NEGOTIATING THE LIFE NARRATIVE

A Dialogue with an African American Social Worker

Rosario Ceballo
University of Michigan

This article explores two methodological issues that arise when researchers involve the women they study in the construction of life narratives. These issues are examined in the context of an interview-derived, life-narrative study of an African American social worker. First, the tension between presenting a neatly unified identity in a written text and acknowledging the contradictions within any person's life story are discussed from both the researcher's and participant's vantage point. The second issue addresses the dilemma that arises when the researcher and the research participant disagree about the meanings and interpretations garnered from the participant's life story. I contend that it is precisely at this moment that the research process has the potential to become a dialogue between theorists and that scholars can incorporate a woman's own theorizing about her life in the research. In concluding, several methodological suggestions are offered as broad guidelines for researchers planning a life-narrative study.

Feminist psychologists have underscored the importance of involving the women they study as active participants in the research process (Belle, 1994; Cook & Fonow, 1990; Franz, 1994; Harding, 1987; Lykes, 1994; Nagata, 1994; Stewart, 1994). As simple as that may sound, it is a difficult and often complicated goal to achieve in practice, even when writing life narratives. This article examines two

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Address correspondence and reprint requests to: Rosario Ceballo, Department of Psychology, University of Michigan, 525 East University, Ann Arbor, MI 48109. E-mail: rosarioc@umich.edu.
methodological challenges that confront feminist researchers seeking to involve their “subjects” in the construction of life narratives. First, I discuss how the duality and contradictions of a person’s life story may be overlooked in the quest to present a coherently unified identity and an integrated scholarly product. Second, I explore the tension between scholarly analysis and women’s own interpretations of their lived experiences. I explore these issues by focusing on the research process I underwent in constructing a narrative about an African American social worker named Mary. My global interpretation of Mary’s life differed from Mary’s own memories of her daily life experiences in important ways. In fact, we disagreed about the overall meaning that others could garner from her life story. As we discussed her life and my writing of her life, Mary and I became two theorists engaged in a dialogue about the different meanings of her narrative. Thus, my differences with Mary reveal the methodological importance of listening to and respecting the interviewee’s own theories about her life.

MARY’S LIFE JOURNEY

As background, I will present a brief, chronological sketch of Mary’s life (Ceballo, 1994). My purpose here is to summarize certain key events that occurred in Mary’s life in order to give the reader a sense of who Mary is as a person. I will caution, however, that this summary account of Mary’s life is based on my initial interviews with her and consequently was influenced by what we focused on and gave primacy to during those initial meetings. It is thus only one possible representation of the chronological events in Mary’s life; another researcher who attended to different issues or who did not share my friendship with Mary might choose to highlight different aspects of her life story.

Presently, Mary is a retired, 80-year-old woman living in North Carolina. Throughout her life, Mary has negotiated a series of difficult and emotionally traumatic life events. She was born in the Jim Crow South in 1915 and was only 3 years old when her mother died of tuberculosis. Mary described her childhood as a lonely period. She was the only female child in her nuclear family, which consisted of her father and five older brothers, in addition to herself. Mary remembered her father as a silent and undemonstrative man who somewhat ineptly single parented a household of children. When Mary was 10, her father moved the family from Durham, NC, to Washington, DC, where they lived in a series of boardinghouses. Mary explained, “We never established a home or anything. We had a room in somebody’s house. That was the way we grew up.” Although her father worked as an attorney, Mary’s family always lived with financial hardship and economic uncertainty. Her father’s career never flourished, in part because he did not enjoy or take part in the social obligations that accompany successful business practices. As a child, Mary confronted many incidents of racism and classism in school. She was embarrassed by her appearance and the clothes she had for school and described herself as a “little ragged kid who never had any decent anything.” Most of Mary’s teachers, who were all African American, visibly favored the wealthy, better dressed, lighter skinned African American children in their classes.
Health problems presented another area of difficulty in Mary’s life. Mary contracted rheumatic fever while in high school and a complication of the illness caused a reactive arthritis to develop in her right hip. Although Mary’s hip was treated surgically, she has slightly dragged one foot when walking ever since that time. During this period, Mary was hospitalized several times and missed many days of school. Despite the many hospitalizations, she was able to graduate with the rest of her high school class in 1934.

Mary talked about the 4 years after high school as the worst period of her life. Her oldest brother had become a widower, and Mary spent those years caring for his house and children. She did all of the housework and provided all of the child care. Those years greatly contributed to Mary’s determination to establish her independence and self-sufficiency. At age 23, she enrolled herself at Howard University. She later received a master’s degree from Smith College’s School for Social Work and established a successful career in the field of social work. Mary’s professional career flourished in Milwaukee and later in Philadelphia, where she served as the assistant director of a family-service agency.

Socially, Mary’s romantic interests developed slowly, and she dated sporadically after high school. In 1943, during her senior year in college, Mary had an illegal abortion and described it as an emotionally dreadful experience. As a young adult, she had an intimate relationship with a man, off and on, for 20 years. She ended the relationship when she realized that there was little intimacy and communication between them. Mary has never been a wife or a mother, and although she does not regret her life decisions, she acknowledged the complicated nature of her feelings about them. She has mourned the absence of a partnership and also declared that “the new feminism has absolved me from much anxiety about the single state.”

I first interviewed Mary in 1992 when we talked over a span of 3 days in the living room of her home. She allowed me to tape-record most of our conversations and has commented on everything I have written about her life, including this article. These initial interviews provided the basis for writing an interview-derived life narrative (Ceballo, 1994). I asked for the opportunity to do a second set of interviews with Mary in May of 1995. At that time, I simply hoped to gain more information about different periods in her life, to fill in some gaps. However, it is the disjuncture and points of incongruency between my theorizing after the initial interviews and our dialogue 3 years later that has led me to think about the methodological issues explored in this article.

**Duality and Contradictions in a Life Story**

As the research process unfolds, there is enormous pressure to uncover a unified and integrated narrative—perhaps because we are socialized to expect chronological and coherently consistent stories that present people in unambiguous terms. On finishing the first set of interviews with Mary, I did just that and wrote my interpretations and conclusions about her life into a cohesive narrative. Mary reviewed and commented on my writing, and we were both satisfied with the final product. In retrospect, I can see that I was perhaps a little too comfortable with my insights.
and ability to make empathic connections in sewing the pieces of her life story together for public consumption. Suffice it to say that I had not sufficiently heeded the feminist caution to avoid the search for unified and singular identities in studying women’s lives. Stewart (1994) warns that:

The women whose lives we study are unlikely to have more stable or monolithic identities than we do, but the effort to “tell a good story” and to summarize and define a person pushes us to represent them as unified persons and personalities. This effort to organize and structure the different voices and selves must be understood as an effort to control—literally to impose an order or unity on what is in fact multiple and even disorderly. (pp. 29–30)

By allowing for paradoxes in the lives of the women we study, feminist scholars can highlight the underlying strengths often embedded in the midst of women’s positions of marginality or uncover previously hidden vulnerabilities in women’s positions of agency and power.

Moreover, feminist scholars have emphasized the need to explore interconnections among gender, race, social class, and sexual orientation in understanding the identities of women of color and our experiences with oppression. Compelling arguments illustrate that our identities are not merely additive, gender plus race equaling an identity, but much more complicated and fluid in nature (Collins, 1990; Harding, 1987; King, 1988; Spelman, 1988). Certain aspects of our identities, for example, will be more salient in certain contexts, at different developmental time periods, and in varying combinations. Hence, it is only logical that the different parts of our identities will not always peacefully coexist; there will be contradictions and inconsistencies in women’s words and actions. As Harding (1987) concludes, “these fragmented identities are a rich source of feminist insight” (p. 8).

Despite my awareness of such feminist paradigms, I came to grapple with the contradictions in Mary’s stories and the inconsistencies in her character only after a second round of interviewing. When the initial interviews with Mary were done, the quest to reveal a neatly packaged life story was further strengthened by a desire to produce an integrated and cohesive scholarly product. All of this is, moreover, influenced by the interviewee’s own desire to present a coherent self and a logical story. Thus, the interviewer and the interviewee share a desire for coherence. Nevertheless, the presence of duality and paradox in any woman’s life mandates that researcher and interviewee forego the desire to present a unified identity with a logically cohesive academic narrative. Instead, the metaphor of African American women’s quilting should help keep us open to the fluid, ever-changing, and complicated nature of life experiences. As Brown (1989) notes, “the essential lessons of the quilt (are) that people and actions do move in multiple directions at once” (p. 929). The challenge for feminist scholars then is to find methods that will facilitate the representation of dichotomies and contradictions in women’s quilted stories.

In my initial narrative, I focused on Mary’s resiliency and identified her ability to attract, nurture, and use relationships as a major source of strength. After his wife’s death, Mary’s father could not maintain a stable and supportive family unit. This led Mary to rely on surrogate family systems and relationships with people outside her nuclear family for care and nurturance. She developed a relational
coping strategy that is in keeping with the psychological literature on resilient children. Stable relationships with adults can buffer children from a host of adverse and stressful life events (Rutter, 1979; Werner & Smith, 1982).

During her childhood summers, Mary sought and identified positive role models among the extended family she visited. Her maternal aunts were school teachers in their teens and early 20’s who became important role models to her. Later, as a teenager restricted to a hospital room, Mary used a network of relationships with the hospital staff to facilitate her own emotional growth and self-awareness. She believed that the long stretches of time spent in the hospital cured her of her “dependency needs.” She explained:

I knew all of the residents, and everybody in the hospital knew me by then. I got a lot of attention. . . . I think I cured my dependency problem. . . . I mean I had all these needs that hadn’t really been met. All the feelings I had about not being well taken care of, somehow were satisfied during this period.

The story of Mary’s unconventional route to college also illustrated how her life was powerfully shaped by the ties she established with others and how her professional beliefs incorporated this understanding of the primary role relationships may play in people’s lives. Mary told the story:

Let me tell you how I happened to go to school. I came down here (Oxford, NC) that summer, and Beecher [a maternal aunt] always somehow, was kind of special. I was special to her. She said to me, “We should have kept you after your mother died. If we had kept you, you would be finishing college this year.” And it was true. If I’d stayed, I would have gone to college. So I went back to Washington, I told my brother Buster that I wanted to go to school. And he said, “okay,” and he said that, it was way late, “but I’ll help you.” And I went to Howard and applied, and they accepted me, and he paid my tuition all through. He was working at the post office. He sent me through school.

I said, “And that all came about . . .” and Mary finished:

Because of what Beecher said. And you never know. This is one of the things in the helping profession. This is one of the things I’ve learned. You never know the effect you’re going to have on people. You never know. Just a word, or a kindness, or something can mean a lot to a person in life. The whole pattern of my life was set from just this one comment that she made.

In the first interviews, Mary identified her search for close, familial relationships as a salient theme resonating throughout her life story. She concluded that, “Throughout all of this, lack of family, lack of stability, I gravitate to situations where I’m in a family.” Therefore, in view of her search and desire for supportive family connections, “it seems natural in terms of working, you work in a family agency. . . . The first job I had was in a family agency. Basically, my whole professional experience was with families.” Throughout her years of working in Milwaukee, a small group of Black professionals provided Mary with a supportive social network.
In fact, Mary lived with a middle class, Black family for 10 years, and to this day, they remain a surrogate family for her.

Although I believe that Mary’s use of relationships and her ability to develop familial connections with others was an important source of her resilient functioning, the presence of an opposing construct, that of privacy and social isolation, emerged as equally prominent in her life story. During the second set of interviews, I was surprised to learn that Mary rarely spoke to anyone about difficult times in her life. One summer when Mary was visiting an aunt, this aunt told her that Mary had no decent socks and that she should send them immediately. I asked Mary how she coped with such painful experiences, like not having adequate clothes, and she replied, “The most painful part was the shame. (Silence) And what did I do about the shame? I don’t know. Just live with it, I guess. Endure it. (Was there anyone you could talk to about it?) No, because if you exposed the shame, there it was again. I can’t say I denied it. Couldn’t deny it. I don’t know. I just endured it, I guess.” I commented that there seemed to be many painful times when she carried a lot inside, never sharing her thoughts and feelings with anyone. She responded, “Or putting it another way, there was no one to share it with. Or I didn’t want to share it with anyone. Or I thought, well, this is my problem; I got myself into it, I have to figure it out for myself.” Even after her mother died, Mary recalled that there was never anyone to help her with this loss or to talk to about her mother’s death. My discussions with Mary broached personal topics and events in her life that she had never before shared with anyone despite the presence of many warm and caring people in her life. These topics included such things as a negative self-image, a sense of her body as damaged, an abortion, and an incident of sexual abuse as a young girl.

Yet another duality in Mary’s life was that her own silence coexisted with her strong belief in the healing power of therapy and the power of discussing one’s painful and joyous experiences with another, more objective person. When we talked about this, Mary concluded that “maybe this is the reason that I went into it (social work) in the first place. . . . I knew unconsciously that I never had anybody to talk to and it’s important, so I want to be a person that people could talk to. And I could help myself.” I believe that Mary’s intelligence, professional training, and intuitive psychological mindedness allowed her to gain insights and understanding about herself and her life as they related to earlier relationships and childhood experiences.

With retrospective reflection, further contradictory themes in Mary’s narrative emerged. There was tension between her descriptions of a neglected, lonely childhood and the enormous gratitude she feels toward her father. Mary described herself as a sad and lonely child who was often left at home by herself. She has painful memories of not being adequately dressed or prepared for school, and she believes that is why her father did not make his children go to church. “The reason he didn’t is because he didn’t see to it that we had decent clothes. And in those days, you had to dress up to go to church. He knew that we didn’t have decent clothes, so he didn’t insist (that we go), but he took himself,” Mary explained. A particularly difficult memory of her father’s neglect centered around Mary’s experiences in the first grade. Mary’s father failed to intervene or even inquire when her teacher decided that Mary would have to repeat the first grade. Mary recalled that her father “didn’t do anything about it, and I held it against him, all
of his life! And all of my life! Until about 3 weeks ago... I never forgave my father for not going to school and seeing about that, but I have finally forgiven him.”

These painful images of loneliness and neglect were coupled with enduring love, affection, and, more recently, forgiveness for her father. Her forgiveness was rooted in her appreciation of his determination to keep his family together following the death of his wife. It would have been commonplace for a widowed man to send his children to live with female relatives. Mary’s affection and gratitude was also evident in her recollections of childhood. Mary remembered one incident when her father had gone away for business:

He did all of the cooking for us, my father. And he had this, he wore this old apron that he put on, a denim apron. And it hung behind the door. As I can remember, it was always greasy, because I don’t think he ever washed it, but you know, he just put it on whenever he was cooking. And I remember, I have no idea how old I was. I just knew my dad was away and I remember going and taking myself and standing behind this old, greasy apron ‘cause I missed my dad... I’m sure I didn’t want to be any place other than with my dad and my two brothers. Even though I would have had a better life, in terms of material things and that sort of stuff, some of the sadness or maybe some of the misery. In spite of that, I have always felt that I was glad that he kept us and that he kept us together. Because I always knew that I belonged there. I belonged with him.

This quote, from the second round of interviews, epitomizes the strong, yet contradictory emotions Mary simultaneously holds toward her father. In this one brief memory, Mary vividly illustrates the competing tensions between her childhood loneliness and her potent familial sense of connection. The greasy apron that has never been washed poignantly symbolizes her father’s simultaneous neglect and caretaking.

Contradictory pieces in women’s stories also emerge in other research. For Honig (1997), this occurred when she and two colleagues returned to conduct a second round of interviews with Chicana garment workers who had been involved in a strike at the Farrah Manufacturing Company in El Paso, Texas. Honig posits that the present historical time influences people’s narration of the past in complicated and contradictory ways. The women whom she interviewed tended to view their participation in the strike as a transformative experience. They described dramatic personal transformations from shy, timid factory workers to brave, fearless strikers. These dramatic claims of transformation were directly contradicted by subsequent recollections of themselves as nonconformist and assertive young adults. Honig stresses that the present historical moment, in the aftermath of the strike, most likely influenced what these women identified as salient from their pasts and which family anecdotes they chose to share. In this instance, the present historical moment “of fierce pride in their battle against political injustice and social conventions” (p. 148) changed and complicated their chronicled past histories. In sum, the Chicana garment workers were “not inventing nonexistent past experiences, but they are retelling them with the language, perceptions, and mandates of their present” (p. 154).
NARRATIVE INTERPRETATIONS VERSUS WOMEN’S LIVED EXPERIENCES AND PERSONAL THEORIES

As previously noted, two basic tenets of feminist methodology assert that the “subject” should be a participant who, with the investigator, is engaged in the empirical process and that the researcher should identify his or her subjective role and how his or her own biases may shape the research process (Cook & Fonow, 1990; Harding, 1987; Stewart, 1994). Far less has been written on what should be done when the researcher and interviewee come to hold conflicting interpretations and differing conclusions. I encouraged Mary to provide me with feedback at all stages of this research endeavor. After writing my initial narrative of Mary’s life story, I was sure that we had a mutual and stable understanding of the central themes in her life. It was only when I returned for more interviewing to bolster my initial impressions that I learned that Mary’s memory of her daily experiences differed greatly from my overall conceptualization of her life story. She had, in fact, only ambivalently accepted my initial construction of her life’s themes.

My interpretation of Mary’s life as an African American “heroine” guided my focus on strength and resiliency throughout her life story. However, Mary did not see herself as a resilient person who overcame a barrage of obstacles to succeed despite them, and she identifies even less with the conceptualization of herself as an African American “heroine.” In the second round of interviews, I asked Mary if she has always been a determined and strong-willed woman, a question obviously based on my own overall assessment of her identity. To my surprise, Mary replied:

No, I don’t think I’m that way. . . . When I think of strong-willed, I think of people who go out there and tackle it and get the job done and come what might, and fight all the battles and overcome all the struggles, and knock anybody down that gets in your way, and that’s not me.

In fact, Mary went on, “I don’t think I really accomplished anything that was very meaningful to many people. . . . I don’t want you to admire me for any terrific contributions because I haven’t made any.”

Mary’s perceptions about her life were enormously instructive to my understanding of resiliency. I viewed Mary’s life course as the epitome of a resilient identity—an African American woman surmounting enormous obstacles in life and succeeding despite them. The obstacles were numerous and significant, including the early death of her mother, an early incident of sexual molestation, her family’s limited financial resources, the discrimination of the Jim Crow South, the absence of family unity, a series of physical problems and hospitalizations, and an illegal abortion. When I read this list to her, however, Mary responded:

But you see, when you read it off like that, it seems as if these are all things that are happening at the same time, and they’re not that way. It’s sequential. And you do whatever you have to do with what happens today. Day to day. In other words, I guess the word for me is “survival.” . . . And I can see how from your vantage point—Oh my gosh, how could anybody overcome, how could anybody get through and do anything with all of this? And I do too. When you read it off to me, my God! (deep breath).
Hence, Mary never experienced her daily life as I interpreted it, as the emergence of a resilient identity. She views her life quite simply, as most of us do, as something we live day to day and manage as we go. When I returned to ask probing questions about how she had overcome obstacles in life, Mary replied:

I guess what I'm hung up on is the word "overcome." As if it was a deliberate effort you made to solve a task, to solve the problem. I don't see it that way. It was just making do, you know, and living through it . . . I dealt with life as it came. I did what had to be done or what you could do.

Mary modified and added subtlety to my conceptualization of resiliency in African American women. She understood how an observer, like myself, could focus on the underlying strength and self-empowerment in her story. She eloquently explained, however, why an observer's conclusions about another person's life can never match the person's own daily life experiences. In our daily lives, we are never entirely "resilient" or "strong." Moreover, as we all know experientially, there can be an enormous difference between how we feel and make sense of things internally versus how our lives are perceived by others. But Mary went beyond this difference in the actor–observer vantage point; she directly rejected my conceptualization of her as a "heroine" and resilient survivor. She finds this description of herself to be unsettling and uncomfortable, and she was steadfast in explaining why her life does not match this conceptualization. Mary would prefer to have herself characterized as a "coper," rather than as someone with a resilient identity. Additionally, my tendency as an observer may have been to uncover a finished "identity" for Mary, whereas Mary typically referred to her actions, her coping, and her engagement with the world. Thus, my dialogue with Mary helped me reframe my notions about psychological theories of resiliency, while continuing to disagree with her claim that she did not accomplish anything of value.

One of the major contributions of postmodern thought is the recognition that there are a multitude of meanings to a text and by extension, to a person's life. As Hare-Mustin and Marecek (1990) explain, postmodernists "challenge the idea of a single meaning of reality and a single truth. Rather than concerning themselves with a search for 'the truth,' they inquire instead about the way meanings are negotiated, the control over meanings by those in authority, and how meanings are represented in language" (pp. 24–25). If we believe in the construction of reality and many available interpretations to a text, then the conflict between Mary and me is not a crisis but rather a source of richness. "Constructivism asserts that we do not discover reality, we invent it (Watzlawick, 1984). Our experience does not directly reflect what is out there but is a selecting, ordering, and organizing of it" (Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1990, p. 27). My own and Mary's selective organizing and overall interpretation of her life journey are both informative. Although she is, on the one hand, an impressively resilient, African American heroine, she is also someone who is simply living her life day by day. Although her daily experiences felt routine and uneventful, they are nonetheless, in the aggregate, quite remarkable to others. Finally, although her accomplishments will seem highly impressive to many, Mary would not let anyone forget the self-doubt and insecurity that pervaded much of her life.
My interest in the resilient aspects of Mary’s story is based, in part, on the points of connection and similarities between us. Like Mary, I was raised in a poor, working-class family and acquired access to educational opportunities through a unique and unconventional surrogate family relationship. Mary and I also share commonalities of gender, race, social-class journeys, and professional careers in helping professions. Although I focused on sources of strength in her life, I did not romanticize Mary’s experiences into the stereotypical image of a “strong” Black woman who can overcome any odds (hooks, 1981). Although different parts of Mary’s life story will resonate more strongly to other researchers, the similarities between us inevitably drew me to the resilient aspects of her life story.

With the written narrative and with time for reflection, Mary and I both theorized further and considered new themes in her life story. When we talked again, I sought elaborative information to further support my theories and new evidence to fill in questions that had arisen since the initial interview. I wanted to develop a fuller understanding of Mary’s emotional life. How did she feel when she was struggling with the isolation of a hospital bed as an adolescent? How did she make sense of her father’s neglectfulness? Likewise, Mary seemed to have new thoughts and ideas about her experiences and a desire to complicate the story so that it would more accurately reflect her experiential memories.

During the second round of interviews, Mary and I were no longer confined to the “researcher” and “subject” positions; instead we became dialoguing theorists, conversing and debating about our different interpretations of her life. Ironically, this new relationship was facilitated by the creation of a shared text—the initial, cohesive narrative. The written narrative and time for reflection enabled each of us to theorize further about the themes in her life.

Indeed, the very act of interviewing transforms an interviewee’s formulation and retelling of her life. After a day of interviewing, Mary proclaimed that she had been flooded by many old memories the next morning. She awoke thinking about “stuff that I haven’t thought of for years, people that I haven’t thought of for years . . . . I just began to remember. It’s really strange.” On yet another day, she began by saying, “I was thinking this morning that there are certain threads that run through my life and one is loss. Loss goes right on through. Loss of the mother, physical loss, handicap, loss of attractiveness.” As the interview proceeded, it became clear that I was not the only one speculating and theorizing about Mary’s life. Just as I was developing and testing conclusions about her life, so was she. Moreover, Mary’s conceptualization of her life was influenced by our dialogue and her own personal process of thinking about, giving voice to, and sharing her story. As scholars, it is imperative that our methodology incorporate women’s own theorizing about their lives. Further, we must accept that scholarly theories may be disrupted as women’s theories about their own lives change.

Although most women may privately theorize and draw conclusions about their lives, not all women engage in a dialogue about their theories. Mary’s therapeutic training may account, in part, for her openness and acceptance of our disagreeing on points of interpretation. As a trained psychotherapist, Mary is intimately aware of how the process of dialoguing with someone can cast new light on thoughts and perceptions about one’s life. Hare-Mustin and Marecek (1990) call attention to the similarities between the process of therapy and deconstructionist methods. On listening to a client’s narrative and reconstructed memories, a therapist proposes
new meanings and ways of interpreting the client’s material. Having access to alternative ways of understanding one’s life events allows the client to activate change in her or his life. For example, a therapist may help a female client see that her actions fulfill her spouse’s desire to have a mother figure who looks after his every need; the client may then try to reconstruct a marital contract with her spouse that allows for a more mutual sharing of goals and needs.

The therapist’s task of listening and responding to the client’s narratives is akin to a deconstructive reading of a text. Both seek subtexts and multiple levels of meaning. Just as deconstructive readings disrupt the frame of reference that organizes conventional meanings of a text, so a therapist’s interventions disrupt the frame of reference within which the client customarily sees the world. (Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1990, p. 48)

In the midst of our conversations, Mary reviewed and reevaluated aspects of her own life story. It is not surprising therefore that she can acknowledge, understand, and respect our different interpretations and conclusions about her life.

At the same time, the interviewee’s sense of the interviewer’s audience must also influence the telling of her story. Mary’s concern about the audience’s impressions was evident when I explored the source of her resiliency in surmounting numerous obstacles. She said:

I’m afraid that putting it all together like this might arouse this sense of poor self-pity, and I don’t really feel that way about my life. Now there were times when I felt sorry for myself. I’ve always felt sorry that my mother died. . . . I just don’t want to convey the idea of this poor thing.

Who did Mary envision as the audience for her narrative? White women? Well-educated women? Upper-class women? Any women like herself? Her awareness of an audience for her life narrative and the desire to present a logical story clearly influenced her warm acceptance and approval of the first written text. Her later willingness to add greater complexity to the narrative reveals ambivalence, on Mary’s part, regarding how best to represent her life experiences.

CONCLUSIONS

My dialogue with Mary suggests several methodological recommendations for the planning of a life narrative. The following strategies are offered only as broad guidelines in an effort to help us use interviews to provide fuller representations of the people we study and to include them in the research endeavor in meaningful ways. I propose that researchers should consider the following strategies when constructing a life narrative:

1. Conduct interviews that respect the “subject” as a key participant in the research process and as someone who guides and shapes the interview.
2. Formulate a “first-draft narrative” that researcher and interviewee can read and react to; allow this written narrative to form a basis for further dialogue.
3. Let enough time pass for the researcher and interviewee to engage in private reflection about the narrative and the discussions that followed.
4. Return to do more interviewing.
5. Incorporate the interviewee’s reactions to your written material and to the research endeavor in your thinking, interviewing, and future writing.
6. Do not avoid searching for and discussing conflicts, criticisms, and disagreements between yourself and the interviewee; remember that presenting a final “answer” or resolution to the differences and contradictions that emerge is not necessary.

As academics we must accept the indeterminate nature of narratives and the scholarly products based on them. Fully incorporating the interviewee in the research process entails making the analysis and scholarly product itself part of the discussion. In such a discussion, women’s theorizing about their own lives must be identified and respected so that a dialogue between theorists can occur. This process requires flexibility and openess to dialogue, criticism, and disagreements. Both researcher and research participant share power and control over the research endeavor. Together, they can acknowledge that the outcomes are only a partial representation of what scholar and interviewee choose to share, and give salience to, at that particular moment in time.

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