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Looking Back, Looking Forward

Catherine Kohler Riessman

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Article abstract

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NARRATIVE WORKS
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SPECIAL ISSUE
AMOR NARRATIO: A FESTSCHRIFT FOR
CATHERINE KOHLER RIESSMAN

Looking Back, Looking Forward[1]

Catherine Kohler Riessman

Responding to the honor of the festschrift, I name and honour those who guided me, especially my mentor, Elliot Mishler. I describe a path from initial fascination with the idea of a "story" to my subsequent work that expanded the study of narrative in the human sciences. Efforts to understand how individuals interpreted—made sense of—events and situations that had interrupted their lives led me to discoveries about narrative form, apparent only after close textual interactional analysis. Recently, the appeal of narrative has mushroomed; I urge scholars not to lose sight of features that distinguish it from other forms of discourse.

Keywords:
Ubuntu, ethnopoetics, narrative form, textual interactional analysis

It is unusual for a festschriftee to contribute to her festschrift—this special issue of *Narrative Works*. I am deeply honoured by the volume and thankful to be allowed to write a response. As those of you who know me will appreciate, it is hard for me to accept praise and, in this instance, individual praise is inappropriate. I was in the right place at the right time and had a gifted mentor. I could take advantage of ideas that were circulating in the humanities and social sciences and apply them to data in the human sciences. In this essay I take the opportunity to contextualize what I did and talk about the particular people who opened up the world of ideas and methods that made it possible. I also want to comment briefly on how the field of narrative studies in the human sciences is moving in different directions today.

[1] This essay has gone through several drafts, strengthened by comments from my writing group—Marj DeVault and Wendy Luttrell. I thank them from the bottom of my heart.

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There is a South African saying—*Ubuntu*--introduced to me by Sanny Mulubale when he was a PhD student at the University of East London. It translates roughly as "I am because we are," attesting to the bonds that tie us together as humans. My narrative work over the years came out of a network of relationships, and it is these bonds that I want to lift up, for they made what I did possible. The most important person was Elliot Mishler, who mentored me tirelessly over the years; he also brought a group of us together to think analytically about storytelling—in doctors' offices, formal research interviews, and in everyday interaction. Scholars in Europe and Australia found different ways of connecting, eventually through the Centre for Narrative Research at the University of East London.

I came to know Elliot's work quite by accident: by attending a Women's Studies Conference in 1985, where I heard Susan Bell deliver a paper on "stories" participants told in interviews. She was completing a post-doctoral fellowship with Elliot as he was completing *The Discourse of Medicine* (Mishler, 1984), and she extended his ideas about narrative structure and function into her work. Immediately, I saw the relevance of the approach to interviews I had been collecting—they were filled with stories. I wanted to work with Elliot, too, and did so as his post-doc from 1985–1988. He led a weekly seminar with a multidisciplinary group of post-docs as he was completing *Research Interviewing: Context and Narrative* (Mishler, 1991). Conversations in that seminar are seared into my history.

So began the bonds that enlarged outward over time to include others in a Narrative Study Group, which met every month in Elliot's living room for nearly 27 years. We were sociologists, psychologists, scholars in communications, education, medicine, and other applied fields. Bringing our nascent work to the study group was a safe space for experimentation, debate, constructive criticism, and enduring bonds. To this day, we are who we are because of each other.

The 1980s and 1990s were a heady time for those of us working with language and meaning. Prescient man that he was, Elliot had audited Noam Chomsky's course at MIT in the early 70s. (His partner, Vicky Steinitz, confirmed this in a personal communication.) As the "narrative turn" in social research was developing, Elliot had his seminar participants read and discuss the work of a variety of social scientists who took language and interaction seriously—including Dell Hymes, Harold Garfinkel, Deborah Tannen, Lakoff and Johnson, among others. We learned to be skeptical of forms of data analysis that treated language

simply as a transparent medium—a clear path to content and meaning. "What" was said, or the content of an utterance in a conversation, needed to be examined alongside "how," "why," and "to whom" it was said, and for what purposes. Looking at the interview data I had gathered, I came to see that the forms of speech my research participants selected to convey particular experiences were strategic choices, rather than arbitrary, shaped to be sure by the constraints and forms of language of a culture. Jerome Bruner's work taught us to be attentive to classic plot lines that contemporary speakers can draw on to give shape to their personal stories. We learned from sociolinguistic scholars—Labov and Waletzky, and the later writings of Labov—about classic elements of narrative structure.

Before coming to work with Elliot, I was drowning in a corpus of more than a hundred interview transcripts, trying to make sense of them thematically. The easy tendency was to get the "gist" of an utterance, and to "look for themes" across the accounts of divorce. Elliot's advice, instead, was to start with a single case—one instance of the phenomenon in question.

The ethnopoetic approach pioneered by Jim Gee was particularly suited to some of the accounts of divorce I had collected, especially those that didn't take the traditional story form. The accounts of these dissolving marriages had no clear plot line, no resolution to the action, and yet they "felt" narrative-like during a conversational exchange and when I read the transcript later. All participants narrated moments in the breakdown of a marriage, but not necessarily with a story about a particular moment; instead, the enduring, draining, repetitive problems in some marriages required a different form of telling, and analysis. Gee's approach encouraged me to experiment with poetic forms of representation of these segments: I organized stanzas and strophes, with breaks guided by the intonation and pauses of the speaker. When and how different narrative forms were invoked in the conversational exchange proved central to interpretation of participants' accounts of the reasons for a divorce.

All this was possible because Elliot taught us to listen—to attend closely to the linguistic choices participants made. He also pushed us to examine *our* positions as the audience and/or questioner—how we were collaborators in an unfolding tale of a past time or moment. He urged us to put aside our privileged theories, disciplinary imperatives, and research agendas and engage in what another of Elliot's students—physician Rita

Charon (2008), in her book, *Narrative Medicine*—calls "stereophonic listening" (p. 97).

Following Elliot's directive to start with a single case, I discovered surprises in language use and subtle rifts in the unfolding interview relationship that contained broader theoretical insights. Building up from the one, I saw subtle commonalities and important differences across the accounts that on the surface seemed to be about the "same" topic. In my scholarship over the years, surprising moments in interviews and interactional "trouble" in research conversations became the subject in several scholarly papers—extended case studies (Riessman, 1987, 2005, 2012).

After the 1990 divorce book, my work over the years focused on other biographical disruptions. All of it was guided by Elliot's continuing mentoring and key readings in medical sociology, notably Mike Bury's (1982) classic paper on biographical disruption and another by Gareth Williams (1984) on meaning-making after serious illness. As Gareth did, I tried to uncover the embedded politics in participants' accounts of the genesis of their difficulties. In case studies of men with multiple sclerosis in mid-life (Riessman, 2003, 2004, 2012), for example, the absence of disability rights and accessible environments were plainly visible to me, the analyst, but not to the men themselves. Instead, they stressed the ways illness had disabled their performance of masculinity—culturally constructed beliefs, through and through. My study of childless women in South India (Riessman, 2000a, 2000b, 2005) emphasized women's resistance practices in the face of massive cultural pressure to produce a biological child. The "personal" problem of infertility brought into sharp relief structural issues about women's place in the Indian family. Carrying Elliot with me throughout my travels, I tried always to pay close attention to the language women and men chose to communicate their situations, while also attending to the specific context of the interview conversation. Reflexivity, I now see, became a more central part of my work over time and I've written about that elsewhere (Riessman, 2015).

Biographical work found a receptive context in the 1980s and 1990s, as some in the social sciences critical of positivism were turning to the humanities for ways of thinking about human problems. My sociological training had occurred in a university where structural-functionalism was dominant—abstract theory that had little to say about how individuals and groups negotiate their lives. I was drawn to a more humanistic sociology that lifted up, as Joe Gusfield wrote in 1980, "the

language-using and symbol-choosing nature of human action and understanding" (p. 10).

I have been asked how my prior background as a clinical social worker informed my narrative research. Most obviously, the biographical disruptions that I've chosen to study over the years—divorce, chronic illness in mid-life, and infertility—are the kinds of human problems that bring individuals into clinical settings like those where I worked. Listening to emotional accounts and bearing witness to people's suffering is central to who I am. The activism of social work also shaped my perspective: the constraints, conventions, and structures participants took for granted required change—social action. The critical sociology initiated by C. Wright Mills taught us to see how seemingly "private" troubles are linked to larger social structural issues. Divorce rates, for example, have been related historically to changing expectations about what marriage is supposed to provide and to women's power in marriage. The personal narratives I collected about divorce experiences in the 1980s contained evidence of profound shifts, including women's ways of thinking about and responding to male violence.

In recent times, the word "narrative" has mushroomed, heard daily in newscasts. Candidates in elections now feature personal stories about themselves to appeal to particular voting blocs by exploiting one of the central functions of narrative—persuasion. Academic scholars are increasingly embracing the narrative vocabulary, too, sometimes with scant attention to specifics of language, ordering and sequence, narrative form, and context, especially the positioning of the questioner/audience. I am troubled by potential simplification and fear that core meanings of narrative may be lost by popularization. I hope it doesn't lead to a dumbing down of the field, and urge investigators to be mindful of Atkinson and Delamont's (2006) caution to qualitative investigators: we can't simply "celebrate narratives and biographical accounts, rather than subjecting them to systematic analysis" (p. 164).

An analogy may be relevant. We can go to a concert and simply enjoy a piece of music. Musicians, however, closely analyze the score before interpreting it in a performance: what does the key the composer chose suggest about the tonality of the piece and sequence of chord progressions? What do the composer's markings for tempo changes indicate? What about the form the composer selected? A sonata, for example, is different from a rondo; similarly, a rule-bound fugue inserted in the middle of a movement communicates something quite different than a triple-metre dance form would. Finally, what do we bring to the

listening experience, and how has the listening context changed over historical time? These compositional and performance choices matter—they shape meaning—how the audience will hear and interpret a piece of music. Shouldn't social scientists do something similar with their research materials? Wouldn't analysis of language and form take us deeper? Why should we assume that a participant's story, lifted out of its contexts of production, simply speaks for itself?

A promising development in the field is the range of human problems now subjected to a narrative lens. The massive upheavals of migration in Europe, the Covid-19 pandemic sweeping the world, and Black Lives Matter movements call out for documentation and study. This is a very different moment in history, compared to when I did my work on biographical disruptions; the scale of disruptions today is huge, and scholars should not be limited in the methods they choose. I have always appreciated different methods of social research, and even though I was inspired by the narrative approach, I certainly don't hold it up as the only way to address the range of contemporary human problems. I certainly don't expect every scholar to take up narrative analysis, especially the detailed analysis of interview excerpts that I did. But I still hold onto key features that distinguish narrative from other discourse forms and that require some attention by an investigator.

In the contemporary period, new and important questions are being asked of narrative segments: who is allowed to talk about their experience? Who is listening? Whose story is valued? Who gains from the research relationship? I was deeply impressed, when I was in London in 2019, by the dissertation projects presented at the Centre for Narrative Research that are pursuing these and other questions.

In closing, I return to Elliot and ideas that circulated in the Narrative Study Group. The final paper he presented to us in draft form, co-authored with Vicky Steinitz (Mishler & Steinitz, 2001), called on narrative researchers to take up the "unjust world problem"; a revised version of that paper, the first entry in a volume edited by Corinne Squire (Mishler with Squire, 2021), takes up the call. We in the group years ago had surrounded him with examples from our research, problems that we had been discussing over many years together: gun violence in a Boston neighborhood, Somali refugees organizing in Maine, immigrant children's experiences in a Massachusetts school, women's negative health interactions with male physicians. With Elliot's encouragement, we have combined in our scholarship study of particular cases of these situations with broader political critiques.

Again, I am thankful for the honour of this volume and hope I have provided a context that situates the work in a time and place, and with a central character who served as midwife for the work.

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