

## **Turning Friends into Research Participants: Rationale, Possibilities and Challenges**

Yanyue Yuan

Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge  
yy346@cam.ac.uk

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### **Abstract**

This paper develops from an oral presentation delivered at the 10th Kaleidoscope Conference at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge in June 2013. The paper concentrates on one methodological decision in my doctoral research: turning friends into research participants. I start by briefly introducing my doctoral study's research topic, which focuses on exploring the capacity of cultural objects to stimulate museum visitors' imaginative thinking. By employing a self-narrative approach, I reflect on my own experience in four anthropological museums in England and my creative responses based on my encounters with museum masks. In order to complement my own narrative accounts and to create opportunities for discussions and dialogues, I decided to invite a few participants to visit two of the museums and to contribute their narratives as well. When faced with the difficulty of recruiting participants due to the nature of the study, I decided to turn to my friends who volunteered to participate in my study. While this may seem to be a reluctant compromise, I found it an opportunity to explore new possibilities of working with participants. In this paper, I discuss some key issues that have arisen during the research process. The ethical, practical and analytical challenges posed by this methodological choice demand a higher level of flexibility and reflexivity. In attending to the researcher-participant relationship, I have noticed the importance of keeping a balance between respect and casualness and that it is helpful to employ a parallel strategy. Beyond the demand to adopt an open-minded attitude, I have found that my methodological decision calls for further attention to some entrenched academic traditions. In relation to narrative inquiry, I believe that the possibilities of turning friends into participants lie in the courage to challenge existing formalities and the readiness to handle unexpected situations.

*Keywords:* self-narrative, friends, researcher-participant relationship, visitor experience, museum

### **Introduction**

Through reading and talking to other doctoral students, I have found that one big challenge that researchers have to deal with is the gap between the research design carefully mapped out at the beginning of one's research journey and those unforeseen situations that

arise once *real world research* is launched. This gap can be even more unpredictable when it comes to research that involves human participants.

In this paper, I discuss my experience of choosing and working with research participants and my ongoing reflections on the pros and cons of the decision of turning friends into research participants. Before zooming in on this methodological issue, I shall first outline the broad research context of my PhD study which focuses on the educational value of cultural objects in the museum context. As my research interest is largely based on my own personal experience, I then illustrate why and how a self-narrative approach is built into the study. The philosophical assumptions of self-narrative inquiry and the difficulty in finding research participants have led me to the decision of inviting friends to become my research participants. As I have completed the empirical part of the research, I now want to reflect on some key issues arising out of this methodological choice, which I believe can provide some insights into narrative research and studies with human participants in general.

### 1. Research Context

My PhD research falls into the field of *museum education* under the assumption that “education is intrinsic to the nature of museums” (Anderson, 1997, p. xiv). My interest in the topic was nurtured during my master’s study in ‘Material Anthropology and Museum Ethnography’ when I had the opportunity to frequent the Pitt Rivers Museum where most of the lectures and tutorials were based. The course introduced me to anthropological perspectives towards museum collections. Adopting a self-critical attitude, scholars have exhibited much concern over the entrenched colonialism behind museum collections and the representation of non-western objects in western museums (Gosden & Knowles, 2011; Karp & Lavine, 1991; Peers & Brown, 2003). The major theme of anthropological inquiries is centred on the *de-contextualisation* of cultural objects. In anthropology, some scholars have worked towards the revitalisation of material culture studies which acknowledge the central role of material objects in shaping and influencing various aspects of human culture (Graves-Brown, 2000; Knappett, 2005; Miller, 2005; Tilley, Webb, Kuechler, Rowlands, & Spyer, 2006).

In the museum world, an increasing awareness of museums as political spaces has culminated into ‘new museology’ (Vergo, 1989), calling attention to the underlying value systems encoded in institutional narratives and advocating for the decolonising power of museums (Marstine, 2006, p. 5). This transition has spawned discussions about the educational role of museums as well. The interdisciplinary field of museum education began

to develop at the end of the twentieth century under the visitor-oriented philosophy (Hooper-Greenhill, 1991, 1999). My personal experience convinces me that visitors' perspectives should not be neglected. For instance, when I was wandering around in the galleries at the Pitt Rivers Museum, I seldom thought about the critical remarks made by anthropologists. I was simply intrigued by the objects on display, and was often struck by a sense of mystery and magic. It was then that a moment of personal enlightenment came. This was when I realised that instead of positioning museums as agencies of *de-contextualisation*, I could take *re-contextualisation* (Dudley, 2012, pp. 2-3) as a new point of departure. My curiosity about the value and meanings of these objects beyond their historical and cultural significance led me to a new research interest: the educational value of cultural objects in museums. To some extent, an educational perspective rests on the belief that museums open up the "possibility of appreciating [our] humanity through encounters with museum objects" (McManus, 2011, p. 33). Anthropologists might ask questions along the following lines: what roles do the objects play in their original cultures? What do these objects tell about the people who created and used them? How have their values been transformed and appropriated by the museum context? On the other hand, researchers in museum education would pose different types of questions: how would visitors engage with the objects in museums? What do these objects mean to them?

To me, the collections and settings at the Pitt Rivers Museum are drastically different from those at the museums I used to visit in China. As the multitudinous objects on display are mostly from places that I have never been to, they are rather "unfamiliar" to me. The settings of the Pitt Rivers Museum create a mysterious ambience. Walking along the narrow corridors between old-fashioned cabinets grouped tightly together, I felt almost like an explorer who had accidentally stepped into a treasure house. The museum adapts itself to various occasions: a 'ghost house' during a flashlight adventure as part of the twilight events, a place for entertainment and learning during weekend family events, and a stage for performances and live shows when special events are organised. Stimulated by these cabinets of wonder, I made the decision to carry out research on visitor experience in museums with ethnographic collections. The Pitt Rivers Museum has a large collection of ethnographic objects, which were brought back or donated to museums by explorers, collectors, colonialists and anthropologists. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) regards ethnographic objects as "artifacts created by ethnographers when they define, segment, detach, and carry them away" (p. 387). These objects are usually found in museums of anthropology and

archaeology. As the term ‘ethnographic objects’ is associated with the discipline of anthropology, I prefer to apply the phrase ‘cultural objects’ on most occasions, as these objects are often displayed in museums as material evidence of a particular culture and are valued for their cultural significance.

More specifically, I aim to explore the capacity of cultural objects to stimulate imaginative thinking. Every time when I step through a museum’s door, I know that it will be an experience that is quite different from those in everyday life. As Bedford (2004) suggests, museums have the capacity to “support learning, understanding of people and situations different from the commonplace, and ultimately, a transfiguration of everyday experience” (p. 5). The many possibilities of the museum space call for a “subjunctive mood” (Bedford, 2004) in approaching visitor experience, which starts off “not with what the visitor *knows*, but with *what (s)he can imagine*” (p. 10, original emphasis). Though there are a number of studies on the role of imaginative thinking in relation to art galleries and science museums (Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990; Root-Bernstein & Root-Bernstein, 2005), scarce research has been done on museums of anthropology. To narrow down the research topic, I have chosen to focus on museum masks. Masks from different cultures are often found in museums of anthropology and they exemplify how ‘detachment’ of cultural objects can be reinforced in a museum context. Masks fulfill various social and cultural functions and they convey rich messages through a wide range of materials, shapes, colours, and forms. The varied forms of certain cultural objects in museums can be found in everyday life (e.g. tableware, jewelry, musical instruments, clothes) whereas masks often appear on special occasions. Masks have been studied from various disciplinary perspectives. For example, Levi-Strauss (1983) has analysed North American masks from a structuralist point of view. Masks are also frequently mentioned in debates about the display methods that position cultural objects either as *objet d’art* or *ethnographic object* (Price, 1989; Vogel, 1988). Furthermore, one significant moment in western art history was the influence of African masks on Picasso’s painting (Price, 1989, p. 96). As Price (1989) has argued, both ways of treating the objects (purely focusing on their aesthetic qualities or purely on their cultural contexts) are problematic and attempts can be made to encourage the interplay between anthropological and art historical perspectives. For museum visitors, masks integrate two interrelated aspects of knowledge, just as many other cultural objects: their aesthetic quality and cultural significance. Traditional ways of exhibiting objects are specifically problematic when it comes to masks, which are usually used in religious rituals and theatrical

performances in combination with music, costume and dance. Nevertheless, anecdotal experience<sup>1</sup> encourages me to think about the possibilities of new ways of engaging with masks, as they can trigger conversations and stimulate the desire to create.

## 2. Self-Narrative: Researching My Own Experience

As I previously mentioned, my research interest has been largely informed by my own personal experience. By phrasing the focus of my inquiry as *visitor experience*, I echo the constructivist turn in the field of museum education. The vision of a “constructivist museum” situates the visitors’ orientation at the centre and positions learning in museums as “an active participation of the learner with the environment” (Hein, 1998, p. 6). Increasingly, studies of museum visitors have switched from experimental designs to naturalistic methods which acknowledge the situatedness and context-boundedness of human experience. When I was thinking how I could capture and represent museum experience in a piece of research, I knew I would need the kind of methodology that would mirror the “long-term, cumulative impact of museum visits” and the “voluntary and fleeting nature of museum experience” (Hein, 1998, p. 134). To bring together the personal, social and physical context (Falk & Dierking, 1992) of museum experience and to capture the interconnectedness between *museum visits* and other moments of lived experience, I decided to employ self-narrative to facilitate prolonged and continuous engagement.

Epistemologically speaking, self-narrative as methodology is premised on two major assumptions. It affirms the narrative turn in social sciences which recognises ‘story’ as the intrinsic structure of lived experience (Bruner, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1988). In consideration of this feature of human experience, researchers employ narrative inquiry as a framework to “investigate the ways humans experience the world depicted through their stories” (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 1). However, self-narrative rests upon an even bolder presupposition: we only have direct access to our own mental realm which is approachable through self-reflective recall or introspection (Polkinghorne, 1998, p. 7). This view is closely connected with the reflexive turn in response to ‘crisis of representation’ that erupted in the late twentieth century when scholars began to challenge the entrenched tradition of studying and

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<sup>1</sup> On the day of the Christmas Light Night in Oxford in 2010, I visited the Pitt Rivers Museums with a few friends and we explored the museum in the dark with flashlights. The Japanese Noh masks looked scary under the flickering light. In a mixture of awe and wonder, we began to discuss the use of masks in performances. On another occasion, I arranged a workshop in museums for children to solve jigsaw puzzles of masks that are part of the museum collections and to make three-dimensional masks with various materials. My impression is that most children were intrigued by ‘masks’ and enjoyed the events.

representing *others*. Anthropologists, for example, started to question their legitimate and taken-for-granted 'authority' to represent others' cultures (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). In the broader sense, the binary position between the 'researcher' and 'the researched' has been criticised at both methodological and ethical levels. The reflexive turn signals a methodological change. Researchers used to apply life story interviews to collect stories of personal experiences told by participants. Since the reflexive turn, scholars have been celebrating their own presence and voices in academic writings, though the ways of writing the 'self' into the research can vary.

Beyond the epistemological foundations, I turned to a self-narrative approach in consideration of the nature of my research topic. I believe self-narrative can bring about the fluid, fleeting, and fragmented nature of imaginative thinking, which is often intertwined with personal experience and meaning-making. I felt that the subtleties and minuteness of these moments were likely to be more accessible and approachable if I started with reflecting on my own experience. As Pearce (1990) has observed, most museum visits involve encounters between a visitor and museum objects and such an experience is "a dynamic, complex movement which unfolds as time passes" and "in the act of interpretive imagination we give form to ourselves" (p. 131).

Self-narrative has been criticised for self-obsession and even narcissism, as in the case of auto-ethnography, originated from ethnographic methods developed in anthropology. Auto-ethnography is a type of self-narrative whereby the researcher "places the story of his or her life within a story of the social context in which it occurs" (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 9). It has often been accused of *self-indulgence* (Coffey, 1999; Sparkes, 2002) and 'ego-centric predicament' (Hufford, 1995). Fundamentally, however, self-narrative as methodology aims to break down the binary oppositions set between *self* and *other*, *subjective* and *objective*, *private* and *public*, *emotional* and *cognitive*, *artistic* and *scientific*. It also calls for new analytical perspectives and different sets of criteria, which I shall discuss elsewhere. In dissolving the dichotomy between self and other, I believe that experiences of self always involve interactions between the self and others.

In my doctoral study, I have selected four museums in England as the research sites. Geographically, the four museums<sup>2</sup> (The British Museum; The Horniman Museum and

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<sup>2</sup> I believe it is important to use the real names of the selected museums throughout my research. I do not consider it necessary to ask the museums for permissions, as my study does not involve explicit arguments about the museums' practices, nor will it affect any museum staff or other visitors. I do not think any harm can

Anthropology, Cambridge) are easily accessible, and all hold collections of ethnographic masks. Though I aim to adopt a flexible approach, these pre-selected sites indicate that the self-narrative accounts of the research will, to a great extent, be based on my own independent visits to the four museums. To avoid carrying out the research in the form of a 'monologue,' I have decided to supplement my own 'self-narrative' by inviting a few participants, whose participation could stimulate dialogues and whose narratives could feed into the 'self-narrative' core. At the stage of designing the empirical study, my plan was to invite three to five participants to visit at least two museums on the list and to produce reflective notes and creative responses in the form that they felt most comfortable with. The participants would have the freedom to organise their own visits to the museums. Before their visit, I would conduct a semi-structured face-to-face interview with each participant, giving each of them the opportunity to reflect on their previous museum experience and initial impressions on masks. For the last phase of the study, my plan was to organise a group visit for all the participants to meet and exchange ideas. As mentioned earlier, there is always a gap between real world research and research plans. Hence, it turned out that the implementation of the above plan was not that simple. I shall now proceed to discussing why and how I have decided to work with my friends as participants and the issues arising out of the research process.

### 3. Friends as Participants

Once the decision of involving participants was made, I had to address a series of practical and methodological questions. How would I select participants to participate in my research? What roles would they play throughout the research? In what ways would I work with the participants?

The nature of my study demands a considerable amount of input from participants, as they are required to devote time and effort to visiting museums and creating responses. In consideration of the research design, the selection of participants came down to two essential criteria: that they are willing to participate in the research project, and that they should be physically living in the UK during the first half of the year 2013 in order to be able to visit the museums. In other words, participants would be recruited based on voluntary

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be done when the names of the museums are mentioned in my writing, though I am considering of getting in touch with relevant museum staff to check whether they would be interested to hear about my research and findings, which might offer them a chance to reflect on their own practices.

participation. Since the primary reason to include other participants was to stimulate conversations and to enrich the content of my own self-narrative accounts, I did not consider random sampling from the public, nor did I plan to approach visitors in museums, which would be a time consuming task. When I was planning and designing the research project, a number of my friends and acquaintances expressed interest in hearing more about the study and they mentioned that they would be willing to help if I needed to recruit participants. After a few weeks of bewilderment and frustration, I finally began to take my friends' words more seriously.

When I reflect back on my reluctance to accept my friends' offer in the first place, I realise that I was preoccupied with a set of dominant values in academic research. My worries were linked with the tradition of studying and representing 'others,' which requires the researcher to *keep a distance* from the subject of the research in order to achieve an unbiased view. However, by employing a self-narrative approach, I have already challenged this positivist stance. Narrative inquiry relies on lived experience represented in story forms rather than analyses based on controllable variants. In my study, I hope to explore the experience of general museum visitors via those of a particular group of people. While participants with different backgrounds would tell different stories and tell stories differently, I would take the contingency of their story-telling as part and parcel of the narrative.

As far as my own research experience is concerned, I have not come across any educational research or social science research where friends have been recruited as participants, though a large number of narrative studies do involve families and friends as informants. Choi (2010), for instance, involves her husband and her own child in her study about how visitors negotiate with museum narratives. Her methodological decision not only made it possible for her to bring, into the study, her multiple identities "as a researcher, an educator, an international doctoral student, a female, a mother, and a wife" (p. 17), it also made it easy for her to incorporate three different types of museums as her husband's expertise in natural history and her six-year-old daughter's expertise in playing at the children's museum complemented her own expertise in art. But in Choi's research, her husband and her child were primarily her informants who accompanied her during her own visits. In my research, however, the main concern for inviting participants was not finding people to visit museums with me, but stimulating dialogues and encouraging different perspectives. My study thus calls for a higher level of commitment and participation.



Instead of trying to avoid the situation of working with friends, I decided to take up my friends' suggestions and to tackle with the risks and challenges that accompany this decision as the research progressed. Now that I have completed the empirical part of my research, I want to highlight some significant challenges that emerged during the process, and to discuss some of the strategies that I used when handling unexpected situations that I did not foresee during research design. Although my reflections are situated in this particular study, I believe that some issues can shed light on social science research that involve human participants, especially narrative research with flexible frameworks.

### 3.1 The General Principle: Honesty

On what grounds can one involve friends as participants? How can one ensure that friends would not *create* or *fabricate* data to conform to the researcher's expectations? Ethically, honesty is the general principle when working with friends as participants. Like plagiarism, data fabrication is also a severe form of academic dishonesty. I consider the concern for honesty a matter to bear in mind rather than an obstacle to the selection of friends as participants. But I have noticed that I need to be more careful in attending to the researcher-participant relationship once friends become research participants. Though I abide by the principle of voluntary participation, the intentions of my friends to participate are likely to be different from those who are recruited through more traditional channels. The primary intention for participation is very likely to show support instead of a desire to contribute their stories or to gain financial rewards. During the research process, I kept reminding myself of this point so that I could build more awareness into shaping the researcher-participant relationship.

### 3.2 Shaping the Researcher-Participant Relationship

Following from what I have just said, the most difficult issue is to shape the researcher-participant relationship during the research. It would be impossible and impractical to just ignore our *friendship* during the research process. Once our two-sided relationships--researcher-participants and friends--were intertwined, I needed to keep a balance between respect and casualness with my friends as participants. Though it was sometimes hard to distinguish research-related events from other aspects of our communication, I treated my friends primarily as *participants* during the research process. To show my gratefulness and respect towards their participation, I offered each of them a small sum of travel reimbursement up to 50 pounds so that they could arrange trips to museums and I also promised to arrange a celebration party at the end of the research.

I wanted to ensure that beyond doing me a favour, all of my participants were to be well informed of their roles and their rights as participants throughout the research. But I noticed that almost all of them signed the informed consent form in front of me without giving enough time to read the document. This might result from their trust in me as a friend or their unwillingness to read the material written in an academic style. In tackling this situation, I added two extra procedures. After the face-to-face meeting, I sent the documents to the participants by email so that they could read the material when they felt like it, and could refer back to it in future days. During our conversations, I also tried to rephrase the written content by using clearer, everyday language so that they could easily make sense of what I meant. For instance, I replaced the term 'narrative' with 'stories' and 'experience' on certain occasions to avoid confusion and misunderstandings.

A great advantage of working with friends is that rapport can be easily built as mutual trust pre-dates the research project. This means that I could carry out the study more efficiently as less time would be needed for a warming up stage. However, during the research, I encountered challenges with keeping track with my participants' progress. It turned out that my communication with the participants did not always follow my planned schedule. This partly resulted from the nature of my empirical research. As the participants enjoyed considerable freedom and autonomy in organising their own museum visits and in creating the kind of responses in their favoured style, it is likely that the participants did not find it necessary to frequently communicate their progress with me during the period of research. In order to ensure that all participants completed the tasks in time and to keep myself updated with their progress, I contacted them on a regular basis with polite greetings to remind and encourage them to visit the museums and to send me their written work. I also discovered that though I often tried to initiate a dialogue in the form of email as a formal way of communication, they preferred other social media such as Facebook message and short messages on mobile phones. Following this observation, I found it hard to keep our communications to the planned schedule, as it would be almost impossible to rule out elements of personal life in our conversations. Shortly after interviews, we would talk about our recent life and plans. We would discuss our travel plans, our mutual friends, our family life and career plans, etc. Such circumstances pushed me towards an ethical dilemma. It would be ethically inappropriate to disrupt or to cut short the conversations simply because the content was not directly related to my research focus. However, I needed to be very careful with information that was too 'personal.' Methodologically and analytically,

difficulties also arose when I wanted to keep a balance between ‘flexibility’ and ‘control.’

Though ‘flexibility’ is valuable in a piece of narrative research and some of the content of such casual chatting may contribute to the study, I found it necessary to steer the course carefully to prevent conversations from ‘running wild.’

Before I acquired formal consent from all participants to attend the group meeting, I acted prudently when communicating with participants through email. Though I knew each of them as a friend, some of them did not know each other. As they all chose to keep anonymous during the research, I always reminded myself not to send group emails that would disclose each participant’s contact details. While this may seem to be a trivial matter, I considered it an essential ethical principle. This constitutes part of the challenge of working with friends - always stay widely awake to our new relationship as researcher and participants.

### **3.3 Friends or Acquaintances**

While four participants initially agreed to take part in the research and help me to complete the interview, one of the participants withdrew from the study. Compared to the other three participants, I would label this person as an acquaintance rather than a friend since we had only known each other as alumni briefly through an online platform. Upon hearing that my research is about museums, he showed much interest and kindly offered to be my participant and to discuss his museum experience. My acquaintance seemed to have a very busy schedule, as he only managed to squeeze an hour for interview between his two business meetings. It was only during our interview that I learnt he was mostly interested in going to museums to see Chinese antiques. It also seemed to me that he had not read the documents about my specific research since he expressed much surprise when I told him that he would need to visit mask collections at the museums on the list. However, he still agreed to participate in the study during the interview. After the interview, I did not hear from him for several months. It was not until the day of the group meeting that he sent me a message saying that he had just come back from a business trip and that he had not had time to visit the museums due to his busy schedule.

I do not blame this participant for not taking the issue seriously. What I have learnt from this incident is that I need to be more careful when communicating my research project and research plans to potential participants. Real world research is always filled with uncertainty and unexpected situations. What I could do is to make more detailed preparations

and apply more flexible approaches so that the research would not be greatly affected when one or more participants decide to withdraw from the study.

### 3.4 Group Meeting

In June 2013, I arranged a group visit to the British Museum in London, followed by a group discussion and celebration. This trip was organised based on the consent given by all participants. By using a doodle poll, we were able to schedule a date that suited everyone. I chose London as the meeting place as transportation to London was relatively easy for everyone.

Before the visit, I sent the planned schedule of the day trip to all participants. On the day, we met near the information desk at the British Museum and I led all the participants to see the masks collections in different galleries. At the beginning, I found it hard to call everyone's attention to the masks as they were excited about this meet-up and started to chat with each other. It was also hard to move along in a group of four, so sometimes we walked along in pairs. Gradually, we began to switch our attention to the masks. I did not choose to audio-record the conversations during the visit because the main purpose of the visit was to stimulate further discussions rather than collecting data for conversation analysis. We did not talk much inside the museum. As we went out of the museum, we then found a pub nearby to have a group discussion based on the framework and structure that I had prepared. The group discussion proved to be a very good occasion for everyone to share ideas.

During the group discussion, I experimented on reversing the researcher-participant relationship by inviting all my participants to have an *interview* with me based on a set of suggested questions that I offered. The interview was not only a chance for participants to understand better why and how this study was designed, but also for me to reflect on my own experience and on the rationale behind the study. In the afternoon, we had a little celebration by boating in Hyde Park, followed by a dinner at a restaurant. The day trip was overall very smooth. Elements of research and friendship were interconnected during the day and everyone had a great time.

If I were to conduct this research again, I would have organized a group meeting at the beginning of the research if possible, as it would be a great opportunity for sharing ideas and stimulating dialogues.

## Discussion

“Each of us must explore our own experience, not the experience of others” (Crotty, 1998, p. 84). But the experience of *self* and of *others* are often mingled together. In my study of visitors’ museum experience, friends became research participants who would inform my own self-narrative accounts.

In this paper, I have discussed my reflections on the rationale, possibilities and challenges of turning friends into research participants. Working with friends during academic research could be a blessing in disguise. Beyond adhering to the general principle of honesty, it is essential to keep a high level of flexibility and dexterity throughout the process. In attending to the way that the researcher-participant relationship intersected with friendship, I found it crucial to keep the balance between respect and casualness, and between negotiation and control.

My experience during the research propels me to rethink some aspects of the academic tradition. In terms of communication, academic researchers may place recorded written documents at a higher rank on the research hierarchy, but this may not be the preferred and natural way of communication for participants. A narrative paradigm calls for a more humanistic approach towards research participants. Informed consent and voluntary participation are only two very basic prerequisites on the ethical agenda. To show respect to human participants, we may need to loosen our grip on the academic tradition and to learn to work along with participants. As I have suggested, one strategy could be adopting a parallel system. When communicating with my participants, I still kept a record of the emails that I sent, but I facilitated communication by using a diversity of communication channels, which my participants were more comfortable with. I wrote documents of my research in a formal style, but paraphrased the content to my participants with more down-to-earth language.

At this stage, my primary concern is to weave reflexivity into the analytical framework. The combination of my own accounts and those of the participants points back towards the *crisis of representation*. The composition of the group also poses a great methodological challenge. Though I invited five participants at the first stage of my research, only three of them finally participated in the research. All of them were of Asian ethnicity and had studied or were studying at the University of Oxford. This is not surprising considering that before my doctoral research most of my friends in the UK were people whom I had met during my one-year study at Oxford. The homogeneity of the group may seem problematic when judged from a sociological perspective, but my research is not

aiming at examining the impact of the educational or cultural background on museum visitors' experience. These elements will become part and parcel of the narrative. These are the challenges that I still need to work with. Turning friends into research participants complicates this challenge, but it also opens up new possibilities and new food for thought within a self-narrative research.

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