

Towards a Reflexive Ethnography: (Re-)inserting the Producer and Process Into the Research Equation

Sam PACK*

Kenyon College (USA)

Abstract: The individualistic orientation of life histories has long been hailed as an antidote to the generalizing tendencies of ethnographic research. However, the life history method is not without problems of its own, as I explain by referencing some of the most well celebrated life histories and so-called ‘autobiographies’ in the anthropological corpus. The traditional method of composing the life history as a flowing narrative is not only morally dishonest but also intellectually inadequate because it conveys the false impression of a chronologically timeless and uninterrupted soliloquy. By focusing only on the final product, life histories ignore the other two components in the communicative process. In this article, I emphasize the need to (re-)insert the producer and process into the research equation.

Keywords: *life history, autobiography, reflexivity, ethnography.*

Introduction

The tendency to generalize has historically plagued anthropology’s depiction of the ‘other.’ Pronouncements of homogeneity purport the singular (‘the native’) as being representative of the whole. Generalization, the characteristic mode of operation and style of writing of the social sciences, can no longer be regarded as a neutral

description. When the anthropologist generalizes from experiences with a number of specific people in a given community, he or she tends to flatten out differences among them. The appearance of an absence of internal differentiation makes it easier to conceive of a group of people as a generic entity who do this or that and believe such-and-such.

A healthy distrust of representing

*e-mail: pack@kenyon.edu. Sam Pack, Ph.D. is an associate professor of anthropology at Kenyon College. His research interests revolve around the intersection of media and culture. His prior publications have addressed such topics as television, feature film, ethnographic film, indigenous media, and photography from an anthropological perspective. He is currently revising a manuscript, *Television Through Navajo Eyes: Situating Reception in Everyday Life*, for publication.

peoples as coherent entities has emerged in recent years, and ethnographies written from feminist standpoints and other critical positions now commonly argue that essentialized representations obscure members' diverse experiences (Frank 1995:145). Feminist anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod, for example, has advocated what she calls 'ethnographies of the particular' by focusing closely on particular individuals and their changing relationships (1991:149). This methodological turn to the individual in anthropological studies corresponds to postmodernism and the much-ballyhooed 'crisis of representation.' As a result, through the 1980s and 1990s, the lived experiences of individuals have seized the academic spotlight. In a culture that is becoming increasingly heterogeneous, it is important to understand how individuals construct their own sense of self and world given their particular, dynamic, and complex lives. If we want to know the unique experience and perspective of an individual, there is no better way to understand this than in the person's own voice.¹

Life History as Method

As a research method, the term 'life history' refers to an oral account of the experiences in an individual's life, told by that person—typically in the form of discrete stories in a linked narrative—to a researcher. According to Lawrence C. Watson and Maria Barbara Watson-Franke, it is 'any retrospective account by the individual of his [or her] life in whole or part, in written or oral form, *that has been elicited or prompted by another person* (1978:2; emphasis

mine). An autobiography, in contrast, refers to a person's self-initiated retrospective account of his or her life.

Life histories are hardly new as the method has been utilized as a source of information about the human condition in social science research for over sixty years. Anthropologists regularly used life histories to ascertain shared cultural meanings, the insider's view of a community, and the dynamics of cultural change (Langness and Frank 1981). However, this method has generally occupied a marginal role relative to more established ethnographic techniques such as participant-observation and structured interviewing. Consequently, the individual has been reduced to a rather insignificant role as ethnographic writing often fails to capture the sense of self embodied in the autobiographical accounts of their informants and instead produces accounts of the 'other.'

The only way to protect the 'self' from the 'other' is through a first-person account. Life histories are especially valued for their ability to capture the 'native's point of view.' No less an authority as Claude Levi-Strauss has asserted that life histories 'allow one to perceive a foreign culture from within, as a living whole, rather than as a set of seemingly conflicting norms, values, roles, rituals, and the like' (cited in Bertaux 1984:232). The life history method holds considerable potential as a way of recovering hidden histories as well as reinstating the marginalized and dispossessed as makers of their own past. As a method of looking at life as a whole and as a way of carrying out an in-depth study of individual lives, the life history stands alone.

Life History as Problematic Method

All of this promotion should not suggest that the life history method is not without its problems. Although life histories provide the illusion of an unmediated relationship between narrator and audience and of an authentic voice speaking to one reader at a time, they should not be viewed purely as vehicles for the delivery of uncontaminated facts about the past. (Browder 2000:272). The key here is that the voice invariably belongs to a member of a minority group and the intended reading audience is composed primarily of middle-class white people.² There is an implicit understanding that the narrator is not telling his or her own story as much as the story of a people. Expected to serve as the representative voice of their people, narrators (and, more importantly, their editors) must often conform to their audience's stereotypes about their ethnicity.

Indeed, most life histories permeate with the distinctive air of a travelogue. Always told in the first person, they are usually as much about the journey of the writer/collaborator as they are about the natives' experiences. By becoming a part of the narrative, the author operates as a kind of proxy for the race and class biases of the reader. Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, a Native American scholar, criticizes the life history method for being essentially anti-intellectual. She asserts that 'the writer almost always takes sides with the 'informant,' with the result being 'a manuscript that will satisfy any voyeur's curiosity' (1998:123).³

Life *Not* Lived Like A Story

The unavoidable dilemma intrinsic to the life history approach is entrenched in converting a life into a story. Is life narratively structured or is a story imposed on the structure post hoc? I would contend that it is the latter. In contrast to the title of Julie Cruikshank's book, life is *not* lived like a story (1990). Stories arbitrarily impose a narrative structure that simply does not exist in the way people recount their lives. Episodes in memory are cinematic and events are not expressed in the linear, step-by-step fashion espoused in these books. Since life anticipates narration, it could be stated that stories falsify or reify experience.

Regardless of good intentions, critics have argued that the accounts of outsiders are fundamentally biased because they hail from very different cultural traditions from those who they are representing (DeMallie 1993). The logical solution, then, is for documents to be written by native peoples themselves. To borrow the anthropological idiom, autobiographies or native-made texts represent the truest emic perspective.

The form of writing generally known to the West as 'autobiography' had no equivalent among the oral cultures of the indigenous inhabitants of the Americas. Although tribes, like people everywhere, kept material as well as mental records of collective and personal experience, the notion of telling the whole of any one individual's life or taking merely personal experience as of particular significance was 'in the most literal way, foreign to them, if not also repugnant' (Swann and Krupat 1987:ix). Strictly speaking,

therefore, ‘Indian autobiography’ is an oxymoron.

Instead, Native American autobiographies are generally collaborative efforts, ‘jointly produced by some white who translates, transcribes, compiles, edits, interprets, polishes, and ultimately determines the form of the text in writing, and by an Indian who is its subject and whose life becomes the content of the ‘autobiography’ whose title may bear his name’ (Krupat 1994:30). The majority of Indian autobiographies were actually written by whites in the form of ‘as-told-to’ autobiographies.⁴ Concerns about editor/narrator relationships have led many scholars to erase the distinction between autobiography and biography in this literature (Brumble 1988:12).

Left Handed

To be sure, there is something strangely disconcerting about reading a title like ‘A Navajo Autobiography’ yet seeing the by-line attributed to somebody besides the subject of the autobiography. *Left Handed: A Navajo Autobiography* was recorded by a husband and wife team. Walter and Ruth Dyk collected the autobiographical data during the years 1934-35 except for the last chapter that was recorded in 1947-48. The life experiences, however, derive from three years at the end of the 1880s—almost fifty years earlier. According to Walter Dyk, Left Handed could ‘remember conversations directly, word for word,’ (Dyk and Dyk 1980:x) but I doubt his memory was so good that he could recount day-to-day

activities in specific detail from a half-century earlier.⁵

This volume comprises the second part of Left Handed’s autobiography. The first part, *Son of Old Man Hat*, recounts his life from birth to the time of his marriage at age 20. This compendium—all 571 pages of it—treats just three years in the late 1880’s. The narrative, needless to say, is extremely detailed. Walter Dyk was interested in mundane behavior rather than the descriptions of highly dramatic episodes which characterized other elicited autobiographies. He therefore asked Left Handed to ‘relate whatever he could remember of his life, leaving out nothing, however trivial’ (Dyk and Dyk 1980:xvii). Left Handed proceeds to describe his feelings toward members of his family, his relations with his wife, his preparations for the hunt, his ‘affairs,’ his hogan building, his gaming, and, finally, his wife’s unfaithfulness and their resulting separation.

Walter began editing this volume himself, but due to a long illness, he was unable to finish the work. After his death in 1972, Ruth continued the editing using her husband’s guidelines: ‘add nothing and leave out only minor experiences, repetitious episodes, and recurring passages...so that the edited version differs in no essential way from the first telling’ (Dyk and Dyk 1980:xviii). The problem here, of course, is what constitutes ‘minor’ and who determines it? Moreover, although repetition disturbs the Western ear, for many indigenous peoples, repetition serves as a rhetorical feature in oral narrative (Brumble 1988:11). In addition, editors like Ruth Dyk always order the material chronologically

even though this distorts the sense of time implicit in the narratives. The end result is that the edited version differs *substantially* from its original telling.

Anthropologist as Ventriloquist

Historically, anthropologists and other researchers have employed what I call a ‘ventriloquist approach’ in their studies of indigenous peoples. By essentially speaking on their behalf, they have rendered their native subjects as little more than exotic puppets. In his article ‘Here Comes the Anthros,’ Cecil King expresses the frustration of being imprisoned by anthropologists’ words:

We have been redefined so many times we no longer quite know who we are. Our original words are obscured by the layers upon layers of others’ definitions laid on top of them. We want to come back to our own words, our own meanings, our own definitions of ourselves, and our own world... Most important, we want to appraise, critique and censure what they feel they have a right to say about us (1997:117-118).

Within anthropology in recent years, there has been interest in reversing the academic perspective by using native epistemologies to critique our own assumptions. Dan Rose, in particular, urges a more radical democratization of knowledge that simultaneously de-privileges our academic inquiry while helping to recover ideas and practices from historically marginalized points of view (1990:11).

The state of scholarly research and writing on Native Americans was the

topic for an anthology titled *Natives and Academics: Researching and Writing about American Indians* (1998). A persistent theme echoed repeatedly by the ten native scholars is the need for Indian voices to finally be heard. According to Donald L. Fixico, more than 30,000 manuscripts have been published about American Indians and more than 90 percent of that literature has been written by non-Indians (1998:86). These scholars recognize a fundamental contrast between how Native American cultures and histories are interpreted and portrayed by non-native academics and how Indians see themselves and their past. One native scholar, Angela Cavender Wilson, asserts that as long as history continues to be studied and written in this manner, the field should more appropriately be called ‘non-Indian perceptions of American Indian history’ (1998:23). *I, Rigoberta Menchu* appeared to be a step in the right direction.

Rigoberta Menchu

In 1987, a Mayan Indian from Guatemala narrated her autobiography in which she described an early life of indentured servitude under the rule of European-descended colonials and included horrific accounts of witnessing the murder of family members at the hands of the military. *I, Rigoberta Menchu* won a Pulitzer Prize and became a staple in college classrooms. The book’s publication transformed Menchu into an overnight sensation and attracted worldwide recognition for her cause, culminating with the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize.⁶ Her story was so compelling that Menchu

became the revolutionary movement's most appealing symbol and she was anointed as the poster child for the struggles of all indigenous peoples.

Twelve years later, David Stoll revealed in his controversial book, *Rigoberta Menchu and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*, that the story was not true—at least not completely. While Stoll was interviewing other violence survivors in her hometown, he stumbled upon a conflicting portrait of the village and the violence that destroyed it. Among the more significant discrepancies, the author found that most peasants did not share Menchu's definition of the enemy. Although the book describes guerillas as liberation fighters, Stoll's sources considered both the soldiers and the guerillas as threats to their lives (1999:8). Contrary to the image she paints of herself as an unschooled peasant, Menchu's childhood was in fact a relatively privileged one as she even attended two prestigious private boarding schools operated by Roman Catholic nuns. Moreover, since she spent much of her youth in the boarding schools, it is extremely unlikely that she could have worked as an underground political organizer and spent up to eight months a year laboring on coffee and cotton plantations, as she describes in great detail in her book (Rohter 1998:8). She did lose members of her family but fictionalized or sensationalized their deaths for shock value. A younger brother whom Menchu says she saw die of starvation never existed while a second, whose suffering she says she and her parents were forced to watch as he was being burned alive by army troops, was killed in entirely different

circumstances when the family was not present (Rohter 1998:8).

The reason Menchu's story achieved such credibility and notoriety is that the notion of native people as innocent victims dispossessed by colonialism seemed so familiar. Like Steven Siegal's movies, the names may change but the plot is always the same. Stoll believes that some of his colleagues were offended because they had unwittingly fallen into the trap of idealizing indigenes to serve their own moral needs (1999:232). Similarly, what makes *I, Rigoberta Menchu* so attractive in universities is also what makes it misleading about the struggle for survival in Guatemala: it lulls readers into believing that they are gaining a closer understanding of Guatemalan peasants when they are actually detracted by mystifications wrapped up in an iconic figure (Stoll 1999:247).

Stoll's revelations appeared to render Menchu's so-called autobiography another classic example of the ventriloquist effect: an outsider anthropologist speaking through a native to further her own agenda. For her part, Menchu deferred all of the blame to the anthropologist who edited the book, Elisabeth Burgos-Debray,⁷ by claiming distortion of her testimony: 'That is not my book...It is a work that does not belong to me morally, politically, or economically' (Stoll 1999:178).⁸ Of course, Menchu had no qualms about accepting all of the accolades,⁹ the countless speaking engagements,¹⁰ and the considerable wealth¹¹ that came as a direct result of the book.

Black Elk

Before Rigoberta Menchu, there was Black Elk, one of the first Indian voices to be heard, or so it seemed. His life and though first came to public attention in 1932 courtesy of John Neihardt in arguably the most well known Native American life history, *Black Elk Speaks*, and another favorite among university professors. The Black Elk portrayed in what Vine Deloria, Jr. calls the ‘Indian Bible’¹² has become the paradigm of the pre-modern Native American. Neihardt’s Black Elk is depicted as solely a nineteenth century figure, born when the buffalo still roamed the plains and conquered by the heartbreak at Wounded Knee in 1890. However, Neihardt focuses only on the first twenty-four years of Black Elk’s life and neglects the last sixty. The general public is made unaware that Black Elk spent most of his life in the twentieth century and even less know that he was a devoted Christian for almost thirty years before he ever ‘spoke’ to Neihardt.

Black Elk Speaks consists largely of first-person narratives that portray Sioux life as it existed during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Black Elk shares his boyhood memories, early adult experiences, village and family life, and traditional religious rituals. With the rapid encroachment of whites, these pre-modern days are romantically portrayed as a precursor to the downfall of the Sioux as a self-sufficient people. The book ends with the 1890 massacre at Wounded Knee and the infamous ‘death of a dream’ speech:

And so it was all over. I did not know then how much was ended.

When I look back now from this high hill of my old age, I can still see the butchered women and children lying heaped and scattered all along the crooked gulch as plain as when I saw them with eyes still young. And I can see that something else died there in the bloody mud, and was buried in the blizzard. *A people’s dream died there* (Neihardt 1979:230; emphasis mine).

These are the most frequently quoted words in the entire book. Unfortunately, according to Clyde Holler, they were never uttered by Black Elk (1984:36).

Neihardt chooses to end Black Elk’s life story at Wounded Knee despite the fact that he was only twenty-seven years old in 1890! Readers are presented with a timeless portrait of an old and feeble man, suspended in nostalgia and melancholy and hermetically insulated from the modern world. *Black Elk Speaks* is a literary work that interprets Black Elk’s life as a tragedy that symbolizes the larger tragedy of Native Americans. Perhaps more than any other, this book demonstrates how Indian autobiography is a post-colonialist literary form that has been predicated on defeat and disappearance.¹³ As Stoll demonstrated was the case with *I, Rigoberta Menchu*, organizing scholarship around simplistic images of victimhood can be used to rationalize the creation of more victims. Neihardt took many personal liberties by making substantial changes to Black Elk’s testimony. He glaringly omitted certain passages, added some, and blatantly altered others. For Neihardt, Black Elk served as a passive, malleable icon to be shaped at

his mercy in order to reinforce popular pre-modern perceptions of the ‘noble savage.’ Instead of ‘Black Elk Speaks,’ a more fitting title would have been ‘John Neihardt Speaks Through Black Elk.’

Reflexive Ethnography

Despite all of the uproar surrounding the ‘crisis of representation’ (Marcus and Fischer 1986) and all of the literature spawned as a result, there has been little more done than just talking about and around it. Countless books and articles are filled with self-righteous theoretical pontifications, but only a minute percentage of these are field-tested. Methodological rigor, or honesty, has not yet come to fruition. Instead, it appears that most scholars are content by continuing to practice academic sleight-of-hand.

If there is indeed such a ‘crisis’ of representation, it seems to me that the obvious solution is to disclose the ways and manner in which the representation takes place. It is no wonder that qualitative research has been given the cold shoulder by certain academics who consider it to be unscientific. If anthropologists purport their discipline to be a scientific endeavor, it is incumbent upon them to treat it as such. Although examining how texts are constructed may spoil the aura of inviolability, it also lends credibility to the research.

What I am advocating here, of course, is reflexivity. According to Jay Ruby, to be reflexive ‘is to insist that anthropologists systematically and rigorously reveal their methodology and themselves as the instrument of

data generation’ (1980:153). More specifically, it is to be accountable to the three components of the communicative process: producer, process, and product (Ruby 1980:157). While all life histories focus on the last, very little is explicitly mentioned about the first two.

In his essay ‘The Ethnographic Self and the Personal Self,’ Edward M. Bruner calls the tendency for ethnographers to segment one from the other an exercise in futility: ‘The idea of a scientific, supposedly objective, ethnographic report that left the individual observer out of the account is not only a cliché, it is an impossibility. Every ethnographer inevitably leaves traces in the text’ (1993:2). Ethnographers generally keep anything of a personal nature out of the final manuscript as a protective mechanism for fear of compromising scientific integrity. However, according to Bruner, to divorce the personal from the ethnographic is to create a false dichotomy because data are not independent of how they were acquired (1993:4).

As already mentioned, life histories are induced and elicited by a researcher. The enterprise *in toto* is unnatural and tantamount to forcing a round peg into a square hole. Kathleen Sands, for example, describes how her native informant’s ‘narrative resistance’ thwarted her notions of a comprehensive and linear autobiography (Rios and Sands 2000:xiii). Similarly, Julie Cruikshank quickly discovered that the elderly Athapaskan women approached the interviews with a different narrative model of life history from her own (1988:200).

Life history interviews are highly processed, constructed, and reified. Questions have been removed, entire sections have been reordered, and redundancies have been deleted. With refreshing candor, Sands demonstrates the multiple stages involved in transforming a narrative life into an inscribed text. In the appendix to her book, she includes the original transcription of the interview, her editorial changes, and then the published product (Rios and Sands 2000:269-306). Like those deceptive weight loss ads, the 'before' and 'after' versions differ dramatically.

The traditional method of composing the life history as a flowing narrative is not only morally dishonest but also intellectually inadequate because it conveys the false impression of a chronologically timeless and uninterrupted soliloquy.¹⁴ Clifford and Marcus call collaborative autobiographies 'fictions' (1986:5), not in the sense of being false but as monologues made from dialogues. Those who have collected life histories on their own know that it entails much more than pressing the 'record' button on the tape recorder. Because communication is a symbiotic process that requires both a sender and a receiver, researchers cannot arbitrarily eliminate their presence—especially when *what* is said is invariably contingent upon *who* it is being said to.

The form that a particular life history takes emerges in discourse. In other words, a life history interview is a highly personal encounter that is shaped by the interpersonal exchange between the ethnographer and the informant. The speaker will only reveal

what he or she wants the researcher to know. Therefore, the quality and depth of the relationship between the two individuals determines what will be said. Usually, the longer and more amiable the relationship, the richer and more consistent is the final product.¹⁵ Although narrators answer a prepared set of questions, *how* they respond depends entirely on the level of rapport. As Navajo scholar, Clyde Kluckhohn has stated: 'No two researchers will ever see 'the same' culture in identical terms any more than one can step twice into the same river' (1959:254 cited in Pandey 1972:335).

The notion that only the native's point of view carries validity reflects a recent trend towards anti-colonialist sentiments. However, the life history as monologue reduces the anthropologist to little more than a transmitter. By conveniently eliminating half of the communication equation in life histories, anthropologists have also been practicing a methodological sleight-of-hand. The only honest alternative, it seems to me, is to acknowledge our particular role in the process. Specifically, I am advocating the fundamental necessity of incorporating the author's voice and emotional reactions into the ethnography. The first place to start is by including the ethnographer's questions in the final product.

The inclusion of questions into the text is not such a novel approach. In fact, question and answer interviews with celebrities have become increasingly common in mainstream magazines such as *Sports Illustrated*, *Playboy*, and *Rolling Stone*. However, the difference between these interviews and their academic counterparts is that

the former rarely divulges the identity of the interviewer and, even then, the reader does not know anything about the person or the nature of his or her relationship with the celebrity they are interviewing. To my knowledge, this methodological technique has never been attempted with published ethnographic narratives.

Of course, anything this innovative is sure to meet with initial resistance. Some criticism will surely be expected, as certain readers are sure to find such extreme ‘navel gazing’ annoyingly self-absorbed. Indeed, Bruner warns that there is a danger in putting the personal self so deeply back into the text that it completely dominates and, as a result, the work becomes narcissistic and egotistical (1993:6).¹⁶ The challenge is to return the ethnographer to the text but not to the extent of squeezing out the object of study. The ultimate goal is a balance that dissolves the distinction between the ethnographer as theorizing being and the informant as passive data, that reduces the gap between subject and object, and that presents both ethnographer and informant as having active voices (Bruner 1993:9).

The ethnographer can engage in a dialogue with the informant, just as there is a dialogue in the field between persons. Appropriately, the word ‘interview’ can be broken into two revealing parts: ‘inter’ is the root meaning ‘between’ and ‘view’ means outlook or perspective. An interview is literally an *inter view*, an exchange of perspectives between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest.¹⁷ Instead of the linear, one way, top down model typical of most life histories, I prefer the circular and reciprocal approach of dialogue.

Not coincidentally, Mikhail Bakhtin’s theories focus primarily on the concept of dialogue. According to him, a dialogue consists of three elements: a speaker, a listener, and a relationship between the two (1981). It should be our goal as researchers to weave all three elements into a cohesive study. Thus, the life history can serve as an experiment for a new way of writing vulnerably about the ‘other’ by not only refusing to hide ourselves as authors but by sharing equal billing in a dialogic ‘I-Thou’¹⁸ encounter with our informants.¹⁹ Ien Ang has similarly called for a radical contextualism: ‘I must know on whose behalf and to what end I write...that is, our stories cannot just tell ‘partial truths,’ they are also, consciously or not, ‘positioned truths’” (1996:78). If it is true that all truths are not only partial but positioned, I believe that a reflexive ethnography in the form of a reciprocal exchange between researchers and informants constitutes the logical extension of reflexivity in anthropological research.

An Alternate Model

In my view, re-conceptualizing the life history means that it should consist of four distinct tiers: 1) profile; 2) interview transcription; 3) editor’s commentary; and 4) the participant’s response to all of these.

First and foremost, it is of fundamental importance to reveal the circumstances of engagement. In this capacity, each life history narrative will be introduced by a profile of the narrator as well as a brief but thorough description of the nature of the

relationship between the narrator and editor.

Admittedly, the vast majority of life histories are highly constructed by their editors. A classic example of their decontextualized nature is Oscar Lewis' *The Children of Sanchez: Autobiography of a Mexican Family* (1961). A statement from the book's preface clearly illuminates Lewis' tendency towards creative editing: 'In preparing the interviews for publication, I have eliminated my questions and have *selected, arranged, and organized* their materials into coherent life stories...I believe this in no way reduces the authenticity of the data or their usefulness for science (1961:xxi; emphasis mine). Contrary to what Lewis may believe, his 'mix and match' style of editing most definitely and irreparably compromises the integrity of the original telling. Indeed, the traditional editing process consists of leaving out the interviewer's questions, creating sentence and paragraph structure, discarding extra things, adding missing things, and reorganizing certain sections to keep common subject matter together (Atkinson 1998:56). Spradley contends that most life histories are heavily edited by the anthropologist and estimates that only 60% of the narration is actually in the narrator's own words (1979:205).

As the editor, it is my responsibility to walk the fine line between preservation and pollution. There are certain unavoidable pitfalls involved in transforming a narrative life into an inscribed text, and every editor of life histories must reach his or her own compromise. In my case, my proclivity for 'raw' data does not mean that I prefer it uncooked. The unexamined

life may not be worth living, as the Socratic saying goes, but the unedited life is not worth reading.

A life history also requires interpretation. The editor's commentary provides additional information as well as a clarifying perspective that attempts to 'fill in the holes' caused by missing historical, social, or cultural background information. This space also imparts researchers with a stage to share their own insights and experiences related to the individual. Essentially, the main purpose of the commentary is to offer readers the perspective of another voice that can say things in a different way than the voice of the person telling his or her story. By providing both a transcription and a commentary, the reader will be able to critically compare the editor's assertions against the participant's account and vice versa.

The final component will feature the participant responding to the previous three sections. It is exceedingly rare for interview subjects to be allowed an opportunity to comment about what the researcher has written about them because this may compromise the researcher's definitive authority. Interpretation of field experience has historically been a one-way process, with no consideration for the input of the native informant (Rios and Sands 2000:8). Because Native American narrators rarely possessed any control in the actual presentation of their stories, Rose recommends what he calls the 'reversal of perspectives': the critique of the ethnographer by those for whom the ethnographer usually had provided the framing discourse (1990:38). It is precisely this reversal of perspectives that can serve as an

antidote to the corporate strain of bureaucratic ethnography that has now become standardized in anthropology.

Notes

¹ Anthropologist Paul Radin concurs: 'For a long time most ethnologists have realized that the lack of 'atmosphere' in their descriptions is a very serious and fundamental defect, and that this defect could only be properly remedied by having a native himself give an account of his particular culture' (1920:383).

² Even readers within the same ethnic community of the narrator have also stated the case for representative authenticity. For example, Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior* (1976) was attacked by many Chinese American critics for being 'a very personal description of growing up in Chinese America' (Browder 2000:5-6). The notion that Kingston was presenting an example of Chinese American life that was misleading or inaccurate implied that the author did not have the right to present her personal experience as such. In the eyes of her critics, she was not telling her own story but (mis)telling the story of her people.

³ Cook-Lynn is adamantly critical of the publication of all Native American personal narratives not only because she sees them as stolen intellectual property but because they undermine the integrity of Native American expression and mislead both non-natives and natives alike about Indian identity: 'Though I've referred to the 'informant-based' Indian stories as 'life-story' works, I would like to suggest that they are offshoots of biography, a traditional art form in European literature. Ethnographic biography is not an Indian story at all and does not have significant

ties to the interest bodies of Native literary canons produced culturally and historically' (1998:121).

⁴ Without qualification, all 'as-told-to' autobiographies are induced texts. In David Brumble's *American Indian Autobiography*, the author of the definitive bibliography of Native American autobiographies asserts: 'It would never have occurred to these people to sit down and tell the story of their lives whole' (1988:4).

⁵ The recording process was exacerbated by the fact that Dyk could not speak Navajo and Left Handed could not speak English. As a result, Philip Davis (a Navajo) served as an intermediary between the two men. Left Handed would speak for a minute or two, Philip would then translate, and Walter would transcribe the translation—hardly an accurate means of recording, to say the least.

⁶ It was no coincidence that the award coincided with the 500th anniversary of the European colonization of the Americas.

⁷ Prior to the publication of this book, she was best known as the wife of French philosopher and Marxist, Régis Debray (Stoll 1998:178).

⁸ Menchu elsewhere accuses Burgos-Debray of substituting other persons' life stories for her own (Stoll 1999:182). Yet in another book titled *Crossing Borders*, Menchu asserts precisely the opposite by maintaining there that she had full and final authority over her book (Rohter 1998:8). Needless to say, the controversy exacerbated any relationship between the women, which was already strained by a disagreement over publishing royalties. Menchu even excluded Burgos-Debray from the Nobel campaign.

⁹ In addition to the Nobel Peace Prize, Menchu was showered with honorary doctorates (Stoll 1999:5).

¹⁰ Stoll reports that Menchu had to choose from more than 7,000 invitations (1999:5).

¹¹ The Nobel Peace Prize includes a \$1.2 million purse for each recipient (Stoll 1999:212).

¹² In his introduction to *Black Elk Speaks* (1979:xiv).

¹³ Krupat has written that while ‘victory is the ennobling condition of western autobiography, defeat is the ennobling condition of Indian autobiography’ (1985:34).

¹⁴ Sometimes, anthropologists get caught in the act, as evident in this passage from Virgil Wyaco’s life history: ‘He married Janice Wyaco’s mother, so it wasn’t too bad. Janice? Janice is my sister’ (1999:14). It is obvious from the text that the narrator is responding to a question from his editors.

¹⁵ This is not always the case as a new relationship with an interview subject may work just as well or better in certain situations.

¹⁶ Judith Okely, a vocal advocate of inserting the ‘I’ into ethnographic monographs, responds to such charges: ‘Self-adoration is quite different from self-awareness and a critical scrutiny of the self. Indeed those who protect the self from scrutiny could as well be labeled self-satisfied and arrogant in presuming their presence and relations with others to be unproblematic. Reflexivity is incorrectly confused with self-adoration (1992:2).

¹⁷ This approach is the basis of Steinar Kvale’s manual on qualitative research titled, appropriately enough, *InterViews* (1996).

¹⁸ The reference here is to Martin Buber’s *I and Thou* (1958) wherein the author describes how personal dialogue can define the nature of reality. According to Buber, human beings may adopt two attitudes toward the world: I-Thou and I-It. The former is a subject-to-subject relationship

defined by mutuality and reciprocity while the latter is a subject-to-object relationship defined by separateness and detachment.

¹⁹ Anthony P. Cohen concurs: ‘As an anthropologist, I cannot escape myself; nor should I try. In studying others I do not regard myself as merely studying my self; but rather, as using my self to study others (1992:224).

References

- Abu-Lughod, Lila (1991) 'Writing Against Culture,' in Richard Fox (ed.) *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*, pp. 137-162. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press.
- Ang, Ien (1996) *Living Room Wars: Rethinking Media Audiences for a Postmodern World*. London: Routledge.
- Atkinson, Robert (1998) *The Life Story Interview*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail (1981) *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, edited by Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Bertaux, Daniel, ed. (1981) *Biography and Society: The Life History Approach in the Social Sciences*. London: Sage.
- Browder, Laura (2000) *Slippery Characters: Ethnic Impersonators and American Identities*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Brumble, David (1988) *American Indian Autobiography*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bruner, Edward M. (1993) 'The Ethnographic Self and The Personal Self,' in Paul Benson (ed.) *Anthropology and Literature*, pp. 1-26. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Buber, Martin (1958) *I and Thou*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.
- Burgos-Debray, Elisabeth, ed. (1984) *I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*. London: Verso.
- Clifford, James And George Marcus, eds. (1986.) *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Cohen, Anthony P. (1992) 'Self-Conscious Anthropology,' in Judith Okely and Helen Callway (eds.) *Anthropology and Autobiography*, pp. 21-241. New York: Routledge.
- Cook-Lynn, Elizabeth (1998) 'American Indian Intellectualism and the New Indian story,' in Devon A. Mihesuah (ed.) *Natives and Academics: Researching and Writing about American Indians*, 111-138. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Cruikshank, Julie (1988) 'Myth and Tradition as Narrative Framework: Oral Histories from Northern Canada,' *International Journal of Oral History* 9(3):198-214.
- (1990) *Life Lived Like A Story: Life Stories of Three Yukon Elders*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Demallie, Raymond J. (1993) "These Have No Ears': Narrative and Ethnohistorical Method,' *Ethnohistory* 40(4): 515-537.
- Dyk, Walter And Ruth Dyk (1980) *Left Handed: A Navajo Autobiography*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Fixico, Donald L. (1998) 'Ethics and Responsibilities in Writing American Indian History,' in Devon A. Mihesuah (ed.) *Natives and Academics*, pp. 84-99. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Frank, Gelya (1995) 'Anthropology and Individual Lives: The Story of the Life History and The History of the Life Story,' *American Anthropologist* 97(1): 145-

148.

- Holler, Clyde (1984) 'Lakota Religion and Tragedy: The Theology of *Black Elk Speaks*,' *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 52(1): 19-45.
- King, Cecil (1997) 'Here Come the Anthros,' Thomas Biolsi and Larry J. Zimmerman (eds.) *Indians and Anthropologists: Vine Deloria, Jr. and the Critique of Anthropologists*, 115-119. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- Krupat, Arnold (1985) *For Those Who Come After: A Study of Native American Autobiography*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- , ed. (1994) *Native American Autobiography: An Anthology*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Kvale, Steinar (1996) *InterViews: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Langness, I.I. and Gelya Frank (1981) *Lives: An Anthropological Approach to Biography*. Novato: Chandler and Sharp Publishers, Inc.
- Lewis, Oscar (1961) *The Children of Sanchez: Autobiography of a Mexican Family*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Marcus, George E. and Michael M.J. Fischer (1986) *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Neihardt, John G. (1979) *Black Elk Speaks*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Okely, Judith (1992) 'Anthropology and Autobiography: Participatory Experience and Embodied Knowledge,' in Judith Okley and Helen Callaway (eds.) *Anthropology and Autobiography*, 1-28. London: Routledge.
- Pandey, Triloki Nath (1972) 'Anthropologists at Zuni,' *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 116(4): 321-337.
- Radin, Paul (1920) 'The Autobiography of a Winnebago Indian,' *American Archaeology and Ethnology* 16(7): 381-473.
- Rios, Theodore And Kathleen Mullen Sands (2000) *Telling A Good One: The Process of Native American Collaborative Biography*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Rohter, Larry (1998) 'Nobel Winner Finds Her Story Challenged,' *New York Times* December 15: A1, A8.
- Rose, Dan (1990) *Living the Ethnographic Life*. Newbury Park: Sage.
- Ruby, Jay (1980) 'Exposing Yourself: Reflexivity, Anthropology, and Film,' *Semiotica* 30 ½ : 153-179.
- Stoll, David (1999) *Rigoberta Menchu and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Spradley, James P. (1979) *The Ethnographic Interview*. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers.
- Swann, Brian and Arnold Krupat, eds. (1987) *I Tell You Now: Autobiographical Essays by Native American Writers*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Watson, Lawrence C. and Maria Barbara Watson-Franke (1985) *Interpreting Life Histories: An Anthropological Inquiry*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Wilson, Angela Cavender (1998) 'American Indian History or Non-Indian Perceptions of American Indian history?,' in Devon A. Mihesuah (ed.) *Native and*

Academics, 23-26. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Wyaco, Virgil (1998) *A Zuni Life: A Pueblo Indian in Two Worlds*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.