherapy) to try to contextualize whatever felt insulting or wounding and help that person recognize that all truths are partial and situated and that researchers distort unintentionally or misunderstand.

As social scientists, our primary task is the better understanding of human experience in society, and in time and we believe that this knowledge will ultimately and along the way lead to a betterment of human life. We cannot fulfill this task unless we can study humans as they are engaged in living their lives, and we cannot do this without incurring some potential for risk. There are few worthwhile endeavors that are completely risk-free.

Above all, an ethical attitude requires that we consider the dilemmas and contingencies rampant in this work. We can never be smug about our ethics since the ice is always thin, and there is no ethically unassailable position. We must interact with our participants humbly, trying to learn from them. We must protect their privacy. What we think might do harm we cannot publish. We cannot put our career advancement over the good of our participants. There will always be dilemmas because virtue in this work stems from contextual ethics that are best specified in each situation through discussion with informed colleagues.²⁸ I believe that if we work from these fundamental principles, we can do this work ethically enough.

Consulting Editors: Amia Lieblich and Susan Chase

Notes

1. See Sue Estroff (1995), who writes poignantly about the ethical dilemmas of research with the chronically mentally ill.
2. See Smythe and Murray (2000) for a review of the basis and fundamentals of the ethics codes.
3. Consent forms themselves, because they have participants’ signatures, should be locked away somewhere and *never* be shown to anyone (such as publishers or granting institutions) who may ask for them.
4. This practice, though, makes it difficult for other researchers to contextualize the data (Poland, 2001)—for example, when working collaboratively with other researchers. Here again, the researcher must balance the needs for participant anonymity and privacy with the research purpose.

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5. The only time in my years of doing narrative research interviews that I even raised the question of psychotherapy was with a person who wanted to keep exploring something that came up during the interview and would not allow me to end it. I simply said that it seemed like the interview had unearthed some unexamined and unresolved feelings that he was only dimly aware of and that, understandably, he wanted to pursue examining them. I told him that this was outside the frame of the work I was engaged in but that there were people, therapists, who were available to help him continue thinking about what all this meant to him. I said I would be happy to offer some names of people who he could consult with and pursue these meaningful issues. I suggested he think about it for a day or two and then get in touch with me for some names if he wished. He never did, but I assume he used whatever self-understanding he gained in his further development—and I was able to end the interview.
6. Corbin and Morse (2003) say that in their 50 years of combined experience doing narrative research interviews, they have never had an incident of grave concern. Holloway and Jefferson (2000) report a case of a woman who decided to pursue counseling, which she had anyway been considering, as a result of her interview. They presumed that this was a

result of her positive experience of feeling listened to in a nonjudgmental way.

7. Richardson and Godfrey (2003) and Thompson (2003) have made similar suggestions.

8. This is one reason why people who are to conduct in-depth interviews need to have specific training in the relational process and to receive feedback on what they bring relationally to the interview situation.

9. Much published research does not report that participants have been involved after the interview phase, which leads me to assume that they have not seen the report prior to publication.

10. Rita Charon (2001), writing from the perspective of narrative medicine, believes that patients should be shown what has been written about them and should have the right to decline publication. Lieblich (2006), Ellis (2004), Ely (1991), and many others also hold to the principle of obtaining agreement from participants about what will be written about them.

11. Judith Stacey (1988) makes a strong argument for the position that the appearance of equality with research subjects can be a mask for exploitation. She questions whether it is possible to have an approach to research that is authentic, reciprocal, and fully intersubjective—and still be research. Similarly, Daphne Patai (1991) offers an impassioned statement about the ethical conundrums in trying to take a feminist approach to research on people who are less powerful than the researcher by virtue of class, race, or ethnicity. She wonders if it is possible to research the oppressed without becoming an oppressor and largely concludes that it is not. These are extreme positions that raise questions worth thinking about.

Sue Estroff (1995) concludes her wrenchingly honest analysis of her work with chronically mentally ill people by saying “I do not think it is possible to work in complete collaboration, in actual equality or in total accord or consensus with our informants. Nor am I certain that these are unassailably good goals” (p. 97). What we may have to give up is the fiction that narrative research can be fully collaborative and still be research.

12. Smythe and Murray (2000) suggest that, in contrast to personal or archetypal narratives, typical narratives are constructed by social scientists in an effort to subsume individual experience to broader typologies of theoretical interest.

13. My comments about written reports apply as well to public presentations.

14. Estroff (1995) begins her article with the rage of one of her participants who, 10 years after the interview, was humiliated to read about how she was when in a psychotic state. See Graves (1996) for a discussion of this issue with regard to psychoanalytic case reports.

15. For example, I classified one woman in my study of identity development (Josselson, 1996b) as diffuse in identity according to criteria specified by the identity status research tradition (Marcia, 1993). Later, on reading the publication, she objected to being placed in this category because it did not match how she *felt*. Some researchers have published responses from participants who disagree with their interpretations in order to open for scrutiny the terms of the differing stances (Osherson, 1980; Stacey, 1990). Other researchers who have tried to do this, however, find that the respondents' objections are often not germane to the research focus but refer to idiosyncratic matters of consequence to the participant, but not to the point of the research (Tova Halbertal, personal communication, 2005).

16. Bar-On (1996) reports one German woman who did not expect her full account to appear in the (English) book, and Bar-On promised her to delete this chapter from the German version.

17. Hadjistravropoulos and Smythe (2001) take up one of my own examples to argue that impact can be severe. The example involved a psychoanalyst whom I had used as an example of idealizing processes in relationships (Josselson, 1992). In "On Writing Other People's Lives" (Josselson, 1996b), I reported that he said that for some time after the publication of my book he thought about himself as "an idealizer" and used my categorization of him as something he had to respond to in his understanding of himself. Hadjistravropoulos and Smythe (2001) say, in effect, that if even a psychoanalyst has such a reaction, imagine how less psychologically reflective people may respond. I would make a different argument, however. I think that precisely because we are in the same field and speak the same language, my participant took my interpretation more seriously and added it to the range of ideas that he used in his ongoing self-explorations. He did not say this was harmful to him, only that it had impact. Less psychologically minded people would, I think, be *less* likely to try to apply unfamiliar scholarly language to themselves and would, like so many of my other research participants, simply ignore my interpretation as something foreign to their lives—as long as they did not feel demeaned or criticized by what I wrote. This, at least, has been my impression of the response of most of the participants in my longitudinal study of women.

Estroff (1995) reports an instance of (and her intense guilt about) one participant who years later felt harmed by reading her words in print since the report preserved a state of being she was deeply ashamed of and had overcome. I know of one other instance of a person who read and gave permission for the publication of a clinical case study about her but then felt mortified (and enraged) for quite some time after it appeared. Both these are related to reports about mental disorders. If there are other occurrences of harm from a published report, I couldn't find them. As social scientists, we need to think about how many cases of negative reactions we are willing to tolerate; we will never be able to prevent them absolutely.

18. If the dilemma here, as Kvale (1996) states it, is that our research may confront participants with new understandings of themselves they have not asked for, then it follows that taking those interpretations to them directly only exacerbates the problem by directing their attention to something that they may not have otherwise known about.

19. Bar-On (personal communication, May 25, 2005) reports an instance of an interview in which he believed that there were many indirect references to incestuous relations which he could not clarify. He decided not to write about this because he knew she might read the text but felt that his presentation omitted what he thought were some of its major features. In this instance, as an ethical position, responsibility to the participant transcends responsibility to the scholarship.

20. Studying women in their longitudinal sample, Gail Agronick and Ravenna Helson (1996) found that women who were most likely to say they had been influenced by the published results of the study were those who were more intellectual, open to new ideas,

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emotionally expressive, independent, assertive, and self-confident. Those who were more guarded and controlled in their lives were less likely to say they were influenced by the study.

21. Chase (1996) suggests that often what participants find most sensitive in their texts is not what they say about themselves but what they say about others.

22. In addition, ethical questions arise about who owns the final product, and these can be complex when matters of financial reward to the researcher are present.

23. Susan Chase (personal communication, 2005) points out that those who are, outside of the research relationship, more powerful than us are also subject to our prejudicial "othering."

24. See the discussion between Smythe and Murray (2000, 2001) and Gottlieb and Lasser (2001) in *Ethics and Behavior*.

25. June Price (1996), studying child-abusing mothers, was required to warn her participants not to disclose to her any incident of abuse not yet known to the authorities.

26. Hadjistravropoulos and Smythe (2001), in their paper on elements of risk in qualitative research, similarly "imagine" circumstances of risk in the absence of actual cases of

harm.

27. Rosenwald (1996) makes the case that this “making whole” is central to the ethics of the human sciences.

28. Institutional review boards could best serve narrative research by serving as informed colleagues rather than purveyors of rigid rules.

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