



WORKING WITH ANGLO-INDIAN LIFE STORIES: EMOTIONAL LABOUR AND ETHICS

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade I have collected a number of life stories from members of the Anglo-Indian community. In this article I focus in particular on the emotional labour that can be required when recording and engaging with stories of 'difficult' or painful experiences in people's lives. Drawing on the experiences of writing one particularly hard-to-tell story I discuss a number of life story depiction dilemmas that arose, many of which required emotional labour to resolve.

As an anthropologist with a 'public anthropology'¹ philosophy I endeavour to produce work which addresses contemporary issues and which is accessible to 'the public', including members of the community that I focus my research upon. Life stories are a particularly useful vehicle to explore important issues relating to this mostly literate community, who do read works about themselves. The lived experience of Anglo-Indians is varied, and a set of life stories should reflect that. There is one particular type of life story – those of the 'less fortunate' (the expression used by Anglo-Indians to describe those in their community who are socially and economically disadvantaged) – that are emotionally harder work for the researcher for various reasons, some of which relate to particular characteristics of the community, while others are more general life story collection and depiction dilemmas. Janet Holland (2007) one of the few scholars who writes about the emotion involved in collecting and writing life stories suggests that it is important to pay close attention to the researcher's emotions, especially to negative emotions such as distress, caused by the research. She says that understanding the reasons behind this emotion can be a source of real insight. The exploration of what it is that

triggers the emotion, which requires labour to resolve, and what meanings can be taken from the experience, is the focus of this paper.

RESEARCH AND EMOTIONAL LABOUR

The concept of 'emotional labour', used in this paper, was introduced by Hochschild in 1983 and is defined by Hubbard, Backett-Milburn, & Kemmer (2001) as "the type of work that involves feelings, and can be contrasted with physical or task-oriented labour" (2001:122). It is generally used to describe the labour involved in managing the feelings of the people who are employed in jobs such as nursing, teaching, counselling, and the clergy. It can also be applied to the work carried out by qualitative researchers, as I explore further along.

The 'emotions' seem to be addressed in at least three different ways in social science literature: One relates to the 'emotional turn' that occurred in disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, and human geography in the late 1990s and early 2000 which has resulted in the study of the emotions and of emotional labour now being seen as a legitimate fields of exploration. This has resulted in the production of a proliferation of works with a central focus on emotion, emerging from new sub-disciplines: for example, the sociology, anthropology or geography of emotions. An example of such a publication is *Emotional Geographies* (Davidson, Smith, & Bondi, 2007) which brings together works from scholars from a range of disciplines.

The second, and quite commonly addressed sense in which emotions are considered, is through taking into account the emotions of the people that social scientists, and others, work with, particularly as we explore sensitive and/or painful issues through narrative research methods. There is a body of work which focusses on the distress that can be caused by carrying out inter-subjective research such as that involved in life story collection, and the need to employ ethically sound practices to ameliorate the potential harm of such experiences. This topic is almost invariably viewed from the perspective of the research participant's or interviewee's discomfort, particularly when an interview involves re-living some distressing event in their life.

The third way of considering emotion is by focussing on the researcher's emotional experiences, and emotional labour, as they go about their work.² There are very few publications which address this aspect, and of those that do, most record emotional

distress in fieldwork accounts of researchers working at the 'coal-face', rather than it being more widely discussed in terms of methodology, which, according to Hubbard, et al. (2001), for example, it ought to be. Of those who do discuss the emotion of the researcher the emphasis is usually on the need to look after the researcher's own 'health', and as I noted earlier, sociologist Janet Holland (2007) also stresses that we need to reflect on what is going on when we experience, in particular, the emotion of distress. It is this, rather than looking further at the ways in which researchers experience emotional labour, (for example, from the work involved in creating an environment of rapport, to controlling emotions as we carry out interviews which upset us, to writing up these same interviews) that is of interest in this case. And it is this third sense, the concern with the emotion of fieldworkers as they carry out their work, that I will look at in this article. In particular I will look at what the emotional labour involved in affective experiences might be urging us to notice.

FRAMING ANGLO-INDIAN LIVES

Social science researchers are at times criticized by Anglo-Indians for the way they write about their community, in particular for drawing unnecessary attention to negative aspects which, it is surmised, has the effect of perpetuating the stereotypes. A focus on stories of the less fortunate, for example, is thought to perpetuate ideas about Anglo-Indians being disproportionately socio-economically disadvantaged. It is in this milieu, with an awareness of this dilemma, that I write community life stories. As a non-Anglo-Indian social scientist working with the community I am aware of the Anglo-Indian perception of how researchers frame them – often negatively – and of some Anglo-Indian responses to it. In my work, therefore, I attempt to traverse this territory by 1) writing about a variety of topics and issues, that is, not just focussing on socio-economic-related matters, 2) drawing on various methodologies, and 3) writing life stories of people from a range of socio-economic positions, for example, as a set of life stories such as are included in *Christmas in Calcutta: Anglo-Indian Stories and Essays* (Andrews, 2014). This ensures that some are written outside the 'frame' which emphasises poverty. In order to present a realistic picture, however, some of the interviews I've carried out have lead me to write just the type of stories that some Anglo-Indians may rather not see. To discuss this further I draw on my experiences with one particularly hard-to-

tell life story. While it does not claim to be representative of Anglo-Indians, or of any particular social group of Anglo-Indians, it helps to shed light on certain Anglo-Indian life depiction issues.

CASE STUDY: WRITING DULCIE'S STORY³

I have carried out a series of interviews with Anglo-Indians about ageing⁴ [iv], including one interview with a woman in Calcutta whom I call Dulcie. She has had a full, but at times challenging and unhappy life, particularly so in the last decade. When I interviewed her she was homeless and staying with a friend in a tiny, musty, single-roomed house which floods each monsoon season. She was there while waiting for a place in an Anglo-Indian rest home. I interviewed Dulcie there because she didn't have the means to go anywhere and at that time couldn't leave her home as she didn't own a pair of shoes she could walk outside in without them falling apart. She is an attractive, very well-groomed and well-dressed 85-plus year old, and as I was to find, a very articulate woman. In addition she is the personification of style and decorum.

We always began our interview sessions with a cup of tea accompanied by some treat I'd bought on the way – usually samosas, sandwiches, cakes or Indian sweets, depending on the time of the day. We would chat for a little while then settle down to 'work': that of recording her life story. Dulcie related her life to me chronologically, beginning with her very early childhood as an orphan in an Anglo-Indian boarding school and ending with her present situation of looking for an institution to take her in and care for her in her old age.

When I wrote it, I framed her story as one in which her 'every day' faith has helped her through the tough times. Another framing tool was to see her life as one which was to be book-ended by Anglo-Indian institutions. In between these institutionalised periods she has married, has had and brought up her children, and was employed for most of her working life in administrative or secretarial positions. She had moved away from Calcutta some years previously but had recently moved back to Calcutta as she planned to spend her last years in the city. The downturn in her life occurred after her husband died, about fifteen years before our interviews, when she was living away from Calcutta. She was then reliant on her children to

care for her and give her a home. Her expectation that they would care for her, based on the fact that she and her husband had bought them each a flat, was not fulfilled and at times she was, in my judgment at least, treated appallingly. She told me, for example, of being forced, by her son and daughter-in-law, to leave her son's home in the middle of the night and she ended up sleeping rough with a stray dog for company. After that she moved into a non-Anglo-Indian rest home for the destitute where there was no one she could relate to – for example, no one spoke English, her mother tongue.

She was reasonably matter of fact in her delivery of these and other heartrending situations. Even though her story had elements of pathos, her attitude to her circumstances was quite upbeat; in fact she described herself as “happy” in a questionnaire that I was using for another piece of research I was carrying out concurrently. So the interviews themselves were not as emotionally taxing (for either of us it seemed) as they could have been if she had delivered her story differently. She seemed to look forward to our sessions, and I, perhaps partly in response to that, also thoroughly enjoyed them.

It was not until six months after I had collected her story, and after the interviews had been transcribed, that I came to write up her life story. I usually begin this process by reading right through the full set of interview transcriptions. So one rainy wintery morning I settled myself down in my comfortable home to spend the day reading the transcripts from the four, hour or so long, interview sessions that I had conducted with her. While I am not particularly prone to melancholy a half day spent reading through her story left me feeling very sad, and quite down for several days afterwards. I was much more affected reading about what she had put up with than I had been when I had heard it directly from her.⁵ Later that same week I again had time to work with her story but it took the greatest willpower to get back to it.⁶

Eventually I did manage to write the 45,000 plus words I had from the interviews up into a 7,500 word long story and I then posted it back to her for her comment – as we had agreed I would do. Thus began another period of emotional labour, as I waited anxiously for her response to what I had written. I was concerned at how she would react to seeing her story in print and I worried that she would find reading it to be

more upsetting than it had been to tell it, in the same way as I had found it harder to read than to hear.

After an anxious month I received a letter from her which I opened to read the following note in her handwriting: “Robyn dear, Many thanks – you have my okay to go ahead, please. You have recalled a beautiful memory, so vivid and real – the recorder on the little table, Mary pottering around getting the tea ready and then galloping the delicious goodies you used to bring us. Miss your caring ways very much. Love and best wishes to you, Keith and David. Have a great time during this festive season. Dulcie”. I read this letter with enormous relief, but it also perplexed me as I describe further on. I look more closely now at the emotional work involved in the various aspects of writing Dulcie’s and other similarly affecting stories.

WORKING WITH DULCIE’S STORY

Dulcie’s response to reading my account of her life, along with my own reaction to working with her story highlighted several issues for me and reminded me of Janet Holland’s (2007) advice – to be aware of what’s going on when we have these emotional responses. A number of issues are noteworthy in this respect, which I have organised into the following categories: 1) the interviewer being emotionally in ‘sync’, or harmony, with interviewee, 2) the interviewee’s versus interviewer’s framing of the interview experience, 3) considerations of the interviewee’s approval, or disapproval, of the story, 4) considerations of the community’s approval or disapproval, 5) the responsibility to tell the ‘real’ story versus potential impact. I will consider these different categories next, drawing on the experience of working with Dulcie and her story, in the milieu of the Anglo-Indian community.

1) The interviewer being emotionally in or out of sync with interviewee: During the interview Dulcie and I were emotionally in tune or harmony with each other. It wasn’t until well after the interview that there seemed to be a disconnect in our emotional responses towards aspects of the interview. When I read the transcripts I responded solely to the content, that is, to the events she had recounted. This was the first time I had heard them unmediated by her delivery, or distracted by the tasks of interviewing (which involve, amongst other things, listening actively in order to respond appropriately, provide encouragement, and steer the conversation in

particular ways). With the content as my sole focus many of the instances she had related in the interviews struck me on reading as being particularly traumatic experiences. Whereas when Dulcie related it to me I responded to her delivery more than the content, and for her it was part of her history, and she seemed to have come to terms with what had occurred, and it no longer seemed to elicit the emotional response that she is likely to have had earlier.

2) The interviewee's versus interviewer's framing of the interview experience: There was a clear disparity in the framing of the interview experience by the two people involved; me as the interviewer and Dulcie as the interviewee. For me the aim of interviewing Dulcie was in order to understand more about her life (as one Anglo-Indian in a particular situation) and to be able to write her story. For Dulcie, on the other hand, the interview was an event in itself. She is gregarious and generally enjoys having visitors and was happy to spend time talking about her past to someone interested in it. I also enjoyed spending my time with Dulcie. But between the interviews and the time I sent back her 'story' I had become concerned that I had caused her pain by stirring up old memories. I was very relieved, and quite taken aback, to receive the response I did to the story I'd sent her. It was only then that I felt reassured that interviewing her hadn't been a 'damaging' experience. Or if I had caused her some pain in remembering tough times, there had been a social benefit in telling it: she had enjoyed that part of the experience.

3) Considerations of the interviewee's approval, or disapproval, of the story: When we write stories of people who are still living we do, and ethically should, be concerned about how they will react. The Association of Social Anthropologists Aotearoa/New Zealand's code of ethics give primacy to the edict, "do no harm" to research participants; with harm including physical, emotional, or psychological injury (see <http://asaanz.science.org.nz/codeofethics.html>). So what do we do if our research participants don't like what we write? This is something that Dorothy McMenemy has discussed in her article "Framing Oral Histories as Autobiographical Accounts" in *Raj Days to Downunder: Voices from Anglo-India to New Zealand* (McMenemy, 2013) and is always a vexed issue. The practice I have adopted to avoid 'harm' and to lessen the likelihood of having to abandon the research, is to be open and honest about the process, and to genuinely give research participants

considerable control of their story right the way through. I ask participants for their permission to audio record them (sometime I use a printed consent form but often I capture their consent on an audio record). I make it clear that as well as not being under any pressure to tell me about anything they're not comfortable relating to me, they also have the last word on what I write as 'their' story. After I write the story I always give them a copy to comment on.⁷ If they request changes, for example, deletions, additions, or corrections to factual accounts, I undertake to do this. What I do keep control of, as the researcher and author, is the analysis of what has been said, although I often run this past interviewees also.

4) Considerations of the community's approval or disapproval: When we write about any community, particularly of a literate minority community, we have concerns about how community members will react. This reaction, of course, won't necessarily, or even usually, be uniform. One of the reasons for some of my emotional work relates to the way this community feel they are typically framed by social scientists. As I noted earlier, many Anglo-Indians feel that non-Anglo-Indian scholars (in particular) focus unduly on the poverty and backwardness within their Indian-resident community, which perpetuates negative stereotypes about them. This text forwarded to me from an Anglo-Indian that I was working with at one stage highlights the feeling from some members of the community about what happens when researchers come into their midst: "...I recd an unsigned letter accusing me of selling info about poor AIs to foreign researchers." Because of the size of the community whatever is written by social scientists in particularised accounts can be seen to reflect negatively on the entire community.

An alternative framing are the valorised reports of what it means to be an Anglo-Indian, sometimes written by members of the community, which focus on Anglo-Indian achievement and their heroes (see D'Cruz, (2006:165) in particular on this issue) and more recently on notions that Anglo-Indians are, through some dubiously supported reasoning, ideal global citizens in an increasingly globalised world. A more credible account is that offered by Blunt (2005:139-174) and D'Cruz (2006: 189-224) about the attributes of Anglo-Indians which enable them to adapt in their adopted countries as successful migrants in multicultural societies.

In the case study account I've given it seems that the insider and outsider involved (Dulcie and me) were taking prescribed, or normative, roles: Dulcie's delivery made it a story about resilience in the face of adversity. She reported that she was happy, and her appearance and demeanour certainly did not invite pity. So in a way hers was a story of heroism. My reaction, at least once I got back home, was of sadness and pity towards her as she seemed to have been the victim of neglect, bordering on abuse, by those who were relationally closest to her.

5) The responsibility to tell the 'real' story versus potential negative impact: We have concerns about the potential of our work to negatively impact on the community. If anything, the telling of a sad or tough story can be seen as doing a service to the community. But it is akin to that flip-sided quandary that Caplan wrote of in an article on Anglo-Indian urban poverty in Madras (Caplan, 1996) where he presented a paper highlighting the progress of Anglo-Indians (which he thought they would be pleased to hear) but which was not well-received because the community there were arguing for Anglo-Indians to be assigned 'Backward Status' in the State of Tamil Nadu (where he carried out research in the 1990s). As he explains "The assignment of Backward Status is a state prerogative (...) [entitling] holders to compete for certain reserved places in state government organisations, educational institutions etc." (Caplan, 1996: 337) But another Anglo-Indian audience might have felt slighted had he depicted them in a way they were not proud of, nor felt was warranted. The community is far from uniform in their socio-economic status or the views of the range of socio-economic status within their community. Some would rather have their pride intact, than receive assistance from outside. Perhaps this is at the root of the popularity of heroic stories. Unfortunately glowing reports of how well the community is doing can undermine the much needed work of Anglo-Indian social service organisations. If Anglo-Indians are doing better now than they have done it's at least partly because of the work being done for them by the members of Social Services organisations, and donations, mostly from 'abroad'. In addition, the social service organisations need the not-so-rosy stories to be told in order to make a case for their continued work.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

While it would sometimes be easier, emotionally, to retreat to theoretically dense jargon-laden publications, and it would also be easier to write only 'success' stories, or 'good' stories (described to me by one Anglo-Indian woman as ones in which the protagonist has been agential in overcoming obstacles and has attained success and happiness), a range of stories is needed in order to convey the reality of the range of lives in this community. This community does have its fair share of poverty so it would be doing a disservice to that portion of the community to present only the positive stories. For one thing, as I note above, the work of Anglo-Indian social services in looking after their less fortunate would be seriously undermined if the only stories told were of the Anglo-Indians who are doing well.

With a story such as Dulcie's, provided it's sensitively written, a number of Anglo-Indian life-depiction dilemmas can be resolved. By writing a story which retains the dignity in which she tells her story, while not airbrushing or valorising what she has experienced, her need for assistance is not denied, which therefore doesn't undermine others' need for assistance.

I am in concordance with Holland (2007) in her claim that by taking notice of the emotions we experience in the various phases of writing a life story, and interrogating those emotions, we can uncover and come to recognise aspects of the interview and life writing process, and aspects of the people we write about, that we may otherwise have missed.

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NOTES

¹ Public anthropology requires an attitude and particular approach to the discipline which is described by Robert Borofsky, who is regarded as the founder of this approach, in this way:

Public anthropology demonstrates the ability of anthropology and anthropologists to effectively address problems beyond the discipline—illuminating the larger social issues of our times as well as encouraging broad, public conversations about them with the explicit goal of fostering social change. It affirms our responsibility, as scholars and citizens, to meaningfully contribute to communities beyond the academy—both local and global—that make the study of anthropology possible. (2006)

² Although, as pointed out by Shuler “...the emotional labor requirements from various areas of life and work bleed into each other” (2007, p. 260).

³ I invariably use pseudonyms to protect the privacy of the interviewees. Dulcie is a pseudonym, as is ‘Mary’ who is mentioned a little later in the paper.

⁴ Some of these were focused on ageing in rest homes which have been published as: (Andrews, 2008, 2010, 2012).

⁵ Shuler (2007:264) also writes about her experience of heightened emotional response on later working with an account of trauma after the event – in her case it was the retelling to a friend.

⁶ I have since spoken (in passing, rather than in a therapeutic setting) to a counsellor friend about this experience, especially about my reaction to it, and she described this as a form of ‘vicarious trauma’ (Described as “the process of change that happens because you care about other people who have been hurt, and feel committed or responsible to help them. Over time this process can lead to changes in your psychological, physical, and spiritual well-being. (<http://headington-institute.org/Default.aspx?tabid=2648> accessed 4.10.13)

She added that it was something that counsellors are well aware of the risks of. It is also sometimes referred to as compassion fatigue (Helm, n.d.).

⁷ Occasionally an interviewee shows no apparent interest in this stage of the process, so while I ensure that I give respondents every opportunity to tell me if they’re not happy with any aspect of the work, if they don’t get back to me with any changes I go ahead with it. I presume they’re happy with the story unless they let me know that they are not.