Narrative Non-Fiction Research and University Ethics Practices

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Abstract: At the formal University level of the Ethics Committee, there seems to be a confusion about the ethical considerations and implications of ‘narrative non-fiction’ and ‘the literature of self’. This paper will look at that confusion and try to suggest some ways through it, as well as some causes for it. Taking into account the PhD model of artefact and exegesis, this paper looks at the ethical questions inherent in writing one’s own story as qualitative research involving creative non-fiction and/or an exegesis about oneself as a writer. It proposes such writing as family and local history, narrative non-fiction, autobiography, biography, poetry, film-scripting, drama and self-as-data has its own ethical dimensions as a research domain. In relationship to forming an understanding of this, it investigates some aspects of the postmodernist views of story-telling as research. It proposes that postmodernist theories about textuality and discourse advance the thinking about (and practice of) the traditional and patriarchal linear analytic-referential knowledge-model being overtaken by lateral postparadigmatic discourse. This conceptual framework involves storytelling and the pastiche of the dispersal of certainties in considering the practice of writing and/or production of an artefact. The aim of this paper is to enable tired research paradigms and debates to be short-circuited by the acceptance of difference. This means the production of new discourse models as well as new content. It also means a new and more open approach to ethics clearances within the university.

Keywords: Ethics, Qualitative Research, Narrative Non-fiction, New Discourse Models of Knowledge

“…thinking with my viscera, feeling with my brain” Barbara Myerhoff.

Introduction

The UNIVERSITY HAS a duty of care to candidates that involves supporting their candidature as it has already been accepted by relevant Research Committees prior to seeking ethics clearances. It also has a duty of care to people named in the works, particularly in dependent relationships, and it has a scholarly responsibility regarding methodologies and outcomes. There are two elements in the PhD by artefact and exegesis, and both may need an ethics clearance under current university practices.

In most cases, the narrative non-fiction artefact element of the PhD writing candidates means retelling their own perspectives of people involved in their lives whether directly (as in autobiography) or indirectly (as in biography). In all cases, these are constructions, these are personal opinions, and I argue should not need a clearance as it is their own observations of their own lives or the lives of others through the prism of their own attitudes. Some observations may be critical or even negative, such as in, for example, Helen Garner’s ‘Joe Cinque’s Consolation. A true story of death, grief and the law’, or Truman Capote’s ‘In Cold Blood’, along with innumerable autobiographies and biographies.
Indeed, Suzanne Eggins (2005) addresses the question of the ethics of real stories being narrated in Helen Garner’s ‘creative non-fiction book’ (123) about the murder of Joe Cinque. She describes such narrative non-fiction as ‘a booming branch of Australian publishing…’ and university writing programs in America and Australia’ and discusses how Garner’s works show ‘how tricky it is to blend the objectivity, balance, ‘facticity’, and source-based reportage of journalistic genres with the subjective, self-reflexive, imaginatively-sourced narrative drive of literary forms.’ (124) If it’s ‘tricky’ to do in the writing process, it’s even more so in the ethics clearance process. Much of the experience of Ethics Committees and their points of reference for discussion is around long-term research projects rather than personal memoirs, observations or perspectives. Is such qualitative research being treated fairly?

Paul Ramcharan and John Cutliffe identify ‘…the claims of a substantial body of social scientists that qualitative research is being treated unfairly and disadvantaged by ethics committees’ and argue that ‘a more equitable method of judging the ethics of qualitative research involves a monitoring procedure of ethics over the research period.’ (2001:358) They have another more confronting suggestion that amused me: if quantitative methodologies don’t care about individual narratives, why are qualitative methodologies scrutinised? They aver that ‘positive science has failed ethically, since many researchers from the quantitative side have found substantiation for breaking ethical rules.’ (360) In science, benefits are set against risks while ‘the discourse of social research has largely eschewed the judgement of research by formal and independent committees and has relied on a common-sense approach to ethics.’

Ramacharan and Cutliffe compare this to peer review, and it certainly gives us a model that I suggest we might apply in ethics proposals where the informed peer reviewer might make the recommendation to the committee as a matter of information rather than to gain ethics approval. Thus, as a writer and Professor of Writing, I- or other members of the Writing Discipline- could make an informed recommendation about applications that are to be a part of a ‘publishable’ standard artefact and an accompanying academic exegesis.

If this was thought to be too close to home, we could ask for external peer reviewers to do so. William Smythe and Maureen Murray, in suggesting ‘process consent’, state that research into narrative methodologies shows that there is a ‘general inadequacy, for narrative research, of the ethical principles that guide more traditional nomothetic social science research…in process consent, explicit procedures are provided for mutually negotiated consent…’ (2000:318) One of the imponderables for writing and/as research is that the narrative unfolds as the project proceeds. Addressing the question of ‘who owns the story’ is a very significant part of writing in many narrative non fiction and autobiographical situations. Ramacharan and Cutliffe suggest that ‘the only remaining approach which would be equitable to all research methods would seem to involve looking at the actual outcomes of research.’ (2001:364)

**Qualitative Methodology: Who Owns the Story?**

This paper both practises and develops from a methodology that arises from the work of Gregory Ulmer, particularly his early work, in which he identifies what he terms a ‘mystery’. Ulmer (1989) further identifies a ‘mysterical’ approach to thinking and research. A ‘mystery’ puts under erasure all claims to fact/authenticity in writing. It shows all writing to be both personal and mysterious (my story and mystery) whatever its claims to authenticity and de-
personalisation. It reveals the academic text to be sewn together as a compilation of the scholarly, the anecdotal or popular, and the autobiographical. It questions the dominant analytico-referential model of knowledge. At the same time it accords with much late 20th and early 21st century thinking about the self, the culture and even the world as a text to be constructed and read. Thus, academic writing itself is arguably always the ‘literature of self’, but it also includes identifiable narrative non-fiction.

A number of exegetical PhDs, as well as many assessable elements of postgraduate and undergraduate writing courses, involve developing artefacts that are personal stories, observations and opinions. Such artefacts are the data for the exegetical component of the PhD in writing at Higher Education, Lilydale, Swinburne University of Technology. (Arnold 2005; 2007) These may include identifiable photographs as well as references to other people. They will refer to lived experiences that contribute to the richness of stories and to the new and significant contribution to knowledge of the PhD by exegesis.

Moreover, as the exegesis records the authors’ experiences as the data about the production of the artefact, this means that the exegesis itself is a form of narrative non-fiction, and may be placed along with the artefact within this broad genre area. Thus both elements of the PhD in writing by artefact and exegesis can be seen as ‘the literature of self’. They thus cause a new consideration of University ethics clearance procedures.

In an age that ascribes to what Mary Midgley (2004) describes as the ‘myth’ of the impersonality of scientific knowledge that we thrive upon, it is apposite to remind ourselves that all research writing is in significant part ‘the literature of self’. Midgely enables us to see that if we can accept this about science, it will allay the fears of many who see it as a dominant paternalistic ideology against which other research is measured and fails. This leads to a faulty binary based upon fear of dominant paternalistic quantitative methodologies. Midgely abjures us thus: ‘people who fear science today are chiefly disturbed by the way in which these imperialistic ideologies import irrelevant, inhuman standards into non-scientific aspects of life and lead people to neglect the relevant ones. Throughout the social sciences and often in the humanities too, distorted ideas of what it means to be ‘scientific’ and ‘objective’ still direct a great deal of life and of research.’ (2004:21) However, even if there is the reality that scientific writing involves ‘the literature of self’, this is not how it is read by traditionalists in Ethics Committees.

Science is neither omnicompetent or ubiquitous: it is one narrative non-fiction amongst many. Angel Laureiro (2000) discusses how the literature of self was one of the earliest forms of writing, how it contains the illusion of self-knowledge and how autobiographical truth is from oneself: it is neither external nor verifiable. It is about the unrecoverable but unimaginable past, and ‘…no single discourse can be privileged in the unveiling of the multiplicities that conjoin to form the subject nor should any of the discourses be deemed fictional…the self is always alienated...’ (2001:13)

If we argue, as I do (Arnold 2007), that all texts-including the text of self and culture- are constructed narratives, then storytelling must inevitably include references to other people involved in the storytellers’ lives. Where these are direct quotations it may sometimes be appropriate that clearances should be sought and/or pseudonyms used. In other cases, for example observed family histories from a personal perspective, pseudonyms are inappropriate and/or unsustainable. In psychological studies, Smythe and Murray have a very pertinent caution ‘…when engaging individuals as data sources in research, it is important to treat them not just as data sources but as human beings with their own distinctive individuality
and autonomy.’ (2000: 317) This caution may also be fruitfully applied to the treatment of PhD candidates and academics engaged in narrative non-fiction as a research methodology. When we tell our stories, we inevitably involve others in that telling.

**There are Significant Ethical Questions Inherent in Writing One’s Own Story as Qualitative Research**

The strain caused by the apparent depersonalisation that is claimed as a significant element of quantitative methodologies is more clearly inappropriate for many qualitative methodologies, although I believe it is inappropriate for both. However, the ethical questions presented in narratives that acknowledge their own narrativity are quite different from those that arise in narratives that assume a scientific methodology. How can the University address these questions? Smythe and Murray say that ‘true anonymity is a problematic requirement to meet whenever a person’s story is presented and analysed as a whole and in detail’. (2000:319)

While they are considering the narratives of the subjects, it is also true of the storyteller. Indeed, who does own the story? For them, ‘narrative discourse is structured more temporally than conceptually, concerns relations among particulars rather than abstract generalities, addresses the vicissitudes of human intentions and motivations, and aims to be convincing more by virtue of its believability than in terms of its logical coherence or empirical testability…narrative accounts are told from multiple perspectives …narrative meaning is multiple as well.’ (2000:323)

Since the middle of the 20th century, methodologies have arisen that propose alternative models to the scientific model that underpins traditional quantitative research. Although much debate has occurred, and much movement has resulted, this old ‘qualitative’ and ‘quantitative’ debate/dilemma is still alive in relationship to ethics determinations, as we can see even from the form itself which is skewed to traditional quantitative research models. Yet there can be no dissociation of narrative and researcher in writing in the PhD by artefact and exegesis.

This has a huge impact upon traditional ways of viewing research that Mary Midgely describes as ‘conceptual monoculture’ (2004:47) and states that ‘the right way to remedy the Cartesian split is not for one half of the world to swallow the other.’ (2004:59). An example of this comes from Janet Bryant who describes the creative impact of a ‘story’ upon her grounded theory methodology: ‘Things were generally moving in a predictable fashion. Suddenly a “story” presented by one participant was so compelling and original that just to “code” the interview transcript would have seemed a travesty.’ (Bryant and Lasky 2007:182)

Smythe and Murray take the view that ‘…ethical responsibility for research participants begins at the recruitment stage of narrative research’ (2000:325) This is relevant where interviewing is involved, yet a writer who is making narrative non-fiction may be importing elements from their own lives that go back many years; they may be referring to family, friends, the famous or infamous. They are not setting up a data base of participants for a narrative to emerge: the narrative is embedded in themselves as their own narrative as much as in the so-called ‘data sources’.
Some Aspects of the Postmodernist Views of Story-Telling as Research

An intrinsic question has arisen in the postmodernist moment about the ownership and the telling of one’s own story. This is embedded in the proposal that all textuality and discourse is a created story, a narrative of some kind. Yet a gap still exists between ‘real’ methodology and ‘other’. I am proposing that important qualitative research methodology is situated within postmodernist theories of discourse that show it to be fragmented, personal and non-replicable.

My interest in such alternative research methodologies arose initially from my own interest in postmodernist textuality and discourse in my own PhD Thesis (Arnold 1994) and the work that entailed of entering into the academic debate through reading germinal academic works and commentaries (e.g Barthes, Derrida, Cixous, Irigary, Eagleton, Norris, Milner). This led me to an acknowledgement of the inevitability of the personal being an integral part of research. This is a significant assertion to make in relationship to ethics clearances for qualitative methodologies, but it is also significant for all writing undertaken within a University research paradigm. It challenges long-held paradigmatic beliefs, and secure boundaries that have ensued are melted away. It demonstrates that all research can be seen to be a ‘narrative’ or a story told by particular researchers within a particular research culture and hence following or promulgating a particular research methodology. It leads inevitably to a widening of the analytical and the intellectual ambience in which university research takes place.

Postmodernist theories and practices of textuality and discourse open up the text to many possible readings: there is no ‘one way’. If, as Roland Barthes declares, the author is dead and the reader brings the text into life, even the act of writing, much less the lived experience of being, displays itself as non-authoritative in the conventional sense. The implications of this are manifold. For me, perhaps the most important—and the most galvanising—is that the academic life and academic writing and language are now able to be seen as open, explorative and aware of their own evanescent nature in the same way as any other form of written or lived discourse. That is, academic writing can be understood as related to and made up of multiple ways of respecting various personal experiences. What are the ethical implications of this for the University that has a legal duty of care to protect all involved?

Family and Local History, Narrative Non-Fiction, Autobiography, Biography, Poetry, Film-Scripting and Drama have their Own Ethical Dimensions as a Research Domain

I argue that we need to establish an open and more sophisticated distributive model of ethics clearances in writing programs for many reasons.

Narrative non-fiction confronts the expectations of the establishment/academy, and in doing so brings forward a richer mix after the diminution of the ‘qualitative/quantitative’ binary. When ‘reality’ and ‘knowledge’ are revealed as constructions not unlike fiction, new possibilities of/for multilinearity may emerge. Elsewhere, I have called this ‘fictional truth’. (Arnold 1994) Many of the elements of ‘narrative non-fiction’ or the ‘literature of fact’, a new and enticing genre challenge and even eliminate paradigmatic expectations of factual writing. (See ‘Bruce Dobler’s creative nonfiction compendium’: Http://www.pitt.edu/~bdobler/readingnf.html) How do we assess the ethics of research models that acknowledge
within the academy that to do research is to speak in multiple ‘voices’ from multiple personal and professional experiences and areas of knowledge?

A most important reason to address the question of ethics clearances for narrative non-fiction is that doing so we also address the limits the Cartesian binary places upon research models and practices in the Arts and Social Sciences. The Cartesian binary that underpinned the Enlightenment has resulted in some wonderful advances in knowledge that have established the quantitative model espoused by the natural sciences. At the same time, it set the scene for the qualitative vs. quantitative debate that has overshadowed non-traditional modes of enquiry.

For Rene Descartes, truth and error all occur in the intellect itself. So the main principle Descartes propounded, and his most influential one, was that intellect is separate from the imagination, the senses and memory, and order and systematization of all worldly knowledge will fall readily and naturally into place once a point of the absolute indecomposable element is reached.

Rather than his ‘cogito ergo sum’ (I think, therefore I am) that sets reason above all other forms of human enquiry and knowledge, the 21st century, following the postmodernist dispersal of paradigmatic thought, has begun to accept alternative ways of knowing. These draw together multiple ways of thought, enquiry, research, theory and practice.

In her discussions of the need to readdress and essentially redress the Cartesian binary, Midgely contends that: ‘…all reasoning is powered by feeling and all serious feeling has some reasoning as its skeleton. Thought and feeling are not opponents, any more than shape and size’. (2004:9) Midgely (2004:21) sees traditional research based on the natural sciences as one of the myths that we live by that produce and accept: ‘… certain ways of thinking that proved immensely successful in the early development of the physical sciences have been idealised, stereotyped, and treated as the only possible forms of rational thought across the whole range of our knowledge. (2004:13) In this sense, traditional research constructs proclaim themselves as logical and reasonable within a given framework and then establish, de facto, that framework as the ‘norm’ by which all other research is judged.

Resisting that framework is one of the tasks of what Jane Gallop calls ‘anecdotal theory’. For the social sciences, this resistance is enabling: it brings a dynamism to the studies of the culture in a way that might be unnoticed and even stifled within a traditional academic theoretical and critical framework. (Gallop 2002:7) It also coincides with Jacques Derrida’s (1983) ideas of not doing again what has already been done. According to Gallop, anecdotal theory both tells the stories within an academic framework, thus theorizing anecdotes, and also acts to ‘anecdotalize theory’ so as to ‘…make theorizing more aware of its moment, more responsible to its erotics, and at the same time, if paradoxically, both more literary and more real.’ (2002:11) This accords with what I call ‘fictional truth’ (Arnold 2007) and may also be seen as rhizomatic (Deleuze and Guattari. 1981)

Midgely alerts scholars to the ways in which Cartesian-based norms become ‘organic parts of our lives’, ascribing this to the seductive simplicity of enlightenment concepts. (2004:5). She is particularly engaging in her assertion that ‘science, which has its own magnificent work to do, does not need to rush in and take over extraneous kinds of questions (historical, logical, ethical, linguistic or the like).’ (2004:6). Ulmer has a more startling take on this. He sees much of our search for knowledge as having a ‘collective blindness’ due to scientific paradigms and norms and asks the provocative question: ‘How do we account for the persistence of error in our lifeworld even after centuries of adopting scientific method
as the dominant mode of collective reason?’ (1999-2000:15) As he uses neologisms frequently to express anew, he suggests a form of seeking knowledge that he calls ‘emplyrical’ which is empirical lyricism, that must combine aesthetic practice with empirical ones ‘before we are able to grasp holistically the true condition of our problematic world.’ (1999-2000:19)

A quote from the observations of anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff upon her responses to utilising qualitative methodology in her work brings focus to this debate:

‘It felt more honest, deeper, and finally simpler than any anthropological work I had ever done. I felt more of my reactions being used, wholistically, the way we are taught to study societies. I was thinking with my viscera, feeling with my brain, learning from all my history and hunches and senses…..I could never imagine trusting my own or anyone else’s work as fully again without some signposts as to how the interpretations were arrived at and how the anthropologist felt while doing so.’ (1992:294-5)

What Procedures do Other Universities have in Place for this Matter?

Looking ethnographically at ‘the ethics review process in 5 countries (Australia, New Zealand, the United States and the United Kingdom)’, Maureen Fitzgerald et al (2006:377) investigate this from the interesting perspective of ‘…what actually occurs within ethics committee meetings.’ Which they describe as ‘…like the proverbial black box…Researchers put an application in one side of the box and out the other comes the “please explain” letter, an often decontextualized request or demand for additional information or changes in some aspect of the research.’ (pp377-8)

Although there were various committees, the investigation found that they were similar enough that a narrative of their meetings could be considered as ‘one body of data.’ (379)

In their findings, the first step of each submission is always purely administrative: that is, to ensure that the form has been fully filled in. Sometimes there is informal discussion to enable the researchers’ applications; in other cases there are formal meetings that result in a full committee scrutiny of the ethics application and may result in a committee or faculty review being formally advised. As a result, ‘…all ethics applications receive an in-depth review by at least one person, most are closely reviewed by two or three people, and in some cases all members of the committee are expected to conduct a thorough review.’ (381) It is the reviewers’ narratives that drive the committee decision-making and Fitzgerald et al postulate that the chair and/or other strong presenters and/or influential voices have a disproportionate influence upon the ethics decision. Furthermore, they go on to note that the applicants’ narratives were skewed or made less informative by the very nature of the form itself that provided very little space for an informed description. Even so, the applicants’ descriptions of the projected research were not the dominant narratives: the dominant narratives belonged to the most outspoken and/or most influential committee member/reviewer.

The dominant ‘reviewers’ narratives’ on the ethics committee were most influential in the ethics clearance process. If they were positive, a clearance usually followed. If negative, they ‘…generally evoked considerable, often heated, discussion, even when people agreed with the opinion of the narrator.’ (387) Moreover, the discussion centred upon the narrative of the presenting reviewer/influential person more than upon the narrative embodied however briefly in the application itself!
Clearly, this throws considerable responsibility upon the Ethics Committee to ensure that the narratives which they present and/or to which they listen are an informed as well as powerful in presentation and articulate in delivery. In many universities, however, the people on such committees do not come from a background of the Arts themselves, much less from a Practice Led Research model. (Arnold 2007)

Smythe and Murray (2000) state that: ‘recent discussions of ethical issues in qualitative research have criticized traditional, regulative approaches to ethics on the grounds that they are too procedurally driven, normative, rationalistic, principle centred, individualistic and utilitarian. They have recommended that qualitative research ethics should be more reflexive than procedural, descriptive rather than normative, intuitive versus exclusively rationalistic, aspirational as opposed to principle centred, intersubjective versus individualistic, and more deontological than utilitarian…ethical issues in narrative research are best rendered in shades of grey rather than in black and white.’ (Pp328)

This is very challenging to those committees that seem to be dedicated to Midgely’s ‘myth’ of science models of research.

**Does this Work Conform to the Genre Model Ascribed by the Candidate and the Genre Model in Which it Most Comfortably Sits and is the Work done within a Fair and Valid Genre Framework?**

Here we address the question of what is acceptable in the public domain. This is particularly relevant for the artefact element of the PhD. I ask my candidates who are writing books as the artefact element of their candidature to walk through several bookshops and to identify where their book would sit on the shelves. I ask them to identify the books that sit around it, where it’s displayed in the shop, and how it’s placed in relationship to any signage. If their book can be seen to be able to be sold in those bookshops alongside other books, then we already have an insight into its publishability.

Writers often feel that their work transcends genre, and this may be so; however I think it would be rare for a book to be so individualistic that no place could be found for it in a bookshop. I think that we also have insight into its acceptability as a publication that can be publicly displayed and accepted as reasonable within its own genre terms. This is simplistic, but it’s an important foundational step. Following this, there are other questions to ask and answer. Many of these involve legal boundaries to information about telling other people’s stories.

Another commercial way to consider this is to look at publishers’ lists and websites and to see if it’s possible to build a publisher’s proposal regarding your book. Many websites have very good information about how to do this, and all publishers require it from their authors.

Whilst it’s comparatively easy to do this for the book, it’s not so clear-cut for the exegesis. In saying this, I would like to acknowledge that the exegeses are becoming as interesting and publishable as the books themselves. The exegeses are what I have come to call ‘a subjective academic narrative’ in a most direct way, as (at least) they act to record, comment upon, draw into the academic debate, and present as new knowledge the practices involved in producing the artefact itself. Hence, they are intensely individual and personal as well as acting to situate the matters arising from the PhD process within the current academic debates.
How might a university ethics committee deal with such a text if it calls upon other people’s experiences?

**Does the Work Conform to Legal Responsibilities for Publishing Work in this Genre?**

With the exception of very obvious defamation, libel or slander, the legal responsibilities of publishing narrative non-fiction are not at all clear. Many publishers may take risks with this dimension of ethics that may not be appropriate for a University to take.

Prepublication, the publishers of my memoirs, ‘Mother Superior, Woman Inferior’, sought a legal opinion. I was advised to change the name of a cousin who was beaten by her husband. Although I did so, I continue to regret it as it seems to me to dishonour the truth and the woman concerned. Of course, she was readily identifiable by family, but the lawyer’s opinion was that I had accused her husband of a criminal act and as he was still alive I should not do so.

‘This night my cousin came home looking for trouble. Although Gwen never stirred him up, she was not cowed by him and spoke up for herself. Her children chided her for this, telling her to let him have his own way: another example of the difficulties women experience in homes like this. To me, it was apparent that nothing would palliate his fury and, at the same time, that the only person who could break Gwen would be herself. I suppose her iron strength and determination not to be utterly cowed might have spurred him to anger, but I think he would have kicked her even if she had been supine before him. I went to bed, leaving him chivvying and shoving her around, and lay there in anguish as I heard their argument proceed. He began to throw things at her, to upturn furniture and to burn a mattress in the fire. I crept out of my room into their little three year old son, reasoning that I would be safe there. The children slept on, no doubt immune to such trouble. Finally I could bear it no longer. ‘Help’ she cried out, ‘please help me; he’s killing me.’ I raced to the door, opened it, and looked through to chaos. The normally warm and pleasant room looked as if a madman had stormed through it, as indeed one had. A kapok mattress smouldered in front of the fire; the table was turned upside down; food, crockery, furniture lay broken and overturned. In the midst of this was the recumbent figure of my darling Gwen. He knelt on her stomach, holding her head back by her hair, hitting her in the face. He got to his feet to kick her, then dropped to the more comfortable position of kneeling on top of her. I ran for help.’ (Arnold. 1985. pp181-2)

The legal position of the work may well be one aspect of what ethics committees consider: but if so, how is this done? What legal input is there and at what stages should this occur?

**Is the Material Already in the Public Domain such as References to Famous People?**

One of our PhD candidates writing about AFL football has been queried about her use of a famous (or more correctly infamous) footballer’s name. This raises for me the question of whether an autobiography must always be under a pseudonym in case anyone can be recognised: surely a risible and even unscholarly/untruthful proposition?

The public domain is often about fair use of copyrighted materials and intellectual property. In this way, it’s almost always about ‘who owns the story?’ But there is a considerable lacunae
in such a legalistic approach: it’s not necessarily addressing the question of ‘who can we talk about when we’re telling our own story?’ In addressing this question, the ethics committee sometimes appears more like a censorship committee than one protecting confidentiality, ensuring fair representation and balancing morel codes and ethical principles with the right to tell one’s own story.

Although it may seem simplistic, what Robert Hauptman says is very encouraging to those of us earnestly seeking to act ethically and even more earnestly seeking an ethics clearance from often unsympathetic ethics committees: ‘the astonishing fact is that despite all of the esoteric complexifying, all of the pedantic quibbling, all of the superfluous pilpul, ethical decisions are made in only two ways. Either one holds that something is good or evil and acts upon this belief or one considers the potential results of one’s actions and acts accordingly. All of the extrapolations, variations, and confusingly disparate terminology, all of the disquisitions, tracts, studies, and adjurations from Aristotle to Spinoza, from Bonhoeffer to Frankel, are merely commentary.’ (In Frohmann: 2007. Pp 269)

For the purposes of most ethics applications regarding the artefact and exegesis, the moral imperative arising from the quasi-legal ‘the right to know’, and ‘in the public domain’ is made clearer by Hauptman’s abjuration. If we can answer that we are doing no further harm by reference to someone that is known, then we are acting ethically.

Throughout our society and culture, there are what Gilles Deleuze calls ‘regimes of information’ (1995) that we know both consciously and unconsciously. The most apparent of these are stories about people that are commonly in the media. These are quite easy to assess: what is more difficult, more challenging and not ever looked at are the ‘regimes of information’ that form and inform our cultural input and hence output.

Where Relevant, is the Process that the writer Undertook Transparent in Terms of the Participants’ Informed Consent?

The same AFL candidate has been told that it is ethically debateable whether she can talk to her family, particular her underage children, about their weekly family exploits as football fans. If an autobiography were about people killed in the holocaust or in the World Wars of the 20th century, surely it would diminish them to be made non-existent yet again for fear of some committee-drive ‘what if’ lack of courage?

Some of our most important writings will come from two women who have been incarcerated for some years in a women’s high security jail. How can they ever write about their own experiences if they are silenced at the ethics committee level? Surely they own their own stories even though they will do all that they can to ensure that the women they talk about in the second and third person in describing their own lives in prison cannot be readily identified.

Should some of these Questions be more Properly Addressed in the Exegesis Rather than the Artefact?

I believe that the exegesis is also autobiographical in terms of the ‘literature of self’, or what I call ‘the subjective academic narrative’ and Ulmer calls a ‘mystery’. In the case of the PhD by artefact and exegesis, some of the dilemmas that seem to raise the anxiety of the reviewers in their narratives to the committee are inappropriate in discussing the genre form/content
of the artefact. As the exegesis is there to enable the discussion of just such elements as may cause the reviewers their anxiety, it does seem that there should be more confidence on their part in the academic nature of the exegesis. As an accompanying academic element, it should and will enter into the relevant scholarly debates. That these should include such apparent irrelevancies as naming famous footballers seems to indicate that the committee does not have enough informed members and/or that the forms do not elicit sufficient sophisticated information to allay what are really quite unnecessary fears based on a ‘what if’ fear of legal problems possibly arising.

This ‘what if’ scenario seems to the scholar applying for the ethics clearance to raise matters that are so minute that they often wonder if their application was read at all. Fitzgerald et al identify a deep communications gap between the committee dominant narrative and the applicants’ understandings of what they have applied to do: ‘…the question to the researcher or the concern raised is decontextualized and, as a result, the researcher may consider such questions strange and even irrelevant to their research.’ (2006:390-1) It is of course a tantalising if paradoxical thought that an application to write a personal narrative is defeated by a narrative about that application because the latter has no confidence in narratives.

Midgely says that ‘as for our knowledge, it too is a network involving all kinds of literal links, a system in which the most varied kinds of connection may be relevant for helping us to meet various kinds of questions…Often it is our powers of perception that are central to the work, rather than the consecutive reasoning that can be easily tested. And in any human situation we must call on special powers of social perception and imagination that are not really formulable at all.’ (2004: 25-26)

What are the Responsibilities of a Scholarly Product in Terms of Publishability?

The University ethics’ guidelines here surely should be that the text under consideration meets the requirements of its own genre rather than is unable to be written? This is a sensible way to look at this ethics dilemma as this is usually the main guideline for PhD by artefact and exegesis.

Yet there is no simple guideline: my own family was shaken and a whole branch became separated as a result of my memoirs ‘Mother Superior Woman Inferior.’.

Then again, great things happened to several families as a result of my book (With Lurline Stuart) ‘Letters Home’. We asked Australians to send us any war letters, and we received quite a lot of faded sad letters many from people never seen again. Many people in the 1990’s still had a box of letters that their mother had kept from some long-lost son. We were aware that as the parents and wives of WW2 servicemen and women died, many of these would be cleared out and probably never seen again. The Australian War memorial was happy for us to send them anything our contributors gave, as they had relatively little from WW2.

There are several outstanding events that resulted from this publication.

One man was a survivor of the infamous Sandakan march. He had never recovered seeing thousands of men die and himself being one of only six Australians surviving. He talked about it to us for the first time. After this, he began a TAFE course to write a memoir, and his wife said that much of the horror dropped away for him.
Another, Les Lothian, was a POW in Germany living on nothing and finally force-marched barefoot in the snow as the Germans retreated before the Russians. He stayed alive because of the few letters his girlfriend, Mavis Reynolds, from Bondi had got to him. They told him of warmth and love and fellowship. They told him of beaches and sand and surfing. They were not about death and suffering. When he got home he married her but latterly they had become estranged as his war experiences embittered him. When he saw what we had written, he was able to forgive his wife and the last years of their marriage were happy.

‘Mavis, you’re a dear to write to me. I love to get letters from you…your letters remind me of the good old time we met down by the river. I wish those days were still here…the weather is still cold, the ground has been covered with ice and snow for the last eight weeks.’ (pp253)

From Mavis: ‘Today Mum and I went down to Palm Beach for the trip. We got on top of the double-decker bus, through from Wynard, and it was a clear bright day, got a lovely view, especially of the harbour as we crossed the bridge. They say Sydney people rave about the bridge and harbour, but you can’t help it, and truly, Les, it’s as wonderful as ever.’ (pp260)

My mother, father and brother’s letters were read on a TV celebration of 60 years since the end of WW2.

The book ‘Letters Home’ was set on a University of Melbourne history course. As a result, the TV writer and producer Wain Fimeri contacted me. He wanted to make a one-hour TV show for the A.B.C. on love letters. He had read the letters my mother had kept and then given to me saying ‘Josie I want you to have these as I know you will do something with them.’ I had published several of them in ‘Letters Home.’ I wrote in the introduction to my dad’s section in ‘Letters Home’: ‘These letters contain a wonderful portrait of an Australian family whose husband and father is at war…Letters such as these, if not unique, must be very rare…The letters from his six sons give us an insight into a child’s view of war and the loss of a soldier Dad which they conceived of as only temporary.

‘Dear dad, I hope you are well, we are rite. I am getting good at school. I am better than I was. Silvia is well. She was sick last night. How are you getting on down there…Goodbye to Dad. Your loving son, Barry.’ (pp63)

The letters from his wife, my mother, recreate their home life and remind of something other than living in a hole as a ‘rat of Tobruk’.

‘Today is a real Autumn day, a touch of frost although the sun is shining. We have a fire as the wind is real nippy, the weather for warm clothes. All the boys have put on their woollen singlets and pullovers and Sylvia looks real nice in black shoes, white sox, cream pleated skirt and pink jumper and pink bows on her hair.’ (pp. 52)

My brother Len wrote a book of all the letters with editorial comment: I gave a copy to Wain and then he went to the Australian War Memorial to read the originals. He rang me with tears in his voice to say what a moving moment it was.

The T.V. one-hour show was called ‘Love Letters From A War.’ To me it represented all wars all time and all loss both on the field and in the home, and this was what Wain managed to convey in film. I negotiated with the A.B.C. to publish and sell my brother’s book. (Johnson 2002) Fimeri used archival footage and re-created dramatic representations with voice-overs. It starred Andrew Blackman and Trudy Hellier as my parents and narration by Helen Morse.
How do we Deal with Ethics where the Work is Dominated by the Writers’ Perspectives and ‘Inevitably Imaginative Reconstructions’ of the Author? (Sinclair. 2005:178.)

Many university committees seem to be focussed upon the quantitative scientific model of enquiry. Indeed, the ethics forms themselves appear to be very much a part of traditional ‘ways of knowing’. Thus the ability to critique ethics applications from an area such as the PhD by artefact and exegesis seem to be heavily compromised. Committees appear to look for group safety by requiring further actions to meet the dominant narratives arising in the committee meetings. Fitzgerald et al state that whilst ‘…few applications were rejected outright…Few applications are approved as submitted…There seems to be some need among committee members to make or request some action’ (2006:389)

Another dominant narrative aspect identified by Fitzgerald et al is ‘what if or worst case scenario’ (390) that I would describe less kindly as ‘covering the committee’s back’. The risks that an autobiography, some narrative non-fiction, a biography (etc) might present is obviously seen as greater than the risks presented in a detached scientific work where the ‘I’ is subsumed into the impersonal.

A PhD student of mine who has had a similar book to his artefact published to great reviews and sales sent me the following emails: ‘I’m waiting for (Ethics coordinator) to get back to me with a final all-okay on my research ethics forms: I’ve had to do up an interviewee consent form to accompany my application, which when it’s right I’ll need to get yourself and (Research Dean) to look over and sign again. I can’t wait to be on the other side of this PhD before filling out forms will be the death of me!!!’ Then came an even more poignant email: ‘I’ll send (research Dean) an email, ethics looks all good following much discussion with (Ethics coordinator) in the ethics department. How you’ve managed a career in academia with no homicides on your record is beyond me!!’

Conclusion

Fitzgerald et al identify a ‘rhetoric of ethics’ (2006:393) that operates through a core narrative that influences members, constrained by time and ethics committee workloads, to ‘…respond initially to the content of the narrative, not to the content of the application.’ They describe such narratives as having immense influence upon the ethics decision making process and advise that ‘being aware of how influential such narratives can be can help committees sift the wheat from the chaff.’ (2006:394)

It is easy to see the dimensions of research ethics when we look at traditional quantitative research, particularly medical and bioethical, but also in physics and especially in chemistry. For example, ‘first: do no harm’ arises from Hippocrates’ writings and has come to be understood as basic to the medical profession, although it is not in their Hippocratic oath. It is, however, a very basic element of any consideration of ethics. At the same time, it does not really answer questions about many aspects of research ethics, where the problems that confront researchers are often very complex. Indeed, much significant research (such as human gene research, or splitting the atom) would not go forward if this principal were slavishly followed.

It is when we come to quantitative research methodologies, particularly those involved in the arts, writing and the social sciences and those that are narrative in style, that the
question of ethical practices arises in another way. Smythe and Murray (2000:311) state that ‘traditional, regulative principles of research ethics offer insufficient guidance for research in the narrative study of lives.’ In doing so they reiterate the bankruptcy of ‘…epistemology that conceives of research participants as data sources…’ based on ‘…positivist and logical empiricist canons of science.’

As psychologists looking at the personal narrative and/as research, Smythe and Murray aver that traditional models, including professional codes, of ethics relating to human participants are neither applicable nor relevant. Their discussion of free and informed consent indicate that this goes beyond signed agreements: indeed, it may not necessarily include them. What they indicate as non-negotiable is that all parties have understood, and continue to understand throughout the research project, that ‘free and informed consent means that individuals voluntarily consent to participate in research and are not induced to do so using any form if undue influence or coercion. Consent is something freely given by the research participants and may be freely withdrawn at any time. The freedom of consent is always considered to be compromised when the researcher is in a position of power and authority …even when there is no coercion to participate.’ (pp312-13.)

Whilst the right to privacy is basic, Smythe and Murray consider that there are conditions under which this does not apply. One is if the actions of researchers are illegal, the other is ‘…when identifiable personal information about research participants is available publicly.’ (pp313) This is important to some writers of biography, autobiography and narrative non-fiction.

The influence of postmodernism since the mid 20th century has resulted in something of a crossover between traditional and newer research methodologies even in medicine. In discussing the importance of the ‘narrative dimensions of sickness and medicine’, for example, Rita Charon (2001:83) states that such ‘narrative research methodologies have been advanced-and accepted with gratitude-for examining and understanding medical reasoning, clinical relationships, empathy, and medical ethics.’ Describing how such personal medical narratives enriched herself as a physician, she also looks at the impact such narratives have upon the patients she is describing. In doing so, she faces the question of ethical narratives: ‘particular ethical duties might be incurred by each genre of narrative medical writing. Clearly, the writer of fiction should not be held to the same standards of disclosure and requirements for informed consent as writers who detail clinical situations of “real” patients. Texts that are primarily autobiographical might require different approaches to disclosure than texts that are primarily descriptions of patients.’ (2001:85)

Midgely asserts that ‘virtually all our thought integrates material taken from both the objective and the subjective angles.’ (2004:24) Writing might ask us all to do something more, even from the ethics angle. Especially from the ethics narratives that dominate ethics committees’ decision-making. It might ask us to consider thought as an act of creation and to look at the roles of imagination, inspiration, and intuition. It might ask such sophisticated responses as acknowledging internal and external perceptions as well as stepping outside traditional barriers and challenging concepts stored in memory and culturally dominant paradigms. It might call upon the ability to recognise there is a reciprocal dynamic response between concept and perception so that preconceptions can be lifted to reveal a plurality of ideas that construct and reconstruct the world of the writer and the reader in words. It might ask in what ways can we see the ethical dimensions of a PhD artefact that is an affirmation of the inner lives of the writer and the subjects? It might ask in what ways can we encompass
the ethical dimensions of narratorial decisions that build and also challenge registers of perception? It might ask of us how do we see creative/narrative non-fiction as compelling research that contains abstractions, interpretations, creative ideas and psychological issues that are clearly subjectively based?

Thus, as addressing the question of ‘who owns the story’ is a very significant part of writing in many narrative non fiction and autobiographical situations, the most even response to the ethics questions may be, as with all research questions, looking at the actual outcomes of research within their own genres.

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