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Telling Tales: A Review of C. K. Riessman’s Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences

Abstract

In the second iteration of her book on Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences, Riessman presents a clear, concise description of four methods of narrative analysis: thematic, structural, dialogic/performance, and visual. Each section is replete with narrative examples of interviews, conversations, archival and written documents, photographs, and drawings. Riessman uses selections from published narratives to exemplify the process of narrative analysis. This book is applicable and appropriate for a variety of professions in the social sciences.

Keywords

Narrative Analysis, Visual Analysis, Qualitative Research

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**Telling Tales:
A Review of C. K. Riessman's
*Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences***

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In the second iteration of her book on Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences, Riessman presents a clear, concise description of four methods of narrative analysis: thematic, structural, dialogic/performance, and visual. Each section is replete with narrative examples of interviews, conversations, archival and written documents, photographs, and drawings. Riessman uses selections from published narratives to exemplify the process of narrative analysis. This book is applicable and appropriate for a variety of professions in the social sciences. Key Words: Narrative Analysis, Visual Analysis, and Qualitative Research

As a novice to qualitative research, I selected the text *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences* by Catherine Kohler Riessman (2008) as it is akin to my profession as a speech-language pathologist. In my discipline, I analyze language patterns of adult and child conversation and narratives to determine if the speaker has a language disorder. I investigate the macrostructure of a narrative by analyzing the intent of the message that the speaker wants to communicate and analyze the microstructure to determine if binding elements of the narrative such as use of temporality and pronominal reference are used so that the story is comprehensible to the listener. The narratives of those with language disorders contain errors in semantic content, syntax, and communicative intent so reading Riessman's narratives with intact linguistic structure was a shift from my typical mode of analysis.

From a therapeutic perspective, I understand the value of having an intact system to be able to retell a story. From a personal perspective, reading others' stories allows you to enter their life and understand their life experiences and viewpoints. It is through the written and spoken word that you can transcend your own experience to understand someone else's. Through stories, you learn how others differ from you but also how they are the same- sharing similar feelings, beliefs, and attitudes. People want to listen to others' stories- are they similar to their own story, are they different, are they different but the same? Are we all qualitative researchers when we wonder what people mean by what they say or what the hidden meaning is of an explicit statement?

Put simply, we like stories. For those who remember a 1960s television show *Naked City*, the closing line to every episode was "There are eight million stories in the Naked City. This...has been one of them" (Leonard, 1958). Everyone has a story. Today we are engrossed and mesmerized by the stories of people on reality shows – those who have lives so different than our own. A formalized method of analyzing these stories is through narrative analysis.

Riessman's book (2008) does just that by sharing other's stories and analyzing them at many levels. Her book appeals to a broad audience because of the varied examples in counseling, education, sociology, psychology, art, and political science. Without reading any other text on narrative analysis, this book would serve as a useful guide as it is written so that a novice to the field could use this as a primary source of narrative analysis. It is written clearly and embedded with engaging examples throughout which would hold the attention of most readers. This is the author's second book after the first one was published 15 years ago. New to this book is the chapter on analyzing visual material. The first two chapters include introductory material, the next four chapters are devoted to different forms of narrative analysis, and the last chapter includes a discussion of the validity of narrative analysis. The author uses a metacognitive approach as she analyzes each narrative. As she proceeds through each, her thought processes are apparent as she analyzes the text as a whole or line by line. An added feature to the book is a summary table in each of the four chapters devoted to narrative analysis.

Chapter one is an introductory chapter which describes what a narrative is. A broad description as to the types of narratives is as follows:

Narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting...stained glass windows, cinema, comics, news item, and conversation. Moreover, under this almost infinite diversity of forms, narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind (sic) and there nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative...it is simply there, like life itself. (Barthes, 1982, as cited in Riessman, 2008, p. 4)

Next, Riessman explains what a narrative does. She discusses some of the purposes of a narrative which can be to mobilize others for sociopolitical reasons and for therapeutic purposes. Narratives serve a communicative function by informing, entertaining, persuading, predicting, and controlling. In reading this text, I found the narratives that serve to move a political or social issue forward to be the most powerful. Riessman states that "narratives are strategic, functional, and purposeful" (p. 8). The speaker may or may not intend a certain meaning, but the analysis should draw this out. The last section of the first chapter provides an overview of narrative analysis. Riessman likens the analysis of narratives to asking and answering who, what, when, and how questions about oral, written, and visual material. These questions set the stage for her four chapters on analysis.

Chapter two provides the process for constructing a narrative beginning with the interview and then the transcription of that interview. Although archival material may be used for narrative analysis, in most cases, narratives are developed from the researcher's interview of the participant. Mattingly (1998, as cited in Riessman, 2008) further describes the narrative interview as:

They do not merely describe what someone does in the world but what the world does to that someone. They allow us to infer something about what it feels like to be in that story world. Narratives also recount those events that happen unwilled, unpredicted, and often unwished for by the actors, even if those very actors set the

events in motion in the first place. Narratives do not merely refer to past experience but create experiences for their audiences. (p. 22)

A narrative can develop between a conversation between the participant and researcher or the participant can produce a longer unit or monologue. To elicit as much dialogue as possible, open-ended questions are used by the researcher; however, the researcher needs to give up control by asking participants to tell their stories. In constructing the narrative, the researcher collaborates with the participant to actively construct meaning. The form of transcription is determined by the researcher and the analysis of the narrative is what determines the story. In the first of many examples, Riessman contrasts two ways to transcribe a narrative through the story of a Hindu woman's reproductive history. Riessman shows that the interpretation of the narrative may change based on the type of transcription used. The chapter concludes with a short segment devoted to narratives that have been translated from one language to another.

The next four chapters form the basis for the book or the "how to of narrative analysis." Chapter three is a discussion of thematic narrative analysis which is the narrative analysis most commonly used by researchers. In thematic narrative analysis, answering the question "what" is most important. The unit of analysis is the complete narrative and not segmented in any way. Riessman (2008) presents fascinating and diverse stories and explores the processes that lead researchers to develop their themes. This analysis can be applied to interviews as well as texts. Riessman draws from other researchers to exemplify thematic narrative analysis. She provides four examples of narratives: a narrative of illness, a narrative of resistance to authority, archival documents of teachers in nineteenth century England, and a combination of an interview of a person who drinks alcohol and written materials in segments from the *Alcoholics Anonymous* book. Riessman suggests that narrative is most often used by novice researchers since it is the most intuitive. After reading the chapter, I tend to agree with her.

In chapter four, Riessman (2008) presents the structural form of narrative analysis. The basis of analysis is "how" the story is told with a focus on syntax and prosody. She likens this type of analysis as one would analyze a musical score as "to hear how a composition is structured and what each part contributes, musicians break the score down, see what each instrument or musical phrase adds, that is, its function in overall composition" (p. 81). As in music, this analysis requires a slowing down in the analysis so that each line or phrase is subject to review. The required linguistic background is provided for the reader and Riessman draws upon a discussion of Chomsky, Brice, and Cazden. Seven examples are provided to show how a narrative is analyzed by units. Riessman discusses Labov's work in story grammar where the elements of the story are important. She reviews these story elements from the orientation of the story, the complicating event of the story, and the coda or end. She reviews also Gee's analysis which analyzes the narrative on a more microscopic level. The reader can follow along with her thinking about each narrative in the seven narrative examples. I was most familiar with this level of analysis in my professional life as a speech-language pathologist.

Chapter five is a description of dialogic/performance analysis. This analysis presumes that when we speak we are performers putting on a show so the narrative can be analyzed as scenes. The questions that this analysis answers are to whom is the

conversation directed toward and when and why did it occur. The narrative is positioned within the greater context of the story so the story is considered as well as the context, speaker, and listener. The concept of time, past and present, in each utterance is important in the analysis. In dialogic/performance analysis, both thematic and structural approaches are used. The language of the narrative is scrutinized and the face value of the language is not taken for granted. Meaning is constructed from speaker to listener. In her description of a man's last day of work, Riessman (2008) analyzes his direct speech, his use language to interact with the interviewer, and shifting of tenses. A second example is a sharing of conversation by preadolescent girls in a classroom.

New to this text is the information presented in chapter six on the emerging field of visual analysis. Visual genres can include photography, painting, and video. Bell (2002, as cited in Riessman, 2008, p. 182) states "visual images are so thoroughly embedded in our worlds that not to take them seriously and not to work at making them part of analysis, is to reduce our understandings of subject worlds." Images evoke emotion which may not be captured on the written page. Stories can be told by the colors and images used by the creator. The researcher's task is to analyze how and why the image was made and what the image says. Riessman (2008) exemplifies this information through the use of photographs and archival documents of Japanese Americans who were interned during WWII. Photographs may tell a different story than what is provided in archival writings. Creff (2004, as cited in Riessman, 2008, pp. 148-151) contrasts the differences between negative information provided by the government documents with unrevealed photos of children behind barbed wire and guard watchtowers. Bell (2002, as cited in Riessman, 2008, pp. 153-157) presents an autobiography in photographs of her narrative with breast cancer.

Validity of narrative analysis is discussed in the concluding chapter. Riessman (2008) includes two levels of concern: (a) was a true story told by the participant and (b) was the researcher's analysis accurate. The teller's truth and the truth value given by the researcher must be considered. One person's version of the truth may be different than another's. People viewing an event may narrate a different story depending on their perspective. Riessman suggests that to determine the truth value, the narrative should be situated within the larger social or political structure so that the researcher can search for consistencies. The narrative can be compared with archival material and or other individual's narratives. The researcher should consider if the narrative has coherence. Are there similar threads throughout the narrative and is there consistency of events across time? From this perspective the analysis should lead the reader to believe the narrative.

In summary, this engaging book provides a framework for analyzing narratives. The use of examples throughout serves as a teaching tool as well as captures the reader's attention. As a novice researcher, I found the book to be clear and well organized; I think that a more experienced qualitative researcher would also find it valuable as well. As I read Riessman's book (2008), I could envision how I could apply this to my professional field. A nice addition to the book would be to extend one or two of the narrative examples and embed them in sample research articles. This would provide the reader with a broader perspective of what follows after the analysis.

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Author Note

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