

COMMENTARY

Accidental cases: Extending the concept of positioning in narrative studies

Catherine Kohler Riessman

*Dept. of Sociology, Boston College and School of Social Work,
Boston University*

Commentary on **Molly Andrews'** *Memories of Mother: Counter-Narratives of Early Maternal Influence*; Volume 12(1), pp. 7–27.

I locate Molly Andrews' article in a long tradition of feminist scholarship on the institution of motherhood. Ruling relations of "expert" narratives inevitably penetrate personal narratives of being mothered, but narrators can resist and complicate the master narrative as they locate memories of childhood in historical and political contexts. Narrative research would benefit from greater attention to historicity, the social location of narrator and investigator that influence the research relationship, and the shifting positioning of the interpreter when she returns to "accidental cases" from previous research. (*Motherhood, Positioning, Historicity, Ruling Relations, Re-interpretation*)

Master narratives of a social institution (e.g., motherhood) are inevitably woven into our personal stories of lived experience with the institution (e.g., mothering and/or being mothered). Despite the power of cultural plots, we do not simply follow them in re-storying our lives over time. We interpret past experiences in composing lives in the present that adapt to, resist, and sometimes reach beyond the master narratives of dominant cultural institutions.

The ruling relations that penetrate the everyday world of experience through “expert” knowledge is a fruitful way of positioning Molly Andrews’ article. She argues that the (Western) textual narrative of motherhood in psychology is contested in the personal narratives of adult offspring. The article can be situated in a theoretical tradition with a long feminist history (DeVault & McCoy, 2002; Rich, 1976; Smith, 1974, 1999).

In four case studies of aging socialists, which Andrews selects from her previous corpus to reanalyze, she examines life histories that expand, complicate, and subvert the dominant (idealized) narrative of biological motherhood. Just as she looks back on previous work, participants look back on their lives to re-interpret memories of “deficient” mothering; difficult early experiences are re-interpreted as motives for political identities later on. Narrators struggle to come to terms with early lives – experiencing injustice when they were children. Andrews argues that the quest for personal freedom from an abusive parent, for example, led to the quest for freedom and equality for all. Radicalism was also rooted in childhood witnessing: seeing education denied to a girl, or watching physical abuse directed against another member of the family. The participants’ memories, like their lives, became politicized.

The counter-narratives challenge the ruling relations that permeate texts on the institution of motherhood, they are acts of “everyday resistance” (Collins, 1997; Scott, 1985). They contest the developmental frameworks of dynamic psychology, psychiatry, and other “expert” knowledges that have powerfully constrained white Western women: (biological) motherhood is seen as the central axis of adult identity; mothers are the single most important influence on children’s psychological development and future well-being; “inadequate” mothering has lethal effects. The power of this gendered and racialized master narrative (and associated mother-blaming) enters into the everyday worlds of mothers today, palpable in the complex emotions white middle-class Western women feel when they are not “totally there” for their children, when their actions cause harm, or when women choose to construct lives outside of motherhood. Black women have not experienced motherhood as white women have (Collins, 1991), nor have they attempted to live out the idealized and homogenized master narrative of the “good mother”, and their mothering has been pathologized in developmental thought. Black women confront different gender restrictions, including racist beliefs (when they are poor) about the “choice” of motherhood itself. In a word, the master narrative of motherhood in psychological theory is bleached of class, race, sexuality,

nationality, and historical/cultural context. Personal narratives reveal how the plot can be written differently.

Molly Andrews' article raises several issues for contemporary narrative studies. The historicity of personal narrative is a neglected area of research (but see Bell, 1999; Plummer, 1995; Skultans, 1999), although it remains a major focus of scholarship on the master narratives of theory. Andrews relates the rise of industrial capitalism to an emerging discourse on (white) women's domesticity, which guided gender relations into the 20th century (in Western societies – the discourse did not penetrate South Asia in pure form, and counter-pressures continue to this day: families, not individual mothers, are responsible for the care and rearing of children). Andrews' participants historically situate their childhood stories in the harsh capitalist world of early 20th England for the working class: high rates of infectious disease (notably TB); early death of parents and siblings; poverty, hunger and insecure housing in cities; child labor in mills; a vast colonial world that (middle class) mothers could turn to for help with children. Arriving at a critical perspective on gender and class inequalities of the historical period enabled narrators to position their past experiences in present socialist identities.

The social location of the narrator, which Andrews identifies and uses analytically, warrants closer attention in narrative studies generally. She avoids the pitfall of “over personalizing” personal experience, and connects the personal and the political, as do her informants. A current trend, especially among psychologically minded investigators, is to reduce the political to the personal (Langellier, 2001a). All four narrators position themselves in class (but not race) contexts in their stories about growing up poor in the first decades of the 20th century. Choosing to locate themselves in this way speaks to the huge significance of class politics in Britain. Narrators in the U.S. would likely position themselves differently.

I wondered about the significance of aging for the narrators as they constructed their historicized accounts of childhood – they were 75 to 90 at the time of interviewing. The issue is not “retrospective bias” in reporting childhood “facts”, as positivists would argue, but rather how subsequent events have transformed the meaning and import of difficult childhood experiences. Aging, for all of us, entails composing *life stories* that, of course, contain bounded narratives of specific moments in the life course. But with aging the quest for coherence (to borrow a hotly debated term in narrative studies)

prompts us to stitch together fragments of memory, to relate past events to present actions, to re-imagine what “really” happened in childhood that may have steered us towards current identities and values. Mishler (1998) puts it well: “ends beget beginnings.” We compose and recompose our pasts, “shifting the relative significance of different events for whom we have become, discovering connections we had previously been unaware of, repositioning ourselves and others in our networks of relationships (Mishler, 1999b, p. 5).

Personal narratives are (among other things) meaning-making units of discourse. They are useful for research precisely because narrators interpret the past in stories rather than reproduce it as it was. The “truths” of narrative accounts are not in their faithful representations of a past world, but in the shifting connections they forge among past, present, and future (Riessman, 2002a, 2002b). The women and men Andrews interviewed were uniquely positioning in the life course to do this identity work. The compassionate understandings they display in the present of their mothers’ situations in the past, which Andrews so sensitively documents, may work to repair wounds that only narrative can heal. It is also possible that their social location as aging women and men influenced their accounts of childhood in another crucial way. They could offer counter-narratives to the master cultural narrative because they had experienced the difficult job of parenting themselves – a corrective to the idealized narrative of motherhood if there ever was one.

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.

Work is now building on positioning in personal narrative – how characters are positioned in reported events (e.g., as victims or as agents of change), how tellers position themselves in relation to their audiences (e.g., as sharing cultural understandings or as instructors), and how tellers position themselves to themselves (Bamberg, 2002). The positioning of the investigator in the field of study offers an additional angle of vision. Beginning in the 1970s,

some anthropologists explicitly interrogated themselves in their work (Briggs, 1970; Myerhoff, 1978, 1992), and scholars since have extended the move. Andrews does locate herself as a speaker/questioner in conversations with research participants, although her participation remains unanalyzed: how did her questions and comments shape the emerging narratives? Her focus is primarily on “the told”, not “the telling” (Mishler, 1995). As readers we can only imagine how the investigator’s positioning as a mother entered into her analysis. How did she select interview transcripts and “hear” them differently given her shifting theoretical interests and changing family context? Who are the “ghostly audiences” (Langellier, 2001b) to whom the aging narrators, and the author herself, may be speaking? These larger questions point to the contexts of production of personal narrative, including our positioning as authors (and readers) in the interpretive process.

The vivid and moving social portraits Andrews constructs offer important insights about identity construction over the life course, the role of memory in re-storying lives, and the master narratives of culture that are reworked and resisted in personal stories. Participants were “accidental cases” – they surfaced during a larger project on lifetime socialist commitments. Looking back on previously collected data – so common it is called secondary analysis in quantitative studies – offers narrative researchers unique possibilities. Historicity can come into view in all its guises – taken-for-granted social arrangements and ruling relations at the time of interviewing; assumptions about gender, class and race in the theories of our disciplines; and, finally, our own autobiographical histories that shape the kinds of narratives we develop from our research materials. Re-positioning ourselves in analysis of previously collected data brings contingency into view – the situatedness of knowledge.

REFERENCES

- Bell, S. E. (1999). Narratives and lives: Women’s health politics and the diagnosis of cancer for DES daughters. *Narrative Inquiry*, 9 (2), 1–43.
- Bamberg, M. (2002). ‘We are young, responsible, and male’: Form and functions of ‘slut-bashing’ in the identity constructions of 15-year-old males.
<http://www.massey.ac.nz/~alock/virtual/bamberg1.html>
- Briggs, J. (1970). *Never in Anger*. Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press.
- Collins, P. H. (1991). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness and empowerment*. Boston: Routledge.

- Collins, P. H. (1997). How much difference is too much? Black feminist thought and the politics of postmodern social theory. *Current Perspectives in Social Theory*, 17, 3–37.
- DeVault, M. L., & McCoy, L. (2002). Institutional ethnography: Using interviews to investigate ruling relations. In J. F. Gubrium & J. A. Holstein (Eds.), *Handbook of interview research: Context and method* (pp. 751–776). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Langellier, K. M. (2001a). Personal narrative. In M. Jolly (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of life Writing. Autobiographical and biographical forms*, Vol. 2 (pp. 699–701). London: Fitzroy Dearborn.
- Langellier, K. M. (2001b). ‘You’re marked’: Breast cancer, tattoo and the narrative performance of identity. In J. Brockmeier & D. Carbaugh (Eds.), *Narrative and identity: Studies in autobiography, self, and culture* (pp. 145–184). Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Mishler, E. G. (1995). Models of narrative analysis: A typology. *Journal of Narrative and Life History*, 5 (2), 87–123.
- Mishler, E. G. (1998, November). *Narrative and the paradox of temporal ordering: How ends beget beginnings*. Paper presented at conference on Discourse and Identity, Clark University, Worcester, MA.
- Mishler, E. G. (1999a). *Storylines: Craftartists’ narratives of identity*. Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press.
- Mishler, E. G. (1999b, November). *Time’s double arrow: Re-presenting the past in life history studies*. Paper presented at conference on “Lives in context: The study of human development.” Radcliffe Murray Center, Cambridge, MA.
- Myerhoff, B. (1978). *Number our days*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Myerhoff, B., with Metzger, D., Ruby, J., & Tufte, V. (1992). *Remembered lives*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Plummer, K. (1995). *Telling sexual stories: Power, change and social worlds*. New York: Routledge.
- Rich, A. (1976). *Of woman born*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Riessman, C. K. (2002a). Positioning gender identity in narratives of infertility: South Indian women’s lives in context. In M. C. Inhorn & F. van Balen (Eds.), *Infertility around the globe: New thinking on childlessness, gender, and reproductive technologies* (pp. 152–170). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Riessman, C. K. (2002b). Analysis of personal narratives. In J. Gubrium & J. Holstein (Eds.), *Handbook of interview research* (pp. 695–710). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Scott, J. C. (1985). *Weapons of the weak: Everyday forms of peasant resistance*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Skultans, V. (1999). Narratives of the body and history: Illness in judgement on the Soviet past. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 21, 310–328.
- Smith, D. E. (1974). Women’s perspective as a radical critique of sociology. *Sociological Inquiry*, 44 (1), 7–13.
- Smith, D. E. (1999). *Writing the social: Critique, theory, and investigations*. Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press.