

Abstract, *Narrative Inquiry* Special Issue

“Culture and Counter-narratives”

This issue of *Narrative Inquiry* explores the relationship between cultural and personal narratives. How do people frame their stories in relation to the dominant cultural storylines which form the context of their lives, especially when those storylines don't seem to fit? Here, we explore a variety of 'counter-narratives' – personal stories which people tell and live which offer resistance, either implicitly or explicitly, to dominant cultural narratives. Individuals become to some extent their autobiographies and the social stories being told around them, but they become their cultural narratives, too (Reissman 1994: 68-9). But sometimes the cultural narratives which are available to them lie in tension with their own experiences, or with the way in which they make sense of their experiences. The challenge then becomes one of finding meaning outside of the emplotments which are ordinarily available.

Cultural narratives are never just individual (Squire 2000), and neither are counter-narratives. Often people who construct personal stories which go against the social grain, do so with a consciousness of being a member of an outside group. While they might position their stories as being on the margin, they do not consider them to be unique. In this sense, counter-narratives, like the dominant cultural narratives they challenge, might be experienced and articulated individually, but nonetheless they have common meanings. Even the most individualised and emotionally charged narratives belong to specific communities with specific scripts (Seale 2001); this too is true of the counter-narratives related in these pages..

All counter-narratives are socially and historically located. The pieces in this special issue explore a range of counter-narratives, representing alternative plotlines from those underlying dominant cultural positions: women whose IVF treatment does not work can only be understood in the context of the medicalization of women's bodies in the 20th and 21st century; what it means for a Jew to suddenly become aware of his cultural inheritance as he walks down the streets of Berlin only makes sense in an age when the Holocaust is our living memory; we can only contemplate what it means for old women to talk about sex in a time when sex is considered something to talk about; the symbiotic relationship between identity and photography is only possible in a context where cameras permeate public and private life; day-time talk shows and the passions which they arouse in participants and viewers alike are the advent our docu-culture, but how we regard this display of emotion reveals a complexity about ourselves and the culture we live in which itself is rarely dissected; and finally, the age-old tale of the critical role of mothers in the healthy upbringing of their children looks rather different when told from the perspective of 'children' who are in their eighth or ninth decade of life.

These are counter-narratives of gentle defiance and resistance.