Researching Irish gay male lives: reflections on disclosure and intellectual autobiography in the production of personal narratives

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ABSTRACT This article explores the difficulties encountered by researchers as they embark on personal narrative study. It is based on research conducted with Irish gay men as they reflect on their lives, coming of age during the 1970s. Drawing on interview transcripts and the researcher's journal, the article charts dilemmas of disclosure, rapport and the construction of the self in the narrative.

KEYWORDS: *auto/biography, disclosure, gay men, intellectual autobiography, Ireland, personal narratives, rapport*

Introduction

This article reflects on the challenges faced by researchers conducting life history research and is based on my experience constructing the personal narratives of some Irish gay men. I argue for the use of auto/biographical[1] research methods in the study of men's lives, but, in particular, exploring the often hidden and previously untold stories of older gay men. This article traces my own experience in recognizing both a personal and intellectual self in the narratives of the men in my study and casts new light on negotiating disclosure with narrators in life history research. This experience is explored through excerpts from interview transcripts highlighting my interaction with the study's narrators and my replies to their direct questions. This study was conducted between the years 1998 and 2001 with eight men aged between 44 and 50 who recalled their lives coming to terms with their sexuality during the first decade of the gay liberation movement in Ireland.

My choice of methodology was not immediate. I knew the research would be qualitative in nature and best suited to an interpretative approach where

the researcher locates themselves within the lived experience of their respondents. Denzin (1989: 19) describes this interpretative paradigm as being both naturalistic and interactional, and I believe it is most appropriate to explore life history. Although qualitative research is frequently referred to as inductive (Patton, 1990: 44), allowing the data to generate theory, it fails to adequately acknowledge the pre-existing beliefs, motivations and theoretical background of the researcher as they enter the field (Stanley and Wise, 1990: 22). I found auto/biographical research sensitive to those concerns. Its focus is on how individuals make meaning in their day-to-day lives and how those subjective accounts are understood in broader social and structural settings (Roberts, 2002: 5). This focus is at the core of my study – a method inspired by sociology's humanistic past, placing the individual's subjective meanings in their cultural contexts and putting them at the heart of the sociological endeavour. This method can be seen as a return to where agency is given a primacy over social structure (Plummer, 2001: 7).

Denzin (1989: 28) describes biographical research's focus on telling and interpreting a life and being two-dimensional. There is the 'lived experience' and the 'situation' (or position) of the person in society. Auto/biographical research attempts to bring these two dimensions together in a life history. In reality, I see this process as being three-dimensional, with the author an active participant in the construction of lives. Feminist research has perhaps made the greatest use of auto/biographical research. Though not exclusively qualitative (Pugh, 1990), it possesses the ability to often uncover a hidden history of women's lives while acknowledging concepts of power within the research process. While disagreement exists over the definition and scope of feminist methodologies (Lentin, 1993: 122–8) and whether they offer a new perspective on old methods or a separate paradigm, they presented distinct characteristics which, from an early stage, would play an important part in my research. They privileged the values of participation, reciprocity and reflexivity – the very values demanded of me from my narrators in this study.[2] This level of reciprocity expected of me brought to the fore the parallel study of my own life that was unfolding in tandem with that of my narrators. Through identification with my narrators, I was simultaneously constructing my own story, answering the very questions that I myself had posed to the men in the study.

Within feminist research, personal narratives have been used extensively to document and interpret women's life experiences (Ginsburg, 1989; Lentin, 2000b; Russell, 1989). The Personal Narratives Group (1989: 5) argues that women, because of their need to negotiate their exceptional gender status, have used this method more frequently. Much of this work has been carried out under a variety of different terminology with oral histories, life story research, in-depth interviews and personal narratives used interchangeably. I use the term personal narrative in my study to describe both biographical and autobiographical work that charts a life history. Life histories can rarely encompass a total life experience retold in chronological order. Decisions have

to be made with regard to narrative form. The story can be retold in a chrono-logical order, as was recalled by the narrator's memory or, as in my study, by focusing one biographical strand at various times in the narrator's life (Rosenthal, 1993: 65). Narrative form is identified by the Personal Narratives Group (1989: 12–3) as one of the central components to using narratives in research. Lentin (2000b) incorporated a number of narrative forms when constructing her stories of Shoah survivors, including: reproducing the narrator's text; a thematic presentation of the narrative; and, finally, her story, constructed through her identification with her narrators. Reinharz (1992: 137) provides an overview of the dispute within oral history on the merits of presenting the transcripts of narrators either interpreted by researchers or in their own words. There are few full life histories conducted within sociology,[3] with most being short life stories which often appear as part of a series. The personal narratives that were the basis of this study conform to this style but also incorporate what Plummer (2001: 34) calls reflexive life stories. Here, there are two stories being constructed: the narrator's telling of a life and the interpreter's very self-conscious construction of that story and their own parallel intellectual autobiography.

Men have also been encouraged to conduct research using feminist epistem-ology to explore male subjectivities (Stanley, 1992: 132; Wadsworth and Hargreaves, 1993: 5). While disagreements exist to the extent to which men can *be* feminist (Reinharz, 1992: 14), personal narrative research, in particular, offers men the opportunity to create an awareness of both the privileges that come with a specific gender, ethnicity or sexual orientation, and the responsibilities on men in the use of that power. Connell (1992, 1995) has used such a feminist epistemology in his research with men, as has Christian (1994) in his life histories of 30 non-sexist men. For Connell (1995: 89), the life history method provides us with knowledge of personal experience, ideology and subjectivity. When used with certain groups of men, it allows us a rare insight into the construction of a dominant and hegemonic masculinity in society. In Ireland too, research informed by feminist epistemologies has been conducted. Lohan's (2000) work on masculinity and the relationship with domestic technologies, and Ferguson's (1996) work on changing masculinity in Ireland, have sought to bring a reflexive and visible quality to the research process. But the extension of feminist research methodologies, particularly using personal narrative to study men's lives has been limited. Messner and Sabo (1990: 13) have argued for a relational theory of gender, where femininity and masculin-ity can be studied within a system of gender inequality and male privilege. hooks (1995: 520) goes further in criticising the feminist movement for desig-nating their work as 'women's work' through their exclusion of men, a disparate category all sharing the benefits of male privilege disproportionately.

The use of personal narratives in the exploration of gay men's lives is not new (Lemke, 1991; Nardi et al., 1994; Preston, 1991; Savin-Williams, 1998). Biographical research has been increasingly used to explore the meanings

which individuals attach to concepts of sexual identity and the body (Roberts, 2002: 29). The use of biographical research to explore gay men's lives represents an opportunity to gain insight into what Connell (1995: 78) describes as subordinated masculinities. For gay men, personal narratives can shed light on the various strategies employed by them as they negotiated a potentially hostile family, school and work life. Here, the real benefit of the personal narrative is exposed. Reinharz (1992: 137) sees narratives as having the ability to view social problems in individual stories. In this study, they enable us to gain insight into the social climate in which gay men lived while at the same time exploring the means by which they survived and normalized their lives during this period. Life history research has been associated with giving voice to women and minorities and has given rise to a proliferation of stories of which the gay and lesbian coming out story is just one. This is part of a wider trend in societies marked by late or post-modernity, that the privileging of public life over private is ever more challenged and an increasing diversity of voices come forward to be heard (Plummer, 2001: 89).

It is the production of these stories that is the central concern of this article. Stories do not write themselves. They are a collaboration of the narrator, the interpreter and the consumer of the story (Plummer, 1995: 23). This collaborative effort in the pursuit of the 'truth' while confessing or interpreting a life story has brought forth a number of concerns. Competing versions of a story have highlighted the issues of ownership, voice, truth and power in the research process. In Lemke (1991) for example, where gay men tell of their lives in the former East Germany, the stories appear unedited with no evidence of the researcher or interpretation present in the text, although this is rarely the case. Nardi et al. (1994) present the stories of gay men under four headings, set against the pathologizing of homosexuality by the psychiatric profession. By contrast, they devote the first half of their research to the social and historical context of their stories, while Nardi's co-editor Sanders outlines his own personal experience of negotiating the psychiatric profession as a gay man. Similarly, Preston's (1991) stories of gay men talking about their home towns in the USA are prefaced by Preston's own experience of growing up in Massachusetts. While the interpreters of gay men's life histories have acknowledged the role of the researcher in the process of constructing them, I believe it has not gone far enough.

Disclosure in the narrator-interpreter relationship

The issue of narrator-interpreter relations is central to the construction of personal narratives (Personal Narratives Group, 1989: 13; Stanley and Wise, 1990: 23). In recognizing this collaborative effort, I understand that the subject of research is never neutral or objective, but is produced in a relationship between the narrator, the interpreter and often the audience. In my study, the narrators, from an early stage, sought from me a level of personal

disclosure that greatly reduced the interpreter's traditional voice of authority. This changed the relationship between us and created a degree of shared ownership over the texts that were produced. This ownership varied between the narrators. Traditional qualitative texts (Patton, 1990: 127) had left me ill prepared for the level of disclosure necessary to create a relationship between my narrators that would facilitate an open and honest dialogue with me. Part of that disclosure was the recognition of the agendas with which we both entered the process. Over time, I could identify a therapeutic motivation in one narrator, a commitment to restoring a gay past in another but my own personal motivation emerged slowly through interaction with my narrators.

Disclosure was also influenced by the means by which the narrators were selected. My study recruited through the internet. The benefit of the internet to students and researchers within the social sciences has been established. O'Dochartaigh (2002: 79–86) guides researchers through the practical use of making contact through mailing lists, discussion groups and web pages. The internet has also been used by researchers to carry out discourse analyses of personal homepages (Slevin, 2000), while a number of online ethnographies of chat rooms have also been carried out (Hamman, 1997; Rutter, 2000). However, using the internet to meet respondents or as the subject of research itself, poses new ethical questions for researchers (DiMarco and DiMarco, 2000). I posted advertisements on two sites: gay.com and gaydar.co.uk. While the literature suggests that men are considerably more likely to open up to a female interviewer when discussing personal issues (Allan, 1989; Stein, 1986), it was important for my narrators that they were contacting another gay man. The subsequent interviews were very often predicated by a relief that the narrators were speaking to 'one of their own', especially when discussing sex, a topic they felt they would be most likely to be judged on. This fine line between insider knowledge and outsider professional distance is seen as an effective strategy in Reinharz's (1992: 26–7) review of feminist research studies that has utilized this approach.

In this sense, I too am the 'other'.[4] I am part of this marginalized group and have insights into gay male lives that go beyond empathy. However, my analysis of those narratives revealed such a complexity of gay male experience in Ireland as to diminish my 'other' status and claims of any superior under-standing (Ryan, 2003). The use of internet sites to recruit the study's narra-tors and my own disclosure about my sexuality did much to diminish the academic distance created by being a sociologist. My narrators' previous use of the internet in making contacts enabled our initial meetings to be friendly and without much awkwardness. This distance was apparently so diminished as to prompt one key narrator, Darren[5], to embark on a sexually explicit conversation with me on our first meeting in his workplace. Darren, whose contribution I greatly valued, would not discuss the prospect of a series of interviews until we both had a number of drinks together. I recorded the incident afterwards in a journal:

> I talked briefly again about the research but he wondered if I had seen Channel Four's Queer as Folk on Tuesday? It had made him horny and he wondered if it had made me horny? I said I thought it was daring. I'm embarrassed and my face has reddened. I again start to talk about the research but he interrupts to ask what my longest relationship was? Where did I go to school and what age was I when I had my first sexual encounter? I said it was one of those drunken things but this was in fact a lie, the first one that I told . . . I considered that he was trying to 'test' me with more and more sexually explicit conversation to gauge my reaction and I was determined to see it through to the end. He tells me that I'm a very open person, an honest man that he'd have no difficulty in talking with. If it was a test, I appear to have passed.

Even after agreeing to participate in the study, he stipulated that the first interview should take place in his house over dinner. I agreed. The sexual interrogation of this first encounter was not repeated in the subsequent interviews I had with this man, and the contacts and stories that he told me proved a valuable resource to the study. Lee (1995: 56) suggests that there is a reluctance to discuss issues of sexual harassment in research settings. He is talking exclusively about female researchers. Conceding that liberal male researchers would possibly be embarrassed by such sexual banter, they would not be threatened by it. Lee (1995: 57–8) agrees with an assessment by Gurney (1985) that such sexual banter serves as an initiation, a test of loyalty for female researchers to gauge their reaction. A similar process was happening in the incident I outlined above. I was reluctant to discuss the incident for fear of what Lee (1995: 58) describes as giving credence to negative stereotypes of a discriminated group under study. When constructing personal narratives, it is naive to expect narrators to talk about intimate details of their sexual lives without being prepared to divulge similar information if asked (Greed, 1990: 145). This mutual disclosure moves the interaction from 'interview' to a conversation and an exchange among equals (Lentin, 2000a: 257). The level and timing of a researcher's self-disclosure has been the subject of much debate among feminist researchers. Oakley (1981: 30–61) has argued forcibly for research based on openness, intimacy and self disclosure, while Reinharz's (1992: 33) discussion also considers the emotional and professional costs of a researcher's self-disclosure. In this experience, however, the disclosure was coerced and the strategy damaging to the research process. Researchers using personal narratives face a challenge in not knowing the exact direction conversations with narrators will take. They do not know whether the experience of telling their life histories will be a liberating and empowering one for narrators, or whether the retelling of the stories will reassert a negative self-identity which has continued from childhood (Smith, 2000: 14).

I experienced both when conducting my research. My key narrator, Tim, used the time we spent together to justify the unhappy state in which he saw his present life. Tim saw his experience of being a stigmatized gay adolescent in school and within his community as being responsible for his low self-esteem and his stilted coming out. Jackson (1990: 261) suggests that men

often carve out a personal space for themselves in society and the telling of a life history can often make them feel more comfortable with that space and the choices they have made. Jackson's argument, influenced by post-modern thinking, suggests that it is not enough to tell the story. There has to be a critical-interrogation component present in that telling which actively reconstructs the self (1990: 265). But what exactly is the responsibility of the researcher to the narrator when the telling of a life story leads to or reinforces the person's stagnation, rather than their emancipation? With Tim, I did not ask him to gay bars and introduce him to my friends. I did suggest, however, that he consider talking over the issues we discussed with a psychologist, after explaining how beneficial I had found this experience myself. We have continued to exchange Christmas cards and the odd email, but Tim's great concern with discretion has made me wary of initiating any further contact.

The location in which the interviews take place may also affect the level of disclosure. I left the decisions about the location of the interviews to the narrators themselves. There was diversity in the location preferred, with interviews taking place at my office at work, a city park, my home, their home. The intention is to make the narrator as comfortable and as safe as possible when telling their story. Despite the researcher's best efforts, there is an elusive element described by Plummer (2001: 146) as 'personal factors' that cannot be anticipated. Doing life history interviews with gay men is akin to that first date: often awkward and embarrassing until both feel comfortable to talk freely. During my research, I arrived to interview Chris, a 47-year-old architect in his spacious loft apartment. Chris had agreed to talk to me after we spoke on the phone about the nature of the research I was doing. After the initial pleasantries, Chris set down some ground rules concerning the interview:

> I hate to disappoint you Paul but I don't think my story is quite what you're looking for. I mean, I don't recall myself ever being this self-loathing, guilt-ridden man who's ashamed of who he is. It wasn't me then and it's not me now and I've concerns about being involved in an 'oh how gloomy and sexually repressed the 70s were' type storyline.

I assured Chris that I was not interested in telling just one experience of being gay in Ireland but we never did recover from his opening statement or my denials that it was not my intention to represent him in any particular way. My journal after the interview revealed my own personal dislike of him and my reluctance to return for a follow-up interview:

> After four calls and much rearranging I finally interviewed Chris tonight; not sure how much of it I can use; defensive man, clearly disliked me and never really got beyond the surface. He's willing to meet again, big ego; not sure whether I want to transcribe for the next week to indulge it though! Cool apartment!

This took me by surprise. Stacey (1991: 116) claims that some feminist female researchers operate under a 'delusion of alliance' when interviewing other women believing a shared gender can bridge other divisions in the research

process. Being gay was not enough to establish a rapport with Chris. Minister (1991: 28) and Holstein and Gubrium (2002: 121) both agree that narrators do not just start talking. The interpreter has to create the conditions necessary to bring this disclosure about. Narrators do not automatically forget the tape recorder sitting next to them or the artificial environment created by having a stranger in their home discussing the most intimate details of their lives. This rapport can be achieved through self-disclosure or a mutual identification over something often quite mundane. Chris was not receptive to this or hearing anything about me, mundane or otherwise. Disliking your respondents in a research setting is not new. The discussion of strategies to overcome it are, however, usually located in the researcher's struggle to achieve rapport with what Fielding (1993: 148) calls 'unloved' groups. Blee's (2002: 12–21) description of her attempts to build rapport with American white supremacists is an excellent example. Chris was not a white supremacist. He was, however, a rather pompous architect. He would, like any of the narrators in my study, have told a different story to a different researcher, acknowledging that stories do not come ready made (Rosenthal, 1993: 64).

Disclosure is revealed through more than just the conversations of the personal narrative process. Interpersonal dynamics reveal much about the narrator and the interpreter (Plummer, 2001: 157; Summerfield, 2000: 102). The style of dress, accent and body language all omit signals about the possibilities of shared values or social distance between the two parties. Summerfield (2000: 102) suggests how narrators may prepare themselves:

> They may also prepare their memory frame, for example by finding relevant documents and photographs, calling in a friend from the time or simply putting their thoughts about their past in order.

When conducting the series of interviews with Tim, I was also doing documentary work on the birth of the gay movement in 1974, drawing from material collected by the Gay Archives in Dublin, which provide great insight into the social and political context from which these individual stories were born. I was, however, determined to be me. I found strategies like Owens' (1996: 62) wearing of a wedding ring, though single, to gain rapport while doing research with men on infertility dubious. I knew I would find it impossible to balance some false sense of self while simultaneously trying to create the conditions necessary for his disclosure and later mine. Tim had also prepared for our meetings. He sought out diaries from his time in school and arrived at our third meeting with a photo album of his family. Photographs and diaries represent an under-utilized resource in the construction of personal narratives (Plummer, 2001: 48–66). I used the photographs in my study as an insight into my narrator's social world while the preparation we both had done on the historical context facilitated interesting discussion. These visual clues draw on various sets of memories which lead to the construction of the life story. For Tim, viewing the photographs of himself as a child was an emotional experience:

> Seeing my face in each one brings me back, I know what I felt on each day, whether it was good or bad. I wish I could just hug the child I was and tell him that everything is going to be OK.

Memory is always a contentious issue in auto/biographical research. Psychology has alerted us to the complexity of memory and the extent to which stories can be remembered, forgotten, narrated or reinterpreted (Baddeley, 1999). The accuracy of memory is often seen as a test of reliability within auto/biographical research. Memory presented two distinct difficulties within my research. Narrators, while remembering and telling of their individual lives, were also conscious of a public or collective gay memory of the 1970s (Roberts, 2002: 145). I had spent weeks trawling through this collective memory in the Irish Queer Archives.[6] Stories of violence against gay men and women, arson attacks against gay venues and the court details of men prosecuted for gross indecency under the Offences Against the Persons Act, 1861. Little wonder that all narrators, bar Tim, prefaced their 'return' to memories of 1970s gay Ireland with indications of how their lives had changed from the secrecy and repression commonly associated with this period. Their stories would tell a more complex story. The second problem was interrelated. I was asking my narrators to talk about a sexual and moral climate that had almost ceased to exist in Ireland by the late 1990s (Inglis, 1998). There was no frame of reference to describe much of the men's experiences. Stories about the stigma and fear of prosecution, police harassment and cottaging had been replaced by newer and more diverse stories of fragmented sexualities. The narrators were initially conscious of the 17-year age gap that separated my experiences from theirs. Lentin (2000a: 260) sees personal narratives as being able to close this memory gap between unhappy or traumatic events in the past and possessing the language to recall those experiences in the present. This is especially true for the narrators in this study, all of whom are recalling the past through a different language from that available when the events occurred. Michielsens (2000: 183) encountered a similar difficulty when conducting life history work on women's lives in post-communist Bulgaria. The women associated themselves so much with the 'progress' of Western European feminism that many were reluctant to associate themselves with concepts and cognitive frameworks that they had rejected. This is central to autobiographical memory,[7] where the aim is to link memory to the construction of the self while being conscious of the social context (Roberts, 2002: 138). Each time a story is told, the memories of that event and the construction of the self can be very different.

Constructing the self in narrative: intellectual auto/biography

The concept of the thoughtful, reflexive and personally grounded research practitioner has been circulating and gaining momentum throughout my short research career (Byrne and Lentin, 2000; Reinharz, 1992; Stanley,

1992). Central to this practice is the rejection of a scientific objectivity among researchers that enables neutral, detached and value-free research to be carried out. It is a rejection of the colonization of the experiences and stories of 'others' and the arbitrary use of those experiences in the academic and research worlds (Lynch, 2000: 80). It is easier, of course, to say what this reflexive research practitioner is opposed to, rather than what code of practice is embodied in this approach. Plummer (2001: 206) suggests that reflexivity in research is often used rather sloppily to refer to self-introspection. He recommends that it should be a broad enough term to incorporate both the narrator's and the interpreter's personal and political pasts, and to be constructed in such a way as to be conscious of the broader social, cultural and intellectual context in which the research is read. Ultimately, what these considerations mean to research in practice should be decided in collaboration with the particular narrators in a study. In my study, efforts to involve narrators in either the construction of the interview schedule, or in any comprehensive feedback after the interviews, were rejected, a common occurrence in life history research (Michielsens, 2000: 189). Kieran suggested a motivation for his disinterest in any involvement in the construction of the narrative after the interview was completed:

> I suppose I should take some interest in what happens to all this afterwards but I know I won't. I can sit here and talk till the cows come home but reading it afterwards? Nah! Like watching that home movie of yourself; I'm sure I'd be cringing over it or I'd be saying, take this out and this and this! Mightn't be much left!

Having the narrators read and make comments on my interpretation of their lives would not necessarily have resulted in the self-censoring Kieran describes. Of the five transcripts Byrne (2000: 154–5) gave her respondents for verification, two were returned substantially revised and expanded. My narrators' disinterest in the text that was produced from their stories spared me perhaps the most problematic aspect of life history research. The judgement of narrators on the interpretation of their lives is fraught with difficulty and can lead to feelings of misrepresentation and betrayal. Borland's (1991) oral history of her grandmother's life reveals this conflict in representation and, ultimately, who controls the text. Borland's representation was rejected by her grandmother who felt that her story's analysis within a contemporary feminist framework was one she did not intend and claimed no allegiance to. Her letter to Borland outlining these objections is sobering to anyone embarking on the representation of the life of another:

> You've read into the story what you wished to – what pleases YOU. (Borland, 1991: 70)

Despite the interpreter's best efforts at a collaborative research process, the ultimate power of representation lies with the interpreter. The narrators in my study, while rejecting the offer of a part in the construction of their stories, did,

however, have a keen interest in a more collaborative style of interviewing based on mutual self-disclosure.

The researcher's intellectual auto/biography is central if this commitment to conduct research in a collaborative and open manner is to be achieved. Stanley (1986: 31) defines intellectual auto/biography as:

> Making visible what is normally hidden, usually conventionally hidden to readers; the shifts, changes, developments, downturns and upturns in the way the biographer understands the subject.

The researcher or interpreter must now step forward as a narrator. My story is also being told. My own life has been constructed in tandem with that of my narrator, and my stories and experiences are scattered throughout hundreds of pages of interview transcript depicting the life of another. This collaborative process sees both the narrator and the interpreter as being active participants in the construction of a life history (Stanley, 1992).

An interest in the author behind the sociology is not new. Both Horowitz (1970) and Berger (1990) asked leading sociologists to chart the personal influences on their sociology and the effects of their work in a wider context. Plummer (2001: 206–7) also outlines the evidence supporting subjective influences on the work of Malinowski, Freud and Margaret Mead. The prospect of bringing the author centre stage in research, however, has not been a welcome development for all. It has been dismissed for its narcissism and shifting the balance of life history from the telling of the story to the hearing and writing of it (Lasch, 1979).

I am equipped with sociological research tools, which enable me to hear and interpret the life histories of my narrators. Even before these formal research strategies are employed, the stories are already the product of a mutual collaboration that has drawn from both my intellectual and personal history (Denzin, 1989: 57). My story emerges out of my narrator's life history at particular stages in their storytelling. These stages were often at the most revealing times or at epiphanies (Denzin, 1989: 71) in the life histories. The stories were organized around the narrator's childhood experiences and earliest memories of sexuality, their school years and the point in their adult lives when they decided to 'come out' or devise alternative strategies to deal with their sexuality. My story is that of a 30-year-old gay man born in Co. Tipperary from a working-class family, coming of age in the 1980s. I would be 27 before I began to consider the influence of my past on my present research and teaching interests. If, as Denzin (1994: 512) suggests, 'researchers work outwards from their own biographies', then this consideration came to me rather late.

Prior to undertaking this study, my main research interest lay in how men negotiated and constructed their masculinities within the framework of a hegemonic masculinity that governed all men's lives.[8] While interested in directly exploring gay men's lives through personal narrative, I was reluctant

to do so. I was conscious of further identifying myself within my department as the 'gay sociologist' as opposed to 'the sociologist who happens to be gay'. In a small academic community, the risk of typecasting is very real. The second reason was more personal than professional. I knew that life stories of gay men coming out would inevitably raise issues about my own, often painful, adolescence, and I questioned the extent to which these stories, should I choose to tell them, would act as a hindrance in encouraging others to tell their stories.

Ireland had changed considerably in the intervening decade between my story and my narrators', but not enough for there to be significant similarity in our lives, particularly our childhood and school experiences. My own experience was somewhat more chaste than that of my narrators. My childhood years were dominated by a close friendship with a school friend called John. The exclusivity of our friendship came to my parents' attention when I was eight or nine. I recalled the experience in conversation with my narrator, Kieran:

Kieran: So what did your mother do when she found out?
Paul: I can distinctly remember her taking me aside and telling me that I should make more friends; that I couldn't depend on John but more seriously for her, John's mother had seen us holding hands while we were playing and my mother told me that this just wasn't on at my age. Can remember to this day the sheer surprise of it, because I so didn't associate it with anything sexual and probably said 'Oh, ok then'.

In a similar pattern to my narrators, the adult world often came crashing into the world of children prohibiting friendships and behaviour seen only as inappropriate by parents. Research into this 'inappropriate', often sexual behaviour among boys reveals no understanding of it as homosexual (Connell, 1995: 148; Davis and Dowsett, 2000: 108; Ryan, 2003: 72). My relationship with John continued until I was 12 years old; there was still no sexual contact between us although our conversations about other boys made both our sexual preferences clear. Our friendship came to an abrupt end aged 12. I continued the story:

Kieran: So how did it end? Did you ever hook up with him in later life?
Paul: No, the ending was shall we say, dramatic and had most of our neighbours thinking I was the anti-Christ. It ended in an old shed that was used by the church, we used to hang out and smoke and stuff until we, accidentally I must add, burned most of the interior down, destroying among other things the crib and statues which were stored there for Christmas. My father ended up building a new crib for the church, one which is still used in our local church to this day. John and I fell out over who should take the blame.

My return to that church is now limited to an annual Christmas morning mass with my parents and the sight of that crib never fails but to make me feel like a 12-year-old again.

I formed the most intense relationship with my key narrator, Tim. His stories of isolation and bullying at school affected me on an empathetic, but also on

a very personal, level. Like Tim, my education by the Christian Brothers with their specific focus on Gaelic games had left me unable to compete for the friends and popularity necessary to lead a happy school life. We both emerged with battered self-esteem five years later. We both had dealt with the experience differently, however. Tim had tried to disappear into his classmates, while I continued on a path of increased visibility and ultimate confrontation with mine. In conversation with Tim, I recalled my experience:

Tim: Didn't you ever wish you could just be, invisible at school? I had long given up on this period as being the happiest days of my life but I just longed to be left alone, not just alone in my thoughts but completely alone, does that make any sense to you?

Paul: Disappearance was never really a viable option for someone 6′3 since they were 13 who was shaving ridiculously early, a vegetarian by aged 16 in a community dominated by large beef farmers, clever eh? I had stepped up my objection to live hare coursing, a pursuit followed by many of the families in the school, including the family of a Ms Annette Kenny, the girl most boys in my school wanted to get busy with. Top it off with hating hurling, being gay and fooling no one with the denials to myself, or my teachers and fellow classmates who seemed to know more about my sexuality than I did.

I believe it is the last sentence which is most revealing here. Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli's (2003: 88) contemporary study of masculinity and schooling illustrates how some boys 'know' others are gay even before they themselves do. I am unsure to what extent this 'external ascription', as Plummer (1999) describes it, influenced my own sexual development. Masculine identities are certainly created and reinforced through the systematic labelling of others as gay, and the recipients of that labelling also construct different identities based on how they are perceived by others. Frosh et al. (2002: 183–7), in their study of British masculinity, incorporate the experiences of boys labelled as gay in school and their attempts to rationalize why they became perceived in that way. For the narrators and me, the study revealed little evidence of a similar process. We all had different experiences. While Tim remained angry that his homosexuality had marginalized him throughout school, I was reluctant to face up to some of the more difficult parallels that were present in both our stories.

In the process of locating these excerpts of conversation with my narrators, I discovered that most were only partially transcribed after the interview. From the extract above, I had transcribed just the first 10 words, the remainder I located on the interview tape. Not only was I making myself disappear from the physical text, I had also removed reference to Stanley and Wise's (1993: 49) autobiographical I. This style of conversation is repeated in other excerpts. If, as Krieger (1996: 3) suggests, social science has taught us about 'minimizing the self' and how 'to speak from above and outside an experience rather than from within it', my transcripts suggested I was guilty.

On reflection, my strategy while at school was to carve out a distinct personality for myself, but in reality I only increased my exoticness, my isolation and my very 'other' status. Michielsens (2000: 188) was concerned that her shared academic background and social values made it difficult for her to see the 'otherness' of her narrators, and she found the familiarity an impediment to good research. I found a familiarity in shared memories that at times led to a real identification with my narrators' experiences, but it was the diversity in the endings of the life histories that often surprised me and recreated that sense of 'otherness' again. I have argued elsewhere that the Irish 'coming-out' story is an uneven one and does not conform to a modernist tale of suffering, endurance and transformation (Ryan, 2003). A preoccupation with closure is not necessary for good life history research.

I desperately wanted to 'fix' Tim after completing the series of interviews with him. I found him frustrating. I thought him too passive and too complicit in accepting the legacy of his school experiences on his life. He had sought comfort in a new language around bullying and emotional abuse, but the knowledge still left him unable to move on. The experience taught me that my own legacy was not a benign influence on my own personal and academic life either. At the time of these interviews, I was 27, had not been in a relationship for six years and had no full-time job. I was perhaps in need of some fixing myself. These tensions emerge when there is a blurring of the acquaintance and friendship roles (Plummer, 2001: 209) and this may lead narrators to reject your interpretation of their lives (Lentin, 2000a: 257).

Conclusion

In this article, I argue for the continued use of auto/biographical research methods in sociology. The experience of feminist research in particular has shown it to be highly effective in exploring the lives of women and using these individual cases to highlight often an institutional inequality in society. Furthermore, the potential of auto/biographical methods in exploring men's lives remains under-utilized. This article has charted some of the difficulties in constructing life histories with a group of gay men. Central have been the problems of gaining and maintaining rapport with narrators when discussing sensitive and often painful memories from a historical period which the men themselves may have now denied. Using my own research, I have shown that this past can be recreated through the use of photographs or other archival material from the era.

I have used Stanley's (1992: 127) concept of auto/biography throughout the article. In doing so, I am reinforcing my commitment to a research process where my own personal and intellectual past is recognized, and, if necessary, revealed to my narrators. Far from an exercise in narcissism, the recognition of this intellectual autobiography demonstrates to the reader that the construction of life histories is the product of a series of interactions between

a researcher and narrators. It is in making these interactions visible that we recognize the human aspect of the research process; the awkwardness, social distance and frustration with the narrators, but also the friendship and intimacy that the life history process can engender between the narrator and the interpreter of a life.

NOTES

1. Throughout the article, I have used Stanley's (1992: 127) widely accepted term, auto/biography, to illustrate the often uneasy distinction between biographical and autobiographical writing.
2. These values are also held by participatory action research. See Dockery (2000: 95–110).
3. A notable exception being Thomas and Znaniecki (1958).
4. Byrne (2000: 140–4) also uses the concept of constructing the 'other' in her research into the lives of single women in contemporary Ireland.
5. All names are pseudonyms.
6. For an overview of the content of the archives, see: http://www.gcn.ie/iqa
7. For a detailed overview of autobiographical memory, see Conway (1990) and Rubin (1986).
8. Ryan, P. (1995) 'Masculinity and Homophobia: A Case Study Approach', MSocSc dissertation, Department of Sociology, University College Dublin.

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