Interrupting Life History:
The Evolution of Relationship within Research

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In this paper the author explores how relationships are defined within the context of constructing a life history. The life history of Benjamin, a homeless young man transitioning to adulthood, is used to illustrate how difficult it is to define the parameters of the research environment. During an "ethically important moment" in the research process, the author had to critically analyze his obligation to his participant based upon the relational titles exchanged. As chaos in Benjamin's life increased, a choice needed to be made about the researcher's involvement in his life. Should the researcher provide support or simply document events? Based upon the obligations inherent in how Benjamin defined his relationship with the researcher, the author explains why and how Benjamin's life was interrupted. Keywords: Life History, Relational Dynamics, Ethics, Vulnerable Populations

"I ain't got nothing to hide," Benjamin (pseudonym) stated in an even tone, "people is going to think what they think." We had met a year earlier when Benjamin was 16 years old during a research project involving homeless youth. Although he participated in an interview as part of the larger project, I wanted to make sure he understood what I was asking. I explained what constructing his life history would involve. "I know, I trust you," he replied, "you like family." I was flattered he trusted me, but I did not consider the power or obligation embedded in this comment.

He shared his life without hesitation or self-consciousness. I interviewed Benjamin five times; however, the majority of his story was constructed through participation and observation. Our relationship evolved. I allowed Benjamin to use terms that transcended research—mentor, friend, family. In what follows, I consider the evolving and complex nature of relationships that can form in life history research. I share aspects of collecting Benjamin's story to set the context in which I struggled to determine if my primary role was documenting or influencing his life choices. In particular, I discuss the responsibility of the researcher during ethically important moments. When a crisis occurred in Benjamin's life I had to critically consider the relational obligations involved in the titles I accepted. I am not suggesting all life historians need to intervene in the lives of participants; however, I argue that researchers should examine the relational obligations involved in the titles they accept … and then act accordingly.

Writing Life's History

Life history provides depth of understanding "specific acts, events, relationships, and circumstances in particular lives" (McCall, 1985, p. 170), which allows one case to be explored in context with a focus on personal reality and the process of making choices (Cole & Knowles, 2001). The life historian typically collects data from multiple sources and makes choices about how to present the participant's story. Taking these intimate pieces of life, the researcher constructs a manuscript for an academic audience. Intensive data collection and extensive time with an individual are essential. Much has been written about the process of constructing life histories. I do not intend to provide a review of this methodology; my

purpose is more focused. The intimate nature of life history often blurs the line between research and "real" relationships (Behar, 2003b; Wolcott, 2002). The time, intensity and intimacy involved increases the likelihood of a close bond with participants.

The intimacy of life history places the participant in a place of vulnerability not always present in other forms of research. The researcher must take steps to avoid harming the participant both intentionally and unintentionally. Previous researchers have explored the potential harm associated with constructing the written text (Cassell, 1982; Muchmore, 2002). While these issues warrant continue discussion and critique, I explore how relational titles exchanged within the research context frame ethical considerations. In presenting Benjamin, I consider my role in his life. Determining the boundaries of our relationship created cognitive dissonance. What was (is) my responsibility to him? What were (are) the parameters of our relationship? In the sections that follow, I discuss aspects of life history that framed how I respond(ed) to these questions.

Considering Relationships in Research

Life histories typically involve interactions with one person for an extended period. These extensive interactions may lead to the formation of a relationship. In some instances, a relationship with a participant may be the impetus for the study (Behar, 2003b; Frank, 2000; Wolcott, 1983, 2002). A researcher may find a person in his or her life particularly interesting. Instead of being an "objective" observer, the relationship between researcher and participant becomes part of the process (Munro, 1993). Developing a bond may facilitate access to personal aspects of the participant's story and increase the depth of understanding his or her experiences.

Relationships formed in the process of constructing a life history vary. Researchers have found themselves being a storyteller, biographer, financial resource, mentor, advocate and lover (e.g., Behar, 2003a, 2003b; Crapanzano, 1972; Tierney, 1994; Wolcott, 2002, 2010). The level of intimacy involved also varies. Harry Wolcott has written extensively about his involvement with Brad. His commentary on the importance of considering the potential complications of intimacy exemplifies the confusing boundaries within research. Given the limited understanding and oversight of IRB offices, life historians need to reflexively consider the research process to avoid harm (Muchmore, 2002).

The nature of constructing a life history involves some level of personal connection as the participant shares his or her life with the researcher. Intimacy does not necessarily mean sex; many forms of intimate relationships can form that resemble friendship. The researcher and participant may become invested in each other's life while engaging in conversations requiring high levels of trust and deep reflection (Swartz, 2011). Behar (2003b) and Frank (2000) exemplify the interconnectedness that results from long-term interactions. They spent several years with participants collecting data and sharing life that transcended the construction of a life history. Forging a trusting relationship with a participant involving empathy and reflexivity allows for self-disclosure to occur (Papantoniou-Frangouli, 2009). This is not to say that every researcher does or should develop a close relationship with participants. Relationships cannot be forced. The researcher or participant may not experience compatibility beyond the research purpose. Or a researcher may set explicit and intentional boundaries the limit relational development. When relationships do form, researchers need to engage in reflexivity and empathetic sensitivity to the socio-emotional states of the individuals engaged in the research; Warin (2011) calls this process relational awareness. Muchmore (2002) argues ethics should frame life history research; however, what is ethical in one situation may not be in another. In constructing the written life history, he argues that researchers should seek to only include details that are relevant, accurate, necessary and

ethical. Power differentials are embedded within the research process, particularly when working with an individual who may be categorized as vulnerable, underserved, or marginalized (Swartz, 2011). The consent process has been posited as the ideal time to negotiate reciprocity expectations because this is when participants have the most power (Haverkamp, 2005; MacKenzie, McDowell, & Pittaway, 2007). While I agree, constructing a life history involves relational shifts throughout the process. Reciprocity and consent need to be negotiated throughout the evolution of the research and relationship (Perry, 2011). The complexity and fluidity of qualitative methods preclude a "how to" manual for ethical behavior (Haverkamp, 2005).

Trust(worthiness) is an essential aspect of constructing a life history. I needed to consider if I was actually worthy of Benjamin's trust. In turn, was I worthy of the readers' trust? These concepts are intertwined. Often the notion of trustworthiness is applied to the reader as a consumer. Haverkamp (2005, p. 146) argues that ethics represent "a thoughtful, and sometimes courageous, commitment to creating trustworthy human relationships within our research enterprise." And "what makes research 'ethical' is not characteristic of the design or procedures, but of our individual decisions, actions, relationships, and commitments." Trust established may increase a participant's comfort with the research process. Behar (2003a, 2003b) argues that she could not have conducted her study without establishing a trusting relationship with her participant.

The process of gaining access to individuals and research sites has received ample attention; however, discussions concerning exiting the field are relatively thin (Iversen, 2009). Lofland and Lofland (1995, p. 62) argue "the handling of these voluntary departures probably deserves more careful thought and pre-planning than fieldworkers have traditionally given to it." Iversen and Armstrong (2006) found that the ease of disengaging from participants did not relate to the researcher's gender, age, family status, or racial or ethnic heritage. However, exiting the field became more difficult for researchers who forged a relationship with participants. For life historians, the field is a person's life. The lines between research and friendship can be difficult to distinguish. Abruptly ending relationships can be difficult and, in some cases, the researcher and/or participant may wish to maintain the connection. New roles may need to be drawn as the relationship continues.

Academic terms, like *participant*, were useful as I began writing Benjamin's life history. As our relationship evolved I felt less comfortable with the distance such terms placed between him and me. I have previously written about the responsibility of the researcher to the informant (Tierney & Hallett, 2010); however, Benjamin became more than an informant. Even the term seems debase in reference to a *person* with hopes and aspirations who I had the opportunity to know. As his life unfolded, I began to question my role and responsibility to him. He defined our relationship in terms that some academics shy away from—tutor, mentor, friend, family. Given the implications embedded in his words, what responsibility did I have to fulfill the obligations inherent within these relational terms? And to what end?

Considering Ethically Important Moments

Institutional Review Boards (IRB) guide and restrict researchers to ensure the protection of human subjects. Although IRB approval requires consideration of the ethical parameters of a study, accounting for all interactions and relational dynamics prior to interacting with participants is impossible (Rallis & Rossman, 2010). This is particularly true with life history research. Behar and Frank could not possibly have known what would occur years after their research began.

Qualitative research often involves interactions that have the potential of harm. A participant, for example, may share stories of abuse or ask the researcher to help make a critical decision. These "ethically important moments" are defined as the "difficult, often subtle, and usually unpredictable situations that arise in the practice of doing research" (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p. 262). Haverkamp (2005) explains that these are times when researchers should recognize how a decision, action or interaction has an ethical dimension. Embedded in these moments is some element of risk and danger (Gildersleeve, 2010; Wolcott, 2002). How the researcher responds has "the potential to harm/help individual participants, constrain/enable the research process, and perpetuate/disrupt master narratives," (Gildersleeve, 2010, p. 408). The nature of qualitative research increases the likelihood of ethically important moments, but differences in context limit the ability of establishing specific standards to address all possible scenarios (Haverkamp, 2005).

Ethical reflexivity has been posited as an essential aspect of navigating these moments (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). Setting parameters and considering potential ethical issues prior to collecting data demonstrate sound ethical preparation; however, reflexivity throughout the process helps the researcher consider the unique aspects of the individuals involved (Renganathan, 2009). Microethics, or ethics-in-practice, force the researcher to think through how interactions are experienced by participants. When confronted with an ethically important moment, reflexivity involves critically analyzing how to respond given the particular situation and specific participants (Rallis & Rossman, 2010).

Ethically important moments should be considered within the context of the relationship between the researcher and participant. Researchers have an ethical obligation to interact with participants "in a humane, nonexploitive way while at the same time being mindful of one's role as a researcher," (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p. 264). Given that cultural and power differences often exist between the researcher and participant, mistakes and misinterpretations are bound to happen. A relationship may help researcher and participant navigate potential harm (Gildersleeve, 2010). These moments become more complicated as the level of intimacy increases. I needed to be mindful of my other roles in Benjamin's life. Treating him in a "humane, nonexplotive way" involved considering our multilayered relationship.

Constructing Benjamin's Story

In June of 2007 I was entering my third year as a doctoral student and involved in a study of homeless adolescents in Los Angeles. Finding participants proved challenging and required navigating gatekeepers who felt responsible for protecting these youth (Tierney & Hallett, 2010). I relied on school staff and social service agencies to introduce me to potential participants. One program manager put me in contact with Ellen, a mentor working with homeless families. She set up a meeting with two adolescents who had lived in Skid Row for seven years. Although their family had been homeless for seven years, they recently transitioned to a "doubled-up" residence (see Hallett, 2012). This is how I met Benjamin.

I spent time with Benjamin and his family on a weekly basis, which included conversations with his mother, siblings and other members of the household. (All members of his family signed consent forms.) Benjamin introduced me to his friends and took me where he spent time. And, on occasion, he joined me as I socialized with my friends and family. Constructing a life history exposes the similarities and differences between the researcher and participant. Religion and gender were traits Benjamin and I shared. Differences included race, family dynamics, and educational participation. I was in my 30s; he was a teenager. My growing up in a low-income community may have allowed for empathy (Tierney, 1998), but I did not assume my background afforded insider status.

Benjamin and I spoke extensively about my research. He read and commented on each of the iterations of this manuscript. I vowed to give him final say on what was written. In the sections that follow I chronicle the evolution of our relationship leading up to an ethically important moment.

Researcher

I arrived at the homeless shelter at 2:50 p.m. Although familiar with downtown Los Angeles, I had not been to this location. I explained to the security guard that I was meeting with a volunteer named Ellen. The portly woman in a yellow security jacket pointed me in the direction of a room on the second floor. No one was in the room. I sat at the table, opened my backpack and double checked the batteries in my recorder.

A few minutes later the door opened and a thin White woman with bright eyes followed by two teenagers came into the room. "Sorry I am running a few minutes late," she put down her bag and extended a hand, "I am Ellen, and this is Benjamin and Asia. I will be right back; I need to let the kids know I am here." Benjamin, Asia and I sat without speaking. Our silence was broken as seven elementary aged residents of the shelter flooded the room with excited chatter about who would be first to use the computer. "I am going to get started with the homework," Ellen smiled, "you can use the office." I thanked her and asked who wanted to go first. "Um," Benjamin shrugged, "I guess I'll do it."

Two folding chairs sat in the center of the small office with boxes and other materials stacked against the walls. I positioned myself with forms and protocols that created a space between us and helped define the boundaries of our interaction. Although I had conducted interviews before, I nervously went over the IRB forms and explained the purpose. "A'ight," he signed the form. I pressed record, "to get started, could you walk me through what your day was like today from the time you woke up until right now." He shrugged, "my day was cool. I woke up, ate breakfast, and then I came here." Benjamin explained that he woke up at 10:00 a.m., just before Ellen picked him up to help her organize supplies at the afterschool program's main office and they stopped for lunch on the way to the shelter. I asked him to tell me more about Ellen. "I known Ellen for a long time," he shrugged, "she's pretty much like family now. She was pretty much always there for us, whenever we needed something for school or something like that, she helped us." He explained how Ellen encouraged him to attend school, "I mean, she tries her hardest to help us, she really wants us to go to college and stuff like that." "Is that what you want?," I inquired. "College, no, I don't think I want college," he shook his head, "it's just not made for me." Benjamin stopped attending school regularly after sixth grade. His aspirations involved "hopefully finishing high school" and "probably joining the Marines or something."

Benjamin spent considerable time with his sisters who were named after international destinations his father hoped to visit. Africa attended middle school sporadically. She enjoyed the social aspects of school, but struggled with the academic content. Benjamin expressed concern that she may join a gang. Asia attended a college preparatory charter school. "She always be the good one who do good in school," Benjamin shared. Sydney dropped out her senior year after becoming pregnant. Her boyfriend sold marijuana and other drugs through a bedroom window. Benjamin did not use drugs, but he received a "whole grip of tickets" for curfew violations. I asked how he got clothes and things he wanted. He smiled, "if you lived where I lived at, you know how to make money, you know how to survive." He described how he broke into a house and stole a radio, "it's not hard to go in someone's house and take. I mean, it's wrong though. I would just do it because I wanted some," he shook his head, "no, I needed some shoes." We spoke for over an hour about his experiences.

After interviewing Asia, I joined Ellen in the main room where Benjamin was helping a student play an educational computer game. "All done?," Ellen looked up from a worksheet she was reviewing. "Yes, thank you," I proceeded to pack my things. "Good, I am almost done here," she looked at Benjamin, "did he tell you that he is planning on going to school." I looked at Benjamin. Ellen continued, "Asia is doing well, but Benjamin needs some help, he needs a tutor in math. I would help him, but I am not very good in algebra." She looked at me. I recalled our conversation on the phone. She offered to set up a meeting with Benjamin and Asia, but she wanted them to benefit from the interview. I realized that she did not consider the $10 gift card much of a benefit. "Um," I looked at her, "I could probably help him." Ellen smiled and handed me an algebra textbook, "that would be great." I took the book and looked at Benjamin, "are you sure you want to do this?" "Sure," he paused, "I ain't got nothing else to do." Ellen's smile broadened.

I found a "Pre-Algebra Assessment" worksheet. "Why don't you start with this," I handed it to Benjamin and looked through my calendar to figure out when we would meet again. He gave me the worksheet after 15 minutes. Benjamin knew the fundamentals of math; however, he was unfamiliar with more complex concepts. We agreed to meet the following week at his apartment. My role expanded. I rationalized that meeting for a few weeks would help me understand his living situation and he may serve as a gatekeeper to other participants. As a former teacher, I also looked forward to the opportunity to "teach" again.

Tutor

I arrived at Benjamin's home for our first tutoring session. An eight foot security gate with spikes along the top surrounded the apartment complex. I walked through the unlocked gate into a small courtyard that had more discarded beer bottles, plastic bags and fast food wrappers than grass. I looked into the apartment through the metal bars that covered the screen door and saw Benjamin sitting in a dimly lit living room. He opened the door, shook my hand, and yelled, "Mom, he's here."

Faith, a short Latina with disheveled auburn hair, came out of the bathroom and shook my hand. "He is the tutor I told you about," Benjamin explained. She bashfully commented that, in spite of her constant cleaning, "it still being dirty." She picked up a straw broom and began sweeping the carpet that was covered with food, trash and dirty clothes. The smell of animal feces and rotting food permeated the apartment. Faith pointed her finger at Benjamin, "these kids is lazy and never be doing anything." A small path through trash bags and boxes led to a mattress in the corner; the only other furniture in the living room was a small table with two chairs. I sat on one of the chairs and tried to follow a Mexican telenovella while Benjamin searched for the algebra book. The three bedroom apartment served as home to Benjamin, his mother, a seven-year-old brother, three teenage sisters, his sister's two children and her boyfriend, a cousin, and a friend of the family.

Our initial interactions involved me helping Benjamin through a workbook in hopes of his return to school. During one session his mother commented that she wanted him to get back in school. "She don't really worry about school," he explained after she left, "I ain't been to school in a long time, I think she just saying that cause you're here."

Benjamin began introducing me to his friends and neighbors. Most often I was introduced as his "tutor". I spent the summer collecting data and tutoring. I planned to support his transition to school. I anticipated that he would be prepared to continue his education by the time my research concluded, but did not really consider how our relationship would end.

Advocate

Benjamin and his family began to see me as a resource. In addition to helping with homework, they sought my assistance navigating institutional bureaucracies. Benjamin's family was evicted from three apartments in the first two years that I knew them. The first eviction notice outlined three violations of the rental agreement. First, the lease did not allow pets; they had a cat, two dogs, and a turtle. Second, the landlord felt the apartment had not been kept clean which led to a roach infestation. Third, the lease listed Faith and four children as tenants. The household consisted of over ten people. Faith asked me to stop by and help her submit an appeal.

I parked across the street and walked up the sidewalk. As I opened the gate Benjamin ran up to me, "man, you came at the wrong time, there was just a shooting across the street." I looked at the liquor store where he was pointing—the store where they bought snacks and necessities. An older model car with a shattered window sat in the small parking lot. The police had not arrived. No one was crying. Benjamin explained that someone "started shooting a big gun" into the back window of the car. His stories of violence became real.

I entered the apartment after knocking. The family had gotten used to my presence and I no longer waited for someone to answer the door. Faith's two month old grandson sat alone in a car seat on the floor. I knelt next to him and he grabbed my fingers. Benjamin came into the living room, turned on the DVD player and pressed play. "This movie is tight," he explained the entire plot of *Boyz in the Hood*. My knees started to hurt, but I did not want to sit on the carpet that was littered with crumbs. I sat on the edge of the mattress. Faith rushed into another room to get a folding chair. "Oh, you don't want to sit there. The dog is always peeing," she shrugged and pointed to a chair. The mattress was where she slept with her youngest son. Without comment, I moved to the chair.

Faith handed me the eviction notice and lease. She wanted to appeal, but the form was in English and she was "not too good in English." I helped her fill out the ten page form that required a clear explanation of why she was disputing the eviction. The final few questions asked for short answers. I read the first one, "Why do you think the landlord is wrong to evict you." She sighed, "I don't know. I just need more time, you know? I don't know where we gonna go."

The appeal failed. A social worker helped the family move into an apartment located next to a large housing project near an intersection that divided the territories of three rival gangs. Benjamin asked if I had ever been "banged on by a gang." I was unsure what he meant, but certain the answer was no. He explained that this happens when a gang member asks where your allegiance falls. "What do you say?," I inquired. He shrugged, "I tell them nobody." Within nine months another eviction notice arrived. The family moved two blocks away.

Benjamin attempted to return to school a few times. Initially the school district directed him to the large public high school down the street from his home. The school, designed for 3,500 students, enrolled over 4,500 students. I agreed to help with the enrollment process. Benjamin walked into the high school counselor's small office and sat down. His mother told me to sit in the chair where I could talk to Benjamin; she sat around the corner in the hallway. I tried to involve her in the conversation. She refused, "I am not so good with this stuff, you know better than me." Without having access to Benjamin's records, the counselor assigned classes based upon availability. I interjected, "are you sure these are the appropriate classes? He has not been in school for over three years." The counselor, who looked worn down, took a deep breath and handed me a copy of the schedule to review.

We left the office with a revised class schedule, map and list of tutoring programs. Nine boys were being interrogated in the hallway by a police officer who explained the

importance of respecting law enforcement while holding a club. Several rival gangs attended the school, which led to frequent outbreaks of violence. "Are you going to be alright," I asked. "I'm not too worried," Benjamin's voice cracked, "I gots a friend in one of the gangs so nobody's gonna mess with me." Benjamin nodded to his mother and squeezed behind the officer in order to walk down the hallway. I left the school full of hope and concern. He seemed excited, but I knew he would face many challenges.

I called that evening to ask about his day. His first period teacher asked why he was there. Benjamin handed over his class schedule. She explained that she preferred to have all the students arrive on the first day of school or not come at all. She pointed to a chair in the back because no desks remained. His second period PE teacher explained that Benjamin could not participate until he had $20 for a uniform. Benjamin sat along the fence as the other students played softball. The remainder of the day he tried to remain invisible. He came home exhausted. I encouraged him to keep trying and offered to pay for the uniform, but he never returned.

The lead guidance counselor requested a meeting with Benjamin and his mother two weeks later. The counselor asked why he had not been in school. He looked at his fingers and commented, "I don't know. I be tired." She sternly responded, "everyone is tired but it is something that we need to do." Faith agreed, "I try, but he is so lazy and I cannot make him do it." The counselor told Faith that parents have the legal responsibility to get their children to school. Faith's shoulders dropped. The counselor recommended that Benjamin enroll in an independent study program. Benjamin asked what I thought. I did not like the idea of leaving a traditional high school, but did not blame him for not wanting to attend the neighborhood school.

The following week, I drove Faith and Benjamin to the charter school. The program required students to attend twice a week to submit packets and take tests. Motivated students could complete two years of course material within a year. Faith suggested that I be listed as an additional contact in the event that the teacher had questions. I agreed. Benjamin headed home with packets in hand. We met once a week to go over his homework, but he had a hard time keeping pace with the program requirements. Over the next 6 months he completed 15 units of course material; however, the program required a minimum of 30 units. I encouraged him to continue and got the teacher to agree to a three month extension, but he was eventually dropped from the program. I realized that I wanted him to graduate more than he did.

Friends

About a year after we met I accepted that Benjamin had little interest in formal education. I continued to mentor and advocate, but not necessarily in an attempt to push him into school. Although the original project had ended, I worked on constructing his life history with a focus on his transition to adulthood. I genuinely enjoyed Benjamin's company. I stopped noticing unpleasant odors and roaches. I began wearing my clothes, not the "uniform" I had selected that involved a plain t-shirt, jeans and sneakers. I had read somewhere that intentionality in wardrobe eased the process of gaining access. In all honesty, I stopped worrying about my clothes being damaged. The one pair of "expensive" jeans I owned was no longer protected from their home. With the exception of avoiding gang colors, I did not think twice about my clothes. I arrived at their home wearing whatever I had on that day, even if that included business attire or expensive jeans. As our relationship evolved my role shifted, but I did not feel that undermined the value of my work. I dared to admit that I began to care about Benjamin. This transition occurred with trepidation; such an admission may cross boundaries at which some people may consider my research illegitimate. But there was no turning back.

Benjamin called one afternoon in the spring of 2008 to ask if I would stop by. A few years prior he had been interviewed for a local news series featuring kids in Skid Row and the station wanted a follow up. The reporter gave him a camera with instructions to capture images of how he spent time, including interviews with people in his life. He asked me to be one of the interviewees. A friend of mine, Matt, agreed to take a detour on our way home from dinner with friends. We arrived around 10:00 p.m. Benjamin asked about my research while Matt watched. I had gotten used to Benjamin interviewing me. Throughout our time together I had the feeling that he was equally interested in studying me. Benjamin looked down at the paper where he had written questions and then asked, "what is your relationship to Benjamin." I paused and looked at him, "I don't know, what is our relationship?" He laughed, "you know, friend, homie." I nodded. Before I could respond further our conversation was disrupted by shouting. We pulled back the curtain and saw a fire blazing across the street as a two women fought on the sidewalk. One of his neighbors, known as the "crack lady", had set fire to her sister's home. The street filled with spectators. Matt whispered, "I think we should go." Benjamin laughed, "do you want me to walk you out?" Before I could answer, Matt anxiously replied, "absolutely."

Over the next few weeks I continued to think about being Benjamin's "friend." I was not exactly sure the implications of our friendship. Can I be friends with a 17-year-old kid living in Watts who is a research participant? I enjoy spending time with him. I trusted him. By this point he had gotten to know several of my other friends and girlfriend. But clearly there were limits. While he knew about major events in my life, I did not rely on him for emotional support. And I still felt responsible for mentoring and researching.

I began acting on this new role. Benjamin and his siblings joined me at several social events. I wanted to offer them the opportunity to see another side of Los Angeles and allowed them to become part of my life. My friends would invite me "and the kids" to events and celebrations. They attended a Fourth of July block party at my girlfriend's home, played beach volleyball with some of my friends and went bowling for a birthday party. I found out the kids had never made cookies before. Not being much of a baker, I called my mom. We—Benjamin, his sister, cousin, niece and nephew, and I—spent a day mixing, rolling, cutting, baking and decorating cookies. I enjoyed the time we spent together.

Family

In the winter of 2008, Benjamin and his family invited me to church the weekend before Christmas. I had attended the church a number of times, in part because the children wanted to go but did not have transportation. In addition to the spiritual aspects, they enjoyed the day full of events that involved lunch and hanging out on the playground. At the end of the pre-Christmas service the congregation was invited to take a family photo next to the manger scene. Benjamin and his siblings posed as I watched. "Hey," Benjamin motioned, "get up here, you're part of the family too." Although he had made this comment early in the research process, this time I took notice. On the drive home Benjamin gave me the framed picture. I looked at him a bit confused, "don't you want to give this to your mother." "No, you should keep it," he paused, "it will probably mean more to you anyways. You should probably put it on your wall with the other pictures." He was referring to a series of pictures in my hallway of friends and family.

I thought about the pictures on my wall after dropping them off. There was the one of my sister and me with my parents for their 35th anniversary. Another showed my girlfriend and me with another couple at a Garth Brooks concert. Others included backpacking trips, birthday parties, graduations, and weddings with friends and family. Where did this picture fit

into these memories and relationships? This picture warranted a place among the people I cared about.

An Ethically Important Moment

Two years after our first meeting, Benjamin turned 18. His perspective on life changed; he felt a sudden urgency to find a job that would afford him a stable life. "I want to go into the military, that's about it," he explained. I asked if he was sure. "I could get killed by a gang here," he pointed out the window at one of the most gang-infested neighborhoods in Los Angeles, "I would rather die in the military than be shot for nothing." I had no rebuttal. I was uncertain how I felt about his joining the military, but I agreed to take him on a tour of the armed forces. Recruiters explained he would need a GED and 22 community college credits. I provided information about the GED, but he was uncertain how he would pay the $100 registration fee. "I need to do something," Benjamin shook his head, "it's time for me to get outta here."

I suggested Job Corps, which would provide skills training and a place to live while he worked on his GED. Benjamin was excited about the program. During our meeting with the recruiter the application process was halted when the background check revealed he had three curfew tickets and a bicycle violation that resulted in over $1,500 in fines. We left the meeting disheartened. My parents, who were in town visiting for my graduation, shared my frustration. I had spoken with them frequently about my research, so they were familiar with Benjamin. My mom pulled me aside; she asked if Benjamin would move to Nebraska to live with them and enter a GED program. I shrugged off her question as a polite gesture, but did not take her seriously. My parents left town a few days later.

Benjamin called me late in the evening the following Friday, "sorry to do this, but do you think you could take me to the hospital?" "What is wrong?," several horrible scenarios played out in my mind. He had gotten into a fight with one of his sister's and punched a concrete wall. We sat in the emergency room for three hours talking about his living situation while waiting to get a cast. Earlier in the day his mother decided to kick him out because he did not have a job and since he turned 18 she did not receive additional welfare benefits to cover his expenses. I asked what he planned to do, he shrugged, "I got a place to stay this weekend, but then I guess I might go downtown." He was debating between the homeless shelter and hotel he lived in as a child. I dropped him off at his friend's apartment around 2:00 a.m.

I drove home unsettled. Up to this point I had offered advice and guidance, but I had not really interrupted his life. I worried about the next stage of his life. We had explored multiple options, but time was running out and we had few options. What was my responsibility as a researcher? A mentor? A friend? A family member? He had explained how Ellen acted "like family" because she offered support when he needed it. If I was a part of the family, what would that mean in this moment of crisis? I did not feel comfortable watching his life unravel. Plenty of research has documented the desperation of youth on the streets who get involved in risky behavior in order to survive. I did not want that to be Benjamin's story.

I felt personally invested in his future and decided to test the legitimacy of my mom's offer. She eagerly admitted that she had already identified a GED program near their home. I picked up Benjamin the next day and explained my parents' offer. "I don't know," Benjamin paused, "Nebraska is far away, right?" I nodded. He sighed, "maybe I should just try to move downtown and see if I can make it." "I know that I have not told you what to do up to this point," I paused, "but I think this is a really good opportunity and one that may not come around again. I fear that if you move to Skid Row you might get involved with something that

could ruin your plans for the future." He nodded. "I really think you should do this," I paused again, "you can always move back when you are done with your GED." I told him to think it over. He called the next day and, although nervous, accepted my parents' offer. I put him on a plane two days later.

Life Interrupted: Choosing a Role

Benjamin's (and my) life changed as a result of constructing his life history. The roles we played in each other's lives shaped what and how data were presented. After careful consideration, I felt our relationship required, or at least encouraged, my intervening. I clearly interrupted his life (and he mine).

The choice I made was based upon the obligation I felt to him. He sought my counsel several times over the two years of data collection on issues ranging from returning to school and finding a job to discipline techniques for his brother and getting medical attention. Each time I accepted that responsibility. I established a history of support. We also spent time watching television, celebrating birthdays and holidays, and talking about mundane life experiences. I felt invested in him as a person. Research, at times, moved to the periphery of our relationship. Benjamin was no longer the "Other" who I studied in order to write articles. Analyzing his life may be useful for policymakers and practitioners seeking to improve educational access, but I felt an obligation to improve *his* access to education. That is what friends, tutors, advocates and families do.

Given his experiences with mentors, teachers and family, I feared walking away may be interpreted as abandonment. Ending our friendship may be difficult for me, but stepping away from those responsibilities may leave a void in his life. I definitely did not want to harm Benjamin. The primary code of ethics in research is to "do no harm" in the process. In order to fulfill this code, careful consideration of the relational dynamics was necessary. Had I remained 'just' a researcher, stepping away in this moment of crisis may have been easier. Accepting the titles meant accepting the embedded obligations. I should also note that I did not "interrupt" until he turned 18. Since he was a legal adult I felt more comfortable suggesting alternative living arrangements. I am not sure what my response would have been if his mother asked him to leave when he was 16 or 9.

The sequence of our relationship is worth considering. The research process meant that he always had to accept the relational obligation first. Only retrospectively did I realize that I had asked him to be my tutor, to advocate for me, to invite me into his social network, to act as a friend, and then family member. I interviewed and observed Benjamin to learn about his experiences and environment. Beginning with the first interview, he tutored me. South Central and Skid Row were unfamiliar to me and not everyone appreciated a researcher nosing around. He advocated for me. I asked him to let me spend time with his friends and family. He welcomed me. In essence, using the titles was his way of asking me to reciprocate. The power differential was clear. I expected him to open his life to me with limited reciprocity. As the participant, he had to sacrifice and endure the potential consequences of intimacy first. Although I present the different aspects of our relationship categorically, soon after we met our relationship ceased to be unidimensional or crisply bound. I can not pinpoint exactly when the transitions happened; however, I share our story to illustrate how moments within our relationship highlighted or magnified that a shift had occurred.

The moment I interrupted was ethically important in my life as well. As the events unfolded I had to evaluate who I was a researcher and person. I strive to be a person of integrity who can be trusted. My commitment to these values was tested. A relatively private person by nature, the moment brought my life into the research process to be exposed,

analyzed and critiqued. I begrudgingly became a participant. The reflexive process increased my empathy for those who open their lives to me.

My actions expanded our relationship to include my parents, sister, and extended family. I had to consider how owning up to my relationship as "family" with Benjamin actually influenced my family and the obligations I would ask them to accept. Inviting him into my family also diminished my ability to filter what information he had about me. He had access to my parents' and sister's interpretations of me. This created a further bond and, in turn, additional obligations. I began to appreciate how Benjamin must have felt when he invited me into his life and family. My response to this ethically important moment had consequences that extended beyond harm to the participant to include potential harm to my family and friends. These extended bonds further complicated ending the relationship because I had completed a manuscript and want to move on to the next project. The relational titles I acted upon created an important moment in my life history as well as the life histories of many people in my life.

Interrupting a life was not my intent. I definitely would not have imagined asking the IRB at the outset about having Benjamin move into my parents' home. My relational obligations transcended the purpose of IRB; I was not questioned about being a good friend, mentor or family member. I was not asked to consider potential harm to a participant if I did not live up to the obligations inherent within each of these titles. Watching him get a job, complete his GED, purchase a car and begin classes at a community college eased my concerns that I may have overstepped an ethical boundary. However, would I feel the same way if Benjamin was not doing well? What if, like Wolcott, Benjamin later resents my involvement in his life?

Relational Reflexivity and Titles

Benjamin and I demonstrate the interpersonal complexity of employing life history methodology. The extended time and intimate nature of conversations can easily lead to the formation of a relationship beyond researcher and participant (Behar, 2003b; Frank 2000; Munro, 1993; Wolcott, 2002). Subtle shifts may occur over time. Our interactions point to the importance of relational titles (e.g., mentor, friend, family). The titles used to name and frame relational dynamics evolve, at times without intentionality on the part of either the participant or researcher. The researcher cannot avoid having some sort of relationship with the participant. For the purposes of this analysis, I focus on the titles that label and define relational obligations. Given the fluid nature of life history, generalizing would be problematic; however, two points are worth noting for researchers considering methodological approaches that encourage relational involvement.

Acting on Titles to Avoid Harm

The labeling of relationships within life history transcends conversations about access or trustworthiness. These terms need to be critically considered within discussions about harm. Participants may be invested in the researcher (not the research). Benjamin trusted me "like family" and, at some point, he literally entered my family. The unexpected consequence is that the participant may use language that makes the researcher uncomfortable or uncertain (e.g., friend or family). This is more than semantics. Titles matter. Obligations embedded within these terms force the researcher respond to underlying expectations. I had to assess my obligation to Benjamin beyond allowing him to analyze data or challenge findings. Accepting titles associated with increased levels of intimacy complicates relational obligations. The

researcher may end up in a position of choosing between betraying the participant and feeling obligated to engage in activities exceeding the research process or personal boundaries.

Relationships evolve when conducting a long-term study. Considering boundaries prior to entering the research process is important, but boundaries erode. Increased engagement in the life of a person may lead to relational assumptions. New titles emerge. Each shift in the terminology used to define the interactions between participant and researcher has assumed obligations. If a researcher accepts titles suggesting a more intimate relationship, then an ethical responsibility exists to act accordingly. I am not suggesting researchers are bound by titles participants assign. If the participant assumes or proposes a relationship that the researcher is uncomfortable with or does not feel he or she can fulfill, a discussion needs to occur. The researcher should clearly articulate what titles accurately define the relationship. Then the participant determines how this influences his or her continued involvement in the research process. Neither the researcher nor the participant should feel powerless in the naming process. And neither person should unilaterally name or define the relationship. Co-construction must occur. I encourage researchers to negotiate titles through dialogue and compromise.

Relational reflexivity involves careful consideration of imbedded obligations within the specific relationship forged during research. Titles warrant an explicit conversation. These are not meaningless or arbitrary terms exchanged. Relational titles signal potential obligations. Trading 'researcher' and 'participant' for other titles requires evaluating the new definitional parameters of the relationship and potential relational obligations. This holds especially true when working with vulnerable populations who may have the greatest potential to be harmed by relational inaction.

Obligations Embedded in Ethically Important Moments

The extended timeframe of data collection often necessary to construct a life history increases the likelihood of ethically important moments occurring that force the researcher to reflexively consider how to respond. These moments may involve an unintentional discomfort created by differing cultural perspectives between the researcher and participant (Gildersleeve, 2010). Or, as with Benjamin, an event may emerge in the participant's life that encourages the researcher to reflexively consider his or her role in responding. These moments truly expose relational dynamics. Gildersleeve (2010) argues the research relationship provides a cushion that limits the potential harm when an ethically important moment occurs between the researcher and participant. However, my interactions with Benjamin demonstrate that the research relationship may be drawn into question during ethically important moments in the life of a participant.

Given that relationships develop over extended periods, the researcher needs to prepare for obligations to shift when/if an ethically important moment occurs and the participant enters a situation inviting the researcher to act on the titles framing their relationship. Figuring out the relationship during these potentially high stakes, emotionally charged moments is too late. The participant may be in a position of vulnerability and neglecting a presumed relational commitment has the potential of harm. Determining a participant is just a 'participant' after accepting more intimate titles in order to gain access could undermine the participant's understanding of relational dynamics in general and may leave the participant feeling exposed, vulnerable and betrayed. Not to mention, real consequences for the participant may be endured if he or she expects—based upon previous understandings of the relationship—that the researcher will intervene when a crises occurs. Clearly, rejecting previously accepted titles during ethically important moments negatively impacts the participant. Based on the relational dynamics co-constructed between the

researcher and participant, not acting upon the obligations associated with the relational titles violates the 'do no harm' mantra.

Intimacy increases both ethical obligations and the potential for harm. Relational titles, dynamics and obligations should be negotiated throughout the research and relational processes. Not challenging a participant's assignment of a title is the same as accepting the obligations associated with the assumed increased intimacy. Given the current approach of Institutional Review Boards (IRB) underestimating the potential harm associated with life history, the ethical responsibility for monitoring relational developments falls on the researcher (Muchmore, 2002). The relationship should frame how researchers respond during ethically important moments that occur during the research process. Relational reflexivity should occur throughout the process of establishing and nurturing a relationship. After spending over five years with Benjamin, I can not untangle my involvement in his life. I exited the research, but not the relationship. Benjamin ceased being one of my participants. I no longer collect "data" and have decided not to write further about his life (unless he initiates). Although the research side of our relationship continues to fade, the other expectations remain as our story continues.

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their helpful comments on an earlier draft. In addition, I appreciate Benjamin's efforts in offering feedback and approval of this manuscript.

Article Citation

Hallett, R. E. (2013). Interrupting life history: The evolution of relationship within research. *The Qualitative Report, 18*(Art. 27), 1-16. Retrieved from http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR18/hallett27.pdf