
Telling Secrets, Revealing Lives

Relational Ethics in Research With Intimate Others

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This article focuses on relational ethics in research with intimate others. Relational ethics requires researchers to act from our hearts and minds, acknowledge our interpersonal bonds to others, and take responsibility for actions and their consequences. Calling on her own research studies, the author examines relational ethics in ethnographies in which researchers are friends with or become friends with participants over the course of their projects. Then she examines autoethnographic narratives in which researchers include intimate others in stories focusing on their own experience. Considering ethical responsibilities to identifiable others, she discusses writing about those who are alive and those who have died. She then reflects on the ways co-constructed autoethnographies circumvent some of the ethical issues in traditional qualitative studies on unfamiliar others, yet avoid some of the ethical concerns in writing about intimate others. The last section presents advice for those who long to write about intimate others.

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I don't feel right reading about your mother when she doesn't know you've written this about her. What if I met her? I know it's not likely to happen, but I'd feel uncomfortable knowing something about her she wasn't aware was possible for me to know.

A student spoke these words at my workshop on autoethnography after having read "Maternal Connections" (Ellis, 1996b), a story I had written about taking care of my elderly mother. His concerns tap into an important

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quagmire in autoethnographic research: our responsibilities to intimate others who are characters in the stories we tell about our lives. His response calls forth my discomfort about not sharing this story with my mother before it was published (Ellis, 2001). These feelings transport me back in time to the angry reactions of my *Fisher Folk* friends, when they read how I had described them in my first ethnographic study (Ellis, 1986, 2001). In this article, I revisit these feelings and former projects to elaborate on relational ethics associated with doing ethnographic and autoethnographic research with intimate others.

Dimensions of Ethics

Marilyn Guillemin and Lynn Gillam (2004) delineate two dimensions of ethics. The first is procedural ethics, the kind mandated by Institutional Review Board (IRB) committees to ensure procedures adequately deal with informed consent, confidentiality, rights to privacy, deception, and protecting human subjects from harm. The second is ethics in practice, or situational ethics, the kind that deal with the unpredictable, often subtle, yet ethically important moments that come up in the field (see also Goodwin, Pope, Mort, & Smith, 2003). For example, what if someone discloses something harmful, asks for help, or voices discomfort with a question or her or his own response?

To these I add a third dimension, relational ethics, a kind closely related to an ethics of care (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984), feminist ethics, and feminist communitarian ethics (see Christians, 2000; Denzin, 1997, 2003; Olesen, 2000; Punch, 1994). Slattery and Rapp (2003), after Martin Buber, describe relational ethics as doing what is necessary to be “true to one’s character and responsible for one’s actions and their consequences on others” (p. 55). Relational ethics recognizes and values mutual respect, dignity, and connectedness between researcher and researched, and between researchers and the communities in which they live and work (Lincoln, 1995, p. 287; see also Brooks, 2006; Reason, 1993; Tierney, 1993). Central to relational ethics is the question “What should I do now?” rather than the statement “This is what you should do now” (Bergum, 1998).

Relational ethics requires researchers to act from our hearts and minds, to acknowledge our interpersonal bonds to others, and initiate and maintain conversations (Bergum, 1998; Slattery & Rapp, 2003). As part of relational ethics, we seek to deal with the reality and practice of changing relationships with our research participants over time. If our participants become

our friends, what are our ethical responsibilities toward them? What are our ethical responsibilities toward intimate others who are implicated in the stories we write about ourselves? How can we act in a humane, nonexploitative way, while being mindful of our role as researchers? (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p. 264).

These practical and relational issues are not normally the focus of institutional applications of ethics (see Denzin, 2003). Although IRBs offer helpful guidelines, they are grounded on the premise that research is being done on strangers with whom we have no prior relationships and plan no future interaction. That is not the case in autoethnography, and often not the case in ethnography. Thus, as qualitative researchers, we encounter ethical situations that do not fit strictly under the procedures specified by IRBs.

The bad news is that there are no definitive rules or universal principles that can tell you precisely what to do in every situation or relationship you may encounter, other than the vague and generic "do no harm." The good news is that we are accumulating more and more stories of research experiences that can help us think through our options (Adams, 2006; Carter, 2002; Etherington, 2005, in press; Kiesinger, 2002; Marzano, in press; Perry, 2001; Rambo, 2005). In my own research, I have struggled with ethical choices time after time (Ellis, 1995a, 2001, 2004). The conflicts I have experienced have taught me a great deal. By repeatedly questioning and reflecting on my ethical decisions, I have gained a greater understanding of the range of my choices and the kind of researcher I want to be with my participants.

In this article, I take you into a few of these research experiences. I offer examples against which you might compare your experiences and practices, begin a conversation, and raise questions for us to consider together. I focus primarily on how researchers treat participants because researchers usually initiate the research relationship, have authority over what gets said and done (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p. 422), and earn prestige and power from their research (Lincoln, 1995, p. 285).

I begin with ethnographic research in which we are friends with people we study or become friends with them during the course of doing our projects. I discuss how ethical considerations in doing research with intimate others are different from those in doing research with strangers. My first qualitative study, an ethnography of isolated fishing communities in which I became friends with the Fisher Folk, provides a case study.

Then I examine autoethnographic narratives I have written that include stories about my experiences interwoven with tales of family members and friends who are part of my stories. I discuss relational ethics in writing

about those who are alive and those who died. In each case, I consider our ethical responsibilities to those who are identifiable. I ask how we can protect their identities and our relationships with them, deal with privacy and consent, and decide when to take our work back to those who are implicated in our stories. What should we tell and what should we keep secret (see Simmel, 1906)? Personal narratives I have written about the death of my brother and failed communication with a friend who had AIDS, along with stories about the loss of my intimate partner and about caregiving my elderly mother, provide case studies.

Next, I move to autoethnographic projects I have conducted with coparticipants who also are coauthors. I examine how co-constructed autoethnographies circumvent some of the ethical issues in traditional qualitative studies on unfamiliar others and avoid some of the ethical concerns in writing about intimate others. Two studies—one I conducted with students about eating disorders, and one I conducted with my partner about abortion—provide case studies.

“Language can never contain a whole person, so every act of writing a person’s life is inevitably a violation,” says Josselson (1996, p. 62). If this is true, how do we research and write ethically? In this last section, I address this question by sharing the advice I give to students who long to write about intimate others.

Relational Ethics in Ethnography

My first ethnographic study, *Fisher Folk: Two Communities on Chesapeake Bay* (Ellis, 1986), was a comparison of two isolated fishing communities. I began fieldwork in Fishneck in 1972, while an undergraduate at the College of William and Mary. My comparative study in Crab Reef started in 1974, while I was a graduate student in sociology at SUNY Stony Brook. I continued doing research in both communities until the mid-1980s.

I was introduced in Fishneck as “a friend from the college” by a sociology professor at William and Mary, who had spent much time in the community and planned to write a book about it. We explained to those we visited that I was writing my undergraduate honor’s thesis on this community, concentrating on maritime work. I hung out, joining in whatever the *Fisher Folk* did, helping where I could. After many visits, community members seemed to forget I was doing “research” and did not respond as though that were a salient part of my identity. After all, I was involved in their lives, and there were more important things to think about—funerals

and doctors to go to, killings to be straightened out, sick babies to tend, and welfare checks that didn't arrive on time. Writing a research paper hardly measured up to the trials of everyday life.

I continued my work on fishing communities for my MA and PhD, living in this community during summers and for one full semester. I continued telling new acquaintances that I was writing about life on the water to meet the requirements of my graduate program. I discussed my project more fully with some community leaders; however, most people viewed me primarily as "Carolyn, a friend, coming to visit." Once set in motion, my role in the community took on a life of its own.

When I began this research, I was 21 years old, had never done "research" before, and had not had a course in ethnography. I wanted to be a good ethnographer, which I thought primarily meant observing closely what went on, being able to get my subjects to tell me things, being someone the community members wanted around, and coming up with sociological insights from my observations. I had a general notion of what one should do to be an ethical researcher based on my personal ethics, which included doing no harm, being kind and considerate, and honoring norms of reciprocity. We did not discuss relational ethics in my sociology classes nor did I address ethical considerations in my undergraduate honor's thesis about this community.

Looking back now at the role I took on, I do not remember being concerned about my ethical choices. I didn't define myself as deceiving the people I studied. I thought I was doing research the way it was supposed to be done, given the research climate of the time. IRB approval for my project, which came quickly when I stated that I would protect identities of community members with pseudonyms, gave me a sense that I was doing ethical research.

I did have concerns that taking on the salient role of researcher might cut off research possibilities because my participants might not talk freely, and I might not have access to all the arenas of life that had opened up to me. If my master status became "researcher," rather than "friend" as researcher, would the close relationships I had formed be affected? I worried that if my role changed, the *Fisher Folk* might feel used and hurt. Perhaps they might deem me a less desirable person to have around, which would hurt me. Who wants to spend time with someone who is out to use you for their own purposes? And how pleasant can it be to spend time with people who feel you are intruding into their lives?

Even had I wanted to come clean about my role, I could not figure out how to do so. How did I make my status of researcher salient in every interaction?

Did I say before any interaction, “Hi, nice to see you again. Now remember I’m a researcher”? Talk about inhibiting conversation. I felt uncertain about when and who I should remind because the boundaries of this peninsular community, and who was included in it, were ambiguous. Likewise, my role was unclear even to me. Although I was a researcher, I also saw myself as a friend to many people there, and sometimes I felt and acted like family.

My perception of the people in the community also released me from trying to come clean about my researcher status. It embarrasses me now; however, at the time I sometimes found myself thinking that because most of the people with whom I interacted couldn’t read, they would never see what I had written anyway and, if they did, they wouldn’t understand the sociological and theoretical story I was trying to tell.

By the time I began research in the second island community of Crab Reef, I was a slightly more sophisticated graduate student. Although I took a course in ethnography and, for a short while, an ethnographer served as the chair of my dissertation committee, primarily I worked with a statistician and an experimental social psychologist. No surprise we didn’t dwell on relational ethics at this point either.

In contrast to my role in Fishneck, I came into Crab Reef clearly defined as a researcher and stood out among the locals as a stranger. My master status was as a sociologist “writing a book.” Once I gave a talk in all three Island churches about my research, it was hard for anyone to say they didn’t know my reasons for being there. Besides, I constantly asked questions and had formally interviewed several community leaders. Because this community was geographically bounded and tightly knit, people in general—even people I didn’t know—seemed to be aware of my research purposes. I told them I was interested in work on the water, and how church and family contributed to social organization and change.

However, in both communities, I also became interested in how residents lived their day-to-day lives and made sense of their worlds. I doubt the people in either community (or I, for that matter) understood the extent to which I also would write about interpersonal relationships, dating norms, sexuality, hidden work control practices, lack of education, poverty, gossip, deviance, and scandals they had discussed with me.

Even with the full “outing” process of my researcher identity in Crab Reef, people I got to know in the community didn’t seem to dwell on it. Those I hung out with considered it more important that I wanted to accompany them on boats, showed interest in their lives, listened to them and provided input from the outside world, and, perhaps most of all, I liked to “party.” Because I attended church regularly and gave a “sermon” there

about the role of religion in the stability and success of the community, I also was seen as a good Christian person who wanted to give back something to the community—which, of course, I did.

Coming to know either community without becoming friends with some of the people there seemed inconceivable to me. Goffman (1989) says that in fieldwork you “try to subject yourself, hopefully, to their life circumstances” and you “want to be close to them while they are responding to what life does to them” (p. 125). That’s what I tried to do. Why else would people invite me back, want me around, and share their lives with me on any more than a superficial level? I found it unthinkable to spend so much time with community members and not develop friendships and caring relationships. What would it say about me if I could do that? Besides, I wanted their friendship; having friends helped ward off the feeling of being the lone fieldworker in a distant land. In both communities then, I bonded with people who told me things you tell close friends.

In Fishneck, the first community, I often spent time with women my age—late twenties, early thirties at the time. I learned much from “girl talk” and included a section in my book about family, including pregnancy and child birth, menstruation, sexual relationships, premarital and extramarital sex, sex-related diseases and problems, prostitution, and incest.

In Crab Reef, I usually spent time with David, a single man my age. Although I did not engage in much “girl talk” there, I often participated in social activities with David and his friends. David and I got along well, unless I asked too many questions; it didn’t hurt that David expressed interest in a romantic relationship with me. No doubt, my association with him gave me entrée into what otherwise might have been private gatherings, private talk, hidden norms, and clandestine, underground methods for getting around them. From these experiences, I was able to describe back stage behavior associated with gender roles, courtship rituals, premarital and extramarital sex, prostitution, drug and alcohol use, and other hidden activities.

In both communities, I made friends and I acted as a friend. But was I a friend?

Friendship in Ethnographic Research: “You Can Be Friendly, But Can You Be a Friend?”

Is it true, as Herbert Gans says, that you can “be friendly but not friends with those you study” (personal written communication, n.d.)? In traditional fieldwork studies where our purpose has been to get information, leave the field, and get back to our professional lives, Gans’ statement

offered efficacious advice; researchers could leave our fieldwork sites without regret and write without remorse because we were not committed to doing something with and for the community. I suspect though that even in those cases, many of us confused our roles. We became friends with those we studied because we couldn't help ourselves, and because it made our work easier while we were there. However, friendship was secondary to our research purposes, and when we left, our relational loyalties shifted to readers and professional associations (Josselson, 1996, p. 70). The problem comes not from being friends with participants but from acting as a friend yet not living up to the obligations of friendship.

In both communities, I was a friend in Bill Rawlins's (1992) sense of a *good friend*: "somebody to talk to, to depend on and rely on for help, support, and caring, and to have fun and enjoy doing things with" (p. 271). However, I wasn't a friend, especially in Fishneck, in that a friend is truthful and opens herself up to you. A friend can be trusted to have your well-being at heart. A friend is loyal. A friend doesn't tell your secrets or knowingly do things that might hurt you. I thought of myself as a caring friend to the people in the communities; however, I did not think sufficiently about what that entailed once I left the communities.

While I cared for the *Fisher Folk*, my loyalties were not to them. I was trying to find my place in academia, build my career, and contribute to sociological knowledge, goals no doubt nurtured by my graduate education. I believed my job as an ethnographer was to learn as much as I could about this community and write an interesting and informative dissertation. I was writing for the sociological community, members of whom commended me for getting to the hidden lives of the *Fisher Folk*. I felt I owed my readers the "truth" and that my book served the greater good and larger purpose of understanding and disseminating knowledge. Although I felt an occasional twinge when disclosing private sexual practices, I felt I couldn't ignore the categories that had been "scientifically" generated from my field notes (see Vidich & Bensman, 1958, p. 2).

In my mind, the dissertation and book that followed were separate from my relationship with the *Fisher Folk*. Thus, I failed to consider sufficiently how my blunt disclosures in print might affect the lives of the people about whom I wrote. Instead I cared about how committee members reacted to my dissertation and whether my manuscript would be published as a book. Although I didn't appear often in the text as a character, I considered the story I wrote to be my realist, sociological story about them, not their story. It didn't occur to me to take my work back to the communities and get their interpretations and responses because I was not writing for the community

or to make their lives better. I was supposed to be the expert. Wasn't this what getting a PhD was all about?

Perhaps my background made me more susceptible to splitting myself into two people—friend and researcher. I had moved away from my small-town, working-class upbringing in the mountains of Virginia and from my life as a social worker, a job I held before returning to graduate school, toward a professional identity as an educated scholar. Occupying two identities then—friend and researcher—provided one more divide in an already fragmented self.

Nine years after the publication of *Fisher Folk*, I published an article in which I discussed how my two identities collided (Ellis, 1995a). I told how several years after my book came out, the professor who had introduced me to the *Fisher Folk* in Fishneck copied and highlighted sections of the text, and read them to the people in the community. When I returned to Fishneck, my friends there confronted me with the words I had written; they reacted strongly to my descriptions of their smelling like fish, taking infrequent baths, being overweight, making little money, wearing mismatched clothing, having sex at an early age, and being uneducated. The Fishnecker had little difficulty deciphering the identities of my characters. My strategy of inventing pseudonyms starting with the same letters as the double names of the Fishnecker had made it easy for them. However, even without these clues, they recognized the stories they had told me and themselves as the characters. Although they knew I was writing about them, some said they thought we “were friends, just talkin’,” and never thought I’d write down the things they told me.

Two years later, a reporter for *Lingua Franca* (Allen, 1997) interviewed me for her report on deception in research. Against my wishes, she then went to Fishneck to interview the residents for her story. Her sudden appearance reopened wounds the Fishnecker felt about being objectified by researchers and reporters. The Fishnecker assumed the article she waved in front of them was another Ellis book, rather than the paper about my colliding identities I had already shown them, which offered an apology for how I had presented them.

None of this should have surprised me. After all, I had read Vidich and Bensman's (1958) account of the community response to their publishing *Small Town in Mass Society* in the 1950s, and other cases where community members had disliked what was written about them (e.g., see Boelen, 1992; Whyte, 1992). In *Small Town*, community members could identify the pseudonymed characters, some of whom were described as the power brokers of a supposedly democratic town. Later, people hung one of the

authors in effigy at a Fourth of July parade, which featured a float carrying an image of him bending over a manure spreader, and newspapers critiqued the ethics of what the two sociologists had written (Vidich & Bensman, 1964).

In contrast to Fishneck, I got little response when I sent a paper I had written, and later a copy of my book, to David, my main informant on Crab Reef. On my next visit, David said he wasn't going to share his copy with many people because they might not like some of the things in it. "She talked about the twins prostituting themselves," he told some friends. When I asked, he affirmed that everyone would recognize the twins, which made me regret not working harder to camouflage their identities. Although a few Islanders asked questions about the book on that visit, I never heard any comments about the book from anyone on the Island after that.

Because of geographic difficulties getting to Crab Reef Island, I returned for only a few visits after publishing my book and eventually lost contact with David. When I began this article, I was moved to reconnect with him. I called him and we exchanged a number of friendly e-mails. David seemed excited to be in touch, asking me about my life and telling me about his, even requesting that I send pictures to him; that is, until I began to ask questions about how Islanders had responded to my book in the two decades since it had been published. David replied briefly on e-mail to my query about the response, "I let one lady read it and she said, 'David, don't let the Island people get their hands on it.' So with the sake of your reputation and getting your feelings hurt, I didn't let many people see it. . . . Many of the people in the book have left the Island or passed away." He added that he had gotten a lot of calls from outsiders interested in the book, and he had talked to them. Then I wrote to him about the article I was writing on ethics in research and asked more questions about what bothered the Island people and how outsiders who contacted him had reacted. This time, David didn't write back. Almost a year later, he again sent me a friendly e-mail; however, he never addressed my questions about the book, and I decided it was inappropriate to ask again. I guess David continues to feel, as he did when I was following him around the Island, that real friends don't ask so many questions. I suspect now he is right.

I have remained friends with a few people in Fishneck, some of the same ones who were initially angry. In some ways this is remarkable because we live almost a thousand miles apart, I haven't visited for years, many of the people I was closest to have died, and it's been more than 20 years since I finished my research. Sometimes I think that if my former professor hadn't interfered in Fishneck, I might have gotten the same nonresponse there that

I got in Crab Reef and that most researchers get to their published articles. I regret hurting any of my participants; however, I have to say that, in hindsight, I don't regret being confronted by the Fishneckers' wrath. Their responses made me rethink how I should do research and live my life. I have become a better researcher and teacher as a result. I would have trouble now doing research on anyone, though I would be happy doing research with any number of people and communities in an egalitarian participative relationship (see Denzin, 2003; Reason, 2000).

Some scholars now advocate using "friendship as method" in ethnographic studies. For example, Lisa Tillmann-Healy (2001; see also Brooks, 2006), who has studied friendship across sexual orientation, promotes researching with an "ethic of friendship, a stance of hope, caring, justice, even love." Friendship as method, she continues, "is neither a program nor a guise strategically aimed at gaining further access. It is a level of investment in participants' lives that puts fieldwork relationships on par with the project" (Tillmann-Healy, 2003, 735). Researcher and friendship roles should weave together, expand and deepen the other. In her approach, as in participatory action research, the people you study are active participants at every step of the process. You research with them, rather than look into their lives from the outside as I thought I should do in *Fisher Folk*. In friendship as method then, there is no leaving the field.

Of course, this approach isn't appropriate for every study. Friendship as method would limit what and who we could study, some projects would be difficult to get through external review boards (Tillmann-Healy, 2003, p. 737), and this research has its own set of complicated ethical dilemmas. For example, friendship as method requires participants willing to subject themselves to scrutiny by a friend. As part of the friendship circle, a researcher has the potential to affect participants' lives more than a stranger might. Ongoing and overlapping relationships may make loyalties, confidences, and awareness contexts more difficult for all to negotiate (Tillmann-Healy, 2003, p. 741), though it helps that a researcher has an opportunity to work this out over time with participants. Friendship as method demands "radical reciprocity," a move from "studying them to studying us" (p. 735) and requires that the researcher turn the same scrutiny on herself as on others.

Relational Ethics in Autoethnographic Studies

As a genre of writing and research, autoethnography starts with personal experiences and studies "us" in relationships and situations. Doing

autoethnography involves a back-and-forth movement between experiencing and examining a vulnerable self and observing and revealing the broader context of that experience. When we write about ourselves, we also write about others. In so doing, we run the risk that other characters may become increasingly recognizable to our readers, though they may not have consented to being portrayed in ways that would reveal their identity; or, if they did consent, they might not understand exactly to what they had consented. How do we honor our relational responsibilities yet present our lives in a complex and truthful way for readers?

Writing About Intimate Others Who Have Died

Given that loss is a prevalent topic of autoethnography (see, e.g., Adams, 2006; Bochner, 1997; Davis, 2005b; Ellis, 1993; Jago, 2002; Marzano, in press; Perry, 2001), often researchers write about people who have died. People lose some legal rules of privacy after they die, and the dead can't be libeled because they cannot suffer as a result of damaged reputations (Couser, 2004, p. 6). Along with these changing rules of privacy, are there changing ethical standards for writing about people who have died? Writing about the deceased raises significant relational ethical issues (see also Freadman, 2004).

First, the easier cases: Sometimes our stories about people who have died serve as memorials that keep our loved ones alive in our memories. For example, I wrote about the death of my younger brother Rex in an airplane crash (Ellis, 1993). The piece extolled his positive characteristics, and the rituals, emotions, and experiences surrounding his death. I think Rex would have been delighted that I wrote about him, and pleased that there was a memorial to him. Nevertheless, I had to seriously consider how I positioned other family members in the story and be concerned with their reactions. I was worried that the mere existence of the story might disturb them. Although most of my family seemed glad I had written about Rex, my mother asked me to stop reading this story to her after only a few paragraphs, and my older brother declined to read it because of the sad memories it evoked.

Similarly, I wrote a story about my relationship to a friend, Peter, who died from AIDS in 1994 (Ellis, 1995c). Although Peter was alive at the time, I felt I could not ask his permission to write his story because it would have been unethical to intrude into his intimate experience of dying for my own personal purposes. I did, however, seek permission to publish my story from his partner, Diane, after Peter died. On reading the story, Diane said, "I love it. It keeps him alive. People should know that Peter lived." She asked that I use their real names, which I did.

However, writing about people who are dead often is ethically more complicated, especially if you are trying to write about a complex, long-term relationship. *Final Negotiations* tells about my relationship with a romantic partner who died in 1985 (Ellis, 1995b). In this book, I describe the attachment, chronic illness, and loss in my 9-year relationship with Gene Weinstein, a sociologist. I divulge personal details that show flaws, disappointments, and weaknesses in my character and Gene's, as well as our strengths, achievements, and good judgments.

I began writing "field notes" on which this story is based during the last year of Gene's life. He seemed flattered to be the object of my writing, perhaps to be spared the "indignity of oblivion" (Freadman, 2004, p. 140). When he could, Gene approved and participated in my chronicles. For example, when I showed him some of my initial writing, he responded that keeping notes was therapeutic for me and encouraged me to continue. Later, in the hospital, he consented to my recording details of his memories of near-death experiences he had on coming out of comas. Sometimes we taped our conversations about his illness and talked about the sociological insights we had.

Gene never intended to write about this experience, nor did he try to control what I wrote or would write in the future. Did he assume my story would portray him only positively? Did he assume his personal life would be hidden in abstract concepts? Given what he knew about me as an ethnographer, I doubt either is true. What is true is that during this time period his attention was taken up with the next cough, getting through the day, and coping physically with the ravages of emphysema. Like the *Fisher Folk*, Gene had other more important things on his mind than what I was writing, and my role as romantic partner and care giver was more crucial in his life than my identity as researcher.

Thus, I doubt Gene had much idea about the depth and form my writing would take or what I would reveal. At the time, neither did I (see also Freadman, 2004, p. 128). Although trust often was an issue in our relationship while he was alive, we tacitly subscribed to the value of what Freadman calls an "implicit trust provision," meaning both of us should agree to what got revealed about us as a couple (Freadman, 2004, p. 143) and how we constructed it for others. However, in reality our "implicit trust provision" also allowed for each of us to reveal unilaterally if doing so provided insight and healing, and especially if it improved our relationship. Sometimes talking about the relationship with others contributed to our desire to become the best selves we could, in and out of the relationship. As I decided what to tell after Gene died, I moved back and forth between considering the

constraints of telling and the possibility of healing, between loyalty to Gene and creating the best self I could become after his death. The backdrop for my decisions was considering how we had dealt with trust when he was alive.

I don't know how Gene would react to the story I wrote. I suspect there are things he'd love; I think he'd admire the difficulty and guts of the undertaking. I suspect there are things he would disagree with, things I revealed he would have preferred kept quiet, parts of his personality I described he wished nobody remembered, parts of my own that he might have depicted as more destructive than had I. If Gene could tell his story, I suspect his too would be a complex tale where he might rightfully portray himself as less controlling and more deserving given the pain he endured. Because we always jointly worked out issues in our relationship and both of us loved to think about moral complexities and explore multiple definitions of the situation, in my fantasy, Gene would want to write a co-constructed version with me and be willing to let multiple interpretations—his and mine—stand, after a good argument, of course.

Writing my way through grief in this text, I realized some of the moral conundrums my relationship with Gene presented. I began to understand what Primo Levi (1958/1987) calls “the need to tell our story to ‘the rest’,” to achieve “an interior liberation” (p. 15). I felt I had to tell my story to move on in my personal and professional life. This story about our relationship, his illness, and my caregiving become a story of my experience and growth. In this account, I considered what I needed to tell for myself, while honoring my implicit relational trust provision with Gene the best I could. This included protecting us together and individually, and other people in the story. Thus, I tried to tell a truthful account for readers, while I omitted things, occasionally changed details of a scene, and invented composite characters to protect identities. All of these techniques are commonly used in ethnographic storytelling and memoir.

Although I was concerned about how Gene would be remembered, I could not predict how people would respond to my narrative. Although most saw my book as a loving tribute, a few voiced concerns that I presented Gene in ways not worthy of his stature. While most found complexities in our relational dynamics, some voiced their dislike of Gene or me as characters who were too concerned with our dyadic morality (Ellis, 1996a).

Readers directed most of their negative responses toward me, the person still alive, who had a relationship with her professor and admitted to engaging in some of the recreational drug use and sexual openness common in the early seventies (Ellis, 1996a). To write an effective autoethnography

demands showing perceived warts and bruises as well as the accolades and successes; thus risking this kind of criticism comes with the territory. My way of dealing with what has appeared to be personal criticism has been to turn my attention back on the critics and to ask: What can I learn from your responses about your identity, socialization, moral community, and alternate constructions of a relational world? Most of the time, that strategy protects me from taking criticism personally, it moves me away from any absorption with self, and toward a sociological understanding of what is going on.

In some ways writing this book put me back into the ethical space of the response I got to *Fisher Folk*. This time though the critical response came not from my “participants” but from colleagues in academia who felt I betrayed Gene or, more commonly, believed I had turned my back on sociology to write personal narrative.

Writing About Intimate Others Who Are Alive

When we write about intimate others who are alive, we have an opportunity to discuss with them what to tell. However, this possibility also opens up a Pandora’s box of communication complications. Seldom are we completely open with people in our lives about how we see them or how we see ourselves relative to them. We often fear that those in our stories will be hurt by what we’ve revealed, how we’ve interpreted events or people, or how we ourselves feel. Often we operate under the fear of the unknown; we don’t know how intimate others will react to what we write, and it feels safer to stay in the accustomed disclosure (or nondisclosure) system that is predictable and comfortable. Sometimes we assume intimate others, who aren’t members of the academy, won’t understand what we’re doing, as I did with *Fisher Folk*. Or, once we’ve written something that feels right (and perhaps will get published), we don’t want to deal with differing interpretations or memories of others. In working with people who are doing autoethnography, I have encountered the fear that taking work back to others in our stories might disrupt the very relationships and family systems we’re trying to improve by writing. Some have mentioned the fear of having charges pressed against them, or that family members might harm them. For example, editors of *Qualitative Health Research* requested that Carter (2002) write under a pseudonym about her abuse by her former husband because they wanted to protect her safety and others’ privacy. All autoethnographers must resolve how and what to tell intimate others about how they have been included in our stories.

My biggest fears in writing about my mother while she was alive included hurting her and the changing relational dynamics that might result. My first story, "Maternal Connections" (Ellis, 1996b), described a scene in a hospital where I was taking care of my mother. In this loving tribute, I said: "Taking care of my mom feels natural, as though she is my child. The love and concern flowing between us feels like my mom and I are falling in love." Yet, because I described her body—the scars and bruises, loose skin and hanging breasts, bile and diarrhea—I felt reluctant to show this piece to my mom before I published it. I was not sure how to explain why I needed to talk about her body and bodily functions. I feared my mother would become angry and tell me these aren't things you talk about in public. Reminiscent of how I dealt with the fishing community, I was not sure she would understand my purpose—for example, to generate discussion of caregiving as a gift rather than a burden—and a voice inside my head whispered that she would never see this story anyway. Because my essay questioning the ethics of my undisclosed research with the *Fisher Folk* (1995a) was published just before I wrote this story about my mother, I have to wonder if I assumed family members didn't have the rights of strangers, or that as a family member I had MORE rights to my/her/our story than to the story of the *Fisher Folk*.

However, not telling my mother about publishing this story felt ethically suspicious. Every time I used this piece in class or a workshop, the issue came up. Often I brought it up, trying to work through my feelings about the ethical complexities. Soon after the young man spoke up in the workshop, the vignette with which I began this article, I had another experience care taking my mom about which I wanted to write. This time, because of the agony I had experienced not telling her about "Maternal Connections," I knew I could not publish anything that I didn't okay with her first. So I read the new story to her and then framed the final published story of caregiving with a description of my experience of reading what I had written to my mother. My purpose in this layered account was to address the intricacies of what it means to inform and do ethical research on intimate others.

As I read the story to my mother, I sometimes omitted and changed things. For example, I left out the mention of my mother's curved back and shaking hand, physical signs that perhaps she had not noticed. She was a proud person, and I didn't want to make her feel worse about herself; however, I also wondered in the context of the story if the reality was that I didn't want to face up to the signs myself. Did I, on some level, prefer to pretend with her, keep a balance between openness and pretense? I skipped the word *vacuous* to describe her expression, thinking she wouldn't

understand it, or if she did, she would be upset by it. I eliminated mention of her underwear, private areas, and bunions because I feared she would think they were too personal to be in a story. Similarly, I skipped the word *stool* as a descriptor of the test she had to take. Then I questioned whether I thought mentioning *stool* was too personal. Maybe I was the one hung up about bodily functions.

I asked myself if I could claim I revealed the story to her if I didn't read everything, and I left the question open for readers to ponder. Although I wanted to share what I had written with my mother, I still did not want to affect negatively her self-image nor take away her hope that she could get better. I did not want her to be hurt, upset, or disappointed with me. Protecting our relationship was more important to me than being able to say that I had revealed every word. Examining how and what I revealed and concealed provided useful information about how difficult this kind of revelation can be and the grey areas between revealing and concealing. I felt that the article provided useful information for others writing autoethnography.

Reading this story to my mother generated feelings of love on my part and seemingly on hers as she expressed her love for me that same day. She told me she liked the story and thanked me for writing it. In answer to my query about what bothered her in the story, she replied, "I like it. You can write anything you want. Anything." Later she suggested that I give the story to other family members to read. I did. The next time I came home, I gave her a revised copy of this story. Although I never asked, I doubt she read it. On that visit, I finally read "Maternal Connections" to her, and I felt justified changing a few of the words in that reading as well.

Fortunately, with each story, each gentle reading, each caregiving experience, my relationship with my mother grew deeper, more open, and more caring. As our feelings grew in the context of caregiving, we openly shared more of our selves with each other, and this enabled me to feel more confident in my decisions about what was appropriate to tell. In this context, it felt right to reveal our life together even though my mother was not aware of every word I wrote nor every nuance in what it meant to be a main character in my tale.

Circumventing Relational Ethical Issues in Co-researched Autoethnography

Co-constructed autoethnographies in which researchers are participants and authors circumvent some of the ethical issues of traditional qualitative studies on unfamiliar others. They also are not fraught with some of the

ethical concerns of revealing the lives of intimate others in personal stories. In “Interactive Interviewing: Talking about Emotional Experience,” Lisa Tillmann-Healy, Christine Kiesinger, and I (Ellis, Kiesinger, and Tillmann-Healy, 1997) wrote about the meanings and embodiment of bulimia. Although I did not have an eating disorder, I shared with my coauthors who did concerns about food and bodies that arise from women’s immersion in cultural contradictions of thin bodies and abundant consumption. Using interactive interviews, the three of us collaborated and shared stories as researchers and participants. We found the understandings, feelings, insight, and stories that emerged and evolved during interaction—what we learned together—to be as compelling as the stories each of us brought to the group interview sessions.

Each of us volunteered to be participants in this study, had control over how it went, were deeply committed, shared the goals of the research, and felt we had something to gain professionally and personally. Thus, we did not confront the ethical tension inherent in most research, which asks people “to take part in, or undergo, procedures that they have not actively sought out or requested, and that are not intended solely or even primarily for their direct benefit” (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p. 271; see also Lincoln, 1995, p. 285).

Being researchers and participants meant that some ethical issues normally present in doing research on emotional topics were not as salient. For example, we did not have to worry to the same degree about: intruding into the lives of unsuspecting and vulnerable others, coping with participants who changed their minds about having their story told, revealing what should have remained private, doing emotional harm to unsuspecting participants and characters in our stories, gaining consent and making sure our participants knew what that meant, receiving negative response to stories we might take back to them, telling stories that might have unforeseen negative repercussions, or dealing with what and who to tell about our research (see Denzin, 2003).

Nevertheless, given the emotional and personal nature of the project and especially my position vis-à-vis the other two researchers—still PhD students when we began—ethical concerns arose regarding our relationship with each other. We had to be on guard continually to process how we were feeling about the project and what we wanted out of it. I emphasized that Christine and Lisa not reveal anything to me they might regret later because they might be concerned with how I, their professor, saw them. We came up with strategies so that they might write privately and talk together without me. When we shared stories, we held them in confidence until we

agreed to make them public. In each meeting, we created opportunities to change our minds, and to add to or delete from the stories we had told as we mined transcripts from the previous meeting.

No matter how close we grew, we acknowledged that Lisa and Christine had to carefully think through how they would be constructed by others after telling their stories, especially because they were about to apply for academic jobs. This article would become part of their application packets, identifying them as women with eating disorders.

We constantly felt the dialectical oppositions operating within our intimate conversations as we moved back and forth between expression and protection and between disclosure and restraint (Bochner, 1984). We were eager to understand each other and the issues we addressed more deeply, and we agreed to use mild discomfort as a cue to explore further. At the same time, we were committed to protect one another from distress and harm. We tried to develop trust by openly sharing our lives; however, we also had to respect each other's needs for privacy and restraint. Verbal responses, non-verbal cues, and our own feelings guided what we said and asked, which sometimes meant holding back comments until they seemed more appropriate. We probed gently, listened attentively, and let interaction flow "naturally" in an atmosphere that grew candid, open, and trusting. Letting this paper unfold gradually over time and holding a series of meetings, including one in a restaurant, helped us to become comfortable with each other and the personal stories we told. We constantly reassessed how we were feeling and what was transpiring. As we became closer friends, we dropped our guards and revealed more, sharing intimate knowledge and revisited previous discussions to probe what we had been feeling and thinking.

In an earlier study, "Telling and Performing Personal Stories: The Constraints of Choice in Abortion," my partner Art Bochner and I (Ellis & Bochner, 1992) wrote a script about our reactions to an unexpected pregnancy early in our relationship. Two months after I had an abortion, we separately wrote stories about the experience. Then we read each other's stories, discussed them, and co-constructed a version that represented our joint experiences. As in the eating disorders work, this study provided some ethical benefits. For example, we had the freedom to explore emotional trauma without worrying about doing emotional harm to other vulnerable participants. Likewise, we did not have to fear losing control of our words and experiences to another researcher. And, unlike the coauthors of the eating disorders study, we started on an equal plane. Although our personal relationship might have been vulnerable in this exploration, we found that co-construction greatly strengthened and deepened our bond.

On the other hand, our personal lives, once published, became vulnerable to attack and disapproval by readers, especially given the moral complexity and explosiveness of the issue of abortion. Certainly there have been responses to this story that have made us uncomfortable. However, we feel that the value of providing the story to others more than made up for the discomfort. We sought to offer a conversation that would be helpful to others facing similar circumstances, one that detailed the emotional and communicative aspects of the emotional trauma of choosing abortion. We wanted our work to reflect the human side of the lived experience of abortion—the meanings, feelings, contradictions, and ambivalences embodied by the experience of choice.

You become the stories you write—Art and I became the couple who had an abortion and wrote about it. No matter that we might feel differently now than then and see ourselves as changed from the characters presented in the story, this portrayal of ourselves is edified in print. An important element in writing autoethnography then is considering the ethical responses to one's own story by readers. A second is considering the people in your life who might be distressed by your revelations. For example, we have come to question the appropriateness of using this work in our own classes. The story raises moral questions and places us, as teachers who have experienced abortion, and students, some of whom see abortion as morally wrong, into difficult relational positions. We did not show our story to our families, though it is available should they seek it out. And, if we had children who might later read this story, we might have felt a moral obligation to keep this story private.

Relational Ethics Revisited: What Do You Tell Your Students?

I haven't come close to addressing all the ethical questions that arise in doing research with intimate others. These questions swirl around me like a sand storm in every research project I do or supervise. Just when I think I have a handle on a guiding principle about research with intimate others, on closer examination, my understanding unfurls into the intricacies, yes-and, uniqueness, and relational and personal responsibilities of the particular case under question. Given this confusion, you might ask, What advice can you give me? Or, what do you tell your students?

First, I tell them that my experiences writing ethnography and autoethnography have taught me that I have to live the experience of doing research

with intimate others, think it through, improvise, write and rewrite, anticipate and feel its consequences. There is no one set of rules to follow. As Arthur Frank (2004) says,

We do not act on principles that hold for all times. We act as best we can at a particular time, guided by certain stories that speak to that time, and other people's dialogical affirmation that we have chosen the right stories. . . . The best any of us can do is to tell one another our stories of how we have made choices and set priorities. By remaining open to other people's responses to our moral maturity and emotional honesty...we engage in the unfinalized dialogue of seeking the good. (pp. 191-192)

I tell my students to seek the good.

I tell them that “[t]he wisest know that the best they can do . . . is not good enough. The not so wise, in their accustomed manner, choose to believe there is no problem and that they have solved it” (Malcolm, 1990, p. 162). I tell them to be wise, but not cynical.

I tell them to pay attention to IRB guidelines, then warn that their ethical work is not done with the granting of IRB approval. I tell them no matter how strictly they follow procedural guide lines, situations will come up in the field and in interviews that will make their heads spin and their hearts ache. I tell them they should make ethical decisions in research the way they make them in their personal lives. Then I caution them to question more and engage in more role taking than they normally do because of the authorial and privileged role that being a researcher gives them.

I tell them to ask questions and talk about their research with others, constantly reflecting critically on ethical practices at every step (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; see also, Cannella & Lincoln, 2004; Mason, 1996). I tell them relationships may change in the course of research—that they may become friends with those in their studies—and to be aware that ethical considerations may change as well. Much ethnographic and autoethnographic research is emergent.

I tell them that often relationships grow deeper over time, but sometimes they don't. That, even when they do get consent from those in their study, they should be prepared for new complexities along the way. I tell them to practice “process consent,” checking at each stage to make sure participants still want to be part of their projects (Etherington, 2005; Grafanaki, 1996). I tell them that people change their minds, back out, don't want to talk to you or participate in your studies anymore. I tell them to have back up plans. I tell them to include multiple voices and multiple interpretations in

their studies when they can. Then I caution them not to ask too much of participants who may get little out of being part of their study.

I tell them to think of the greater good of their research—does it justify the potential risk to others? Then I warn that they should be cautious that their definition of *greater good* isn't one created for their own good.

I tell them to think about ethical considerations before writing, but not to censure anything in the first draft to get the story as nuanced and truthful as possible. Then, I warn,

Now you must deal with the ethics of what to tell. Don't worry. We'll figure out how to write this ethically. There are strategies to try. You might omit things, use pseudonyms or composite characters, alter the plot or scene, position your story within the stories of others, occasionally decide to write fiction. Sometimes it may be appropriate to write and not publish.

I tell my students they should inform people they write about and get their consent. Then they bring me projects where that is an unreasonable goal and might even be irresponsible. Sometimes getting consent and informing characters would put them in harm's way (such as from an abusive parent or partner). Sometimes my requirement that they get consent means they cannot do a project that would help them heal and get on with life. Then I ask myself, "Is the well-being of the researcher always less important than the well-being of the other, even others who have behaved badly?" I answer, "No, not always."

I tell them they should let their participants and those they write about read their work. Then a student, writing about being abused by her brother, convinces me it would cause unraveling of a family system that is, after many long years, intact. Sometimes giving our work back to participants could damage the very people and relationships we're intent on helping (see also, Kiesinger, 2002).

Recently, a student, who was studying mental health teams who care for at-risk children and their parents, wrote,

I plan to publish my dissertation, and while I can pretty well presume that the mother won't be reading academic texts, what if she does? I offered to everyone on the team that they could read it, and she was the only one who didn't express an interest. What if she had? Should I have given her an edited version? How ethical is that? When I interviewed her, I never let on that I thought she and her home were "dirty," so how surprised would she be to find out what I really thought? Should I have been more candid? Would that have been more or less ethical? (Davis, 2005a, n.p.)

Situations like these make me modify what I tell my students. “Sometimes you may decide not to take your work back to those you write about. In those cases, you should be able to defend your reasons for not seeking their responses.” To this particular student, I say,

People never get over being called dirty. Rewrite the offending passages—try to show the dust and clutter without saying THEY’re dirty. Concentrate on what in your life makes you so bothered by her living conditions and leads you to construct her as dirty. That will take away a little of the sting if she ever reads your dissertation. Assume everyone in your story will read it.

I tell them that writing about people who have died will not solve their ethical dilemmas about what to tell and may make the dilemmas more poignant. I tell them that dead people can’t give them permission, approve what they say, or offer their accounts, that they will feel a tension between their implicit trust provisions with those who have died and telling what is necessary for their own healing, construction of self, and offers of comfort to readers.

They say they just want to write their own story. I tell them that self-revelations always involve revelations about others (Freadman, 2004, p. 128). I tell them they don’t own their story. That their story is also other people’s stories. I tell them they don’t have an inalienable right to tell the stories of others. I tell them that intimate, identifiable others deserve at least as much consideration as strangers and probably more. “Doing research with them will confront you with the most complicated ethical issues of your research lives.” I tell them they have to live in the world of those they write about and those they write for and to. I tell them they must be careful how they present themselves. “Writing about your depression and suicide attempt while taking sick leave and trying to earn tenure?” I ask, aghast, and the former student replies, “Yes, I have to write myself out of my depression.” She does, and gets a teaching award the next year (Jago, 2002).

I tell them our studies should lead to positive change and make the world a better place. “Strive to leave the communities, participants, and yourselves better off at the end of the research than they were at the beginning,” I say. “In the best of all worlds, all of those involved in our studies will feel better. But sometimes they won’t; you won’t.” I tell them that most important to me is that they not negatively affect their lives and relationships, hurt themselves, or others in their world. I tell them to hold relational concerns as high as research. I tell them when possible to research from an ethic of care. That’s the best we can do. “But what about those who kept secrets

from me, who hurt me?” they ask, and I reply, “Write to understand how they put their worlds together, how you can be a survivor of the world they thrust upon you.” Sometimes I say, “I don’t know.”

I warn that they are not therapists so they should seek assistance from professionals and mentors when they have problems. I tell them I am not a therapist, but that I will be there for them. I seek to make my relationship with my students similar to what I want their relationships to be with those they study—one of raising difficult questions and then offering care and support when answers come from deep within. I tell them we will take each project on a case-by-case basis, and I promise to be available to discuss each step of the way. I tell them that every case has to be considered “in context and with respect to the rights, wishes, and feelings of those involved” (Freadman, 2004, p. 124).

I tell them that not only are there ethical questions about doing autoethnography but also that autoethnography itself is an ethical practice. In life, we often have to make choices in difficult, ambiguous, and uncertain circumstances. At these times, we feel the tug of obligation and responsibility. That’s what we end up writing about. Autoethnographies show people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and what their struggles mean (Bochner & Ellis, 2006, p. 111).

I tell them that there is a caregiving function to autoethnography (Bochner & Ellis, 2006). Listening to and engaging in others’ stories is a gift and sometimes the best thing we can do for those in distress (see Greenspan, 1998). Telling our stories is a gift; our stories potentially offer readers companionship when they desperately need it (Mairs, 1993). Writing difficult stories is a gift to self, a reflexive attempt to construct meaning in our lives and heal or grow from our pain.

I tell them I believe that most people want to do the right thing, the sensible thing. As human beings, we long to live meaningful lives that seek the good. As friends, we long to have trusting relationships that care for others. As researchers, we long to do ethical research that makes a difference. To come close to these goals, we constantly have to consider which questions to ask, which secrets to keep, and which truths are worth telling.

That’s what I tell them. Then I listen closely to what they say back.

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