**Writing other people's lives**

Jenny Preece

My research involved human subjects, so ethics was always going to be an important part of my PhD. When I thought about research ethics, I primarily considered the fieldwork encounter – my presence in someone else's home, talking to families about their lives and experiences. I diligently followed the University's research ethics protocols, considering people's capacity to give consent, issues of power and coercion, how to handle sensitive topics, protecting participants from harm during the research encounter, how to anonymise the stories that people told, and how to secure the data that was collected.

I thoroughly considered all the issues that seemed relevant. But as I started to write, I felt that I had failed to address one of the most important issues: what it means to write and represent someone else's life. Conducting biographical, 'life history' interviews gave me rich, in-depth data. People told me intimate details about events in their lives, emotional accounts which covered issues that some participants had told few other people. Then I went away to analyse and write up these stories within a sociological frame of reference. I was entrusted with writing other people's lives, doing justice to all the complexities, inconsistencies, contradictions, and emotions that were contained within their accounts.

I had already decided that it would be impractical to actively 'co-author' the thesis with participants. Not only would this require more time than I had, it would likely have resulted in a different set of participants because of the much greater time commitment. Would the busy families, shift-workers, carers, and lone parents that I interviewed have had the time to co-author their stories, seen through the lens of my research questions? Probably not.

So there I was, a researcher, a writer, with responsibility for writing other people's lives. In a way, all sociological researchers are engaged in this process, but with biographical research you have so much of someone's life that the responsibility to somehow do justice to that person feels even greater. On writing, I found that there was tension between addressing my research questions and ethically representing people's lives. As I wrote thematic chapters to consider my research questions in turn – a logical approach, I thought, and one which may help me when it came to dissecting my thesis into papers for publication – I began to feel that I had lost the essence of people's lives. When you have biographical data and you write thematically, you are working against the grain of the data and something can be lost in the process (Thompson, 1981).

I needed to write another chapter, one which focused on specific biographies. Writing other people's lives was complicated; you are interpreting their stories, what they meant – what they *really* meant – when they said this, or that. I wondered whether people would recognise themselves if they read my interpretation of their life. And would they agree with me? I suppose you could say that it didn't matter. People had consented to me interpreting their lives, given me control over telling their stories and locating them in a particular frame. But can you really prepare someone for the way in which their life is told by someone else? As I wrote people's stories, I privileged my interpretation over their own: you said this, but you *meant* that. In a way, that is the job of the researcher; to situate people's lives within a broader frame of reference. But I found it surprisingly difficult to write about other people's lives without returning to think about the ethics of my role. As Josselson (1996) reflected, the process of writing felt like talking about participants behind their backs in a public place. It is hard to capture the interpretive process of writing on a consent form, and having your story re-interpreted and moulded into a different form may have emotional consequences for an individual, something that I did not appreciate until I came to write these stories myself (Chase, 1996, Smythe and Murray, 2000).

In a way, the process of writing is both the problem and the potential solution – through reflexive pieces like this I have tried to write my way through the judgements, interpretations, and compromises that I have made as I have written other people's lives.

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