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Using Narrative Analysis to Understand Difficult Relationships

Mary Breheny and Christine Stephens

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Article abstract

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NARRATIVE WORKS
Issues, Investigations, & Interventions

The Bonds and Burdens of Family Life: Using Narrative Analysis to Understand Difficult Relationships[1]

Mary Breheny & Christine Stephens
Massey University

Attempts to understand difficult family relationships have ignored the inextricable links between positive and negative relationships. Narrative analysis provides insight into complex relationships within social context. We analysed interviews with older people in New Zealand using levels of narrativity to reveal the negotiations required to manage personal identity at the intersection of competing public narratives. Participants and interviewers used public narratives of family life that reinforce family roles while simultaneously drawing upon alternative narratives of identity and morality. Investigating narratives of difficult family relationships reveals the influence of dominant social norms on the negotiation of social identities through personal stories.

Social networks and the social support that they offer have been shown to exert significant effects on the wellbeing of older persons (Berkman, 2000). In societies in which families are expected to support elders, the presence of family members has been taken to imply both physical and emotional support. However, it has more recently been shown that it is the quality, rather than the quantity of an individual's relationships with family members, that is associated with well-being (Fiori, Antonucci, & Cortina, 2006; Ryan & Willits, 2007). Furthermore, as Rook (1990) has pointed out, family relations may be harmful as well as beneficial. Attempts to separate the effects of positive and negative social interactions on wellbeing and health (see Newsom, Rook, Nishishiba, Sorkin & Mahan, 2005; Rook, 2001; Sorkin & Rook, 2006), and to explain why people continue to maintain problematic social relationships (see Bushman & Holt-Lunstad, 2009) have tended to individualise these relationships and deflect attention from their complex moral and social basis. Yet, the positive and negative aspects of social relationships are inextricably linked (Rook, 1992),

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and this is because they are practised and understood within moral and cultural contexts.

From Durkheim on, sociologists have pointed to the ways in which family relations are embedded in institutional arrangements endorsed by social and legal structures. Rapid social change over recent years has meant considerable changes in expectations of family life and widespread discussion of the decline of traditional family structures (Langellier & Peterson, 2004). However, there is also evidence that the expectations and values of family relationships remain as powerful social forces (Eekelaar & Maclean, 2004; Hughes & Stone, 2006; Langellier & Peterson, 2004). Eekelaar & Maclean (2004) show how within today's more individually focussed ideologies, the rights and obligations associated with family relationships are subject to constant negotiation. Thus, although more negotiable, both positive and negative social exchanges remain as inextricable aspects of family life. Rather than focus on negative and positive relationships as individual entities, it may be more fruitful to reflect on the ways in which social actors manage and balance the competing demands within obligatory social relationships.

One way to investigate these competing demands is through attention to the stories that people tell about their family relationships. The stories told by older people, who have lived through changes in societal and family expectations, are particularly instructive (Westerhof, 2010). Narratives are employed in everyday life to make sense of experiences and to constitute social identities (e.g., Somers, 1994). Pioneers of narrative approaches in psychology such as Sarbin (1986) proposed that narrative is an organizing principle for all human action and the way we understand the world and make moral decisions is guided by narrative structures. Bruner (1990) additionally proposed that the stories people tell provide insights into the specific cultural rules for interacting and for claiming identities. In everyday talk people negotiate a positive identity using shared linguistic and social resources. These negotiations are enacted within story lines as people construct their relationships with the world and others in the context of ongoing biographies and situated narratives (Bruner, 1991; Harre & Gillett, 1994).

In particular, family stories provide opportunities to resolve challenges for individuals and families, and reveal often complex and contradictory expectations among family members (Wall & Spira, 2006). These stories of family life and social relationships do not represent static aspects of the narrator's life, but a particular version of events produced in a specific context to present themselves and others as certain types of people. Stories about families both produce family relationships and reproduce and resist "the family" in the performance of those stories (Langellier & Peterson, 2004). Furthermore, family stories not only describe social connections but reproduce the publicly shared social and moral values that are part of those relationships (Powell, 2005; Phoenix & Sparkes, 2009). Investigating socially shared

narrative structures provides an understanding of the cultural and moral fabric within which social relationships are structured and contributes to understanding complexity and conflict among family members.

In the study described in this paper, we used narrative analysis to analyse the personal stories and publicly shared narratives people use to talk about their family relationships in later life. Rather than simply relaying individual experiences of personal relationships, they are seen to reflect possibilities for storytelling located within wider social and cultural narratives.

Method

Participants

Forty-eight people aged between 55 and 70 years volunteered to be interviewed about their important social relationships. Participants were part of a longitudinal survey study of older adults (Health, Work and Retirement Study: HWR). Of these participants (21 males and 27 females), 31 were legally married or partnered, 5 never married, and 12 separated, divorced, or widowed. Forty of the participants indicated New Zealand European ethnicity, four indicated Maori ethnicity, and the remaining four other ethnicities. Although most participants reported their health to be very good and living standards as good or comfortable, those interviewed included the range of living standards from severe hardship to very good living standards and excellent to poor health. Interviews were undertaken in large and small urban and rural settings across New Zealand.

Data Collection

Letters providing information about the study and inviting participation were sent, and participants were telephoned to arrange an interview. The interviews were semi-structured and questions were developed around three main topics: important social connections, family connections, and family change. With few exceptions, the participants discussed members of their immediate and extended family as their most important social connections. 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

For the present study, each transcript was read to identify the stories told about difficult relationships by our participants. To structure our analysis of these stories we drew on the notion of levels of narrativity as outlined by

Somers (1994), Murray (2000), and Stephens (2011). We focussed on distinguishing the functioning of three levels: personal stories, interpersonal co-creation of stories, and publicly available narratives.

First, we identified the personal "stories" told to the interviewer by the participants about their family relationships. We did not employ a formal structural analysis of these stories, but used our understanding of the temporally ordered narrative form to identify particular accounts as stories. We know that a well-structured story, or a particular episode, is finished when the narrator sums up the "lesson" or message of the story and often adds a final point to bring that message into the present (see Labov & Waletsky, 1967).

Second, we paid attention to the ways in which these personal "stories" were constructed jointly with the interviewer in the particular context of the interview. Mischler (1986) has argued that narratives from interviews are co-constructed in this way and Tanggaard (2009) and van Enk (2009) have more recently focussed attention on the importance of the interviewer and the interview context in constructing stories that do particular identity construction work in the dialogical moment. In some of the interviews in our study, the interviewers tended to become more actively involved in the story construction than a "good objective" interviewer should. In analysing the stories, we found that these instances of active engagement produced the clearest examples of co-constructed stories.

Third, we noted the publicly available or "ideological" narratives of social life that participants and interviewers drew upon to achieve this co-construction. Somers (1994) describes these as shared public narratives used unconsciously to provide locations for selves. In other words, the public narratives drawn upon by our participants provided subject positions, or moral and social identities, for the speakers and those in their social networks. Discursive theory points to the importance of contradictory accounts in identifying discourses that construct objects and subject positions in different ways (Wetherell, 1998). This approach can also be used to investigate the public narratives people draw upon to story social relationships. Public narratives include certain plots and characters which are appropriated to shape events and produce particular identities in personal stories. We looked for the shifting narratives drawn upon within each storytelling event, as opportunities to reveal the competing accounts available to manage social life. When an interviewer, behaving just like a member of the interviewee's social world, challenged his or her identity or moral positioning, the interviewee was more likely to draw upon different public narratives to respond to the challenge. Thus, the more the interviewer was involved in the story production, the easier it was for the analyst to recognise the social construction of the story.

This framework was used in our analysis to point to the distinction between the personal "stories" told by the participants about their family social connections, the publicly shared "narratives" about how to practice social

relationships, and the moral positioning of subjects in the stories. Of course, our participants told stories that included all these elements working together and rather than artificially work to separate the levels of analysis, we have used this framework to work toward an integrated approach, such as that used by Bell (1999), to include the personal, interpersonal, and public level of analysis. Thus, the "stories" that people constructed with the interviewer about their social connections also tell us about "narratives" of social life and available moral and social identities.

Results

Our participants told stories about both very intense family ruptures and more mundane family conflicts. For example, a daughter described how she cared for her abusive father during the last days of his life and another daughter told how the death of a beloved father allowed her the freedom to cease contact with a difficult mother. Other less dramatic accounts relayed difficulties managing conflicting expectations of family contact or disagreements over care of grandchildren. All of these stories provide clear examples of the results of the analysis which we describe below: private accounts of intensely personal relationships, which may also be understood as located within a particular social environment. The stories also demonstrate the ways people use stories to construct a coherent identity when they are positioned within competing public narratives. In this paper we use just three examples to enable detailed presentation of the levels of each narrative. The stories quoted below were also edited to focus on the unfolding storyline and to limit word length.

The three examples were chosen to illustrate both the comfortable use of public narratives of family and the ways in which public narratives of family construct identities for those describing difficult family relationships. First, we provide an example of a story that uses complementary narratives about "ageing" and "family" that are publicly available and were often used by our participants in a way that left these public accounts unchallenged. Secondly, we provide examples of more complex stories used to describe the difficult relationships experienced at the intersection of public narratives of family and other contradictory narratives.

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 important social relationships. Even non-family relationships were described in terms of a family narrative, by describing close friends as like a mother or a sister. The family narrative provides familiar identities in terms of relationships to nuclear family members. An identity as a mother or son, husband or wife provides a

clearly delineated subject position within a personal story of social connection. 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 particular 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 in some way.

Mary told a story which highlighted some of the tensions around social relationships in later life. In accord with these narratives of ageing and family, Mary's story revealed anticipation of care in later life from her sons. At the same time her story showed the moral dimension of the subject positions of the "good" caring son, and the independent neglectful son. This story illustrates different subject positions available in the conjunction of the family and ageing narratives.

> 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. But then he's got his own family that he's got to look after first.

Mary's story is set in the kitchen where the most mundane of family activities, doing the dishes, is taking place. This family story is told with humour and defines some characteristics of the members of that family. The story draws on publicly available narratives of "family" and "ageing" to demonstrate how those characteristics measure up to certain moral values 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. Both narratives are compatible in that this care will become the responsibility of the sons on the death or incapacitation of the husband. Neither the sons nor Mary question the assumption of these narratives that Mary will inevitably require care as she ages. 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. What Mary is storying here is not just that her sons should care for her, but that this care should be a reflection of affection and regard rather than social obligation.

The public narratives include alternative versions of moral action and virtuous or immoral subject positions. Thus, each public narrative has a set of characters that can be appropriated to present the personal story line. The alternatives at the intersection of the public family and ageing narratives construct possibilities for the protagonists of the personal story and demonstrate the possibilities for family relationships and ways of ageing in families. In this story, Luke's joke about minimal care is contrasted with James' offer of limitless care over Mary's lifetime. A key aspect of this extract is the care provided by James described as the appropriate and morally virtuous option, the expected and approved response of son to mother. Any suggestion of lack of family care for ageing mothers (even as a joke) is hurtful, and attributed to the individual failings of the immature family member. The contrast between the good son and the neglectful son stories the two possibilities for later life care for Mary. This is a simple dichotomy provided by the family and ageing narratives. However, it is worth noting that most stories are more sophisticated and complex. Here, having storied the contrast, Luke's mother does not leave her own son in the invidious position of bad neglectful son. She makes additional effort to provide another (and potentially contradictory) position for Luke as responsible for his own nuclear family and potentially unable to prioritise care of his ageing mother.

Competing Narratives and Difficult Social Relationships

The "family" narrative is a cultural resource that people incorporate and resist when accounting for their social relationships. Most stories draw upon public narratives in a complex way which includes the use of multiple positions and more than one public narrative. Stories about difficult relationships highlight this complexity as narrators draw upon different narratives that may be contradictory and provide troubled subject positions. Although narratives of family life are a powerful way to organise social relationships, the participants also identified with subject positions from other public narratives. At times these narratives fitted uncomfortably with the dominant family narrative and revealed difficult relationships. Attempting to reconcile the competing public narratives within which people must situate their experience tells us about the boundaries of these narratives and how difficulties arise.

In this section, we will unpack two stories in detail to demonstrate the way that our participants' stories of family life are at times troubled by alternative 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.

Sexuality and the family.

Charles' story shows the interlinking of different public narratives and the ways in which subject positions provided by the narratives may be compatible or create difficulties. His story also demonstrates the importance of the context and the interpersonal character of stories.

While telling the story of his own ageing, Charles constructs his ageing and homosexual identities together by describing the "gay scene" as a life style for younger men. He said:

> I get a bit cynical about today because today's gay scene as you probably know yourself has been all based around hero parties and bloody hero parades and it's all the flashy hoo-ha stuff. I'm not in that age group. I'm in the age group of the guys that have been through all of that, know all that it's just superfluous, what the public wants to see, it's the image that's there. That's not where the gay guys are. Gay guys are old guys like me.

Charles positions himself as both ageing and homosexual by distancing that identity from the younger members of the "gay scene." Across the telling of his subsequent story of caring for his ageing mother, Charles draws upon the "family" narrative in which he is positioned as both a virtuous son and a resistant homosexual. Because these subject positions are shared and widely recognised, it is the interviewer who highlights the incompatibility of the positions and who forces Charles to tell about how this incompatibility causes difficulties in his relationship with his mother. Thus, Charles' story of his care of his ageing mother began with an account of son/mother obligatory social relationships and concluded with their difficulties:

> 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.
>
> Interviewer: 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 it's 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.
>
> Interviewer: 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. ….
>
> Interviewer: 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.
>
> Interviewer: 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.
>
> Interviewer: 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.
>
> Interviewer: 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 rumpty pumpty 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, responsibility for an ageing mother, and the son devoted to the care of his mother and his refusal to consider placing his mother in institutional care. In this way, Charles's story identifiably

draws on the same narrative as Mary's story of ageing and family life, although narrated from the position of the virtuous son. Consistent with the compatible narratives of "family" and "ageing" is the construction of home as the best place for older people and Charles' home as his mother's home. This first sequence of the story of "living with my aged mother" is consistent with the narrative of family care for the elderly. Charles presents the "ageing" and "family" narratives as universal both through a report of Charles's partner having the same problems caring for his mother, and through Charles' implication of the interviewer herself in the ageing narrative. The family narrative works to provide a clear position for Charles as embedded within a family structure and conforming to a moral imperative of responsibility and family connection.

The story of family care and responsibility is disrupted by the interviewer, who re-introduces Charles' identity as a homosexual man from the earlier story. The interviewer asks about his mother's response to Charles' homosexuality, therefore highlighting a mismatch between the virtuous son and homosexual man in the family narrative. As Charles resists this disruption and continues with the plot of "living with my aged mother," the interviewer doggedly returns to the lack of fit between the two subject positions that have structured Charles' talk: the caring son and the sexually active homosexual in his sixties. The discussion of his sexuality and his desire to bring partners home is thus uncomfortably interwoven with the story of living with his ageing mother.

From his position as a childless homosexual man (which is not a virtuous position in the "family" narrative), Charles resists being positioned as responsible for his mother by arguing against her "Victorian" attitudes. At the beginning of this section, the "Victorian" description is used to describe his mother's attitude towards homosexuality, but this segues into expectations for elder care by children as "Victorian." In this way, the expectations from the family narrative of both heterosexuality and family care of elders are understood as compatible, and are both dismissed as old fashioned and culturally irrelevant. At this point, having been re-positioned in the story by the interviewer, Charles draws on a "neoliberal" narrative of freedom and resistance to obligation to story his experience of living with his ageing mother, claiming "I just tell her to go to hell."

Again the interviewer challenges his words as inconsistent with his actions in caring for his mother and in response he uses the family narrative to point to a lack of alternative options within the moral order of family care. Moving between the narrative positions, he both resists and reinforces the morally virtuous position of care for elders and attempts to reconcile two identities as a caring son and a homosexual in this account of living with his mother. 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. The interviewer and Charles have co-constructed a story about the difficulties of a relationship acted out within contradictory identities of a caring son (showing the essentially heterosexual basis of the "family" narrative) and a homosexual man.

Burck (2005) has noted that within a story there is often a refrain, an element of the story that is repeated for narrative effect. The refrain often highlights the competing elements of public narratives and draws attention to the lack of fit between these elements. Charles uses such a refrain in his story as he repeatedly accounts for his mother living with him by describing the substandard care of elders in rest homes: "I'm not putting her in a bloody home." This refrain is recognisable as part of the complementary narratives of ageing and family life in which institutional care is the substandard and non-virtuous alternative to family care. Within the compatible narratives of "family" and "ageing," Charles manages a difficult relationship with his mother as the only option available to them. He uses this refrain to emphasise both his and his mother's lack of choice: "What else were we going to do?" Within the "family" narrative, the obligatory nature of their relationship means that Charles has no option but to live with and care for his mother and she has no option but to accept his homosexuality.

Liberation and the family.

The second story reveals the tensions between the position of wife in the "family" narrative and a personal identity made available through a "liberated woman" narrative. Betty introduces the story of her second marriage to explain the large age gaps between her children. The interviewer invites Betty to talk about "the changes in her family" to which Betty responds, "don't know why I ever married him, put it that way." Betty manages the story of her difficult marriage by drawing upon intertwined narratives of "family" (with its roles and expectations for the wife) and "liberated woman" (with an identity for a person "in her own right").

> 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.
>
> Interviewer: So in what ways when you made that decision, how has that affected things for you?
>
> Betty: Oh deteriorated rapidly.
>
> Interviewer: 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. (…)

Interviewer: 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.

Interviewer: 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. [Interviewer: Emptied the what?] Cheque account. I left him $12. I can laugh at it now but it wasn't funny at the time. …

Interviewer: It's nice to be able to see the humorous side.

Betty: He can't see the funny side about it at all, not at all.

Interviewer: So how long was that?

Betty: 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.

Interviewer: 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.

> Interviewer: And I think that's generous of you too.
>
> 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.
>
> Interviewer: 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 way 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 which reads as part of the narrative of liberation. Rather than this moment heralding the beginning of a new life for Betty, it is storied as the beginning of a rapid deterioration for her. Betty rebels against the strictures of her marriage and strategies of economic control by leaving her husband's house and taking the money from their bank account. Betty finds considerable humour in this account of her leaving her husband with $12 in his chequing account, a humour she can share with the interviewer, but not her husband, who fails to find this amusing. Although Betty returned to live with her husband, who "offered the earth," she is able to find a virtuous position in the "liberated woman" narrative as one who recognises the limitations and inequalities of family life in which she does all the work and her husband "looks at the dishes."

Cutting across this personal story is the traditional narrative of family life in which Betty's husband is the good provider and the good father, who understands the family as a private sphere that should not be discussed with others. When Betty positions her husband within this "family" narrative, she is unable to criticise him. The refrain in this extract is Betty's repeated assertion that her husband is "not a bad joker." The interviewer interprets this from within the "liberated woman" narrative as generosity towards her husband; however, through the lens of the "family" narrative, Betty's recognition is her husband's due. She insists on assessing these attributes in terms of the "family" narrative in which masculinity is about provision and fatherhood. Betty also earns her due by cooking, cleaning, and washing, and so earns her position as a good wife in this traditional narrative. Betty is unable to find fault with her

husband from within a traditional family narrative, but she is able to draw upon a "liberated woman" narrative to outline problems in the relationship.

The Mills & Boon romantic novels provide an image in Betty's story which powerfully draws the two narratives together. The romance novels which Betty reads represent the romance and happily-ever-after marriage of the "family" narrative. Yet Betty uses them as a fantasy and an escape from the unhappily ever after of the personal story of her marriage. They are the way in which Betty ironically and reflexively chooses to tolerate the shortcomings of her relationship; the romantic novels accordingly provide her with a way to be a person in her own right. As Radway (1991) suggests, the reading of romance novels is a way to express dissatisfaction with dominant gender norms without challenging the basis of these norms. Betty, too, uses the act of reading romance to manage her dissatisfaction with her marriage, without challenging its strictures. Betty stories her inability to change her life and her relationship: "Never mind and that's our life."

Difficult Relationships and Conflicting Narratives

Betty's story of leaving and return and Charles' story of living with his mother are narrated in ways which work to position the narrator as upholding the different virtues of conflicting narrative identities. For Betty, the virtuous position which combines the liberated woman with the good wife is one of social obligation. Using an alternative narrative, Betty's decision to return to her marriage may be re-defined from the "stupidest thing" to a virtuous choice. Charles positions his decision to live with and care for his elderly mother as lack of choice. Although he rails against the "Victorian" attitudes which position children as responsible for their ageing parents, he is also bound by that social obligation. 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) is described in terms of the moral order of the dominant family narrative. The advantage of the family narrative is that it has clear expectations of rights and responsibilities and social actors can be measured against these expectations. Although the relationships described here present difficulties for the speakers, they also endorse social relations of mutual care and obligation which are features of the family narrative.

Both the publicly available narratives of homosexuality and liberation privilege individual choice and a subject unrestrained by hegemonic masculinity and patriarchal structures within the family. As such, they trouble the public narratives of family and ageing which provide virtuous identities only in relation to other family members. The family narrative reinforces gender binaries, while the subject positions offered by homosexuality and liberation contradict family values of obligation and particular gender roles. Attempts to story the conflicting requirements of these narratives demonstrate

the social basis of difficult social relationships. The inconsistency between the family narrative and narratives based upon individualism are highlighted in stories about obligation and choice. Charles describes living with his ageing mother as an obligation, whilst Betty explains her duty within her marriage as a choice, illustrating how choice and obligation are drawn upon to manage a moral identity within family relationships. In these two examples, we can see that constructing identities and maintaining relationships within competing narratives is complex, contradictory, and shifting.

The stories told here show that alternative public narratives can be drawn upon to account for difficulties in managing close personal relationships. Although it is possible to use an alternative narrative to reject the dominant narrative completely (Stephens & Breheny, in press), in these examples both competing narratives are necessary to capture the complexity of the relationships described. Although these narrators do not reject the dominant family narrative, Charles cannot speak only from the position of a son, and Betty cannot speak only as a wife, because the family narrative cannot account for the complexity of their situations. The speakers are unable to reject one narrative account over the other, as aspects of both narratives are required to make sense of their personal stories.

Conclusion

The stories told by our participants represent personal, interpersonal, and public narratives that reveal the importance of the wider social context of personal identity and family relationships. Telling a particular story to the interviewer situated the speakers within publicly available narratives. The public narratives position actors within each story according to the local moral order, and speakers worked to identify as virtuous subjects within the competing demands of multiple narratives and identities. Thus, the personal stories tell us about how the moral world of social relationships is ordered and reveal the complex and negotiated basis of difficult social connections. People simultaneously resist and reproduce the public accounts to talk about the difficulties of their relationships.

There are two features of the broader social location of relationships that we will discuss here. First, this analysis demonstrates the dominance of the family narrative in structuring social relationships in our society (Koenig Kellas, 2010; Pickard, 2010; Stephens & Breheny, in press). Despite a moral panic about the decline of the family in the twenty-first century and loss of family values, pervasive and persistent appeals to family values remain (Hughes & Stone, 2006; Langellier & Peterson, 2004; Smart & Shipman, 2004). Although the rhetoric of agency and individualism (Eekelaar & Maclean, 2004) may highlight the availability of alternative narratives, actual practical choices are often based in a family narrative of care and obligation. As

individual life circumstances are increasingly understood as the result of choice and individual responsibility (Ferguson, 2001), the social structural basis of these choices are obscured and the importance of family structures is ignored. Neo-liberal understandings of individualisation provide the resources for people to speak against constraining social arrangements like family obligations, but do not completely challenge or negate these collective constructions (Rich, 2005).

Second, our analysis shows the ways in which competing narratives are available and used to construct other socially legitimate identities. People hold contrary expectations and values with regard to family relationships, and constantly negotiate between their own interests and their social obligations (Skrbis et al., 2011). Thus, expanded opportunities for choice exist in modern society, but these choices are embedded within societal possibilities which are structured by past and present social expectations. Although a narrative of family relationships and the obligations that are part of that narrative remains dominant in our society, there are alternative narratives, with alternative identities which provide complex and sustaining ways to "have and to hold" while remaining a morally virtuous social actor and a valued member of society.

Through storying the complex negotiations of family relationships, story tellers reveal the social basis of their choices. These results highlight the value of narrative analysis in examining the complexity of social relationships which are difficult but managed as one part of the social identity of the narrators. These stories demonstrate the wider socially based norms and values within which dyadic relationships are formed and practised, and the ways in which some narratives fit together compatibly, while others trouble a mainstream understanding of family life. Narrative analysis can show the importance of the wider social and moral fabric in this management of simultaneously supportive and detrimental social bonds. The analysis here demonstrates that these relationships are complex but can be better understood through apparently contradictory accounts, not as singly unitary relationships. Understanding the social basis of these very personal relationships is important when we come to understand difficult social relationships. Narrative analysis provides a useful tool with which to examine complex stories of family life and take into account personal and social levels of experience.

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Mary Breheny, PhD, researches in critical health and community psychology in the School of Psychology at Massey University in New Zealand, focusing on the economic, family, and community lives of older people. She is currently investigating economic living standards among older people.

Christine Stephens, PhD, teaches health promotion and research methods in the School of Psychology at Massey University in New Zealand. She has published work using narrative analytic methods and is currently involved in longitudinal research regarding the health and wellbeing of older people in New Zealand.