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A Chronicle of Mentoring Narrative Scholarship

There are many aspects of Catherine Koehler Riessman's narrative scholarship which have established her international reputation in the field. This contribution will pay 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.

Scholarship by example

'The little blue book' *Narrative Analysis* (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.

While a plea for 'positionality' is not unusual in today's academic world, when this was written it was relatively novel and bold. As we would come to recognise in subsequent research, here Riessman led by example. For many young researchers, myself included, long before personally meeting her, Riessman established herself as a very human fellow traveler. 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. Thus she has eschewed equally both a stance of distant objectivity 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 in *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 3-4 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 and 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.

I remember reading this, and how liberated it made me feel, encouraging me to write in a different, fuller voice. 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.

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 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 fifteen 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.

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 <http://www.novella.ac.uk> conference, which was to be held in Oxford. Riessman contracted Lyme’s 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” (2015). <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/25923981> . Here Riessman describes the illness narrative of the article as one which ‘traces how cancer transformed the many identities I enact on a daily basis.’ 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.” 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.’ 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 lay 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 background, it is important to know that Riessman joined the Advisory Board of the Centre for Narrative Research (CNR) <https://www.uel.ac.uk/research/centre-for-narrative-research> 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. When speaking of her own development, she never fails to mention Elliot Mishler, who provided Riessman with a supportive, but critical sounding board for her work. Mishler was well-known for his generous capacity to engage with the work of others, and for many years hosted meetings at his home in Cambridge, welcoming a small group of narrative scholars who would meet to discuss work in progress. Not only had Riessman, like others, benefitted from this over the years, but she became willing to play this role in the life of 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 organise, 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 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 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 twenty 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 longterm 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 programme 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 was to be forever vigilant about the process. Throughout the years, Riessman 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* (2000) aimed to 'bottle' the benefits accrued from our one-day intensive workshops, with authors who had contributed to those events. *Doing Narrative Research* (2008/2013) was a collection of chapters by authors whose work we thought was exemplar; 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* (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 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.

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 of 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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