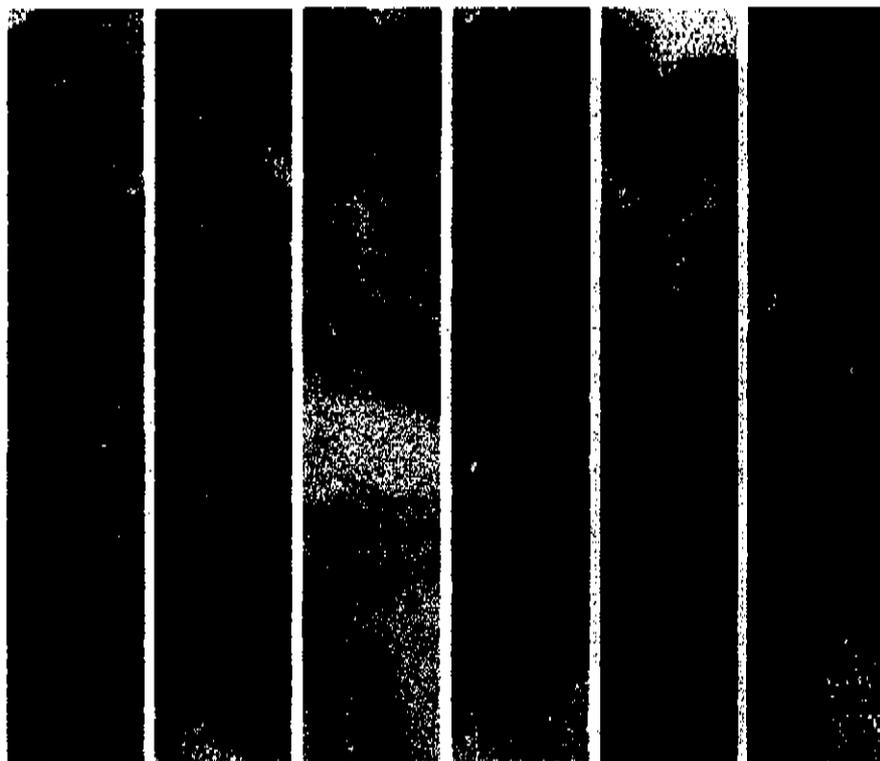


# Life-History Research: An Emancipatory Approach to Institutional Evaluations

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# Life-History Research: An Emancipatory Approach to Institutional Evaluations

Rubby Dhunpath

## Abstract

During the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, evaluation research has been characterised by an expansive proliferation of alternative paradigms, each claiming its space as a legitimate research genre. My own quest to create a space for an emancipatory approach to institutional evaluations has been simultaneously a rewarding and unsettling experience. In this paper, I reflect on my incursion into the field of institutional biographies, focusing on how I came to terms with what Noel Gough (2001) describes as *blindspots* and *blankspots*. To this end, I explore, in a mode of critical self-reflexivity, some of my learning and insights, while putting up for scrutiny, some of my unresolved methodological dilemmas. I explore, by referring to contemporary literature in the field, the epistemological underpinnings framing the narrative method, attempting to understand how it resonates with illuminative and empowerment evaluation. Alluding to vignettes derived from my work within a doctoral fellowship, which has provided a space from which to disrupt my own essentialist notions of qualitative research, I bring into the spotlight constructs such as validity and reliability, emotionality and neutrality and the influence of competing voices in research production. I also problematise and complicate the assumptions that frame this genre with a view to highlighting the potential hazards of the narrative method becoming a "victory narrative within the redemptive culture of the social sciences".

## Preamble

Non-Government Organizations) NGO's have been a familiar part of the development landscape in South Africa (SA). They were particularly visible in the apartheid years, receiving an abundance of international donor funds to seek democratic alternatives to the apartheid state. After the 1994 elections, which launched the democratic state, many foreign donors took one of two routes. They decided either that with apartheid dismantled, all was well and they focused on other global trouble spots, or they regarded the fragile new government of National Unity as a legitimate government they could work with and redirected their funding to the state, resulting in direct funding to NGO's plummeting. As a result many NGO's have found it difficult, if not impossible to survive the substantially reduced funding quotas. Consequently, NGO's have gone one of three routes. Some have embraced corporate cultures becoming private companies; some have reinvented themselves to mimic corporate identities, but continue to function as NGO's offering contextually relevant programmes. Many have failed to do either of the above, and have simply submitted to the forces of attrition dying untimely deaths. Among the fatalities are a large number of language and literacy NGO's that have been ravaged by the funding crisis.

During the mid-eighties, The English Language Educational Trust (ELET) an NGO for teacher professional development was conceived by the multinational corporate, Anglovaal, to respond to the dire need for professional development in language teaching, an imperative ignored or systematically neglected by the apartheid

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government. As part of its social responsibility programme, Anglovaal acknowledged that the language question would be crucial for skills development in a new democratic order and responded by directing substantial levels of funding towards ELET for teacher professional development in language teaching. I was a graduate of its teacher development programme, and like many other graduates of ELET, I benefited significantly from the experience. However, during the post-apartheid period, the season of corporate rationalisation and strategic mergers saw many multinational corporate enterprises unbundling and rationalising their operations in the name of fiscal austerity. Anglovaal, ELET's core funder was not insulated from this wave of economic rationalism, which resulted in it looking inwards, rather than continuing funding its social conscious projects. The once generous funding it directed towards ELET began to diminish rapidly. For the first time ELET, like hundreds of other NGOs, was faced with the prospect of collapse and closure.

Interestingly, however, at a time when other Language development NGO's submitted to fiscal ravages, ELET has actually grown and expanded its sphere of influence in the development arena, redefining and reconstructing language development by instituting innovative literacy programmes. This has prompted me to ask why, and how this was possible. To answer this question, I would need to engage in an evaluation of ELET to document its historical trajectory, investigating its precise role as a language development agency, evaluating its relative success in the development arena, and examining the influences that have shaped its emerging identity in a context of democratic transition. I began the task by engaging in a documentary analysis of past records, evaluation reports, and by conducting interviews with staff members. I soon realised that conventional evaluation studies based on empiricist approaches would be inadequate in excavating institutional identity. It also became apparent from the analysis of evaluation reports that evaluation studies in South Africa focus inadequately on the ethnographic and anthropological domains, serving instead, a bureaucratic function for funders and donors, based on self-reports by programme participants. (Jansen, 1996:3) argues that one way of resolving the dilemma of unreliable evaluation reports is to set a new standard for evaluation reports e.g., "producing the richly contextualised narratives which bring to light powerful findings on impact beyond statistical summaries" (ibid.:7).

I contemplated Jansen's challenge and pondered on the notion of a post-modern evaluation, and asked the question: "So what would a post-modern evaluation research study of institutional identity look like?" As a postgraduate student, I had done some work in the field of life-history research, and was aware of the potential of how stories enable researchers to gaze in fresh astonishment upon a part of their world they thought they had already seen and understood. And so began my journey, documenting the institutional memory of ELET, using the life-history approach, attempting to find answers to the critical question: **What influences shape the identity of a Language Oriented NGO in the context of a society in democratic transition?**

This paper proposes three outcomes: first, I want to provide a rationale for proposing an alternative Emancipatory Approach to Evaluation Studies; secondly, the paper focuses on how life-history research may be coupled with a transformatory agenda in the field of "empowerment evaluation", or "illuminative evaluation" which expands and enriches the dominant empiricist and technical approaches to evaluation studies; thirdly, I engage briefly in a critical appraisal of the approach, highlighting

some of its possible blankspots and blindspots.

### **Towards a Praxis of the Present**

Firstly, my quest for an alternative emancipatory approach to evaluation studies derives from an acknowledgement that there is no neutral research in an unjust world (Lather, 1991). I am therefore influenced by Lather's "praxis of the present", which she suggests, draws on feminist research, neo-Marxist critical ethnography and Freirean empowering or participatory research, each of which is premised upon a transformative agenda with respect to social structure and methodological norms. Hence, this post-positivist<sup>1</sup> conception of research and evaluation advocates modes of enquiry which recognise knowledge as "socially constituted, historically embedded, and value based" (Lather, 1991). In this approach, praxis-oriented researchers seek emancipatory knowledge rather than the illusory value-free knowledge. Emancipatory knowledge/s "increases awareness of the contradictions distorted or hidden by everyday understandings, and in doing so it directs attention to the possibilities for social transformation inherent in the present configuration of social processes" (Lather, 1991: 52). "For researchers with emancipatory aspirations, doing empirical work offers a powerful opportunity for praxis to the extent that it enables people to change by encouraging self reflection and a deeper understanding of their particular situations" (ibid: 56).

### **So, What Would a Postmodern<sup>2</sup> Evaluation Look Like?**

Firstly, I would be reluctant to venture into any definitive categorisations, definitions or typologies in an attempt to launch a new "rubric prototype" (Pillow, 2000). However, for the sake of intelligibility, I will make a few generic observations about what a postmodern evaluation of institutional identity could look like. As already mentioned, the postmodern evaluator would resist the temptation to smugly dismiss modernist approaches as passé, but attempt to understand how it coexists alongside modernity. In this sense, it is multi-paradigmatic: while those who work within the positivist paradigm see their contribution as adhering to established canons, a post modern evaluator would attempt to construct new designs based on alternative tenets and epistemological commitments, moving research in different and contradictory directions in the hope that more illuminating ways of knowing will emerge (Lather, 1991:69). It frees the researcher from what Blumenthal (1999:5) calls the "tyranny of methodolatry" which hinders new discoveries, preventing us from raising questions never asked before and from being illuminated by ideas that do not fit into pre established boxes (ibid: 5). It recognises ambivalence, not as a contradiction, but a signal of the coexistence of multiple identities, some emergent and prioritised, some diminished in importance (ibid:8). It requires that the evaluator resist the tendency to impose her own constructions of reality on the researched in favour of a reciprocal dialogue.

In challenging her own positionality and its influence on the research process,

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<sup>1</sup> Lather's notion of postpositivism embraces the whole range of philosophical and methodological movements since positivism, including poststructuralism and postmodernism.

<sup>2</sup> Some authors hyphenate 'post-modern' whereas others do not. Whether or not to hyphenate 'post' words is largely a matter of personal taste, but Pauline Rosenau (1992, in Gough 2001) suggests that a hyphen and/or its absence signals a position: "The absence of the hyphen has come to imply a certain sympathy with post-modernism [sic] and a recognition of its legitimacy, whereas the hyphen indicates a critical posture"—although she also notes that exceptions to this apparent convention can be found with increasing frequency.

Lather (1991:83) asks the following questions, which I find particularly useful as a self-interrogative reality check:

- Did I encourage ambivalence, ambiguity and multiplicity, or did I impose order and structure? What elements of legislation and prescription underlie my efforts? How have I policed the boundaries of what can be imagined?
- What is most densely invested? What has been muted, repressed, unheard? How has what I have done shaped, subverted, complicated? Have I confronted my own evasions and raised doubts about any illusions of closure?
- Did I create a text that was multiple without being pluralistic, double without being paralysed? Have I questioned the textual staging of knowledge in a way that keeps my own authority from being reified?
- Did I focus on the limits of my own conceptualisations?
- Who are my "others"? What binaries structure my arguments? What hierarchies are at play? Have I imagined "that would contain only subjects: no more speculators, only actors, all similarly compromised, with no possible exceptions"?
- Did I make resistant discourses and subject positions more widely available? Did my work multiply political spaces and prevent concentration power in any one point? Perhaps most importantly, did it go beyond critique to help in producing pluralized spaces for the emergence of subjected knowledges and for the organisation of knowledges?

In "Getting Smart", Lather focuses on three interwoven issues: the need for reciprocity, the stance of dialectical theory building versus theoretical imposition, and the question of validity in praxis oriented research. For Lather, reciprocity implies give and take, a mutual negotiation of meaning and power. It has long been recognised as a valuable aspect of fieldwork, in creating the conditions that yield rich data because the researcher moves from the status of stranger to friend and thus is able to gather personal knowledge from subjects more easily (Lather, 1991: 57). The goal of emancipatory research is to encourage self-reflection and deeper understanding on the part of the researched at least as much as it is to generate empirically grounded theoretical knowledge. To achieve this, interviews are conducted in an interactive, dialogic manner that requires self-disclosure on the part of researcher to encourage reciprocity.

#### **Can Life-history research be coupled with a transformatory agenda in the field of Evaluation studies?**

To date, the practice of life-history research has largely confined itself to exploring individual identity as window to other epistemological and ontological concerns. While its popularity in ethnographic studies, as a tool for documenting the lives of marginals and subalterns, as well as communities and societies is on the increase, I have not found any significant use of this approach in the study of institutions and organisations. What if we were to expand the notion of individual life-histories to include institutional biographies? I attempt to explore this question with the acute awareness that there is little merit in substituting one brand of methodological triumphalism with another. "Reconstructing academic networks to accumulate narratives (instead of, say, counting the distribution of variables) may merely replace one academic elite with another" (Nespor & Barber, 1995, in Cary, 1999). In exploring the implications of postmodernism for our practices in the world, Lather (1991: 49) cautions us that in "disassembling the master narratives", especially those of

Marx and Freud, we do not replace them by Foucault, Derrida, Baudrillard, Lacan, etc., as new master narratives.

Therefore, my attempt at opening the window of life-history research as a window to institutional evaluation proceeds from the standpoint that displacing conventional approaches of evaluation with revolutionary methods is both naïve and counterproductive. Instead, I argue that in order to enjoy the full benefit of years of accumulated experience and expertise offered by positivist approaches, we need to embrace and utilise it in combination with other strategies for producing realist evaluations of institutions. Embracing the life-history approach to institutional evaluation opens up spaces for multiple constructions of knowledges including subjugated disqualified knowledges<sup>3</sup>, necessitates devising ways to both value that knowledge and be attentive to the individuals who tell the stories.

### **Genealogy and the Excavation of Identity**

The crucial question that the postmodern evaluator would ask is: how do we discard the "spurious technological simplification of reality" (Parlett & Hamilton (1976:101), which exclusively empiricist approaches generate, and how do we excavate instead, the complexity of social reality in a deeply illuminating way? This challenge reflects one of the two dominant rival schools of thought in the field of evaluation. The first is the classical 'agricultural-botany' approach derived from experimental and mental testing traditions in psychology. The other competing tradition, located in the discipline of social anthropology seeks **illuminative evaluation**, with a fundamentally different research style from that of mainstream educational research, to describe, interpret and make sense of the learning milieu being evaluated.

The most common form of evaluation is the agricultural-botany evaluation, which assesses the effectiveness of an innovation by examining whether or not it has reached required standards on pre-specified criteria. For example, students, like plants, are given pre-tests (the seedlings are weighed or measured) and then submitted to different experiences (treatment conditions). After a period of time their attainment (growth or yield) is measured to indicate the relative efficiency of the methods (fertilizers) used. Parlett and Hamilton suggest that studies of this kind are designed to yield data of one particular type, i.e. objective numerical data that permit statistical analyses. Isolated variables such as IQ, social class, test scores, personality profiles and attitude ratings are codified and processed to indicate the efficiency of curricula, media or methods. This type of controlled experimental design certainly does have a

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<sup>3</sup> Foucault describes subjugated knowledges as "...those blocs of historical knowledge which were present but disguised within the body of functionalist and systematising theory and which criticism - which obviously draws upon scholarship - has been able to reveal" (Foucault, 1980, p. 82). Foucault (1980) describes two types of subjugated knowledge erudite and disqualified. Subjugated erudite knowledges are expert or qualified knowledges that have been buried in the formulation of dominating systems of knowledge. By contrast, subjugated disqualified knowledges are subjugated knowledges that are bereft of 'expertise' and 'qualification' "...a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naive knowledges located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity..." (Foucault, 1980, p. 82). Thus subjugated disqualified knowledges are 'disqualified' precisely because they are deemed not to meet the criteria for *recognised knowledge* because they are *inadequate to their task*. Foucault proposes that these subjugated disqualified knowledges are valuable, and that this value is very much related to the degree to which these subjugated disqualified knowledges are opposed:

useful application, particularly in formative evaluations, but can hardly be appropriate in evaluating human agency programmes and excavating institutional identity. My dissatisfaction with this approach stems from its fragmentary nature, and its tendency to ascribe simplistic cause and effect explanations for complex social phenomena. In effect, it is based on the injunction: "Hold all else constant, manipulate one variable at a time and measure the results" (ibid.: 14). Such approaches do not address the total life of the researched but attempt to use the research as a method of social validation rather than an attempt to seek the truth, or approximations of the truth

### **Can the Genealogical approach be illuminating**

Illuminative evaluation research purposes a substantive understanding of the 'learning milieu' as crucial in understanding institutional and individual behaviour. Using the Genealogical method of enquiry, IE seeks to write the "history of the present" (see Meadmore et.al, 2000:463-476). In the Foucauldian sense, Genealogy is "the union of erudite knowledges and local memories which allows us to establish a historical knowledge of struggles and to make use of this knowledge tactically today" (Foucault in Gordon, 1980:83 cited in Meadmore, 2000). Genealogy seeks to inquire into processes, procedures and techniques through which truth, knowledge, and belief are produced. The present rather than the past becomes the object of enquiry. "Historical data are used to unsettle and destabilise the self-evidence of the conceptual bedrock of present understandings and analyses"(ibid). The genealogist does not work within fixed essences, underlying laws or metaphysical finalities - the search is for discontinuities where others found continuous finalities. It seeks for small details, minor shifts and situations within which events take place. I find the genealogical approach to institutional evaluation a compelling one because it can contemplate social change by paying attention to gradual and continuous processes that operate within power and authority differentials. It charts the emergence and growth of social institutions as well as the social-scientific techniques and disciplines that reinforce and institutionalise specific social practices (Hoy, 1987). When genealogy looks to beginnings, it looks for "accidents, chance, passion, petty malice, surprises, feverish agitation, unsteady victories, and power" (Davidson, 1987). An important facet of institutional identity that Foucault examines is the formation of the *canonical* - how is the status of canon attributed?

Paramount in an evaluation study is the experience of change. Herzog, (1959, in Suchman, 1972:54), suggests that the study of change must consider the following four questions: (1) what kind of change is desired? (2) by what means is change to be brought about? (3) what is the evidence that the changes observed are due to the means employed and not by extraneous factors? (4) what is the meaning of the changes found? Hence, the exercise of evaluation, inevitably, involves some degree of judgement. Many evaluation specialists choose not to judge, but to generalise educational practices. Scriven (in Wiess, 1972) suggests that there can be no evaluation until judgement is passed, and that the evaluator is best qualified to pass judgement. Whether or not evaluators are sufficiently qualified to pass judgement is debatable. However, it is clear, that to hazard any form of judgement with mono-dimensional lenses is neither wise nor productive. Unless the researcher can provide thick descriptions of the intimate and less obvious features of the programme or institution, she is guilty of telling only a part of the story. For this reason, the life-history approach can be used to tell the "whole story" as authentically and accurately as is possible.

The genealogical approach has, as its focus, the rich, deep and thick illumination of

milieu within which the evaluation is conducted through eclectic methods. The researcher is preoccupied with the day-to-day realities of the site she is studying. In this sense she is similar to social anthropologists or to natural historians. Like them, she makes no attempt to manipulate, control or eliminate situational variables, but takes as given, the complex scene she encounters. Her chief task is to unravel it; isolate its significant features; delineate cycles of cause and effect; and comprehend relationship between beliefs and practices and between organisational patterns and the responses of individuals (ibid. 1976:92-93). Since the focus is on the milieu, much emphasis is placed on semi-structured and open-ended, in-depth interviews with participants.

Typically, the evaluator begins with the excavation of documentary sources: committee minutes; evaluation reports; funding proposals; curriculum plans and consultant's reports; tape recordings of meetings, examples of students work, etc. Assembling this information can provide a useful historical perspective of the how the various participants experienced the institution or programme. This data may also signal areas of further inquiry and provide the basis of the interview schedules for the subsequent biographical and autobiographical constructions. Illuminative evaluation thus concentrates on the information gathering rather than the decision-making component of evaluation. The task is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex realities that surround an institution and its programmes. In short, it seeks to 'illuminate'. In the unfolding report "the evaluator aims to sharpen discussion, disentangle complexities, isolate the significant from the trivial, and raise the level of sophistication of the debate" (Parlett & Hamilton, 1976:92-99). A powerful means of inspiring this illuminative experience is the telling of one's story.

### **Illumination for Emancipation**

While the essence of emancipatory evaluation research is the desire to consciously channel respondents towards gaining self-understanding and, ultimately, self-determination through research participation, an emancipatory intent is no guarantee of an emancipatory outcome. Too often, researchers who conduct empirical research in the name of emancipatory politics fail to connect their doing of research with their political commitments. We ask the question then: of what pragmatic value is the emergent evaluation exercise if it does not help the participants to help themselves? Self-determination is therefore the central ingredient and forms the theoretical foundation of what Fetterman (1999: 12) defines as Empowerment Evaluation (EE). One of the most important guiding principles of EE is the pursuit of truth and honesty – not the naïve concept of one absolute truth, but a sincere attempt to understand an event in the context of multiple worldviews. The aim is to understand what is going on from the participants' own perspective as accurately and honestly as possible, to document this in a credible and legitimate way and make this accessible to participants as a stimulus for self-appraisal. Herein lies the act of empowerment. Empowerment evaluation is a form of participatory self-evaluation, which aims to create the conditions for members of an institution to critically reflect on their praxis, with a view to affirming good practice and instituting mechanisms for change where necessary. The illuminating experience at the individual level often sets the stage for liberation at the institutional level. Fetterman (1999:16) suggests that EE can "unleash powerful forces for self-determination". The illuminative experience enables participants to find new opportunities, see existing resources in a new light and redefine their identities and future roles (ibid: 16). Employing both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, EE can be applied to individuals, organisations and

communities, although the focus is usually on programmes. EE is necessarily a collaborative group activity, not an individual pursuit. Fetterman suggests that "an evaluator does not and cannot empower anyone; people empower themselves, often with assistance or coaching" (ibid: 9). While as researcher I do not purport to have the capacity to empower anyone or any institution, it is my desired intention to understand, through the eyes of its participants, the complex realities that shape the lives of the participants, and consequently, the institution.

EE relies extensively on written narratives as a mechanism to focus holistically on an institution or programme. These narratives gradually become internalised as a part of the planning and management of a programme. Institutionalising EE in this way makes it more likely to be sustainable rather than sporadic (ibid: 11) Furthermore, the power of narratives in human lives, in educational practice, and in evaluation research has increasingly become the focus of attention of several writers. Carol Witherell and Nel Noddings (1991: 280), who advocate the use of life histories as a pedagogic tool suggest:

Telling our stories can be cathartic and liberating. But it is more than that: stories are powerful research tools. They provide us with a picture of real people in real situations, struggling with real problems. They banish the indifference often generated by samples, treatments and faceless subjects. They invite us to speculate on what might be changed and with what effect. And, of course, they remind us of our persistent fallibility. Most important, they invite us to remember that we are in the business of teaching, learning and researching to improve the human condition.

#### **Problems and possibilities of illuminative evaluation**

While this approach to evaluation may appear to be a significant departure from the dominant tradition, it prompts a number of crucial questions. Foremost would be the subjective nature of the approach. Parlett & Hamilton (1976:90-99) ask for example: Can personal interpretation be scientific? Is not collection and reporting of the data entirely at the discretion of the researchers themselves? They suggest that behind such questions lie a basic but erroneous assumption: that there are forms of research that are immune to prejudice, experimenter bias and human error. Clearly, this is not so, and we know that any research study requires skilled human judgements and is thus vulnerable. Nevertheless, the extensive use of open - ended techniques, and the focus on qualitative data still raises the possibility of gross partiality of the researcher. Parlett & Hamilton (1976:90-99) recommend a number of precautionary strategies: during the investigation, different techniques can be used to cross check the most important findings; open-ended material can be coded and checked by outside researchers; consultants to the evaluation can be charged with preliminary interpretations and playing devil's advocate; members of the research team can be commissioned to develop their own interpretations. At the report stage, critical processes should be documented; theoretical principles and methodological ground rules can be discussed and made explicit; criteria for selecting or rejecting areas can be articulated; and evidence should be presented in a form that enables others to evaluate its quality. Despite these assurances, the subjective element remains an undeniable reality and should serve to heighten the researchers awareness of the fragility of the exercise and the need for scrupulous rigour and unwavering integrity of the process.

#### **Disentangling the Methodological Conundrum**

As a way towards disentangling the methodological conundrum and exploiting the potential of narrative research as a methodological tool, I want to trouble and

complicate certain methodological constructs, which have become the battering rams of researchers, with a view to exposing the contradictions and seeking principled alternatives. In the words of Lather (2001), Let the rhizomes<sup>4</sup> of methodological possibility bloom a thousand flowers as we "do and trouble" research simultaneously. In grappling with issues of integrity, validity, and emancipatory politics, I am reminded of my previous biographical research (A Tapestry of teacher development through the eyes of Cynthia Mpati)<sup>5</sup>, which alerted me to a myriad of potential methodological hazards, facing a novice life historian. First was the danger of misinterpreting data, making too much of ambiguous data, and often ending up with inaccurate, unreliable or biased interpretations. As Baronne (2001:3) asks: "are the informants whose 'selves' are presented and examined in a narrative work any more or less truthful (and therefore 'factual') than the researcher/biographer?" I think not. Grumet (1988) accurately describes stories as "masks through which we can be seen," with every telling of a story a "potential prevarication." In the telling, personal interests are omnipresent. Moreover, human beings are only able to "construe their lives within the confines of linguistic and social conventions", conventions that are designed to evoke particular responses in an audience. It is impossible, in the figurative sense at least, to strip off the masks of individuals, or prevent the (re)crafting and (re)shaping of their identities. The resulting rhetorical figures would still vary in accordance with those "specific situations within fields of power, history, and culture" (Kondo, 1990, in Baronne, 2001). Moreover, in autobiography, multiple versions of the "self" are simultaneously in play. There is, for example,

the self then, the self now recalling then, the self now interpreting the self then from the present self's perspective, the self now thinking of possible future selves, a possible future self looking back to now to the present self seeing it as in the past. (Cortazzi, 1993, p. 13, in Baronne, 2001)

As narrative researchers we need to ask: Are we conscious of the impact of our own narrative persuasion on the representational process? For instance, my narrative influence is largely a Euro centric one, privileging the epic, the romanesque and the picaresque canons<sup>6</sup> of narrative. There is in my narrative positioning, an almost imperceptible slide towards the monomyth, a narrative that places the character as central to a heroic trajectory. Pamphilon (1999:5) suggests that this archetype of narrative form rarely accords with female experience that, "rather than being unidirectional, exhibits story lines that are multiple, recursive and intermingled with self and other". As a woman positions herself (often in binaries) as a particular form of wife, mother or woman, she also chooses what not to be. How do I as researcher negotiate the silences, the fact of selective memory and memory loss, of subject positionality?

What we need to confront is the issue of voice. How do persons voice their narratives or narrate their voices (Antoinette, 2000)? One of the claims made by some

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<sup>4</sup> Deluze & Guattari (1978) use the notion of rhizome to disrupt the 'weariest kind of thought' that roots itself in foundations as trees do. A rhizome is not an arborescent as trees; rather it is like crabgrass that multiplies and spreads and can never be contained.

<sup>5</sup> See Dhunpath, R (1999) "A Tapestry of teacher development in KZN through the eyes of Cynthia Mpati", which is a biographic study of one of the country's eminent teacher educators.

<sup>6</sup> The epic model is one of conformity that identifies with the core values of the culture, the Romanesque constructs a life where change has been possible through notions of individual challenge, and the picaresque model challenges the hegemonic values of that culture. (see Pamphilon, 1999)

respect and integrity; that sometimes it is necessary to stop listening for what we could extract from the narrative and to listen to stories that do not fit neatly into our frame of reference. We know now that the narratives of our participants run alongside our own narratives, and that their memories vicariously become our own memories. We suspect that some memories are more meaningful when they are shared with some audiences and not others, or best narrated in the absence of an interviewer.

As a counterpoint, we might ask: what of the silences? Can we know with any degree of certainty whether silencing is a conscious or an unconscious act, an act of self-censorship or a strategic selection of what may be shared and made public? Does the researchers attempt at probing these silences perhaps reflect the kind of morbid emotional curiosity that separates the researcher from the soap-opera writer. Emotional responses and "emotional data" (Lather, 1997) are regarded as a legitimate means of social enquiry. We are warned that in handling emotional data, we must resist becoming "emotional exhibitionists" (Ellis & Flaherty, 1992:3, in Pamphilon, 1999). However, is the decision to avoid emotional exhibitionism a political act, borne out of the desire to preserve objective neutrality as though there is something profoundly sacred in either objectivity or neutrality. Perhaps in our attempts at objective neutrality, we are trying to induce illusory vestiges of positivism to compensate for our own sense of insecurity with the methodology.

### **Concluding comments**

This paper has argued for a contextually sensitive approach to theory-based evaluation into institutional identity and organisational behaviour. In contemplating the possibility of a postmodern evaluation, I have proposed illuminative and empowerment evaluation to probe the recesses of folded memories not always accessible to empiricist approaches. However, this paper cautions against an evangelical defence of qualitative research by entrenching the spurious binaries between the qualitative and empiricist paradigm. While Life-history research can be coupled with a transformatory agenda in the field of Evaluation studies, we need to be acutely mindful of a myriad of methodological hazards facing a novice life historian, such as issues of subject and researcher positionalities and the fragility of autobiographical memory. Our best attempts at problematising our blind spots does not absolve us as researchers from culpability, neither does it mean that we reject the autobiographical approach because we cannot de-problematise and neutralise it. These "joys and perils of narrative research" (Dhunpath, 1998), do not detract from the importance of stories whether or not they live up to the arbitrary coveted narrative standards of the dominant Western canons. It inspires us to work within and against the limits and possibilities of the approach, with an obligation to recognise these limits and expand their boundaries. With the wisdom of hindsight, and an evolving antiessentialist approach to life-history research, I embark on a new troubling journey, with the hope of clearing up more of my blind spots.

I am inspired by temerity of Le Guin, (1985, p. 317, in Bloom, 1996) who declares:

The story is not all mine nor told by me alone. Indeed, I am not sure whose story it is; you can judge better. But it is all one, and if at moments the facts seem to alter with an altered voice, why then you can choose the fact you like best; yet none of them is false, and it is all one story

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