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Auto

Creating Criteria: An Ethnographic Short Story

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In this work, the author introspects about the steps she takes when evaluating narrative ethnographies. Her story shows how she thinks about and reacts to alternative genres of writing. Optimally, she tries to feel and think with the story, moving back and forth as the two processes merge. She tries to immerse herself in the flow of the story, until she is unable to stop thinking about or feeling the experience. Along the way, she asks questions about what she has learned from the story, and she evaluates the writer's literary strategies, ethical concerns, and the degree to which the goals of the work have been achieved. When she reviews, she attempts to offer helpful feedback yet protect the writer's sense of self.

I open the article, note the title—I like the nuance—and flip through quickly. “Great,” I say to myself, “a personal narrative with scenes and dialogue. My cup of tea.” Moving to my comfortable desk chair, I lean back and dangle my feet over the arm of the chair in front of my computer. I take a long sip of lukewarm, bitter coffee. Attracted by the movement, Traf, my 6-year-old Rat Terrier, stands on her back feet and gently paws my arm. She wants kisses; I oblige. I rarely refuse, no matter what I’m doing. It’s my nod to the importance of living in the present. I learned this from my dogs. I also enjoy the kisses. Satisfied, Traf yawns, circles, and returns to her place under my desk.

Smiling now, I begin to read, looking forward to being engaged. I let the words and images flow through me, eagerly anticipating what path the narrative will carve. Optimally, I want to feel and think with the story (Frank, 1995). At the risk of oversimplifying, I want the two sides of my brain to be engaged simultaneously or for the text to call forth one side and then the other, back and forth, until thinking and feeling merge. I want to be immersed in the flow of the story, lost in time and space, not wanting to come to the end (as in a good novel), and afterwards unable to stop thinking about or feeling what I’ve experienced. Usually I go downstairs for something to eat after I’ve read the piece. I like to see what the story does to me as I distract myself briefly. Do I continue thinking about and/or experiencing the story or does my consciousness easily flow to something else—the mail, the newspaper, a phone call I need to make?

This first reading and reflection sets the stage for my evaluation. If I read the whole paper without stopping to evaluate cognitively from a distance—well that tells me something. The work has engaged me. If I read the whole story, stopping frequently to think about details of my experience, my memories or feelings called forth by the piece, then the work has evoked me.

What if the piece first calls forth a distanced cognitive reading instead, where I think *about* not *with* the story? For narratives claiming to be evocative, that may not be a good sign. As a reader of stories, I privilege evocation over cognitive contemplation. Now that doesn't mean that a good narrative has one and not the other. But I often feel that if an author can write evocative prose, we will be able to work with what it all means. If an author has trouble writing evocative narrative, well then maybe it would be best to write in a more traditional genre.

In a cognitive reading, I hope that the work has provoked me to argue back and forth with the author's interpretation. But unfortunately what usually happens in this scenario is that I question the logic of the story, what's left out, underdeveloped, unconvincing, disorganized. What's too chaotic, or not chaotic enough. The piece literally interrupts itself. When that happens, the reading has kicked in my critical faculties. That's a necessary step, just not what I want to dominate my initial reading of narrative prose. Because it may mean the story has no narrative soul. It has not engaged, evoked, or provoked me sufficiently. I remain disconnected, outside the experience.

Okay, what happens next?

If the story does not capture me the first time through, the second reading then is for the purpose of providing details for the author of specifically how and why the story has not connected me to it. Simply going through that exercise—jotting notes in the margin—usually reassures me that I have made a defensible decision to recommend against accepting the manuscript. Often though, believing in writing as inquiry (Richardson, 1994), I hold back final judgment until I write the review. Decision making often is a combination of general and immediate response to the manuscript and the awareness that comes from the comments I find myself writing afterward. When the two match, reaching final determination is relatively easy; if they don't match, often I read through the manuscript again. I act as the editor, and eventually make a determination among my own internally conflicting reviews. Only rarely is a manuscript all good or all bad.

Let's say I decide the manuscript is not acceptable for publication. Now one might argue, usually the author, that it may be my own lacking that leads me to be insufficiently engaged by the story. As a person trying to be a good reviewer, I will of course be aware of that possibility and prior to or during the second reading I will ask myself questions to inoculate against that. Is this a topic I know little about? I have built in biases about? I have not experienced? I have experienced differently? Okay, if so, why? I ask if my experience of the paper is a result of history or positioning different from the author's. Am I

missing an opportunity to learn something about racial, class, ethnic, age, gender, political, or national difference? Am I missing an opportunity to experience vicariously relationships, feelings, thoughts, or acts connected to these categories? Is the author providing a view that complexifies how I look at the phenomenon? Or is this story, as I first suspected, simply not convincing enough?

Now let's say the story has engaged me sufficiently the first time through. What do I do next? If the story has evoked me narratively, then I ask a series of questions to explore the contribution more fully and more cognitively.

I ask what I have learned from the story: About social life, social process, the experience of others, the author's experience, my own life. Is there anything "new" here or a new way to view or twist the familiar?

I ask about the plot of the story: Does the story have a balance of flow and authenticity of experience? Has the author been able to represent the chaos, yet do it in a way that provides a readable and understandable experience? Is there sufficient, yet not overblown dramatic tension? Do I long to turn the page to find out what happens? Are there unexplainable holes in the plot? Or too much detail about insignificant points? Is the story coherent and logically consistent? Is there a sense of verisimilitude? Of course, I don't think of that word—instead I ask, does the story ring true, is it lifelike?

I ask about the writing of the story: Does the author show instead of tell? Does she develop characters and scenes fully? Are there too many characters and scenes to follow? Does she edit so that all words are necessary, well placed, and the best choices? Does she paint vivid pictures? Sounds? Smells? Feelings? Does the conversation feel real to life? Did the author know the end of the story when she started or does writing become a form of inquiry? Is the story sufficiently complexified and nuanced? Is there a literary sensitivity to the writing? Does the ending surprise or move me, making me think about the story in a new manner or see connections or the whole in a way I had not seen before? Are there so many spelling and punctuation mistakes that they interrupt my reading?

I ask about the goals, claims, and achievements of the author: What is the author trying to achieve? Has he achieved his goals? Are these worthwhile goals? Are these goals that can be met by this writing form? Might there be a better way of achieving his purposes? Can the author legitimately make these claims for his story? Did the author learn anything new about himself? About other characters in the story? About the processes and relationships described? What might readers take from the story? Will this story help others cope with or better understand their worlds? Is it useful, and if so, for whom? Does it encourage compassion for the characters? If not for the characters, does it encourage compassion for those acted upon by them? Does the story promote dialogue (Ellis & Bochner, 2000)? Does it have the potential to stimulate social action?

I ask about ethical considerations: Did the author get permission to portray others? Give them a chance to contribute their perspectives to the story? If not, are there sufficient and justifiable reasons why not? Are other characters sufficiently complexified? Is the author? Is this exclusively the author's interpretation of what is going on? Does the contribution of the story outweigh conceivable ethical dilemmas and pain for characters and readers?

I ask if I am the proper reviewer: Is the author writing in a style and form that I am familiar with and feel adequate evaluating? If not, say it is poetry or an extremely minimalist narrative form, then perhaps I should tell the journal editor to send it elsewhere rather than say it doesn't move or educate me.

I ask about the requirements of the journal and editor: Is this journal receptive to the kind of analysis the author develops in this story? Will the editor accept that analysis can occur within the story? Or will the editor require separate traditional analysis? In either case, has the analysis been connected closely to the story and to the "proper" areas of literature? Is this story worth fighting for even if it does not fit within the parameters of the editor's boundaries of social science? Do I have to try to educate or convince the editor?

At this point in the review, you'd think I was almost done but sometimes the hardest part starts here: I ask if I have done my job as a reviewer. Have I been helpful to the author? I go back through the review and try to rewrite it in a more encouraging manner. I ask if there is anything here that will harm the author. I ask if I have invalidated the author's personal story. I ask if there is a better way to say something critical, yet protect the author's sense of self. I remind myself that not only is the writer's scholarship on the line, but perhaps their personal identity as well. I remind myself to mention the positive qualities of the manuscript. I find these reminders especially important if I sense or know that the author is a young writer perhaps trying this form for the first time. Then I caution myself that seasoned writers also can get their feelings hurt. I hope that the author, no matter their career position, will find my review both critical and supportive.

Of course, reviewing does not flow as smoothly as I have described it. Reviewing is a chaotic process. I have harnessed the chaos into an orderly story line here. My mood undoubtedly influences my review; so does whether I know the author or something about that person. My evaluation—at the very least its length—may even be affected by who asks me to do it, the nearness of the deadline, and how many manuscripts are lying on my desk vying for attention. Of course, I try to control the impact of these extraneous "variables" as much as possible, and I encourage myself to "be fair." But, to be honest, I find some topics inherently more interesting and engaging than others. And sometimes I take short cuts. I don't ask all the questions. Often my dogs interrupt more than once, dropping balls in my lap, enticing me to play, and sometimes I do. Sometimes I go to the refrigerator several times, and I get distracted by household details even when the paper is engaging. Sometimes I

get tired in the middle and take a short nap on the carpeted floor in my office. And, later, I sometimes find myself complaining to my partner about the workload and about whether the whole endeavor is rewarding or meaningful.

I did not tell you these things up front because I did not want this process to sound too subjective, unsystematic, or continually interrupted.

Undoubtedly, you will evaluate this story as I evaluate the stories of others—or not.

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