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Maternal counter-narratives reconsidered

Let me begin with a note of appreciation to the five people who took time to comment on my original article, "Memories of mother: Counter-narratives of early maternal influence": Carlos Kolbi, Leigh Coombes and Mandy Morgan, Catherine Kohler Riessman, and Kyoko Murakami have all provided me with very stimulating feedback which has caused me to revisit my original argument.

About eighteen months have passed since I wrote the original piece. Two events in particular have occurred which I feel in some way will impact upon what I write today; they are part of the person I am as I now try to make sense of and respond to the commentaries on my article. The first event happened within the past week: I attended and participated in the memorial service for 'Helen' who died several months ago at the age of ninety-eight. (Though the data which I drew from was collected some fifteen years ago, in most cases I have had on-going conversations with my once participants, now friends.) The service celebrated a rich life dedicated to improving the material conditions of the lives of others, and although the main hall in the local school had been set up with ample chairs, in the event, there was standing room only. I sat listening to the stories which others told about Helen; one account in particular pricked my interest. A gentleman who had travelled from North America to be there, began with the question, what made Helen the way she was? How could anyone, brought up in the circumstances in which she was, become the kind of person which everyone in the hall knew her to be? I wondered to myself whether the

‘answers’ I had come up with were ‘right’? Is there any meaningful sense in which one can have correct answers to such questions? Or ultimately is the most one can strive for an interpretation which can match the complexity of the experience as it is related by the person who recounts their life story? Would Helen have recognized herself in the account I have provided about her, both in my original contribution to the counter-narratives debate, and elsewhere? I will return to a related set of questions when I address the question raised by Carlos Kolbi: is my construction of ‘counter-narrative’ merely a “useful methodological trick”?

A second event I would like to relate concerns a talk I delivered on this topic at a British university last year. As it happened, the university is located within a few miles of ‘Ann’s’ home. When I realized that I would be in the vicinity, I informed her of my engagement, and asked her if she would like to meet. Yes, she assured me, not only did she want to see me, but she also wanted to attend the talk. (At eighty-eight, she was not bothered about taking two public transportation buses to the university on her own). Having made these arrangements, I then realized that the paper I had intended to deliver was ‘Memories of Mother’ in which Ann herself featured quite prominently. How would she feel being present while I discussed the circumstances of her early life in public? Should I instead deliver a different paper? I decided to consult Ann herself on this. Her reaction was immediate and clear: if others might benefit from hearing about these experiences and her (and my) interpretations of them, then she was comfortable with me using it. Thus, I delivered the paper as originally planned, in the presence of Ann who sat anonymously amongst the audience. On the bus leaving the university, Ann began to tell me many more early memories relating to her relationship with her mother. The exchange meant a lot to

me for two reasons: first, and most important, was the mere fact of its existence. Here we were, fifteen years later, still deeply engaged in conversation with one another. However, our bus-ride conversation also reassured me that Ann did not reject the interpretive framework which I had offered to make sense of the early experiences she had recounted to me years ago. On the contrary, it seemed that it had fit not only what she had originally told me, but indeed had prompted her to elaborate further.

In Catherine Kohler Riessman's commentary, she highlights the importance of the situatedness of knowledge. What I see in the pieces which have been written as a response to my earlier article is very much influenced by experiences such as the ones described above, interactions which feed into the ongoing evaluations I make about my own interpretive process.

Carlos Kolbi entitles his commentary "Blame it on psychology!?" and it is evident throughout his piece that he feels the argument I have constructed is "largely unjustified psychology-blaming." Kolbi identifies three interrelated components to his response. First, he asks what I mean by the term 'master-narrative.' This is an important question, and one to which I do not have a definitive answer. Indeed, I see my contribution as one of opening up this question, and in editing the special issue on this topic, my intention was to collect work which might assist us in thinking through such a definition.

Second, Kolbi feels that I "seem to regard the whole of (developmental) psychology as a monolithic, clear-cut, uncontradictory and mostly mythological and not properly scientific block." It is worth noting, perhaps, that the criticisms which I outline –

which I am not unique in articulating – apply to “much developmental work.” That I do not dedicate the remainder of my article to depicting what I see as the exception rather than the rule is not, I believe, problematic. I do, however, find it somewhat ironic that Kolbi cites the work of Klaus Riegel to illustrate “the groundbreaking work on resilience” which has been done in developmental psychology. I would suggest that Riegel has more commonly been thought of as a pioneer of what is now known as Critical Psychology, the very source of some of the most scathing (and most well-informed) criticisms of developmental psychology.

Third, Kolbi asks if the framework of counter-narratives assists us in producing better interpretations of respondents’ accounts, or whether it is instead a ‘useful methodological trick.’ For me, this question begs another, which lies at the heart of the two accounts with which I began this response: how do we assess the adequacy of the interpretations that we as researchers give to the words of others? What makes one interpretation better than another? Better for whom? For me the task has always been one of trying to create an explanatory framework which can accommodate the complexity and variety of experience of others as they relate it to me. My exchange with Ann in particular tells me that if my framework is not perfect – for I doubt any framework can be – neither is it altogether flawed. For Ann, it appears to be a construction in which she can recognize herself and upon which she can plot other experiences not-yet told to me.

After questioning the usefulness (and, by implication, presumably the applicability) of counter-narratives, Kolbi writes “Do we not always tell stories which, on the one hand, take up acknowledged common cultural ends ... and on the other hand

challenge these ends?” I am intrigued by this comment, for, by use of the term ‘always’ Kolbi seems to be making a stronger case for the existence of counter-narratives than the one I myself put forward. Does he mean to say that speakers so commonly use this device when telling stories that it is hardly (or indeed not at all) worth mentioning? Perhaps. I think this point is not unrelated to the one made by Tore et al (2001) and cited in my original article, namely that “critical stories are always (and at once) in tension with dominant stories, neither fully oppositional nor untouched” (p. 151)

Kolbi comments that the four participants “do, of course, speak of their mother’s influence on their political and educational biographies, precisely because this was required by the interview context.” Murakami makes a similar point when he states that interviews were settings in which respondents were asked to describe their childhoods “in terms of their mother’s role modelling.” It is important for me to emphasize here that I did not in fact ask respondents about their parents; rather the opening question of the interview was a much more general one, asking for a biographical account of their lives. Almost without exception, respondents chose to respond to this question in terms of their parents. So deeply ingrained is the narrative regarding the centrality of the role of parents in socialization that respondents call upon it even when it is not explicitly asked for by the situation. When Kolbi says that such an account (i.e. one which examines the mother’s influence on political and educational biographies) was ‘required by the interview context’ as opposed to, for instance, required by the question posed by the interviewer, perhaps he is acknowledging this tendency to include certain ‘expected’ ingredients when offering biographical accounts of ourselves.

In Kólbi's summary of his argument, he offers one of his most compelling points: we need, he argues, explicit criteria to help decide whether and for whom a presumed dominant cultural narrative is indeed dominant. For this,

the empirical realm would have to be given extraordinary status... the first person perspective should play a major role. Which narratives do the subjects themselves regard (explicitly or implicitly) as the dominant cultural narratives? And equally important: how can we validly detect them?

This is a very important issue, and one which I hope will attract more researchers in the future. Rebecca Jones's contribution to the special issue on counter-narratives is, I believe, a very good starting point for such a discussion.

Kyoko Murakami approaches the article from the perspective of a discourse analyst, emphasizing the importance of "not only what is said, but also ... how it was said and under what circumstances." Such a perspective highlights a pivotal dimension of the work, a corollary of Riessman's 'situatedness of knowledge.' Murakami emphasizes that narratives are "socially organised for the occasion and for the people at present as well as non-present others that are implicated in the narratives." This is, I believe, not only true in terms of what respondents say, but also in terms of what interviewers hear, the "ghostly audiences" which Riessman addresses. While it is true that interview data must be viewed contextually, taking account when, where and between whom the exchange took place, this can equally be said of talk which is documented in any setting. Yes, "narratives are occasioned in the present interview activity" but their relevance is not necessarily limited to this setting. The seamless continuation of my conversation with Ann about her early childhood fifteen years after our first

discussion of this topic is, amongst other things, testament to the continuity of the narrative self.

When reading Murakami's commentary, I am most struck by the dramatic difference of our interpretations. His piece is peppered with phrases such as "abuse and neglect" "lack of love and caring" "[respondents] blaming mothers for what went wrong in the past". I understand the stories which I was told, and which I presented in my earlier paper, in a very different way. For instance, in the case of Helen (who, of the four, suffered physically the most), I specifically state "Helen never passes judgment on her mother... the way in which she makes sense of her early experiences, and her mother's treatment of her in particular, is in terms of the socio-economic conditions in which she lived." The language of abuse was never, to my recollection, used by any of my respondents at any time to describe their own experiences. Murakami writes "Despite its sensitive nature, they [the respondents] reveal some critical aspects of the mothers' behaviour and child-rearing practices that were considered abusive, tyrannical toward them at the time." By whom? Certainly not by the narrators, and probably not even by the communities in which they lived as children. Ann does describe her mother as tyrannical, but never abusive. Indeed, the word Ann most commonly uses to describe her mother is "frustrated" a term which I think is highly indicative of the interpretive framework she employs to make sense of the harsh realities of her childhood. I have not encountered any evidence which suggests that any of the four respondents regarded their mothers as abusive either when they were children or subsequently. Murakami suggests that "Their moral integrity can be questioned for denigrating their own mother in public." But they do not denigrate their mothers; indeed, they express real understanding towards them.

The compassion they show is, I believe, far more than a “rhetorical achievement.” Murakami’s insistence on interpreting the data exclusively from the perspective of the present time strips the stories of the contextual framework from which they derive their meaning, at least from the point of view of the narrators.

Murakami describes mother-blaming as “a discourse practice contrary to the cultural and socially desired view of mothering and being mothered.” What I and others have argued elsewhere is that there are different and seemingly contradictory discourses of motherhood which lie at the heart of many of our master narratives. What Suzanna Walters (1992) describes as the “Mommy did it to me” genre of film and books – the grotesque accounts of motherhood-gone-awry as depicted by the daughters of famous women – is also evident, in perhaps less dramatic forms, throughout our society, not least in many of the narratives underlying theories of developmental psychology.

Murakami states that respondents’ views of their mothers differ over time, and that one can see in the narratives “multiple versions of mothering.” While I do think that there are multiple versions of mothering in the narratives (both between and within respondents), it is important to note that I only collected data at one point in time. I do not know what speakers made of their early experiences with their mothers at the time that they were living through them. I do however think it is possible, indeed probable, that their interpretations have changed over the course of their lives. This is a point I will return to when discussing the significance of aging for the narrators.

Leigh Coombes and Mandy Morgan describe themselves as:

multiply positioned in relation to the master narrative of the constitution of motherhood and the determining effect of mothering. We are both mothers of (newly) adult children, we are both adult children of mothers, we are both, differently familiar with feminist and poststructuralist theory challenging the master narrative with counter narratives of experiences and the complexities of social relations involved in mothering... Both of us, then, are already positioned personally and intellectually in relation to master narratives of motherhood and mothering.

Of the four commentaries which I received, all mentioned the importance of positioning theory to the set(s) of issues which my paper explored, but only Coombes and Morgan actually position themselves in relation to these issues. Their 'personal and intellectual positioning' is apparent throughout their commentary, and it enhances my ability to engage with their overall argument.

The authors allude to 'the politics of enunciation' [editor please note here that Jardine 1985 is not listed in their bibliography]: which attends to "who is speaking, to whom we are speaking, and to how our speaking may work towards dialogue among activists." The four narrators whose stories I represent in my article do not merely find some way, any way, of mediating the difficult circumstances of their early lives. Rather, their political understanding, which forms the cornerstone of their identity, also provides for them a way of making sense of these experiences. Political commitment and activism lie at the heart of stories I was told, and I hear these stories, and communicate these stories, not only as a researcher but as someone who has much sympathy and admiration for the lives I am documenting. Coombes and Morgan ask "how can we can continue to make heard the voices of activism in our

work?” My own political sympathies, no doubt, strongly influenced not only what I was told but how I heard it, and in turn what I fed back into the interview itself.

Riessman, in her commentary, asks how my questions and comments helped to shape the emerging narratives; clearly the positioning of the interviewer is an important component to consider not only in the analysis of the data, but indeed, in what narrators are willing to communicate in the first place.

As the narrators recount their early years, they do not justify or explain away what happened to them; they simply understand it in the wider context in which it occurred, and, as a consequence, all dedicate themselves to addressing such circumstances in the lives of others. Coombes and Morgan rightly suggest that without the narrators’ commitment to activism “it might be possible to read resistant storylines as ‘excusing mothers.’” This dimension of their identity is more than an interesting angle into interpreting the data; without it, how can one understand the paths they took in their lives? Indeed, their retrospective narration of their relationship with their mothers might well seem like a “rhetorical achievement” if it is stripped of the framework which lends it genuine meaning.

Coombes and Morgan comment on “the importance of hearing and legitimating the stories of older activists.” Riessman, too, addresses “the significance of aging for the narrators” and questions

how subsequent events have transformed the meaning and import of difficult childhood experiences... 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.

The age of the narrators is not incidental to the stories they tell. As Riessman suggests, the perspectives which they offer are a result of the seventy odd years which separate them from the experiences they relate. Interestingly, too, age plays an important factor in the relationship which I developed with each of them. I was clearly a daughter, though not yet a mother. Although I was considerably younger than any of their children, it was evident in many of the interviews that they saw their participation in my project as a contribution to future generations, of which I was in some sense a representative. Ann even told me one day as she held the complete set of transcripts in her hand “These are the answers to the questions my daughter never asked me.” I heard this, of course, not only as a researcher, but also as a daughter, and wondered if I would ever sit with my own mother recording in such intimate detail her life’s story. Several respondents wanted me to become friends with their children, and would devise all sorts of ways for us to ‘spend time alone together’; not surprisingly, this was greeted with a range of reactions from their adult children.

Riessman wanted me to “push [my] positioning argument further to include [my] changing ‘self’ in relation to the material.” 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.

Riessman observes that “all four narrators position themselves in class (but not race) contexts in their stories about growing up poor.” Only two of the four narrators, Joe and Helen, come from lower working class families. Ann and Peter, in contrast, come from upper middle class families. Nonetheless, it is correct to say that for all of the four, class is an important component of their identity. Riessman comments that “narrators in the U.S. would likely position themselves differently.” To some extent, this is true: class and race are differently weighted as salient social categories in Britain and the United States. However, it is also important to remember that Ann, Helen, Joe and Peter were all life-time Marxists - a category which itself might be more widespread in Britain - and all had belonged to the Communist Party for varying lengths of time in their lives. However, I believe that Marxists from the United States would also have described themselves in terms of their class membership. Similarly, race might be a more integral factor in the narrations of many people in Britain than it was in the four cases which I presented. This brings us back to the multiple positionings which we all occupy: the categories which we spontaneously draw upon in our self-identities are influenced not only by our nationality, but by the complex interplay between all of our various group memberships, including not only those

which we are born into, but also, and perhaps more powerfully, those which we choose.

Coombes and Morgan ponder “what kind of community [are] we speaking into when we ‘comment’ on someone else’s work.” This is precisely the question I have been grappling with in the process of writing this piece. My own situation is made somewhat more complicated, perhaps, by the fact that the ‘other work’ was written in response to an article of mine. The audience for whom I now write is not only the authors of the rich commentaries I received, but also, of course, the readership of *Narrative Inquiry*. Do these exchanges help us, as scholars and as engaged human beings, to think more carefully about the ‘data’ which we help to generate and which ultimately we represent to the outside world? How can we develop an increased sensitivity towards the influence of our own positioning, while avoiding a stance which is overly confessional and self-absorbed? If the framework of counter-narratives is to be anything more than a ‘useful methodological trick’ then we must continue to ask of ourselves and of others the kinds of questions posed in these ongoing exchanges. We will not emerge with absolute answers, and the questions themselves will change over time; however, it is in the dynamic process of the inquiry itself that we can locate the meanings of the narratives, and the counter-narratives, which we document.

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