

Social networks of older people: Negotiating the moral landscape of kinship.

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Abstract

Social relationships have been shown to have important influences on the physical and mental health of elders. Although there is acknowledgement in the social support and social network literature that not all relationships are supportive or healthy, there is much less attention to the complexity of social ties in the everyday lives of older people. In this presentation we describe a discursive narrative analysis of interviews that were conducted with fifty people aged 55-70 years in New Zealand to investigate their social connections. Narrative structures allow people to describe their social networks within the context of everyday social interactions and across the events of a life story. A discursive approach shows how such relationships are constructed through language. People's talk about their relationships not only describes those connections but reproduces the social and moral values that are part of these relationships. Such talk demonstrates accepted understandings of how to be a certain sort of person within the context of socially circumscribed relationships. From the findings we provide examples of how people explain complex and contradictory 'love/hate' relationships to provide insight into the social and moral context of close relationships. This approach demonstrates the importance of wider social context and draws attention to the limitations of suggestions for individually based social support interventions.

Key Words: Social networks, social relationships, family, health, ageing, narrative

Social relationships have powerful effects on physical and mental health¹. Social support and social networks have been shown to exert significant positive effects on the physical and mental health of older persons^{2,3,4}. However, there are also problematic and difficult aspects of social bonds which have negative effects on health and wellbeing^{1,5}. Rook points to how the supportive and detrimental effects of social bonds are intertwined. The positive and negative aspects of social relationships are inextricably linked because they are practised and understood within a particular moral and cultural context. Investigating this social context will provide an understanding of the cultural and moral fabric within which social networks are structured and contribute to understanding the complexity of older people's social networks.

Narrative theory provides a basis for these investigations. Relations between people are enacted within story lines and people construct their relationships with the world and others in the context of ongoing biographies and situated narratives^{6,7}. In everyday talk people negotiate a positive identity using shared linguistic resources. Using particular socially available discursive resources makes certain subject positions available for a speaker⁸. These subject positions are constituted by the rights and obligations to say certain kinds of things in certain situations⁷. People's talk about their relationships not only describes those connections but reproduces the social and moral values that shape these relationships. In this study we were interested in the ways older people use public and personal narratives to talk about their family relationships.

Method

Participants

Forty nine people aged between 55 and 70 were interviewed about their family situation and their experiences of family life and social relationships.

Data Collection

The interviews were semi-structured and questions were developed around three main topics, important social connections, family connections, and family change. The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed and a copy of the transcript was sent to each participant for checking. Ethical approval for this project was gained from the Massey University Human Ethics Committee.

Narrative Analysis

The interviews were subjected to narrative analysis. The stories were interpreted as personal and interpersonally constructed stories that reflect the public narratives and moral landscape of the wider social context. The examples used in this paper to illustrate our findings were edited to focus

on the unfolding storyline and to limit the length of the stories for presentation.

Results

Murray (2000) has identified four possible levels of narrative analysis: personal, interpersonal, positional and ideological. At these four levels our analysis identified different types of narratives that were used by the participants. The personal 'stories' that people told us about their family life and social connections were co-constructed with the interviewer in the interview context. The stories also provided moral and social identities for the speakers and those in their social networks. To construct these identities the speakers drew upon public or shared ideological 'narratives' of social life.

To illustrate the results of this analysis we have chosen three examples of stories told by our participants. First, a story that uses complementary public narratives of ageing and family that were often used by our participants. Secondly, examples of complex stories in which people drew on contradictory narratives to describe difficult relationships.

Narratives of Ageing and Family.

A dominant 'family' narrative is widely available in our society and was used by all participants in some way to structure stories of family relationships. The family narrative provides clear relationship based identities such as mother or son. These positions carry a set of rights and responsibilities which provide the basis for evaluation of family members' behaviours. The roles and duties of this family narrative fit comfortably with a narrative of 'ageing' which was drawn upon by many participants. This narrative tells of physical decline in older age and the need for care by others. There is a strong expectation that family members will provide this care.

Mary told a story which highlighted some of the tensions for older people around these expectations of care. This story illustrates different subject positions available at the conjunction of the family and ageing narratives. It also shows the moral dimension of the subject positions of the 'good' caring son, and the independent 'neglectful' son.

We were altogether as a family for Christmas and we were standing in the kitchen and I think we were doing dishes or something and all in the kitchen talking and the question came up, because we had some other friends there as well, "how would you look after your mum if anything happened to your dad?" and of course James immediately came up and he says "Well you know, she doesn't need to worry about anything, I'll take care of her no trouble at all, I'd look after her." And Luke, he turned around and he said "oh I'd just put her out in the dog kennel and throw her a bone once a week". Which

you know at the time it hurt, nowadays it's a standing family joke because I know that he did not mean it but he in a lot of respects, although he's coming up 37 he is not a very mature 37 and he just needs to grow up a little more but I have no doubt if anything did happen he would be there.

In this extract, Mary repeats a family story and draws upon public narratives of 'family' and 'ageing'. The most mundane of family activities, doing the dishes, sets the scene for the story. The family narrative provides clear gendered subject positions for husband, wife, son, and mother. The ageing narrative is drawn upon to provide the taken for granted notion that Mary will require care as she ages. Neither the sons nor Mary question this assumption. Even Luke's bad joke does not question his responsibility to make provision for his mother. As such this story does not question the public narratives and demonstrates the positioning of those at the intersection of these narratives of 'family' and 'ageing'. In this story James and Luke are assigned to the parts of the good and neglectful son who provide possible futures for Mary.

Competing Narratives and Difficult Social Relationships

Although the 'family' and 'ageing' narratives are a dominant way to organise social relationships, our participants also identified with subject positions from other public narratives to tell stories about their connections. At times these narratives fitted uncomfortably with the dominant family narrative and revealed difficult relationships.

In this section, we will use two stories to demonstrate the way that our participants' stories of family life and ageing are at times troubled by other narrative identities. The first story is about the difficulties of drawing upon the family and ageing narratives with their themes of obligation and care alongside the narrative positioning of homosexuality.

Charles' Story

While telling a story of caring for his ageing mother, Charles drew upon narratives of 'family' and 'ageing'.

Charles: Well at the moment I've got an elderly mother in there, she's 90. We are just living together in a house. ... I've certainly been in and out of old people's homes and seen what a disaster they are so I thought I'm not putting her in a bloody home when she gets older because most people do get old and you will do yourself; there's no escape

out of this life, you don't get out alive. So basically what we did was settle up here.

INT: And your mum was fine [about your homosexuality]?

Charles: No she was Victorian. She didn't want that because most mothers want to have, are selfish, especially from that era, they want you to get married and have kids and provide them with children and something in the future and I think its the Chinese syndrome where you say well those kids are going to look after us in our old age. It doesn't work that way. That was a Victorian thing you know.

INT: Well you are still looking after her though.

Charles: Yeah but that's alright. What else were we going to do? I certainly wouldn't put her in those bloody homes. Of course when you get into that geriatric care you understand what those old people's homes are like. Some of them are just minding people you know.

INT: And she's alright with your partners coming in or if your boyfriend...?

Charles: No still Victorian she doesn't like it, but that's her personal clash in her mind you see.

INT: So there is still a little bit of tension there as far as that is concerned?

Charles: I just tell her to go to hell. I've had five partners, ... It's been a bloody struggle with the old lady because she came with a Victorian, inbuilt Victorian attitudes and were hard to shake.

INT: But she has still accepted you because you are her son?

Charles: She can't do anything else can she? It's not what she wants so she's had to struggle with her selfishness against what is reality.

INT: She's coped?

Charles: Well she has to. She still doesn't like it. When I was with this guy, he's a bit of a hard case ... and of course we're down in the bedroom having rumpy pumpy and fooling around and what have you and she's banging on the door "what's going on there?" And he says "Well do you want to come in? It's the game the whole family can play." And of course it just throws her for a sixer you see. She storms off. Actually in her brain what's going on is that she's not accepting that and she wants it on her rules, her terms you see. It's very difficult.

The story begins as the story of family life, with the devoted son who refuses to consider placing his mother in institutional care. Charles' story is the same as Mary's story of ageing and family life, but told from the position of the virtuous son.

The story of family care and responsibility is disrupted by the interviewer, who re-introduces Charles' identity as a homosexual man from a previous story. The interviewer twice asks about the mother's response to Charles' homosexuality, therefore highlighting a mismatch between Charles' identity as a good son and as a homosexual in the 'family' narrative (which has a heterosexual basis). This discussion of his sexuality and his desire to bring partners home is then uncomfortably interwoven with the personal story of living with his ageing mother.

When he is positioned as a homosexual man, Charles resists being seen as responsible for his mother by arguing against her "Victorian" attitudes toward not just homosexual behaviour but care for parents. When the interviewer challenges *these* words as inconsistent with his actions in caring for his mother, he uses the family narrative to point to a lack of alternative options within the moral order of the family and ageing narratives. Moving between these narrative positions, Charles attempts to reconcile two identities as a caring son and an active homosexual. They finally coalesce uncomfortably in his partner's description of sex as a "game the whole family can play". The irony of this statement points directly to Charles' difficult positioning in the family narrative and the story of living with his mother ends on a note of discomfort.

Betty's Story

The second story reveals the tensions between the position of wife in the family narrative and a personal identity made available through a feminist narrative.

Betty: And sort of woke up and decided I wasn't going to be a door mat and I want to be recognised for the person that I was. Which didn't happen.

INT: So in what ways when you made that decision, how has that affected things for you?

Betty: Oh deteriorated rapidly.

INT: Oh, but you stayed together?

Betty: Well I left for three months and came back because he offered the earth which didn't happen. So we're two people living in the same house. (...) Oh yes, it has its moments and it has its "oh god I wish I wasn't here" moments you know. (...) Well we have settled down into sort of semi routine where I do the cooking and the cleaning and the meals and everything and the washing and what does he do? Looks at the dishes. (...)

INT: Is he here at the moment?

Betty: No he's not, I wouldn't be open like this if he was here. (...) He does not believe in talking about it, what went on in the house is private, personal, you do not talk about it. (...) I mean

he's not a bad joker, it's just that I changed, he didn't. He's still set in the old ways where a wife is a wife in the home sort of thing you know, but he's not a bad joker and he's been a good father and he's been very, I mean I have not wanted for anything. Except emotion and to be recognised as a person in their own right instead of his wife. So I changed, not him.

INT: That was quite a big thing for you to move out then for three months?

Betty: It was, but I did it in such a way - I just packed my bags and went. Emptied the cheque account. [INT: Emptied the what?] Cheque account. I left him \$12. I can laugh at it now but it wasn't funny at the time.

... That was 10 years ago. I was away for 3 months and came back here. Most stupidest thing I ever did was coming back. Never mind, that's life, I made the decision I better stick to it. That's what I told myself.

INT: Well thank you for sharing that. I mean it's not easy sometimes to talk about these things.

Betty: You cannot understand, still can't understand but never mind, as I say he's not a bad joker in himself.

INT: And I think that's generous of you to.

Betty: I don't think so, he deserves the recognition. I mean as I say he's not a bad joker, he just can't help the way he was brought up and his beliefs.

INT: Well I think that's right and I think it's not easy to live with someone is it?

Betty: No. Especially when he's deaf and he has the TV blaring and he flicks and then he goes crook because I read a lot, that is why I go out there with me smoke and me books and I read. Mills & Boons, so you can just be obliterated for a couple of hours or something, sometimes I pick my book up and I think what the hell am I reading this for. Never mind, come on Betty. So away I go. He does not appreciate that one iota. Never mind, and that's our life.

Betty initially describes herself as striving for more out of life, exemplified by the awakening to self-fulfilment as part of a 'feminist' narrative. Betty rebelled against the strictures of her marriage and its strategies of economic control by leaving her husband's house and taking the money from their bank account. Although Betty returned to live with her husband, who "offered the earth", she finds a virtuous position in the feminist narrative as one who recognises the inequalities of family life in which she does all the housework and her husband just "looks at the dishes".

Cutting across this personal story is the narrative of family life in which Betty's husband is the good provider and the good father, with the family as a private sphere. As Betty assesses her husband within this family narrative, she is unable to criticise him. Betty repeatedly asserts that her husband is "not a bad joker". The interviewer interprets this from within the feminist narrative as generosity towards her husband; however, through the lens of the family narrative, Betty is recognising her husband's rights and her role as wife.

The Mills & Boon books provide an image in Betty's story which ironically comments on the two narratives. The novels which Betty reads represent the romance of the family narrative. Yet Betty uses them as a fantasy and an escape from the unhappy ever after of her personal story. They provide a way for Betty to manage the shortcomings of her relationship and to be a person in her own right.

Conclusion

This research revealed the complex basis of difficult social relationships. Family relationships that do not easily fit the publicly available family narrative reveal the ways that social relationships, particularly family relationships, are structured. People simultaneously resist *and* reproduce the public accounts to talk about the difficulties of their relationships. In regard to choices about living arrangements and social obligations, the analysis of these stories highlights how these sorts of important life decisions are made in the context of dominant moral values. Those who experience intimate relationships characterised by difficulty and discord must also account for themselves as morally virtuous social actors who continue to give and receive care within public narratives of ageing. In both of these stories, the justification for what is finally seen as the only virtuous course of action (such as staying with a husband or living with a mother) was described in terms of the moral order of the dominant family narrative.

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