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Listening to stories as activism: The promise of narrative for troubled times

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Proposal type: paper

Text

This presentation seeks to elicit the activism that is enfolded within *listening* as an essential element in narrative research. Like most narrative researchers, I have spent hours listening to research participants. I taught graduate students the craft of narrative research by inviting them to listen to the stories of their peers before interviewing others. I also facilitate courses in which prospective teachers write personally meaningful life stories which then serve as material for dialogue (Li, Conle & Elbaz-Luwisch 2009). Over time, I have gradually come to view the practice of listening as a form of activism.

The presentation is based on my experience of listening to people's personal stories in two settings oriented (perhaps not incidentally) around conflict: *a*) a course for prospective teachers taught for more than 10 years at an Israeli university; and *b*) a large international seminar based on a non-conventional approach to conflict resolution ("worldwork" and "deep democracy", Mindell 1995, 2017).

Theory provides some of the resources necessary for conceptualizing listening as a practice of activism. Considering listening from a political perspective, Bickford (1996, p. 145) argues that "the receptive quality of listening is indeed unique by virtue of always being a movement towards another's activity, an active involvement in a joint project. Speaking and listening are active responses to each other, and they connect us in a way that no other sensory interaction does." A philosopher of language, Corradi Fiumara (1990, 23) points to the subversive potential of attention to listening, reminding us that our culture pays little attention to the act of listening, for "we are "imbued with a logocratic culture in which the bearers of the word are predominately involved in speaking, molding, informing." And O'Donnell, Lloyd & Dreher (1990, 423) hold that "attention to the politics of listening provides a means of moving

beyond questions of speaking and voice to canvass issues of dialogue and meaningful interaction across difference and inequality. “

The presentation will examine episodes from my interactions with students from diverse backgrounds at an Israeli university who engaged in writing and sharing stories of persons who had influenced their lives (typically a parent, relative, friend or teacher), and with participants from many countries, diverse in age and life experience, who volunteered to be interviewed for a study of participants’ sense of inclusion and belonging at a large international seminar on world issues and conflict. I will examine episodes of listening in which I or others were called to be receptive and involved with the teller of a meaningful personal account; I will explore instances in which dialogue developed - or did not - across boundaries of difference and equality. In both settings, there are episodes in which tellers and listeners are enabled to go beyond the logocratic culture and accepted patterns of interaction to confront the edges of our ‘authoritative discourse’ (Bakhtin, 1981) and bring about dialogue. The presentation will consider the potential for change that emerges from these examples of activism in narrative research and pedagogy.

Question: *In neoliberal times, is narrative research a source of activism in its own right?*

Keywords: *autobiographical research, dialogue, diversity, listening, conflict*

References:

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