

# **NEW ISSUES IN REFUGEE RESEARCH**

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## **Life history and personal narrative: theoretical and methodological issues relevant to research and evaluation in refugee contexts.**

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Life history and personal narrative<sup>2</sup> are valuable tools for research and evaluation. Whilst not commonly used in refugee contexts, they do offer a number of advantages:

- They allow for the communication of refugees' voices in a powerful and relatively direct way.
- They enable us to capture the particularity, the complexity and the richness of an individual refugee's experiences.
- They help to restore, both to the teller and to the audience, a sense of the refugee's own agency, however limited by events and external interventions.
- They highlight refugees' most serious concerns and can challenge us to think creatively about ways to address them.
- They are a means to discover unexpected gaps in our knowledge of particular situations.
- They tend to create a strong bond between the researcher and the subject, which can be empowering for vulnerable refugees.
- They can help us to understand the impact of trauma, and in some cases the process of recording may be cathartic.

Underwriting these arguments for using life history and personal narrative in refugee contexts is recent research, especially by psychologists, into the role of narrative<sup>3</sup>. Brockmeier and Harre summarise this clearly and succinctly when they say, "as far as human affairs are concerned it is above all through narrative that we make sense of the wider, more differentiated, and more complex texts and contexts of our experience" (2001:40). If narrative really is this fundamental to how people understand their lives and the world around them, then we should be more attentive to the stories that refugees tell about their past and their present. This is not to say that other beneficiary-based approaches, whose importance has been clearly highlighted (Hallam 1998, Apthorpe & Atkinson 1999, Bakewell 2000, Kaiser 2002), should be abandoned. Research and evaluation in refugee contexts requires a broad tool kit of methods that can be drawn on as appropriate, and what I am arguing for is the insertion of life history and personal narrative into this tool kit.

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank David Turton, Jeff Crisp and Greta Uehling for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Watson & Watson-Franke define life history as, "any retrospective account by the individual of his [or her] life in whole or part, in written or oral form, *that has been elicited or prompted by another person*" (1985:2, italics in original). "Personal narrative" similarly refers to any retrospective account, but does not imply the broad chronology of a life history, nor need it be elicited or prompted by another person. Thus personal narratives would include autobiographical stories, written down in private by the individual him or herself, shared during the flow of everyday conversation, or recorded during an interview session.

<sup>3</sup> For a discourse to be narrative it must have characters, setting and a plot, that develops over time.

There are, however, theoretical and methodological issues around life history and personal narrative that need careful and critical consideration before using these approaches. This paper aims to set out some of these issues, primarily from an anthropological perspective. Questions that will be raised are for example: to what extent is a life history the subjective interpretation of someone's life or an accurate account of the past? How much does the presence of the interviewer affect what is said? Is genre important for shaping the way people speak about their lives? Are these approaches going to be suitable for use in all refugee contexts?

We begin with a brief section describing how these approaches have developed within the discipline of Social Anthropology, which serves to highlight what sort of document a life history or personal narrative is, and what therefore we can hope to learn from such material. The next section looks in detail at how to read and interpret a particular life history or personal narrative, and I offer a set of five questions as a framework for this process. In this section, I draw heavily on the life history of an Angolan refugee named Susanna Mwana-uta, which I recorded during anthropological fieldwork in a refugee settlement in the mid 1990s<sup>4</sup> (Powles 2002). In the third section, I concentrate on the more practical issues of recording and writing life history and personal narrative. In the final section, I discuss ethical considerations, some of which apply to other beneficiary-based approaches and others which are more specific to life history and personal narrative, and then I raise the question of whether it is possible to make these approaches more participatory.

### **Life history: the development of an approach within anthropology**

The first attempt by an anthropologist to use life history was in the 1920s, when Paul Radin produced *Crashing Thunder*. His aim was as he puts it himself, "not to obtain autobiographical details about some definite personage, but to have some representative middle-aged individual of moderate ability describe his life in relation to the social group in which he had grown up..." (Radin, in Langness 1965:8). To this end, he invited a Winnebago Indian named Crashing Thunder to write down his story from childhood to the present, and the result is indeed a fascinating insight into American Indian culture that complements very effectively the generalizing anthropological accounts more typical of the period.

There was little change to Radin's emphasis on life history as primarily a means to illuminate the workings of society and culture in most of the anthropological life histories of the next sixty years (Watson & Watson-Franke 1985:13). There was however some critical discussion about methodology, so that for example whereas Radin had given only fleeting attention to the context in which Crashing Thunder produced the manuscript of his life history, later works explored the relationship between the anthropologist and the subject more fully and how this might have affected what was said. The difficulty of finding a truly "representative" life history was also raised; Lewis in his famous book *The Children of Sanchez* (1961) tried to circumvent the problem by juxtaposing a number of life histories from within a family rather than concentrating on just one individual. He explains in the introduction, "this

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<sup>4</sup> Fieldwork was carried out in Meheba Refugee Settlement from Sept 1992-July 1993, Dec 1994-August 1996, July 1998 and July 2002. My thanks to the Government of the Republic of Zambia for allowing me to conduct this research, and also to the ESRC who provided funding.

approach gives us a cumulative, multifaceted, panoramic view of each individual, of the family as a whole, and of many aspects of lower-class Mexican life. The independent versions of the same incidents given by the various family members provide a built-in check upon the reliability and validity of much of the data and thereby partially offset the subjectivity inherent in a single autobiography' (pg.xi). The need to make explicit the extent of editing and rearranging of a recorded life history in the production of a final text was also acknowledged, although not always followed (Langness 1965:9).

A shift in emphasis came in the 1980s; the "subjectivity" of which Lewis was so wary (above), was finally accepted as inherent to life history and a legitimate subject of analysis (Watson & Watson-Franke 1985:13). This did not mean that the earlier categories of society or culture were abandoned, indeed they were seen as shaping individual experience and expression in very important and very interesting ways (ibid:2). It was a matter of asking new questions of a recorded life history, so that for example rather than asking, "how does this contribute to our general understanding of the process of displacement?" we might ask, "what was this individual's experience of displacement and how did she make sense of it in the terms of her own culture?" The problem of whether a life history was representative or generalizable receded, as the very particularity of every life history was in a sense celebrated.

In the meantime some were beginning to doubt the appropriateness of using life history at all in cultures where people might not think of themselves in the kind of isolated, individualistic and linear way that the approach tends towards. Moreover, there was a recognition that the life history interview might have not only shaped the way that the subject spoke about his or her experiences but actually made them a stranger to their normal self, seeing those experiences in subtly new ways because of the encounter.

Those with such doubts moved towards recording stories, or personal narratives, rather than focusing on formal life history. One advantage of this approach is that frequently the anthropologist does not need to initiate their telling, the stories will be a natural component of the everyday conversations going on around her during fieldwork and of which she is part. And by looking at the social situation that made their telling appropriate, the anthropologist should be able to deduce their meaning more fully (Rosaldo 1986:122). A book composed of stories told by a variety of people, either to the anthropologist directly or to others, and in manifold situations, is necessarily going to be more fragmented than a life history. However the strength of this sort of account is its capacity to hold together contradictory and even opposing voices.

There was a surge of interest in narrative generally across the human sciences (Hinchman & Hinchman 2001). Its potential to emphasise individual agency, a plurality of perspectives and the richness and complexity of human affairs appealed not only to anthropologists, but philosophers, psychologists, sociologists and historians (ibid: xiv). A very fruitful inter-disciplinary discussion has emerged resulting in a number of excellent edited collections, such as *Storied Lives* (Rosenwald and Ochberg:1992), *Narrative and Genre* (Chamberlain & Thompson:1998) and *Narrative and Identity* (Brockmeier and Carbaugh:2001). Some of the insights that have come out of these collaborative works will be explored

further in the next section on reading and interpreting life history and personal narrative.

## **Reading and interpreting life history and personal narrative**

### *Flight from Angola*

Susanna: It was that boy Chinyama who came to warn people. Without him all of us would have died. No one would have survived - no one would have come out of it alive.

The UNITA<sup>5</sup> soldiers had captured him but whilst they were taking him off the child managed to run away! It was dark, but he struggled through the bush. He struggled through the bush and he came back and warned us, 'if you stay you will die!' It was night, but people packed. It was night but we cut through the bush. Did we rest? No! We walked night and day. And didn't we cover ground!

Then suddenly we were at Mbalango; we had already crossed the border and entered Zambia.

We stayed there for a while but we realized Mbalango was a place of great hunger.

Julia: Did anyone take you in?

Susanna: Did anyone take us in? We just put up at some relatives of mine. But you wouldn't believe the hunger at Mbalango, and no water. From nightfall, through the next day to sundown with hunger; not even a cassava root or a sweet potato to eat. The next day our hearts would cheat us and we would go and steal.

And when you went to do piecework all you would get was a small plate of cassava in return [for a whole day's work]. I had a lot of beads, a whole pouch of them, like that white one there you can see on my key {she points to the padlock on her hut door}; all of them got finished, exchanging them for cassava or for a little maize meal. Aah, we said, we will die. Lets go. We moved on to Kalova.

When we came to Kalova we couldn't believe how much food there was! When you went to do piecework you would find a big basket full of food for you. After some time my husband Chihango discovered his grandchild was there, his mother's brother's daughter's child. He gave a field to him, what a field!

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<sup>5</sup> National Union for the Total Liberation of Angola.

*Forced relocation*

We began to take cassava to sell in Zambezi town; we needed money for soap and relish and other things like that. And we stayed there at Kalova. Then we heard that they had started having meetings again [at the District Council]. They sent word to the Headman where we were staying, 'Lilamono, we know that you are keeping Angolans at your village, if you don't send them away to [the refugee settlement] at Meheba we will come and gather up everyone from your homestead and send them all to Meheba instead. The visitors (*vangeji*) whom you have hidden will remain behind and we will send all your own people to Meheba.'

We thought to ourselves, what?! How can it be, we visitors stay here and Lilamono go? We hide here so that they take Lilamono and we remain? Ah...

Lilamono came to see us at our place, he arrived in the afternoon:

'Chihango'.

'Yes'.

'Have you heard about this ruling they have announced?'

Chihango said, 'yes, we have heard about it.'

'If it was up to me, Lilamono, certainly I would have kept you here, but it's those bad folks where you were before; they went and told [the authorities] that Lilamono has hidden some Angolans. And now they are telling me, "if you persist in hiding those Angolans then you Lilamono will go to Meheba and those visitors you have hidden will remain here in this country of Zambia."'

'Really'.

'Yes'.

Chihango replied, 'I am a visitor, from Angola. My country is at war and that is the reason that I have fled to you my friends. But if that is what your leaders are saying then I cannot hide, no I am not able to hide. We ourselves will pack and go to Meheba. You whom we found, you citizen (*muka-lifuchi*) of this your country, you stay. You stay. Tomorrow by sundown they won't be able to accuse Headman Lilamono of keeping Angolans anymore'.

It was over. At dawn we began packing.

Julia:                   And how did you feel?

Susanna:               Ahh grandchild, you feel in your heart...even a little happiness, even an ounce of happiness in your heart, no not even that.

War you flee from, you return, you flee again and come back, you flee again and come back - in your innermost heart...that is why I am behaving like this [not wanting to repatriate again this year].

And so we started to pack. Lilamono found some children to carry our things and to bring us to the Luningyi road. When we arrived there we found many people we knew. They had already gathered, gathered, gathered and were waiting for a truck. We sat and waited. We slept and the sun rose.

After the sun had risen, mid-morning, the trucks loaded up. They came and registered us; as you put down your things they would write your name, so and so, so and so, so and so, so and so. Then you would go to the truck and someone already on would help you up. And so they carried us away and they drove us to Zambezi and unloaded us there...Later they took us on to Meheba.

Susanna's words draw us in and we begin to have a sense of what it must have been like for her to have gone through these experiences. Some would argue that this in itself is enough and that it would be wrong to try to interpret or analyse her account; to do so would be to risk reasserting the familiar authority of the outside "expert". Others would argue that such material, despite its apparent authenticity, is mediated in various ways and that it is only through a process of interpretation and analysis that we can fully understand it. Underlying this debate is another, is life history primarily "history", or an exercise in "self-construction"?

The recent trend is represented by Bruner's statement, "we have come to reject the view that a 'life' is anything in itself and to believe that it is all in the constructing, in the text, or text making...[the concern is] with literary-historical invention, with form, with the *depiction* of reality" (Bruner 2001:27). Or as psychologists Rosenwald and Ochberg would put it, "the object of study is not the 'true' event, as it might have been recorded by some panel of disinterested observers, but the construction of that event within a personal and social history. In short what interests us most is precisely what the realist finds most discomfiting - the factitiousness of the tale. In the form a particular narrator gives to a history we read the more or less abiding concerns and constraints of the individual and his or her community" (1992:4). Thus Eastmond, when writing about the narratives of two El Salvadoran refugees, prefers to speak of "life story" than "life history" (1996:235).

There are those who are repelled by such a constructionist position, "People may have somewhat different versions of their life stories during different periods of their lives... Nevertheless, the basic story is very much the same and, more importantly, the individual always strives to render the version that most adequately represents his or her life, as presently understood by the writer. The changes introduced in the life story are more often than not results of an improved understanding or knowledge bringing the story closer to the 'real life', not new arbitrary versions attempting to create a new identity" (Roos 1999:210).

These different perspectives are brought together in an interesting way by oral historian Allesandro Portelli, who suggests that life history represents a shifting scale between "life and times", "performance-oriented narrative and content-oriented



document”, between “subject-oriented life story and theme-oriented testimony” (1998:26). In other words it is about the historical past and about self-construction, and one of the challenges of reading life history is to be able to judge where one ends and the other begins.

In conclusion then, I would agree with Chamberlain and Thompson when they say that life history and personal narrative are not as “transparent” as they appear (1998:16) and that a process of interpretation and analysis is necessary for us to gain as full an understanding as possible. In the next section I offer a framework of five questions for those engaging in this process, based on the insights of anthropologists, historians, psychologists and sociologists.

### *Towards interpretation*

1. Under what circumstances was the life history or personal narrative recorded?

It is important to examine the relationship between those involved in recording the life history or personal narrative, the “investigator”, or “researcher” and the “subject” or “informant”. For the nature of this relationship is likely to have had a significant effect on what was said, and not said, during the course of recording. If the reader was not the person who made the original recording then they will need to ascertain as much information as possible.

Watson & Watson-Franke suggest that pertinent points include: How well did the investigator know the subject? What was their relationship? What “inducements, persuasions, arguments, reasons” were given to motivate the informant to share their life history? Did the informant say anything about the process of recording and how it was influencing his or her recollection? What were the investigator’s own biases, both in relation to the immediate situation and to theory? To what extent were questions used? Was an interpreter required, either during recording or for later translation? And, what techniques were used to record the life history? (1985:18)

This should not be a process of excessive self-analysis by the investigator that then over-shadows the life history, but a critical appraisal of the circumstances of its recording and how these might have shaped the narrative. To take Susanna’s life history above as an illustration, it is relevant that at the time of recording (July 1996), Susanna and I had known one another for some time and particularly well over the preceding twelve to eighteen months. She distinguished me from the outsiders with whom she had been familiar in the settlement, missionaries and NGO workers, by virtue of the fact that I lived with a refugee family in a nearby homestead rather than at the mission or administrative centre. I would often visit her in the afternoon to chat with her and her elderly neighbours and to listen to their stories about the past. We gradually adopted the relationship of grandparent to grandchild, in local terms characterised by openness and friendly joking (in contrast to the parent-child relationship which is much more restrained and formal). We would exchange gifts, so that occasionally she would present me with some item of produce, and more frequently I would take her a purchase of dry fish.

She knew that I was a student (*muka-shikola*), who was interested in both her traditional culture and her experiences of displacement, but by the time of the

recording I think she was responding to my request to tape her stories less because of the potential value for my research, than because it was consistent with our on-going personal relationship. I would usually open a recording session with a request for her to tell me about a particular phase of her life or to re-tell a story that I had heard before, and there was usually little need for me to pose further questions. We recorded this life history over four sessions, on two of which at least one of her neighbours was present. We always conversed in Luvale, neither her mother tongue<sup>6</sup> nor my own, but in which we were both fluent.

In sum, the circumstances under which Susanna's life history was recorded are perhaps less significant for the shape of her narrative than they might be in some other instances; there was a strong degree of continuity between the recording events and "normal" daily social interaction. On the other hand, Susanna's current situation was an important factor.

## 2. What was the current situation of the informant?

The political, economic and social environment in which the informant was situated at the time of recording must be considered during the process of interpreting their life history, for as Bruner says "auto-biography", and I would argue life history is the same in this respect, "is not *only* about the past, but is busily about the present as well" (2001:29, italics in original). Indeed herein lies much of the value of life history and personal narrative for social research. By carefully examining the ways in which people narrate the past we can see more clearly how they understand the present. Bruner points out that although we would expect auto-biography (or life history) to be in the past tense, often this is the case for only 70% of the verbs used; he concludes, "most of the 'present-tense' aspect of autobiography has to do with what students of narrative structure call 'evaluation' – the task of placing those sequential events in terms of a meaningful context" (ibid:29). This may be more or less explicit; sometimes there will a clear statement closing a story, such as "we were not suffering then as we are today", and sometimes it will be much more subtle, a matter of the interpreter asking themselves, "what made this story worth telling?" (assuming that it was not in response to a direct question). Either way seeking out this "present-tense aspect" is crucial to the interpretive process.

Returning to Susanna once again, the way we read and understand the story about her flight from Angola (above) should be informed by an awareness that the flight she described was subsequent to her participating in a mass repatriation from Zambia to Angola in the 1970s (Powles 2002:95), and that at the time of her telling the story, a new mass repatriation was being organised from the settlement to Angola. The way in which she dwells on their panic stricken journey through the night to Zambia, and the anguish of being forced to relocate back to Meheba, explains to herself and her listeners her reluctance to repatriate once again. That there is this connection between the past and the present is corroborated by her "evaluative" statement towards the end, "war you flee from, you return, you flee again and come back, you flee again and come back – in your innermost heart... That is why I am behaving like this".

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<sup>6</sup> Susanna identified herself as Lunda, however there are very strong linguistic, social and cultural similarities between the Luvale and the Lunda.

Even stories for which a connection between past and present is not immediately obvious should nonetheless be read with this possibility in mind. Included in Susanna's life history are stories about her early marriages, as well as a later marriage to a Portuguese trader, and even a story about how she nearly died from food poisoning; all of these have, in the sense outlined above, a "present-tense aspect".

### 3. Has the informant experienced trauma?

The definition of "trauma" is not straightforward (Leydesdorff et al 1999:1); however I suggest that BenEzer's use of the term, which follows that of psychoanalysts and psychologists, is a helpful one:

- an event that happened in the external world together with the way it was subjectively experienced; the external and internal reality are put together through the common reference to a "traumatic state" or "situation" which is their nexus;
- some pathological consequences which are interpreted – through extrapolation backwards in time – as having been initiated by the trauma (2002:155).

It is important to highlight that the sorts of events that are considered traumatic will tend to be culturally specific; for example, it might be difficult to imagine how being forced to light a fire on a particular day of the week could be a deeply traumatizing experience, and yet BenEzer describes how for a young, and very devout, Ethiopian Jewish girl this was indeed the case because lighting a fire on the Sabbath violated Jewish law (2002 159-160). It is also important to remember that within cultures there will be "different kinds" of traumas, "since experiences may have widely different impacts according to the specifics of personal experience and context"; thus we should distinguish between those who have been directly effected by a traumatic event, those who were witnesses and those who have, for example, been bereaved as a result (Leydesdorff *et al.* 1999:13).

Certainly in the refugee context it is very likely that the subject of a life history will have experienced trauma, and it is more than possible that this trauma will form the core of their story. In their discussion of trauma and life stories Leydesdorff *et al.* summarise the implications of this very clearly, "The impact of trauma makes the processes of remembering and forgetting more complex than in other situations, and survivors are therefore particularly likely to express themselves in stories containing elements which are imaginary, fragmented or disjointed, and loaded with symbolism. This in turn means that the understanding and analysis of these stories is inevitably complicated and challenging" (ibid:1).

How then to find a way through this "complicated and challenging" process? Firstly I suggest that we should be very aware not only of what is being said, a person may recount a traumatic event in an unusual amount of detail, or repeatedly, but also of what is not being said, of the silences in their narrative. Returning once more to Susanna, the contrast between her willingness and ability to tell stories about her more distant past, and her willingness and ability to tell stories about her more recent past, was very striking. In the three interviews that dealt with her life up to the early 1990s her narratives flowed freely and were well developed; however in the last interview,

when we concentrated on her life from the early 1990s onwards, she struggled to narrate anything at all. Although I did not explore this in the published version of her life history, in a sense respecting the silence that she had adopted, I now suggest that this shift was brought about by a particularly traumatic episode in which she was accused of witchcraft by her neighbours (as she was again at the end of her life). The anthropological literature on witchcraft does not usually approach the topic from this perspective, however the ways in which elderly women in the settlement expressed their fears of such accusations, and the violence that they tended to involve, as well as Susanna's own frequent depressions and social defensiveness, would, I think, support my view that they be considered traumatic.

A man named Eduardo<sup>7</sup>, whom I got to know well during my fieldwork, had fought for the MPLA during the Angolan civil war. I don't recall ever hearing him speak about this period of his life with family or friends, however on a few rare occasions he described his experiences to me when we were alone; the halting and sometimes disjointed way in which he did so was suggestive of the trauma he had been exposed to, confirmed by his comment at one point, "...something happened to my brain; I wasn't talking properly to my colleagues, when someone said something bad I just wanted to shoot him, I just wanted to kill him...they took me back to Huambo to the hospital and the Cuban doctor helped me with some medicines (Powles 2000:254)".

It is very important when looking at life histories from a particular context to consider how that culture might receive trauma narratives, for instance in both the cases above there was an extent to which there was no "listening space" (to use Leydesdorff *et al.*'s poignant phrase (ibid.10) within which they could be heard: the cultural logic of witchcraft belief in this area means that people's sympathy lies with the victim of witchcraft rather than the accused witch; and Eduardo's experiences of fighting in the civil war seemed to belong to a moral world fundamentally different to that of family and community, one which lay beyond the scope of assumed shared understandings (possibly accounting for why he chose to speak to an outsider about them). Moreover trauma narratives are never going to be politically neutral: "When memories recall acts of violence against individuals or entire groups, they carry additional burdens, as indictments or confessions, or as emblems of a victimized identity" (Antze & Lambek 1996:vii). So that for example the prevailing authorities promoted the sharing of trauma narratives in post-Apartheid South Africa but attempted to suppress them in the case of Guatemalan war widows (Zur 1993).

When, for whatever reason, trauma is difficult to narrate, symbolic language comes to the fore. Such language can be very illuminating to explore, touching upon the hidden realities of people's experience. For example after Eduardo had shared some of his memories of fighting in the Angolan civil war he told a riddle, it was about a sorcerer who made an evil snake in his own likeness; interpreting this riddle gave me an insight into the entangled knot created by his memories, his religious identity and his alcoholism (see Powles 2000:274-77).

#### 4. In what genre was the subject speaking?

We are familiar with the idea that there are different literary genres, the novel, poetry, biography, for example. Tonkin argues that the same holds for oracy, so that amongst

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<sup>7</sup> This is a pseudonym.

the Jlaos of Liberia whom she studied, there were heroic genres, etiological stories and proverbs, amongst others (1992:53). And just as we would know to interpret a novel or a piece of poetry in a different way to a biography, so the same should be true of different oral genres, indeed this lies at the heart of Tonkin's definition of genre, "Genre...could be called 'patterned expectancy'. Genre in this sense labels an agreement between writer or speaker and reader or listener on what sort of interpretation is to be made" (Powles 1992:51).

We discriminate between different literary genres by looking at their internal form and representation on the page, but how can we discriminate between different oral genres? Tonkin suggests that the occasion of the telling and the status of the teller may be the most important signals (1992: 3), but also the structuring conventions of the account, such as its order, plotting and metaphors (Ibid:9). If the speaker and listener are from the same culture the process of reading these signals, and the interpretation itself, may be unconscious, but when they come from different cultures the listener will need to learn "how to listen".

Amongst the personal narratives that I recorded whilst in Meheba I think it is possible to identify two prevalent genres, firstly what I shall call "the expanded genealogy", and secondly, the "first-person story"; although there isn't always an indigenous term for oral genres these can be approximated by the Luvale "*chisemwa*" and "*chihande*". The expanded genealogy tended to be recounted by elderly men, in a rather formal way, which served to emphasise their authority to speak on the matters in hand. It would begin with the names of the subject's mother and her siblings, and would go on to trace the generational and affinal links between, and geographical movements of, family members leading up to the present. The expanded genealogy was minimally descriptive and did not include the representation of direct speech. In contrast the first-person story was recounted by both men and women, in informal settings and without the assumption of any privileged knowledge. The content of such stories was extremely varied, and often drew on the tragic, the humorous, or both. Descriptions would be rich, the teller mimicking sounds, reporting tastes and even bodily sensations (such as the bite of a tsetse fly). Stories would include long and detailed dialogues, and the teller would sometimes play with Luvale words, extending the final syllable to add emphasis to a reported statement. Both the expanded genealogy and the first-person story were distinguishable from normal conversation by the unwillingness of the teller to be interrupted, or at least until they had closed what they were saying with an evaluative phrase and/or physical gesture.

I was sometimes frustrated and disappointed when I went to record a refugee's life history or personal narrative; thinking back, with Tonkin's insights in mind, I suspect that this may have been because the subject was speaking within the expanded genealogy genre rather than the first-person story. For example when I embarked upon recording with Susanna, I initially asked her to tell me about her life "from the beginning up to the present"; the five minute summary, an expanded genealogy, lacked all the vividness and immediacy of the many stories she had told me in the past. I later returned and asked her to tell me such and such a story, or about a particular episode, and this was much more fruitful (see below for further discussion). In this case this was, I think, an appropriate strategy but in other cases I appreciate Tonkin's point, that we, as outside researchers, should learn to respect a teller's

expertise and not insist upon them speaking within the genres with which we ourselves are most confident and familiar (1992:54).

There appear to be a number of important points to draw from this as regards how we interpret life history. Firstly, we must remember that what people narrate is selected and shaped by the repertoire<sup>8</sup> of genres available to them (Chamberlain & Thompson 1998) and therefore ask, what genre(s) was the subject of the life history speaking in? Secondly, and linking back to the first question above, we must ask to what extent their choice of genre(s) was a response to a particular situation and their appraisal of the investigator's expectations throughout the encounter.

5. What are the prevailing images or themes within the life history or personal narrative?

With this question we come to the end of the interpretative process. Through a careful reading and re-reading of the material it is generally possible to identify certain prevailing images in the subject's narrative, or underlying themes, that lend a coherence to what he or she has said. It may be that these images or themes can be seen in part as a response to the person of the investigator, or the subject's situation at the time (see (1) and (2) above), but bearing that in mind, they can nonetheless be the subject of worthwhile analysis. Understanding these images and themes will require looking at how the subject used them within the life history or personal narrative: in what contexts did they evoke a certain image? Did these contexts change over the course of the narrative? Did they make explicit reference to an underlying theme, or is it implicit in the content and ordering of the episodes they describe? The exploration of such images and themes within the life history or personal narrative will both inform the investigator's understandings of broader social and cultural discourses within the refugee community, as well as be informed by them. The interpretative process is simultaneously shaped by the investigator's theoretical perspectives, and in turn should re-orientate them.

Thus when I reviewed the material that I recorded with Susanna the clear underlying themes were "home" and "homelessness". Her stories described an array of different places and people and situations, and what emerged was where and how and when she felt she belonged or didn't belong. As I then read some of the literature on the "meaning of home" in displaced populations (for example Warner 1994 Kibreab 1999, Xenos 1996, Malkki 1992, and Rapport and Dawson 1998), I was struck by the fluidity of Susanna's conception of home, how it seemed to change during different phases of her life (Powles 2002:83).

Eastmond has written a very stimulating interpretation of the life histories of two El Salvadoran refugees, a woman named Marcela and a man named Walter (1996). These life histories were recorded in Sweden by students within a doctoral programme seminar that Eastmond was supervising. She touches on the issue of trauma and narrative, suggesting that when she worked with Chileans, "what was narrated was not only a question of how traumatic experience fragments memory (repressing some, highlighting others, at varying times); it was also the expectations and perceptions of the narrator of how much I as a listener was capable of comprehending and coping with" (1996:235). Presumably she is suggesting that this

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<sup>8</sup> It should be remembered that this repertoire is not fixed.

applied in the cases under discussion in the paper as well. She also takes account of the role of genre, emphasising the structure and form of the two life histories, especially in relation to turning points in their narratives. The underlying theme that she identifies in both the life histories is that of “life as struggle”, but what is particularly interesting is the ways in which this theme is employed differently by the two individuals according to their social experience both at home and in exile (1996:234). Their contrasting gender is a very important factor in this, so that whereas Marcela placed a strong emphasis on the suffering that she endured whilst in El Salvador this, Eastmond argues, was not to provoke pity but respect, for sacrifice and suffering are morally ennobling for women in many parts of Latin America and confer a certain status (1996:245). Meanwhile Walter downplayed the suffering that he had experienced, and was especially reticent about his time in prison. Rather he was keen to portray himself within a culturally specific heroic discourse, the man who is “invulnerable and stoic, never giving up” (1996:244).

BenEzer’s work on the journey experiences of Ethiopian Jews who migrated to Israel is another excellent example of a narrative ethnography, enriched by his dual training in psychoanalysis and social anthropology. He carried out forty-five interviews with members of the community, both males and females, who had been in Israel for a variable number of years (2002:58). He describes the process by which he identified the underlying themes in their narratives as phenomenological; “By keeping our minds open and by using our intuition [here he follows Giorgi (1970, 1975)], we can identify ‘natural meaning units’ in the text. Once the natural meaning units are identified, the researcher can delineate central or essential themes which dominate them. The natural meaning units are divided without accounting for the specific aim of the study, and they reflect the natural divisions in the text itself. The central themes on the other hand, are delineated in relation to the particular goal of the study” (ibid:54). The themes he thus identifies are “Jewish Identity”, “Suffering” and “Bravery and inner strength”, and he dedicates three substantial chapters to these themes. These chapters include both large sections of the original narratives and his own suggestive comments upon them.

I began this section with an extract from Susanna Mwana-uta’s life history. I have suggested that to learn as much as possible from such a narrative it is necessary to engage in a process of interpretation and have proposed five questions which can enable this. I now turn to the very much related issues of recording and writing life history and personal narrative.

## **Recording and writing life history and personal narrative**

### *Recording*

Some familiarity with the context in which one is working is critical in order for the process of recording personal narrative to have a chance of success. It is important for example to know whether a one-to-one interview would fit with local cultural norms, particularly if the investigator and the subject are of different ages or genders; and similarly it helps to know whether there are certain topics that should not be approached explicitly. Being familiar with local conversational practices is useful too; for example when listening to a story is one expected to keep quiet or respond in

some way? In the refugee field it is of course also vital to have some grasp of the conflict which led to the refugees flight and the political context in which they are now situated.

Many anthropologists who have used this sort of approach have done so towards the end of their field research when they are already sensitive to some of the potential pitfalls and have attained a degree of fluency in the local language. This does not rule it out for the purposes of short-term research but it may be that an alternative to the anthropological model of the investigator conducting all interviews him or herself will need to be found (see section 4.2).

As well as bearing in mind social and cultural factors, it is worth considering when is the best time to approach refugees in order to record their life history or personal narrative. The process can be time-consuming and it may be unrealistic and unfair to expect people to do this during, for example, a busy agricultural season, or at a time of day when there are many tasks to be completed.

How many life histories or narratives should be recorded? I suggest this depends on the focus of the researcher's interest. If it is to explore refugees' subjective understandings of their experiences of displacement and resettlement, through a textual interpretation of their narrative, it may be best to work with a small number of individuals in as much depth as possible. If it is to look at a theme such as changing livelihoods, then perhaps a larger number of individuals, and shorter interviews, would be an option. It will not be possible to collect a number of life histories or narratives that is statistically representative of the refugee population as a whole, but the researcher should be able to state in a general way to what extent the individuals they have worked with are typical or not. Aiming to work with individuals of different social and economic categories certainly helps to tease out different experiences and perspectives and should be an objective. Working with a set of individuals who are in some way significant to one another, such as members of a family, or a particular religious movement, can be very revealing.

In reality, many anthropologists have picked out a particular individual to record their life history because they have been drawn to him or her in some way, or indeed the informant has picked out the anthropologist for reasons of his or her own. The best known anthropological life history, *Nisa: the Life and Words of a !Kung Woman* (1981) is based on this sort of lively dynamic between the interviewer and interviewee and this is partly what makes it so engaging.

The next question is how to record the life history or personal narrative. I would suggest that usually audio-taping is the ideal, since it captures more detail and nuance than a written version, and is less of an impediment during the course of the interview than video-recording. Perhaps surprisingly, anthropologists rarely report any resistance to their use of a tape recorder, and in fact I found that people often enjoyed it. It is also important to write down any narratives that form part of everyday conversation, and the circumstances that stimulated their telling. Clearly there may be situations when refugees are not willing to have their stories recorded in any form for reasons of personal security and this should be respected

The interview should be conducted in as informal a way as possible, preferably at the subject's home and seated in a manner with which they feel comfortable. Depending



on the extent to which the subject is already familiar with the researcher and their activities, some explanation for the recording, and its likely uses, will be necessary. Brief biographical information, the subject's name, where and when they were born, etc. is normally a good starting point for the recording, and can be replayed quickly and simply so that both the subject and the interviewer can assess how the tape recorder is working. The tape recorder needs to be positioned in such a way that it records any questions the interviewer asks as well as the subject's narrative.

As already mentioned, asking someone to recount their life history may not be the best interview strategy; in a culture where there is a notion of life history this is a very large question and in a culture where there is not this sort of individualized discourse people are likely to be confused and provide a very impoverished version of their experiences. If the broad chronological sweep of a life history is what is desired, then breaking it down into different phases, which can be pursued separately, is certainly one way forward. Alternatively Slim and Thompson suggest a helpful format which divides topics into three broad sections, "issues of family and early life", "working life" and "adult family and social life" and within these a number of possible themes (1993:64-65). In general, the interviewer should concentrate on listening and try to be as flexible as possible. When asking questions they should be open, not closed, leading, or double-barrelled (1993:77).

The most important ingredients for a successful life history or personal narrative interview are trust and rapport. It is a complex task building and maintaining these throughout the course of an interview (Francis 1992:96). It may be that the investigator has already cultivated, or been assigned, a particular social role that either enhances or inhibits trust and rapport, examples would include kin, NGO worker, student, missionary, government spy and so on. It may be that the presentation of a gift at the beginning of an interview, or during the course of a number of interview sessions, seems appropriate and will help to create a sense of a growing reciprocal relationship. Joking, when and only when fitting, can be an excellent way to break the ice. In the end trust and rapport must be worked towards, by trying to be sensitive to local social and cultural norms and by trying to really listen and understand. Some interviews will go better than others, and it is largely a matter of learning from experience.

### *Writing*

The first challenge will be to transcribe any recorded material. This can be an extremely time-consuming activity. It should be a word for word rendition, including the questions that the interviewer asked and any verbal gestures (silences, sighs, imitated sounds and so on). A complete transcription is ideal, but if this is not possible then an inventory should be made of those parts of the tape that are not fully transcribed.

The next challenge is likely to be translation. Again, this should be as accurate and full as possible, although all translation is a matter of balancing the communication of a sentence's meaning with its readability in the translated version. I would suggest that particular words which are likely to be significant for the purposes of interpreting a narrative, be placed in the vernacular in brackets.

Sadly much of the vividness of the original narrative is inevitably lost as it goes from its verbal form in the language of the story-teller to written form in what is often a very different language. Abu-Lughod, an anthropologist who has written a very evocative narrative ethnography of Bedouin women, admits the enormity of the problem when she says of her own work, “it seemed that a number of essential qualities of everyday conversation and narrative just could not gracefully be carried over into English” (1993:34). She cites the little affections, “my sister...” and the religious oaths, “How great god is!” that the women frequently used as examples. The stories I heard in Meheba were likewise often embellished with the sounds of gunfire, or people running, or the ring of axe on wood; all so hard to capture on paper but integral to their original telling.

The very important decision of how to present the recorded material then needs to be made; whether to concentrate on a single life history, or juxtapose a number of personal narratives, or organise the material around salient themes. Of course the decision is likely to hinge upon the purpose of the research or evaluation and the possibilities and constraints that involves. An advantage of presenting the material as a single life history is the extent to which the continuous thread of one person’s words can draw in the reader and enable them to begin to see the world through that person’s eyes. Whilst more fragmented, juxtaposing a number of different personal narratives does allow for the presentation of contradictory and even opposing voices, which may be an advantage. Obviously organising the material around salient themes may be a more natural complement to other research and evaluation that has been undertaken using different methods.

Another important decision will be at what point to provide any necessary background information. Certain knowledge will have been assumed by the subject during the interview, the significance of a place for example, which will be meaningless to the remote reader. Clearly there is a need for the investigator to provide some context but this in itself presents a dilemma which Henley expresses rather well: “if the broader context is clarified before the presentation of the personal narrative, it reduces the latter to no more than a QED<sup>9</sup> function. If it is placed afterwards, then the reader has to wade through much quotidian detail, the significance of which remains obscure” (1997:7). Different authors handle this issue in different ways.

The question of when to provide an interpretation of the life history or personal narratives presents a similar problem. If during the course of the narrative, it can have the effect of squeezing out the subject’s original words (Eastmond for example presents what is largely a summary of the narratives of the two refugees from El Salvador (1996). If placed at the end of the life history or personal narratives then the richness and complexity of what has gone before may be overwritten (for this reason Abu-Lughod resisted giving her a book a conclusion 1993:xvii). There is no simple solution to this dilemma and it is probably best tackled on a case by case basis. As argued above we can learn more from reading life history and personal narrative when some interpretation is provided. At the sametime, however, there is a way in which, as Portelli suggests, the truth in such material lies ultimately in its beauty (1998:38), in its ability to evoke a response in the reader (Hampsten 1989:135). To this extent, compromises may need to be made between scholarly commentary and preserving the integrity of the original narrative.

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<sup>9</sup> *Quod erat demonstrandum.*

## **Ethics and participation**

### *Ethical considerations*

There are risks associated with using life history and personal narrative as research methods; they are potentially intrusive, exploitative and could compromise the situation of the subject in a variety of ways. Efforts should be made to minimize these risks as far as possible, if they remain a serious problem then alternative research methods will need to be used.

Firstly, the reason behind the recording and its likely uses should be explained clearly at the outset. If the material is going to be published it should be discussed whether this will be locally or not (although of course this boundary is hard to guarantee); some subjects will be happy for their stories to circulate locally (Rasbridge 1993:53) whilst others will be reluctant to have members of their own community read about their experiences but are willing for outsiders to do so (for example Esperanza in Behar 1993:19). Some oral history projects ask the subject to sign a “condition of use” form and this could be considered, although if the subject is not literate a clear discussion of the issues may in fact be more productive (Panos 2003:23-25). Several anthropologists have returned to discuss a finished text with the subject to see if they would like any changes to be made (for example Caplan, Dwyer and Rasbridge).

Questions of confidentiality and anonymity may be especially important when the subject has shared information that is politically sensitive. The possibility of using a pseudonym should always be raised when working with life history and personal narrative, but if there is a risk that this will not be sufficient to protect the subject from possible repercussions, then the material will need to be carefully edited or not reproduced in any form. Rasbridge encountered an interesting situation where a refugee’s life history did not compromise her physical security but her relationships with those who assisted her. He decided to edit it in such a way that the anonymity of the storyteller as well as those she accused was protected (1993:62).

As mentioned in the previous section, if an informant appears to be unwilling to discuss a particular period of his or her life, or a particular experience, then the interviewer should not press him to do so. This is particularly important when working with refugees who have experienced traumatic events. Slim and Thompson suggest that it may be helpful to discuss whether there are any topics that are “off-limits” before an interview begins; the subject may not want to explore these during the interview at all, or he may be willing to explore them but not want these parts of the interview to be recorded (1993:152).

Whilst there are these various risks to take into account it is arguable that life history and personal narrative as research methods present a number of potential benefits to the subject, both direct and indirect. Rasbridge highlights how working in this way can serve to create a powerful bond between the researcher and the refugee, based on trust and reciprocation. He recorded the life histories of three Cambodians in the United States, for whom this sort of relationship stood in stark contrast to the frequent hostility of the majority population (1993:56). The emotional empathy and raised political consciousness Rasbridge experienced as a result of the recording encounters, were extended to other US citizens through the publication of the life histories

(similarly Central American refugees have found that performed life histories are a very powerful tool for mobilising support in the US (Westerman 1994).

A certain prestige may accrue to the subject of the life history or personal narrative through the process of recording, and the written form of the life history or narrative itself, if published. I myself produced two life histories in booklet form whilst in Meheba (see below), which were very popular with the families involved and resulted in at least one other request. Rasbridge was similarly asked by acquaintances of the refugees with whom he worked to repeat the process with them (1993:57).

What must be weighed against the risk that the life history interview will re-traumatize a refugee that has struggled to put a difficult past behind him or her, is the fact that many of those who have used this sort of approach find that subjects benefit from the opportunity to unburden themselves, sometimes speaking for the first time about very troubling experiences (Leydesdorff et. al 1999:17). Rasbridge develops this point when he says, "I'm struck here with the notion that the sensitive researcher does not "take" a life history in the sense the verb is often used. Rather, the recorder encourages and facilitates and ultimately "gives" a life history back to the speaker. The "giving" here is not so much the written essay as it is the release and concomitant renewal associated with catharsis' (1993:56).

Of course, the researcher should be cautious. She should not assume that talking about trauma necessarily constitutes a cure (as many psychologists have pointed out). Secondly, she needs to remember that she is not a therapist (BenEzer being an exception) and should not attempt to adopt that role.

Finally, the process of recording life history or personal narrative can be very empowering, not least for refugees because it is a sign that their experiences and perspectives do matter within a humanitarian system that tends to appear otherwise<sup>10</sup>. It can help refugees to become more aware of the social and political roots of their suffering, to give them a sense of their own agency, and to claim the right to be heard (Leydesdorff 1999:10, Tonkin 1992:134, Westerman 1994). I shall discuss this further in the next section.

In sum, there are ethical issues associated with this sort of research and it should always be conducted with as much sensitivity as possible. In the end, we may believe that life history and personal narrative are simply one of the best ways to help us understand how refugees make sense of, and respond to, the difficult situations in which they find themselves, and that this is of sufficient importance that we are willing to expose those individuals with whom we have worked so closely in ways that they may not fully grasp (see Abu-Lughod for a related discussion 1993:37).

#### *Making it more participatory?*

It should be clear from the preceding sections that life history and personal narrative are "beneficiary-based approaches" to research and evaluation. but is it possible to escape the anthropological model of the researcher directing the process, conducting

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<sup>10</sup> Of course where claims for asylum are assessed on a case-by-case basis, rather than en masse as in many parts of Africa, the individual's story may be crucial to his case. For a fascinating discussion of the differing ways in which lawyers and anthropologists use life stories, see McKinley 1997.

the interviews and sorting out the material, in other words, can this approach be made more “participatory”?

In August 1995 I travelled with Eduardo from Meheba (as described above) to visit his family several hundred kilometres away on the border. During this visit I interviewed his elderly father, and recorded a number of stories from his past. We agreed that I should type these up and give copies to the family for them to keep. The following April I returned with the man to see his father once again. I showed the family the typed script, and although pleased they suggested some changes. It was agreed that the grandson would take over the interviewing process and I should be less strict in the way that I transcribed and ordered the material when presenting it.

The grandson and grandfather clearly enjoyed the recording process, the trust and rapport that are so crucial were of course already established. The final life history is a rich collection of stories that the whole family appreciates, and can use to help revitalise inter-generational ties eroded by the forced separations involved in their displacement. “Handing over the stick” (Chambers 1997), or in this case the tape-recorder, made the process more empowering for the refugees involved, and produced a fascinating and, at points, unexpected, resource from which I could learn. A similar devolved approach might make life history and personal narrative research more of a realistic option for the short-term researcher or consultant, if they can find a suitable interviewer and subjects to be interviewed.

It is possible to broaden participation in these methods still further. Whilst in Meheba I was also involved in initiating an “oral testimony” project, oral testimony including life history and personal narrative, but also more discussion based material, traditional stories, songs and so on. A group of refugee school students came forward for the project, aged between approximately 16 and 22. Facilitated by two co-ordinators, they held a number of meetings to discuss the purpose of the project, interview techniques and possible topics (Panos 2003: chapters 3 & 4 provide excellent suggestions for such meetings). They then approached elderly members of their families, neighbours and other acquaintances to interview them. They recorded a very diverse and absorbing set of material that was then, with the assistance of one of the facilitators, transcribed by the students and edited to produce a community booklet, in their own language, called “*Vihande vyamu Meheba navyamu Angola: Mazu avakulwane vakuMeheba*” (Stories of Meheba and Angola: the Words of the elderly in Meheba, Sangambo: 1999). Again, the process as well as the product were exciting and innovative. The young men involved were pleased to learn new skills, and the book itself was popular in the settlement and became a focus for discussions about the refugees’ changing circumstances.

These limited examples from Meheba do suggest that it is possible to make life history and personal narrative research more participatory in the refugee context and that there are likely to be a variety of benefits. The sort of project just described would not be possible during the early phases of an humanitarian emergency but I suggest it could be very helpful in a protracted refugee situation, weaving development, evaluation and research together into one process. This might be especially true in those protracted refugee situations where agencies are stuck in a pattern of providing long-term care and maintenance programmes, and where the refugees themselves are suffering from a “sense of despair and low self-worth” (Crisp 2003).

Making life history and narrative research, or the broader category of oral testimony, more participatory does raise new challenges. A daunting amount of time and hard work are involved. Moreover, issues of confidentiality and anonymity become more complex. There may be political implications in a settlement situation to this type of activity. The sort of information regarding the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee, which I outlined above may not be so easily obtained. It would only be through the implementation of such projects in a variety of contexts that we would be able to judge whether these challenges are surmountable.

## **Conclusion**

Jeff Crisp has suggested that UNHCR does not know enough about the refugees it is mandated to protect, particularly the social dynamics of refugee situations (2004). Life history and narrative could be very valuable means to help address this problem. They can uncover information that is not necessarily accessed by more formal approaches such as sample surveys or semi-structured interviews (see Jacobsen and Landau 2003 for a discussion of quantitative approaches in refugee contexts). This is because narrative research does not rely on a pre-determined interview framework and therefore allows the space for unexpected subjects to emerge. Moreover recording refugees' stories enables them to express their experiences and evaluate them within their own terms, historical, social and cultural. Finally there are some issues that I would argue can only really be communicated through narrative since they are not readily amenable to generalisation: for example the meaning of home, the impact of memories of violence, what it is to be "vulnerable" (see Powles 2000). Understanding these in a particular context is not merely a matter of academic interest, they relate to vital areas of UNHCR's work such as repatriation, rehabilitation, community services and protection.

However, before life history and personal narrative approaches are used, it is important to consider some of the theoretical and methodological issues that they raise. It has been my aim in this paper to outline some of these issues, primarily from an anthropological perspective. A narrative approach will be more suitable for some contexts than others and should be seen as part of a broad tool kit of complementary methods that agencies can draw upon as appropriate. I foresee that they will be most useful in protracted refugee situations where a slightly longer-term view of both research and assistance can be taken than in the initial stages of an emergency.

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