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# **To name or not to name: reflections on the use of anonymity in an oral archive of migrant life narratives**

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*This paper draws on an oral archive project on narratives of return migration in contemporary Ireland, as the basis for a discussion on the potential of life narrative research to destabilize meta-narratives and to contribute to the mapping of transformative geographies. It is argued that this kind of research requires the creation of safe spaces within which participants can tell their stories and articulate counter-narratives. At the same time, it is important to make their voices available to a wide audience and to recognise their authorial roles. There are contrasting perspectives in oral history and life narrative research on the use of anonymity to protect participants' identities, which reflect different disciplinary traditions and practices. The paper reflects on these different perspectives and on the process of designing a research project that draws on multiple methodological influences. It concludes that it is possible to facilitate access to these voices, while at the same time providing safe conditions for the articulation of counter-narratives, by providing anonymity where possible and desirable in agreement with the participant.*

Keywords: life narrative, return migration, anonymity, oral archive, ethics, Ireland

## **Introduction**

This paper presents reflections on some of the ethical issues involved in designing a research project involving the collection and preservation of migrant life narratives.

The diverse methodological and disciplinary influences on a life narrative/oral archive project are explored, as are some of the practical implications of these influences for the way in which the research is conducted. One of the aims of this special issue is to explore the potential of oral methods to destabilize meta-narratives and to sketch a world where geographical knowledges are situated. This paper explores the potential

of life narrative research to challenge dominant narratives of place, by introducing some results of research with Irish return migrants. The paper focuses in particular on the question of anonymity for research informants, the implications of this for the creation of safe spaces in which stories are told, and the potential of such stories to challenge dominant narratives.

The project, entitled *Narratives of Migration and Return: an all-island research resource* (NMR)<sup>1</sup>, has involved developing an oral archive of narratives of recent return migration to Ireland. It was a collaborative all-island project involving researchers in the south and the north of Ireland<sup>2</sup>. Irish migration in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is rarely studied on an explicitly all-island basis. Much of the existing migration research either focuses on the Republic of Ireland, or is underpinned by an implicit assumption that similar migration systems operate on both sides of the border. Both parts of the island have experienced return migration in recent years. While specific data are not available for return migration to Northern Ireland, figures show that although out-migration has continued, approximately 11-12,000 persons per year on average have moved to Northern Ireland from other parts of the UK alone since 1991 (CAIN 2006). It can be suggested that, given the history of high out-migration from Northern Ireland in the 1960s and 1970s, and the recent decline in political violence in the 1990s, a proportion of these are likely to be returning migrants who had left in earlier decades. In the Republic, figures show that on average 22,000 persons of Irish nationality have migrated into the state each year between 1996 and 2005 (Central Statistics Office 2005), the majority of whom are likely to be return migrants who had left in earlier decades. While there are shared experiences of return migration north and south, it was felt that it was necessary also to recognise the different political,

economic and cultural contexts within which migration has occurred on the island in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Despite the significance of return migration in contributing to population increase and social change in Ireland since the mid-1990s, little research exists on the lives and experiences of return migrants (see however Corcoran 2002 and 2003; Jones 2003). In addition, the research team felt that, due to the growing distance between the realities of life in Ireland during the era of high emigration and unemployment in the 1970s and 1980s, and the experiences of many current undergraduate students, who are coming of age at a very different time, there is an emerging gap in understandings of Irish society in that period. The project aimed to address these issues through recording and archiving life narrative interviews with recent return migrants. These are introduced and made accessible to a student audience by producing related online research and teaching material aimed at facilitating an understanding of social change in Ireland in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, through a focus on individual migrant lives.

The research in the southern part of the project, which is the subject of this paper, focuses on the 1980s generation of emigrants. The target group is a generation who came of age at a time of severe economic depression in Ireland, and who lived and worked in Britain, Germany, the US and elsewhere in the 1980s and 1990s. They later returned to a very different 'Celtic Tiger' Ireland, at a different stage in their lives. The project is set within the context of the well-established role of oral history as a means of recovering experiences often overlooked in recorded history and involving people in exploring and making their own histories. The research is also informed by interpretive approaches to the collection of oral testimonies, understood as a means of revealing 'the conscious and unconscious meanings of experience as

lived and remembered' (Perks and Thompson 1998: 3). Recent developments in the use of oral testimony, moving away from the idea of oral history as a means of collecting knowledge, instead emphasise the contingent nature of knowledge production, the conditions of production of life narratives and the discursive construction of identities and experiences as reflected in personal testimony (for example Personal Narratives Group 1989; Tonkin 1992; Portelli 1998). Reflecting this, increasingly, the terms oral history, personal narrative and life narrative tend to be used interchangeably, and this project is located somewhere within this confluence of ideas, as is explained in the next sections.

Life narratives were collected during 2004-2005 by three researchers – two in the south, including the author, and one in the north – who agreed on some shared procedures and principles with regard to the research process. A total of 48 life narratives were collected in the south. Drawing on existing literature on emigration in the 1980s, in the southern part of the project we were concerned in particular with social class and occupational difference. Taking into consideration the debate regarding the social composition of 1980s emigrants (Mac Laughlin 1994; Shuttleworth 1997), and the emerging available information on characteristics of recent return migrants (Punch and Finneran 1999), there was a desire in the southern project to include some of the main social groups who had emigrated in the 1980s and early 1990s, and who seemed to have been returning in recent years. Some specific target groups were identified as a result. These were construction workers, those working in the caring professions (nursing, social work/care) and in the IT sector. There was also a specific desire to include those who had emigrated with little or no qualifications or resources. In particular we aimed to include people who had been undocumented migrants in the US, and we also targeted graduates. While these

groups were targeted in particular, we also included a broad spectrum of other occupations and attempted to achieve a balance in terms of gender.

The research was shaped by its focus on a very particular group of return migrants – those who had emigrated in the 1980s and early 1990s, and had returned from the mid-1990s onward. The positionality of the research team is important here – all four members of the team in the south are themselves return migrants, and I myself was part of that particular cohort. This may have been helpful in some cases in establishing a rapport with participants, and certainly helped me to engage with the participant at a meaningful level in the course of the pre-interview conversations and during the interview. However, in most cases I did not reveal I was a return migrant until after the interview. This was partly an attempt to avoid the pitfall of attempting to over-identify with participants in an effort to avoid difference, as I was aware of the very heterogeneous nature of the return migrant population. For example, my own experience of life in northern England as a student and academic in the 1990s is a very particular experience of being an Irish migrant, which provides some points of contact with other Irish migrants, but is very different from the experiences of those who were undocumented migrants in the US for instance, or those who worked as labourers in the construction industry in London. The research was certainly influenced by my own motivation to document the under-researched phenomenon of return migration to Ireland during the 1990s and 2000s. My own position as a returned Irish female migrant may have been influential in shaping the direction taken in the interviews, sensitizing me to particular issues, while simultaneously closing me off to others. It did mean that I was aware that some experiences of return migration in contemporary Ireland are unacknowledged and unspoken for various reasons, and I was concerned to provide people with a safe space in which to articulate this.

## **To name or not to name**

The NMR project draws on the experience of a previous project, entitled *Breaking the Silence*<sup>3</sup>, which was conducted by colleagues at Cork. This was an oral history project which involved developing a full online oral archive of interviews with people who stayed ‘at home’ during the decade of extremely high emigration from Ireland in the 1950s. The project website is now fully online and the oral history interviews can be accessed and listened to from anywhere in the world. Seventy-eight interviews were conducted, by a team of researchers, with individuals aged 60 to 75, about their memories of Ireland in the 1950s and their feelings about staying-put at a time of high emigration. Fifty of the interviews are now available online in full digital audio format, most identified by name, and accompanied by an interview log, family history and photograph of the individual.

NMR is inspired by the innovative nature of *Breaking the Silence* (BTS) – the title itself expresses the aim of the project to allow previously silenced voices to tell their stories and to break some of the taboos around the experience of emigration at that time. NMR is a life narrative research project on recent return migration, but at the same time, its primary task was to produce an oral archive of interviews for future use. It shared with BTS a desire to create a source of data that would be widely accessible. However, in developing methodological procedures for NMR, it became clear that the emphases and requirements of this project were different in a number of ways. My assumption, based on my own experience of conducting biographical research, was that the principle of anonymity for participants would be applied, which would represent a departure from the practice in *Breaking the Silence*. But why did I

make that assumption? On reflection, I realised that very different precedents have been set for oral history projects and other qualitative research.

Oral history projects often capture accounts of the relatively distant past for the purposes of posterity, that is, for future generations, through the voice of an identified and named participant. This type of oral history work is closely related to 'reminiscence and life review' – a form of oral history that emphasises the process of sharing memories and the outcomes for participants (Bornat 2001). It is also bound up with a current concern with heritage and a popular desire to preserve oral testimonies of the past. It is often understood in such research that the participant gains respect and posterity for their contribution. Often, the participant is photographed, and their family history and their memories are considered valuable resources which need to be preserved and made available to the general public as part of a process of remembering the past. On the other hand, in other qualitative research in the social sciences, often the story being told is considered to be something highly personal and private, and there is no public honour, or posterity, for the participant, who is usually given a pseudonym. In this way, their privacy is protected and they are encouraged to open up in a way they might not have done if they were to be named. This distinction may reflect underlying philosophical approaches, whereby oral history has traditionally prioritised the credibility and authenticity of data, while social science on the other hand emphasises interpretation of data, although these disciplinary distinctions are now becoming increasingly blurred. In designing the current research, together with the project team, I have found myself drawn to both types of research, influenced in part by the precedent of *Breaking the Silence* and in part by my own experience of biographical research.



These distinctions may seem artificial, especially given the extent of the interdisciplinarity that now exists in biographical research, but the degree to which the distinctions are institutionalised is evident at the level of professional research associations. For example, associations such as the UK's Oral History Society and the Economic and Social Data Service (ESDS) respectively, each offers a set of ethical and practical guidelines to researchers. The Oral History Society defines itself as 'a national and international organisation dedicated to the collection and preservation of oral history.'<sup>4</sup> In its guidelines on copyright and ethics, it does not recommend agreeing to anonymise interviews (Oral History Society website). Its guidelines suggest that any anonymity clauses, which should be the exception rather than the rule, must have a time limit. In general, it is expected that the participant is identified and thereby given due credit for her/his own story. The US Oral History Association adopts a similar approach (Ritchie 2003). The point is made that anonymity means 'condemning participants to remain hidden' (Rolph, cited in Bornat and Russell 2004), and some also argue that the use of anonymity reduces the credibility of the data (Etter-Lewis 1996). Similarly, BTS was guided by a desire to make the narratives themselves widely accessible rather than simply presenting the researchers' interpretations of the narratives, and in this way to give credit to the authorial contribution of the participants (Gray 2002).

However, in contrast, qualitative research by social scientists is often based on the assumption of anonymity. The ESDS (Economic and Social Database Service) is a UK national data service that is jointly funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC). The service provides access and support for a range of social science qualitative datasets, promoting and facilitating increased and more effective use of data in research,

learning and teaching (ESDS website<sup>5</sup>). Their guidelines for creating qualitative data to be deposited in the UK Data Archive include detailed notes on anonymisation of data. While they do not insist that all data to be anonymised, nevertheless they consider anonymisation to play an important part in confidentiality and consent agreements. Indeed, it is an unwritten assumption of many (or most) qualitative research projects in the social sciences. The life narrative research conducted by Lawson (2000), Christou (2002) and De Tona (2004), for example, all use pseudonyms. Many participants in such research expect anonymity and it allows them to be much more open than they might be otherwise. Possibly, and importantly, it is a tool that facilitates the expression of the unspoken or hidden narratives. This paper explores the 'to name or not to name' dilemma in relation to the NMR project, by presenting some of the opposing arguments and evaluating the implications of naming and not naming.

### **Biographical methods**

There is a vast array of methods that involve collecting oral testimonies of individuals' lives (see Roberts 2002). In this paper, the term 'biographical methods' is used to refer to these methods in general, but I am specifically concerned with the methods and practices associated with oral history, life history, and life narrative research. Oral history, as conventionally understood, is a research genre that tends to be associated with fields such as social history, anthropology, folklore, community projects, feminist research, and in general with projects that attempt to challenge the dominant narratives of history. According to Ritchie (2003), what distinguishes oral history from other forms of interview-based research is the emphasis on availability of

research data for re-use (although this is of course not unique to oral history, as anthropological and folklore research also emphasise this). Our research on return migration draws on oral history traditions in terms of a desire to document lived experiences and to make data accessible to a wide audience.

However, it is also theoretically influenced by sociological or structural approaches to life history research (Bertaux 1981). The emphasis here is on the role of the life history in enabling the integration of macro-level with micro-level social analysis. Individual lives are set within their wider historical and social contexts, illuminating individual and group experiences and representations of social processes. Recognising that migration is part of a person's biography and is bound up with a person's past as well as their present and future is useful in migration research, and can help to overcome the limitations of aggregate statistics and studies of migration as a single event in time. The life history can illuminate the ways in which migration is bound up with an individual's biography, revealing the tensions between internal and external processes, and between structure and agency (Ní Laoire 2000). A biographical approach, as advocated by Halfacree and Boyle (1993), facilitates an understanding of the complex relationships between individual consciousness and the cultural, social and material frameworks within which people live their lives. Recent geographical research using such biographical approaches reveals the many unacknowledged factors in an individual's life, which shape migration processes and the temporal, social and place embeddedness of migration decisions (Findlay and Li 1997; Ní Laoire 2000; Findlay and Stockdale 2003; Halfacree 2004). Migration decisions are therefore made within the context of an individual's life history as well as the broader socio-economic, geographical and political contexts within which they live. Following in this tradition, the current research is guided in part by a desire to

develop a biographical approach to recent return migration to Ireland, and thus to facilitate an understanding of the social and economic circumstances of emigration and return in Ireland in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

Benmayor and Skotnes (1994) show that biographical methods are of particular value in capturing the lived experiences of processes such as migration and the internal negotiations of belonging, exclusion, placement and displacement. The life history can illuminate experiences of economic, social or cultural exclusion that can precipitate a decision to emigrate, as well as conditions of migrancy<sup>6</sup> such as displacement, unfamiliarity and 'in-betweenness' (Lawson 2000). Beyond this, however, it reveals the meanings that people give to such experiences. One of the key debates in the literature on biographical approaches surrounds the question of the authenticity and reliability of personal testimonies (Roberts 2002). It is increasingly argued that the meanings people give to their lives and events are more valid than attempts to elicit any kind of 'truth'. As Lentin (2000: 259) argues, 'the historical truth of an individual's account is not the primary issue, since 'facts' are products of an interactive and interpretive process and since it is always possible to narrate the same events in different ways'.

Related to this, the life narrative approach, which emphasises meaning, has become popular in social science research and has shaped the thinking on the NMR project (see also Devlin Trew 2005). The life narrative method, while it has its roots in the long history of the use of biographical methods from anthropological and sociological perspectives, also borrows the concept of narration from literary and critical theory. The life narrative method has been enthusiastically adopted by geographers, sociologists and others working with qualitative research methods across the social sciences. Roberts (2002) refers to this as the 'narrative turn' in social

analysis, which draws on the use of narrative in literary studies. Narrative can be defined as a process whereby individual life experience is 'storied' (Polkinghorne 1995). It recognises the role of the teller in constructing her/his own life narrative, through a process of selection, ordering and giving meaning to particular events and stories. This process is contingent on the context in which a narrative is being constructed (for whom, why, when and where the narrative is being told). According to Roberts (2002: 119), individuals 'construct their own narratives according to their interpretation of experience in socio-cultural contexts'. Narrative analysis then focuses on *how* people talk as well as *what* they say, and on interpreting layers of meaning in a text and the connections between them (Miles et al. 2005).

This is particularly valuable in the study of migration. Lawson (2000) argues that migrancy creates fluid subject positions and that as a result migrant stories have theoretical power due to the ambivalence they express. Lawson (2000), Christou (2002) and De Tona (2004) provide useful recent examples of life narrative or autobiographical research conducted with migrants. Christou's (2002) research with second-generation Greek-American return migrants is premised on the idea that identities are constructed through narratives of the self. These migrant narratives reflect processes of identity construction and negotiation. As De Tona (2004) outlines, in her research with Italian women in the diaspora living in Ireland, narratives function as a strategy to negotiate shifting gender and diasporic boundaries. De Tona (2004) distinguishes between informative narratives (narratives that tell us something) and performative narratives (that 'do' something) (see also Lentin 2000). The latter refers to the idea that narratives actively construct lives and identities through the act of telling by 'storying' a set of events, memories and thoughts. In this process of 'storying', there is a tendency towards conveying a coherent and meaningful narrative

of life, often by using classic or communal narratives, which are based on socially accepted or dominant ideologies. Thus migrant narratives serve to create coherence out of the fragmented nature of diasporic or migrant lives (De Tona 2004).

### **Mapping transformative narratives**

In constructing coherence out of fragmentation, narratives reveal the contradictions that are inherent in dominant ideologies. This is particularly so for narrators whose experiences conflict with the dominant narratives (Personal Narratives Group 1989). For example, Lawson (2000) shows that migrant narratives in urban Ecuador reveal the contradictions of processes of modernization, while De Tona's (2004) research reveals the ways in which Italian women in the diaspora can behave in 'deviant' ways while appearing to conform to gender norms. Both Lentin (2000) and De Tona (2004) suggest that life narratives can be transformative as well as performative. In other words, they have transformative possibilities in terms of their ability to construct and articulate counter-narratives (see also Personal Narratives Group 1989). Through their ability to reveal and legitimate hidden worlds, life narratives can construct alternatives to dominant or accepted narratives. De Tona's (2004) research, for example, creates a space for the articulation of young women's narratives, challenging the hegemony of men and of older women in constructing an Italian diaspora in Ireland.

This research with Irish return migrants draws on these methods and theories of narrative analysis, and in particular aims to reveal the interplay of hegemonic and counter-narratives in migrants' accounts. It can be argued that conventional notions of Irishness and the Irish nation have depended on and been reinforced by particular constructions of migration. For example, the highly potent notion of 'migration as

opportunity', especially in the 1980s, constructed migration as a positive and voluntary process associated with Ireland as a globalised entrepreneurial nation (Mac Laughlin 1997). This discourse has concealed hidden stories of joblessness, lack of opportunity, and escape from a socially conservative society, and creates silences around particular experiences of emigration in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Gray and Ní Laoire 1999). In other words, there are dominant and marginal narratives of Irish migration, which are bound up with power relations in Irish society and in the diaspora, and have served to sanitise and sanction high levels of emigration in the past. Conventional constructions of Irishness therefore have relied upon the dominance of particular narratives of migration.

Gray (2004) highlights that in previous waves of emigration, emigrants stayed at a comfortable distance from Ireland, but for the 1980s generation, greater spatial mobility has meant that emigrants 'come home' more often and move back and forth more, and as a result the boundaries between home and away become more blurred. This is further reinforced by the phenomenon of significant return migration in recent years. The presence of the returning or returned migrant can act as an uncomfortable reminder of the many silences in Irish emigration, such as the past failures of the economy, as well as the unarticulated reasons for departure. This paper presents some suggestions around the potential of the NMR research to facilitate the articulation of counter-narratives of return migration and to map transformative geographies.

Frank<sup>7</sup>, a returned migrant in his 40s, living in the west of Ireland, was interviewed as part of the research. He had spent about eight years living in the US and also some time in the Middle East. Although he spoke very positively about his return experience in general, he also spoke about his frustration with certain reactions towards him in Ireland as a return migrant. He told the following story in order to

highlight the resistance he had met to any new ideas he might have brought to his work from his experience in the US:

He [a work colleague] continually tried to put down the experience I had gained. It was, 'well we've been designing [this technology] here [for a long time]...', and, 'the Europeans are way ahead of the Americans'... After a while I just said, 'yeah whatever...'

The implication here is that he felt that people were subtly trying to put him in his place by devaluing any experiences he had gained in his work outside Ireland. There is the sense of an attempt to position him, to place him where he could not threaten the status quo. He claimed that other return migrants, or visiting migrants, have experienced similar reactions. Frank suggested that because of this, most return migrants 'come back quietly'.

Frank: We can see the wood for the trees, whereas I think some people that haven't gone away, cannot see the wood for the trees. But I wouldn't like to say that too loud you know, because someone would probably say 'then why the hell didn't you stay away?' [Laughs.] And I didn't want to stay away.

Interviewer: You get the sense that is what people would say?

Frank: Yeah, yeah, and I don't need that hassle. I think people come back, and they come back quietly.

This implies that some return migrants negotiate their place within Irish society by keeping silent about certain experiences and stories. For example, Emer<sup>8</sup>, who lived abroad for eleven years, told me a story about a row she'd had with her sister, who was arguing that:

we had no right to, we had no right to... It started off that 'moaning immigrants', 'moaning emigrants' returning... Well I said we're over here paying our taxes. I said you have to give some credit for the



Celtic Tiger to the fact that people came back with new ideas, and with experience gained overseas that they wouldn't and couldn't get in Ireland at the time. A lot of things just converged at the same time, inward investment, returning emigrants, you have to give-, they come back and they add to the country. You have to hear their voice. She's like 'No, no, no'. It was getting more and more heated. It probably started around recycling and rubbish collection, or something like that because we would have been big on that in [destination] and it's only coming in here now, and her thing was we didn't have a right to critique. Well nobody's critiquing without a positive suggestion [...] which not the same as just moaning.

Interviewer: Did you get a lot of that?

Emer: Ah yeah, I did actually when I came back. I found it very hard to keep my mouth shut. And eventually I was told to keep my mouth shut. Stop moaning! [...] But I would hope, I wouldn't want to be-, I don't think anyone would want to be labelled as a moaning migrant, no, no matter where they lived.

This story reinforces for Emer the rights of return migrants to a place in Irish society and to freedom of expression. It reflects her frustration with being silenced and provides a window on to her perspective on migrant-stayer tensions. It is also clear that she has a strong desire to be accepted as a return migrant, which comes into conflict with her desire to voice her criticisms openly.

This is also articulated by Kate<sup>9</sup>. On her return from the US to rural Ireland, she talked about what she saw as the poor standard of services in Ireland. Her frustration was heightened by a sense that as she saw it, there was no complaint culture and therefore she could not express her dissatisfaction with this. This silencing of her views was compounded by her awareness that it was particularly unacceptable for her, as a return migrant, to complain about 'Ireland.'

... one thing they don't like is when we give out about Ireland! They don't like that. If you say 'well I think that's expensive', [...], it's like as if you're personally hitting at them. But you're not, you're

hitting at the establishment, the government, yeah it's as if, kind of... maybe it's because you've moved back in, that you're the returned emigrant, you think you can compare it to you know... They don't like when you bitch. They don't and I have to stop myself sometimes. I'm not as bad as I used to be! (Kate, return migrant, twelve years in the US).

It may be that return migrants are made aware, sometimes in subtle ways, that they are not entitled to critique Irish society. This may have its roots a particular dominant narrative of return migration based on the historical stereotype of the 'returned Yank', or the emigrant returned from the US. The stereotype involves a construction of vulgarity associated with conspicuous personal wealth and a tendency to glorify the achievements of America and to criticise Ireland. According to Hickman (2002), the term 'returned Yank' implies a denigration of what is seen as the 'atavistic Irishry' of the Irish-American and an ambiguity around the Irish-American success story. She relates this term to the 'plastic paddy', a term 'deployed to deny and denigrate the second-generation Irish in Britain' (2002: 160), which also affects first generation returning emigrants, who often have to prove that they are still 'authentically' Irish and have not become 'plastic paddies'. Frank, for example, is aware of the 'returned Yank' stereotype, and to an extent he reproduces it in his life narrative. He talks somewhat disapprovingly about other emigrants who come back to Ireland, having acquired American accents, and who talk loudly about what a terrible country Ireland is in comparison to America. He is careful to differentiate himself from them. Kate was aware that she and her husband were known as the 'Yanks' when they returned first:

Kate: Never to us really, but we would hear it from someone else: 'Oh that's the Yanks' house, that big house up there'!

Interviewer: How did that feel, being described as a Yank?

Kate: That never bothered me, no, because I myself when I was young would probably have called someone a Yank because they moved back!

She positions herself in the in-group by referring to her non-migrant self (prior to emigration). She claims that she does not consider it an offensive term, yet, she goes on to talk about her son being 'teased' about being a Yank when he started school in Ireland, implying that she realises the term can be used in a disparaging way. Her awareness of the boundaries between non-migrants and return migrants means that she can work to overcome her positioning as the migrant while appearing to accept the boundaries themselves. As many return migrants are aware of the stereotypes, through their positions as both insider and outsider in Irish society, there may be a conscious effort to avoid being stereotyped in this way, by staying silent about certain opinions. In an attempt to avoid such allegations, it may be that return migrants attempt to be silent about their experiences of emigration and to 'slip back' into Irish society in an inconspicuous way. If this is the case, then there are hidden narratives of return migration, and some potential for research that can provide a 'safe space' for these narratives to be discussed.

This is one of the most valuable functions of oral history or life narrative research – its potential to give voice to unspoken thoughts and feelings. The life narrative is a highly personal perspective on society, the economy, place and belonging. Benmayor and Skotnes (1994: 14) suggest that the individual experience 'is always richer, more contradictory, more paradoxical than that which we represent as the experience of a group'. They suggest that 'few actual individual lives fully conform to the master narratives' (1994: 15). In other words, the conflicts and tensions of processes such as migration are revealed in the life narrative. Focusing on

the construction of narratives by return migrants reveals the ambivalence and contradictions that are dealt with in the process of constructing coherent narratives. So for Irish return migrants, their narratives reveal the ways in which they deal with contradictory desires: on the one hand, the desire to belong, and on the other, a sense of being different. Their narratives reveal their everyday struggles with hegemonic narratives as they attempt to challenge accepted norms in Irish society. However, as these attempts are resisted, the desire to be accepted in effect silences their counter-narratives.

This is reinforced by the assertion by some of the research participants that there are certain things they feel they can talk about only in the company of other return migrants. One of these is their experiences abroad:

It's nice to be able to talk about all that stuff again. People just get weary of it! [...] It's lovely now to meet up with, like there's an Australia friend of ours, and we can just go back on the memories, retrace your steps and things, because like other people's travel stories can be boring! (Emma, four years abroad).

The other topic of conversation that is reserved for the company of other return migrants is the experience of return. For example, Kate says that she only complains about Ireland now in the company of other return migrants. Therefore, by providing a safe space for people to tell their stories, life narrative research can provide a window onto transformative geographies, such as the spaces, places and networks that are occupied by migrants who come and go across, and often challenge, conventional boundaries. This 'safe space' for the voicing of marginal narratives is one that needs to be carefully negotiated in the research design. It implies a certain degree of confidentiality, privacy and anonymity for the research participant.

## **Creating safe spaces**

In designing the methodology for NMR, we have been grappling with the question of anonymity – to name or not to name – and finding conflicting advice in the published guidelines for this kind of research. Etter-Lewis (1996), who has conducted life narrative research with African-American women, also came up against the ‘to name or not to name’ issue. She refutes claims that pseudonyms make a story less truthful. In the end, she felt that it was important to allow participants to maintain anonymity, to protect their privacy, and to allow them safe conditions within which to tell their stories. Interestingly however, a number of women got in touch after publication of her book, to say they were ready to be named because after all, it was ‘their story’, which highlights this tension between the need for safety and privacy and the need to give fair authorial credit to the participant.

According to oral historian Portelli, ‘to tell a story is to take arms against the threat of time... the telling of a story preserves the teller from oblivion’ (cited in Tonkin 1992: 3). The experience of Etter-Lewis, and the opinion expressed by Portelli together raise the question of exactly why participants take part in research and what they expect to gain from it, if anything. Is it for posterity reasons? Certainly, for some participants, the interview is an opportunity for them to put their story on record and to preserve it for future generations. For example, one of the participants in the NMR research was not at all concerned about anonymity. He treated the interview as an oral history, mentioning individuals’ names and place-names, not as asides, but as valuable items of information in their own right. He felt it was important to record

that he was in Boston with his school-friend and his cousin, and to record, as a kind of family history, exactly who his emigrant aunts and uncles were.

What I'm getting at is, I'd love to have heard their story [aunts and uncles who emigrated], and in talking to you, it might give other people that come after me the opportunity to hear me going on and on at length about where I've been, you know, and there's obviously a history of emigration in our family... (Michael, return migrant, nineteen years abroad).

Clearly, he understood the purpose of the interview in the same way as did many of the participants in BTS. For this kind of interview, to attempt to impose anonymity seems quite contrived and unfair.

In the oral history tradition, the impulse to record one's story for the future is given a degree of legitimacy by the heritage movement, which valorises and celebrates oral testimonies of the 'past'. Perhaps the key to understanding the establishment of norms regarding anonymity in biographical research lies in the way in which society and researchers define 'the past'. If a story refers to the recent past (more common in life narrative or other qualitative research), perhaps society treats it differently to a story about the more distant past? There is a strong urge in contemporary society to preserve memories of a time gone-by (the distant past) before they are lost forever, which has a tendency to exoticise and sanitise the distant past, while the same urgency does not exist in relation to the recent past. It may be that recent or current experiences and thoughts are considered to be more sensitive or more 'real' than events and experiences from the more distant past. Therefore the nature of the interview is different in the latter case and privacy becomes more important. With time, these sensitive issues may become more acceptable or 'harmless' to talk about, and they are rendered palatable for public consumption.

Clearly, as discussed in the previous section, some of the tensions and conflicts of the return migration process are not articulated openly.

The decision whether or not to use anonymity/pseudonyms is however only partly governed by disciplinary traditions, and is also a function of the specific spoken or unspoken research agreement between researcher and participant in each specific interview context. This includes such factors as trust and the way in which the issue is presented to the participant<sup>10</sup>. In NMR in the south, it became clear that anonymity was an important issue for many participants, as some asked about this before agreeing to participate. Without the option of anonymity, it would have been impossible to create the kind of safe conditions required for the articulation of counter-narratives. However, for a minority of participants in the south, anonymity was not deemed to be important. In fact, this was the case for a majority of participants in the northern part of the project. The difference between north and south here may be a result of the influence of different researchers on the relationships established between researcher and participant, as well as the different geographical/historical contexts. The southern interviews generally referred to a more recent time period than those conducted in the north; in addition there are different historical and cultural discourses of emigration in the two parts of the island, whereby emigration as a source of anxiety as well as celebration has been central to dominant narratives of the southern state, but has been less significant in the north (Mac Éinrí 2006).

It is apparent that the creation of safe spaces for the telling of life narratives becomes particularly important under certain conditions. These include: when telling stories about the recent past, telling stories that have wider emotional resonance, and when narrators' experiences conflict with dominant narratives. In these cases,

narrators need safe spaces if they are to tell the stories that they do not wish to tell openly. This involves reducing the risks to the narrator and creating the conditions whereby a relationship of trust can be established, so that the narrator not only feels it is safe to tell their story, but is protected from the risks involved.

### **Implications of naming and not naming**

One way of reducing the risk to the narrator is to anonymise their story. The decision to name or not to name has implications in terms of ethics as well as researcher autonomy. Issues of informed consent, harm and exploitation are particularly important. Informed consent is an accepted principle in qualitative research (Plummer 2001; Economic and Social Data Service 2006), but in a named interview, it is particularly important that the participant is informed about and fully understands the implications of being named. The ethical principle of minimising harm to the participant and to others is also relevant, as the participant is in a particularly vulnerable position in a named interview, where it is possible they may be hurt by the ways in which their own story is made public and interpreted. In a named interview, other individuals who appear in the narrative may also be recognisable, which means that it is possible that potentially defamatory or hurtful information on identified others might be included in the interview or publications arising from it.

Dealing with these ethical issues means that the named approach, therefore, requires the participant to have a considerable degree of control over the final product. This issue of control over the use of the interview material is a central one (Wengraf 2001). It requires striking a balance between ethical responsibility and researcher freedom. Using a pseudonym can reduce the participant's control over the testimony



and allows the researcher to take substantially more freedom with the interview material in terms of analysis and interpretation, and can leave the participant more open to exploitation. (However it could also be argued that a named approach can also conceal the authorial power of the researcher, who still maintains considerable control of the research process and therefore the shape and style of its outputs). While this balance of power does reduce the role of the participant in the research process and therefore can be abused, it also allows the researcher to conduct a more critical interpretation of the stories being told than might be possible with a named interview.

There is a balance to be struck, then, between giving fair authorial credit and control to participants on the one hand, and creating a safe space for the telling of life narratives, on the other, while recognising the inherent power relations of the research process. Providing the option of anonymity to the participant may be one solution. Ritchie (2003) argues against what he calls 'blanket anonymity', proposing that participants should be given the choice to go on the record. In the ESDS guidelines, the point is made that anonymity should not be crudely imposed. So, what do these complex ethical issues mean for how we conduct oral history and life narrative research? Can a research project belong firmly one or other tradition? It is more likely that all are located along some kind of spectrum, where issues such as anonymity need to be negotiated.

### **Negotiating solutions**

It is this process of negotiation that we have been going through in our research on return migration. This process has involved locating the research in relation to other oral history and life narrative research, and also negotiating issues of privacy,

confidentiality and anonymity with the research participants themselves, and as a research team across both parts of the project (north and south). The approach that eventually was taken is that participants were offered the option of remaining anonymous or being named. This means that for some participants, all names and identifying details were removed, and for others, these were left in and the participant gave informed consent for this. The procedures were carefully explained to all participants and they were all asked to sign two copies of a consent form, one of which they keep.

All of the ethical issues involved in naming and not naming participants required careful consideration. In order to be guided by the principle of informed consent, all procedures regarding the interview process and the destination and final use of the interview were explained carefully and openly to the participant before each interview, both verbally and with the use of an information sheet and consent form, which the participant kept. After each interview, the final edited audio version was sent to all participants for their approval and it was made clear to them that they could request changes to be made before it was archived. Unfortunately, one of the implications of this process is that some of the most personal and powerful material in an interview may need to be removed at the request of the participant. Some of the most sensitive issues for migrants are their relations with other family members, reflecting the complex sets of relations that develop between those who go and those who stay. This is the kind of material that is often either not shared, or later removed, in a named interview.

In any project that involves archiving oral testimony (as opposed to written transcripts of oral testimony), there is the additional complication that anonymity is particularly difficult to achieve in an oral recording. In theory, every individual's

voice is unique and identifiable. Complete anonymity was not going to be possible in this project. The implications of this were explained to all participants, who were told that their identities could be recognisable to anyone who knew them. There are further issues around an online archive, which is available to the public in a way that a physical archive is not. When the individual's voice is put together with their life story, and it is made available on the internet, then anonymity becomes almost impossible. In addition, there are concerns around the ethics and potential misuse of interview material that is made available online (Ritchie 2003). One solution that is adopted by some oral history websites is to provide a selection of interview highlights online, while retaining the rest in an archive. In contrast to the approach adopted by BTS, and drawing on the practice of some other oral history websites (for example, Survivors of the Shoah<sup>11</sup>; ESDS Qualidata<sup>12</sup>), for NMR it was decided to put thematic excerpts rather than full life narratives on the website<sup>13</sup>, while placing the full recordings in the archive, to which there would be access through the university and research centre libraries. This does mean that the full recordings do not reach as wide an audience as those of BTS, but it was also felt that the main audience for full recordings would be the committed researcher in any case, and that the casual listener would find excerpts more accessible. The process of resolving the dilemma to name or not has been highly contingent on the aims and conditions of the research project itself – the decisions we have made reflect the contexts of the research and the nature of the outputs, and may not be appropriate in another project. This highlights the situated nature of research ethics. Established ethical guidelines do provide a valuable framework within which to work, but the risks are contingent on the nature and specificities of the research itself (Plummer 2001). This means that decisions regarding anonymity, privacy and confidentiality require constant negotiation.

## **Conclusions**

Life narrative methods offer valuable possibilities for research into the inherently geographical phenomenon of migration, by allowing us to explore relationships between geographical processes and the complexity and richness of individual lives, as they are lived out in places and in between places, and the ways in which they are bound up with dominant and marginal discourses of place and belonging. Focusing on the construction of narratives by Irish return migrants reveals the ambivalence and contradictions that are dealt with in the process of constructing coherent narratives of migration and return. Their narratives reveal the ways in which they deal with contradictory identities: on the one hand, the desire to belong to their place of return, and on the other, a sense of being different, as they attempt to challenge accepted norms in Irish society. The research participants articulated these contradictory identities and narratives in their interviews but suggested that they often tried to avoid doing so in normal conversation. For a number of reasons, some of the experiences of return migration are articulated only in safe spaces, for example, in the company of other return migrants, or, in an interview situation in which a relationship of trust has developed. For this reason, providing a safe space in which interviews were conducted was crucial, one aspect of which was the question of anonymity.

The decision to name or not to name participants was shaped by a number of factors. It was influenced by (often very different) historical practices in the oral history and qualitative social science research traditions. There are contrasting perspectives in oral history and life narrative research on the use of anonymity to protect participants' identities, which reflect different disciplinary traditions and

practices. In this research, there was a desire to give credit and a fair degree of control over the recordings to the participants themselves. However, the project also set out to allow space for voices which might challenge dominant narratives, and was concerned therefore to create safe spaces for the articulation of counter-narratives of migration and return. In order to deal with these conflicting needs and desires, the process of negotiation resulted in the decision to provide the option of anonymity to participants, and to create as safe a space as possible for the participant, while being honest with them about the risks involved. This decision reflected a desire to facilitate access to migrant voices, while at the same time, providing safe conditions for the articulation of those voices, by providing anonymity where possible, and in agreement with the participant.

Understanding the often hidden dimensions of the experience of return migration to Ireland can contribute to mapping alternative geographies of Ireland and the diaspora, by providing a safe space for the articulation of migrant voices. One of the challenges for this type of research is how this safe space is created and kept safe, without diminishing the authority of those voices. As with any life narrative research project, there is a balance to be struck between the competing demands of anonymity and authority, which in the case of this research was further complicated by the specific issues involved in an oral archive. It is hoped that the end product will be a valuable archive complemented by a useful and accessible package of online resources, both of which will, into the future, contribute to understandings of social change in Ireland and the diaspora at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

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<sup>3</sup> Project Director: Breda Gray. See <http://migration.ucc.ie/oralarchive/testing/breaking/index.html>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.oralhistory.org.uk>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.esds.ac.uk/qualidata/introduction.asp>

<sup>6</sup> Migrancy is understood here in the sense of migrants' complex subjectivities, as used by Lawson (2000).

<sup>7</sup> 'Frank' is a pseudonym.

<sup>8</sup> 'Emer' is a pseudonym.

<sup>9</sup> 'Kate' is a pseudonym.

<sup>10</sup> I am grateful to my colleague Johanne Devlin Trew for highlighting this.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.usc.edu/schools/college/vhi/>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.esds.ac.uk/qualidata/introduction.asp>

<sup>13</sup> <http://migration.ucc.ie/nmr>