

A Chronicle of Mentoring Narrative Scholarship

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

There are many aspects of Catherine Kohler Riessman's narrative scholarship which have established her international reputation in the field. This contribution pays tribute to the role she has played as a mentor, both through her written work and in her practice. Mentoring, which is time-consuming and painstaking work, is a critical but widely unacknowledged aspect of scholarship, which is often portrayed as an individual endeavor, the accomplishment of the name or names which appear on the publications. The article argues that all scholars are part of a larger cycle, situated mid-stream, between those who have come before and those who will follow. There are many questions surrounding the meaning of mentorship: who should do it and who receive it; if and how it should be institutionalized, calibrated, and recognized; and more. Taking Riessman's example as its focus, the article critically examines the importance of mentoring and its role in forming, sustaining, and nourishing community.

SPECIAL ISSUE

AMOR NARRATIO: A FESTSCHRIFT FOR
CATHERINE KOHLER RIESSMAN

A Chronicle of Mentoring Narrative Scholarship

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There are many aspects of Catherine Kohler Riessman's narrative scholarship which have established her international reputation in the field. This contribution pays tribute to the role she has played as a mentor, both through her written work and in her practice. Mentoring, which is time-consuming and painstaking work, is a critical but widely unacknowledged aspect of scholarship, which is often portrayed as an individual endeavor, the accomplishment of the name or names which appear on the publications. The article argues that all scholars are part of a larger cycle, situated mid-stream, between those who have come before and those who will follow. There are many questions surrounding the meaning of mentorship: who should do it and who receive it; if and how it should be institutionalized, calibrated, and recognized; and more. Taking Riessman's example as its focus, the article critically examines the importance of mentoring and its role in forming, sustaining, and nourishing community.

Keywords:

Mentorship; community building; intergenerational scholarship

There are many aspects of Catherine Kohler Riessman's narrative scholarship which have established her international reputation in the field. This contribution pays tribute to the role she has played as a mentor, both through her written work and in her practice. Mentoring, which is time-consuming and painstaking work, is a critical but widely unacknowledged aspect of scholarship. Without it, many of us would not have been able to stay the path. Through her example, Riessman has taught us much about what it means to mentor, to be mentored, and why it is so invaluable.

I have had the privilege to be in conversation with Riessman for more than two decades—which means that I am writing about someone with whom I have a longstanding relationship. As Riessman (2015) has written, “The subjectivity of the investigator does not stand in the way, nor does it belong at the center; rather it is one object among many” (p. 234). In what follows, I discuss in detail two angles in which I have been mentored by Riessman, the first as a scholar, and the second as a co-director of a research centre. It is from these points of situated knowledge that the current article is written.

Scholarship by Example

“The little blue book,” *Narrative Analysis* (Riessman, 1993), published more than a quarter of a century ago, is still widely cited, having obtained an almost “bible-like” status. For me, personally, what is most memorable about that book is the way in which it opens, with the heading, “Locating Myself.” Here she writes:

The construction of any work always bears the mark of the person who created it. So, before formally discussing narrative analysis, I begin by locating myself and the contexts that shaped the volume and authorize its point of view. (p. v)

As we would come to recognize in subsequent research, here Riessman led by example. She describes herself as first venturing “into the hall of mirrors that is reflexivity” (2015, p. 221) during second-wave feminism. While she did not use the language of reflexivity at that time, she was one of the first in the social sciences to take account of the impact of her own presence on her scholarship, exposing “the constitutive nature of research: the inseparability of observer, observation, and interpretation” (2015, p. 221). For many young researchers, myself included, long before personally meeting her, Riessman established herself as a very human fellow traveller. She describes the persona of the anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff, which was woven through her scholarship: “a specific, identifiable, thinking, feeling, and gendered ethnic participant observer—[who] is deeply embedded in [her research]” (2015, p. 224). A similar description could be offered of Riessman’s presence in her writing. Later we would accompany her on various journeys, be they listening to couples talk about divorce, or to South India where she was mistaken as a medical doctor who could assist with

fertility problems, or indeed through her own journey as a cancer patient and survivor. Critically, throughout the many stops on this journey, Riessman has never substituted personal engagement and exposure for rigorous scholarship. Rather, her example has offered her reader a carefully calibrated balance which insists on locating herself within her analytic framework while not allowing her own presence to overshadow the enquiry. She has written:

Research must do more than feature the self of the investigator in an evocative autoethnography.... The goal of ... reflexive questioning is greater rigor; that is, to generate research that is more trustworthy—the kind of objectivity suited to the narrative enterprise.... Self-reflexivity should work in the service of better understanding the phenomena at hand. (2015, pp. 227–234)

Riessman has eschewed equally both a stance of distant neutrality and a mirror turned exclusively toward the self. In doing so, she has demonstrated time and time again what it means to be a scholar with heart. I have benefitted from this not only as a reader, but also as someone whose work has been reviewed by Riessman. Let me give an example. In 2002, I edited a special issue of *Narrative Inquiry* on the theme of “counter-narratives,” which included my article, “Memories of Mother: Counter-Narratives of Early Maternal Influence.” Michael Bamberg, editor of the journal, then invited three to four people to respond to each of the articles, to which the author of the original piece could then respond. These articles were published together as *Considering Counter-Narratives: Narration and Resistance* (Bamberg & Andrews, 2004). I was very fortunate, because one of the commentators on my article was Riessman. The first few pages of her contribution discussed a number of important points: aging and its relevance to the shaping of these retrospective accounts; my contextualization of the lived experience of the people I wrote about; the historicity of personal narrative; and more. But her final point resonated the most with me:

Speaking of parenting, Andrews says in passing that she collected the data before she was a mother: “ten years and two children later,” she returned to the transcripts with new interests and theories in mind. It is rare in narrative research for investigators to return to texts they have analyzed in the past, and bring to bear newly current theoretical perspectives and autobiographical

insights. I wanted Andrews to push her positioning argument further to include her changing “self” in relation to the material, that is, issues of reflexivity and the research relationship. Writing need not be confessional, and can reveal how the positioning of the investigator influences what she “sees” in the data—a critical component in the social construction of knowledge. (Riessman, 2004, p. 36)

I remember reading this, and how liberated it made me feel, encouraging me to write in a different, fuller voice. Riessman’s own scholarship has long been characterized by a deeply reflective mode; readers know who their narrator is, as she weaves her own situatedness into her scholarship. I was a mother, writing about the ways in which people had experienced the way in which they had been mothered. Surely this was a topic that had more than merely professional interest for me. My rejoinder included a different register:

It is not a coincidence that the first time I returned to this set of data after more than a decade was to explore how respondents recalled their early childhood. My two small children have enriched my life – and challenged me - in many ways, but it was an unexpected gift that my relationship with them would afford me a new perspective into conversations I had had long before they were born. What I saw, and perhaps wanted to see, in the four cases I presented in my paper, gives me personally, as a mother, hope for my children; despite how imperfect we may parent, they – and we, as adult children – still have within them the ability to overcome whatever blows we may deal them, however inadvertently. The accounts of the narrators serve as an antidote to the stories of those adults who continue to see their parents as the ultimate arbitrators of the individuals they have become. We can shape our lives, but not in circumstances of our own choosing. (Bamberg & Andrews, 2004, p. 58)

In the years since I published that piece, this particular passage has been one which has proven to resonate not only with myself personally, but also with other readers. It was undoubtedly Riessman who had encouraged me to bring my own experience as a mother into my analysis—in other words, to write about those most central intellectual and emotional concerns which had encouraged me to revisit my data.

Now looking back on this moment of looking back, some 15 years after our exchange, I appreciate Riessman's role as the mentor she was, she holding her hand out to me in invitation to push further.

Riessman is very conscious of the importance of mentoring, and speaks passionately about the significance of her relationship with Elliot Mishler to her own professional development. She writes that Mishler

set a model of mentorship and engaged scholarship that also entailed a fierce commitment to contending with complicated and messy political realities of neighbourhoods, communities and societies. [Young scholars] were encouraged and challenged to take intellectual risks. (Bell & Riessman, 2018)

He would read multiple drafts of work in progress, and was both supportive and rigorous in the critical feedback he offered. Mishler also pushed the model of mentoring one step further; for over 30 years, he hosted an interdisciplinary narrative study group in his home each month, creating a mentoring community. Rita Charon has written about Mishler's impact on her:

Did Elliot have any idea that he transformed my life? He showed me that listening is the holiest thing, and that recognizing another's truth is the greatest gift. He gave that gift to me time and time over, and I have done my best, with his example, to give it to others. (Cited in Bell & Riessman, 2018)

In these words, one hears the fundamental importance of mentorship to the life of an academic.

Yet scholarship is often portrayed as an individual endeavor, the accomplishment of the name or names which appear on the publications. In reality, we are all of us part of a larger cycle; we are situated mid-stream, between those who have come before us and those who will follow. What Riessman, and Mishler before her, demonstrate is a commitment in practice to the next generation. There are many questions surrounding the meaning of mentorship: who should do it and who receive it, if and how it should be institutionalized, calibrated, and recognized, and more. In contrast to formal mentorship schemes which are often institutionally organized, can be involuntary and not always desired by mentor and mentee, and which tend to reinscribe a hierarchy which is already firmly in place, what Riessman offered was never

explicitly articulated. She led by example, both in her scholarship and in her building of a mentoring community, and knew when and how to offer critical support.

Years later, I would come to experience viscerally what it meant to stand in Riessman's shoes. In 2014, she had been invited as the keynote speaker for the end-of-grant Novella conference,¹ which was to be held in Oxford. Riessman contracted Lyme disease just before the conference, and I was asked to step in to read her contribution. This was one of the most challenging public deliveries I have ever had to do. Her paper is one which many are probably now familiar with, later published as "Ruptures and Sutures: Time, Audience and Identity in an Illness Narrative." Here Riessman (2015) describes the illness narrative of the article as one which "traces how cancer transformed the many identities I enact on a daily basis" (p. 1055). The opening line still haunts me with its sense of foreboding: "As Aristotle observed, dramatic plots turn on ruptures: something goes awry, there is a break in the expected course of things" (p. 1055). One can feel the dark clouds gathering; the scene is set. From here Riessman writes of how cancer changed her thinking about her "life in time" (p. 1057). But true to form, this would not be a confessional—never that—but rather, a journey which included in equal measure long passages from the journal she kept during the months of her intensive treatment, in conversation with the concerns of medical sociology. Reading another's paper is always a challenge—the act of ventriloquism never quite a perfect fit. But how much harder this was when the voice I was speaking was that of someone I knew personally and held in high regard, as she so bravely laid herself bare in paragraph after paragraph. I knew that I needed to muster my strength to read this—she, after all, had had to endure it—but standing in those shoes, even for that one hour, I felt the stature of the woman, her intense bravery, her drive to understand and to communicate—in short, her commitment to scholarship.

The Practice of Mentoring

Now I would like to consider another aspect of Riessman's mentorship, sharing with readers some of the concrete lessons which I have learned through my years of association with her. As with the previous section, my positionality is an important aspect of my observations here. What follows are reflections which stem from my experience as a co-founder and co-director of the Centre for Narrative

¹ <http://www.novella.ac.uk>

Research. Riessman joined the Advisory Board of the Centre for Narrative Research (CNR)² in the very early years. As the millennium approached, this new research centre was created, and we invited many narrative scholars from around the world to be on our board. No one took this role more seriously than Riessman. Through the two decades which have passed since its birth, Riessman has visited on numerous occasions, delivering public presentations, intensive postgraduate workshops, and whatever it was felt was needed. She has proved herself to be unwavering in her support, a friend through good times and bad. Here I will discuss four aspects of that critical friendship:

- *The Importance of Mentoring*: Riessman has always had a high level of consciousness of the importance of the mentorship relationship. Acknowledging the importance of the role Elliot Mishler had played in her own development, Riessman was always prepared to put in the hard work—both time-consuming and emotionally taxing—to mentor younger colleagues. Mentorship at its heart demands a recognition of the continuity of generations: *l'dor v'dor*, from generation to generation. This stance is built on a recognition of those who have come before oneself and those who will follow, with one eye on history and the other towards the future. Every time Riessman has visited London over the past two decades, she has requested to meet with our students, always curious to know what they are working on, and how, if at all, she might be able to support them as they confront the murky waters of the discipline. Mishler had provided this for Riessman, and she in turn has done the same for others.
- *Forming, Sustaining, and Nourishing Community*: Centres such as CNR are products of the digital age; its virtual existence is inextricably linked to the way in which it has developed. It is not uncommon for those wishing to visit our Centre to express a desire to “see it.” But there is no physical location of the Centre. It exists in the events we organize, the courses we teach, the newsletters, our online modules. And it exists in the endless communications between those of us who run the Centre. But there is nothing “to see.” Early into the life of the Centre, Riessman was visiting and commented that this was one aspect

² <https://www.uel.ac.uk/research/centre-for-narrative-research>

that we should endeavor to change. People need to be with one another, physically face-to-face, from time to time, and without this, a sense of belonging and shared purpose will be compromised. Mishler himself had written years before about the importance of a scholarly community; those pursuing narrative research often feel marginalized in their home institutions and disciplines, and might need to rely more heavily on the virtual community made possible by the digital age. Indeed, this is one of the primary functions that the vast e-list of CNR has served over the years. But Riessman emphasized to us that this could not and should not be a substitute for coming together. In the 20 years of the existence of the Centre, we have learned the wisdom of this advice.

- *Attending to the P's: Personal, Political, Process:* Not only does Riessman's scholarship connect the micro/biographical with the macro/social and political, but this commitment is demonstrated in her practice as well. As an advisor to our research Centre, Riessman has been acutely aware of different challenges we have faced over the years. The first of these has been of an institutional nature: how can one defend one's corner, fighting for the continued existence of the Centre in the increasingly fraught context of higher education in the United Kingdom? The strategic advice and long-term perspective of one who has experienced the institutional battlefield was very useful. Running a research centre on a shoestring budget, all the while pursuing a very ambitious program while meeting our multiple and increasing academic responsibilities, was not without its challenges. Here too, on the personal front, Riessman was insightful and forthcoming in her feedback. Feminist methodology is not just a good theory; it is a commitment to a way of doing business, and critically that includes a willingness to acknowledge conflict and to endeavor to resolve it. Moreover, at its centre is a sharing of power and a commitment to transparency. While the university has tended to orient towards quantifiable outcomes, our challenge has been to be forever vigilant about the process. Throughout the years, Riessman has helped to remind us of this.
- *Policing Narrative:* It is perhaps not surprising that the Centre for Narrative Research would continuously have to face the question

“What is narrative research?” We published numerous books which we thought demonstrated some of the key debates in the field: *Lines of Narrative* (Andrews et al., 2000) aimed to “bottle” the benefits accrued from our one-day intensive workshops, with authors who had contributed to those events. *Doing Narrative Research* (Andrews et al., 2008/2013) was a collection of chapters by authors whose work we thought was exemplary; our aim here was to show the nuts and bolts of how narrative research is done across a number of applications (visual, digital, etc.). And *What is Narrative Research* (Squire et al., 2014), which was co-authored by a small group of people affiliated with CNR, tried to address just that question: what *is* narrative research? As Ian Craib (2000) had written in our first volume of collected essays,

One might think that a concept which brings together the world religions, all of Western philosophy, large scale statistical correlations in the social sciences, every biography and autobiography that’s ever been written, every work of fiction and my account of losing a pet cat obscures more than it illuminates. (p. 64)

If narrative is everything and the kitchen sink, then effectively it is nothing at all. Our attitude at CNR was always that we wanted to be an umbrella group and felt neither the inclination nor the capability to be the “narrative police.” And yet, and yet.... Was everything that called itself narrative actually so in our own eyes? What of Craib’s blistering critique? Conversely, wasn’t there much work which did not self-label with this term, which nonetheless appeared to us to have many of the characteristics that we would expect to find in narrative research? These were complex issues which we needed to discuss, not only amongst the leadership of CNR, but with critical friends like Riessman. It was then not only her very useful book, *Narrative Methods in the Human Sciences* (2008), which helped to identify key issues pertaining to such scholarship, but also, and crucially, her willingness to engage with us as we struggled to find a path which was simultaneously inclusive and intellectually rigorous.

For all who know Riessman and who read her work, she is intellectually demanding. By word and by deed, she encourages others to do as she has done: Don’t look away. Resist easy answers. Accept that interpretation is always provisional and dynamic. Investigate your

discomfort. Live with the uncertainty that is and must be a part of an engaged scholarship. Riessman poses for us the hard questions: What is it we want our research to do? Why does it matter? To whom are we speaking? With whom do we form community? How can we most effectively attend to questions of process, interpersonally and institutionally? Riessman's work and her life have provided an inspiration for those of us following in her wake; she has insisted that we think harder, and has had the courage to lead by example.

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