Interpreting Harmful Family Relations: Two Researchers, Multiple Stories?

Eija Sevón, University of Jyväskylä, Finland, Marianne Notko, University of Jyväskylä, Finland

Presented at Gender and Power in the New Europe, the 5th European Research Conference

August 20-24, 2003 Lund University, Sweden

Introduction

We as two researchers with two separate data present this paper. Our studies are linked to each other through commitment to feminist family research and to phenomenologically coloured narrative approach. We think that people understand and make sense of their experiences through narrating, and it is through narratives and narrativity that people constitute their social identities (Chase 1995; Ricoeur 1991; Somers 1994). Our data offer various opportunities to write a shared story (conference paper/article) of harmful woman-to-woman relationships (mothers, daughters, grandmothers, mothers-in-laws and daughter-in-laws) in today’s Finnish families. In future we are going to enlarge our analysis to include also relations between men and women. With this paper we want to ask what narrative approach means in our studies. What can it or cannot be?

Marianne’s study deals with power and violence in family relations. Her data is collected by a writing request, which was published in a newspaper and two magazines during Fall 2000 and Spring 2001. That moment for collecting data was interesting because both research and public discussions on violence against women in Finland is quite recent: this issue has been silenced for an exceptionally long time. Marianne’s study focuses on emotional, verbal and psychological violence and they are even more fresh topics in Finnish context than concrete physical violence. Eija has collected her data with interviews. The focus of her study is to explore how becoming a mother changes women’s everyday lives. She has written about the narratives of the choices of becoming mother as a relational, embodied female subject’s desire but also as a culturally determinated choice. Her dissertation work is longitudinal and consists of four interview sessions each with seven first-time mothers. The women’s experiences of transition to motherhood were explored, first, approximately one month before the delivery of the child; second, when the child was about one month old; third, when the child was about six month old; and fourth, when the child was close to one year of age. Family relations between women became one important theme on transition to motherhood in some interviewed women’s stories.

Melanie Mauthner (1994) writes about the lack of research on sister relationships. We think that practically all family relations between women (mothers, daughters, sisters, daughters-in-laws, mothers-in-laws,
grandmothers) are a generally neglected issue in family research and especially in Finnish context. The study of family relations has mostly concentrated more on relationships between parents and children or between women and men. The fact that family has often been understood as being consisted of two (heterosexual) parents and their (biological) children has directed the research of family relations. We assume that this kind of view on family relations may be linked to heteromatrix. Other than relations between (heterosexual) man and woman are seen as problematic or unimportant, and possibly therefore neglected in family research.

Relations between women are influenced by public representations and narratives of relations between women. Jokes about mother-in-laws, fairy tales with wicked step-mothers, assumptions of women as verbally evil creatures or beliefs of tragic mother-daughter relationships draw a picture of almost always negative relations between women. For example, mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relations are often presented as a parody (Cotterill 1992, see Mauthner 1994). Even woman-to-woman friendships are presented to have lots of gossiping and betrayals of one’s trust on one other. We ask if it is because woman-to-woman relations in families are truly complicated or is it because they are construed to look like that? We are also interested in whether it is possible to explain this complexity with other backgrounds than patriarchy/heteromatrix. What could these alternative but still feminist explanations be? Is it possible/necessary/allowed to seek for other options? We both presume that relations between women within family context are construed with cultural, ideological and mythical frames. Family relations are specific types of close relations. In this paper we concentrate on the stories of harmful woman-to-woman family relationships, which are linked to the interplay between closeness and distance.

Interpreting the stories of harmful woman-to-woman family relations

Donald E. Polkinghorne (1995) has an idea that narrative research is more about construing a synthesis than dividing separate categories, which is perhaps one reason for our personal interests in narrative research. Polkinghorne (1995, 12) separates a) the analysis of narratives, in which the researcher collects narratives and analyses them through paradigmatic process, and b) narrative analysis, in which the researcher’s role is to collect descriptions of episodes and to transform them as stories. The analysis of narratives derives from stories to general, whereas the narrative analysis from episodes to stories. One function of telling about the lived experiences through emplotment is to find conformity among fragmentary and contradictory events, emotions and feelings (Carr 1991, 170 in Carr, Taylor & Ricoeur 1991; Ricoeur 1991, 21). However, a narrative and phenomenological study also aims at grasping the contradictions and the fragments of lived experiences lying “behind” the narration (Chase 1995; Miller 2000). Thus, we aim at construing one story with multiple voices about the harmful family relations based on our data. We are also committed to make our analytical interpretations transparent in our future article. The aim of our forthcoming work is to analyse the methodological choices of our interpretations.

In our studies being a human is ontologically understood as lived experiences which are embodied,
intersubjective or relational (Heidegger 1996; van Manen 1990), sexed (Battersby 1998; Braidotti 1994) and pre-narrative (Ricoeur 1991) by their origins. Relationality is often linked more to women than men. In our research we see relationality as a crucial way to describe all human life without referring to ethics or moral (see Battersby 1998, 6; Somers 1994). Furthermore, being is always being-in-the-world, the human being is an inseparable part of the culture she lives in. The primordial aspect of being in-the-world is understanding and interpreting that world. (Heidegger 1996; Taylor 1991.) Taylor (1991) states that understanding itself is embodied. Our conceptions of ourselves, other people and the world are understood through lived embodiment (Taylor 1991). Rosi Braidotti (1994, 158-167) stresses the sexual differences embodied in lived experiences. She depicts three separate levels of differences concerning lived experiences: differences between the sexes, differences among women and differences within each woman.

Doing research is always a multilayered interpretation process. In the stories that women tell us there can be seen their ways of understanding and interpreting their own lives and experiences. However, doing research with these women’s stories is linked to our own understandings and interpretations not only about those stories but also about world around us. Meanings are thus always partial, incomplete and from oneself’s point of view, the world is not identical for all of us, it is a world of our perspective (Haraway 1991, Heidegger 1996). Donna Haraway (1991, 193) states: “the topography of subjective is multidimensional; so therefore, the vision. The knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always construed and stitched together imperfectly, and therefore able to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another. In doing research this means awareness about differences, partial understandings which creates the space in which the other’s experiences can be heard and understood as the other’s experiences (Haraway 1991, Pearce 2002). However, our consciousness about the cultural narratives of sex, femaleness, motherhood, good life, kinship, and about their intertwinings makes it possible to interpret meanings produced by individual women as stemmed from social stock of stories.

Anni Vilkko (2003) emphasises how the significance of home becomes clearly visible when something changes or something tragic happens, e.g. divorce, burglary, or water damage. Crises or some less dramatic turning points in women’s lives are crucial in our data as well. In Eija’s data the moment of telling the story is while facing a significant turning point in interviewed women’s lives when becoming a mother for the first time. The moment of telling of Marianne’s writers is when they write their story for her study. Some of the writers write in the middle of the harmful situation, just after the violent acts. However, some of Marianne’s writers describe events in their past. Thus, the moment of writing is distant to the moment of experiencing harmful relationship, but the insults have not been forgotten. That is why we suppose that, despite the recency or the distancy of the moment of experiencing, the complicated meanings related to women’s family relationships are clearly present.

Marianne’s data example

“Emotional violence in the family.
Parents are not always aware of what kind of pain they cause when they cling to their child. I have noticed, after living 72 years that I have been a victim of my mother’s dominance. It was never discussed. Only now when I’m this old these old memories reach the surface. I was a so called good child. The word of my father and mother was the law. They were always right. Once I was given birching because I didn’t salute my mother’s friends. I remember that I was so shy that I just didn’t dare to say hello!

When I was a child I wasn’t allowed to invite my friends to our home. I wasn’t allowed to go almost anywhere. Answer was always no, I was told to concentrate on my homework. School went poorly, war time was in between. Eventually I got a proper profession and applied for a position in our locality and also got it. At that time my father died so I end up living with my mother. It wasn’t easy at all. It started the agony of my life… If the phone rang, it was immediately asked who it was, where are you going and when will you be back? I felt that maybe I just stop going so there won’t be all these questions either. I did have hobbies but it was too much. I attended e.g. a Karelian pie course. It was an amazing feeling to be able to bake the pies! Then it came a name day and I made these pies for our guests. In the afternoon when I came home from work most of the guests had already arrived. I wondered where the pies were because I couldn’t see them anywhere. My mother told she had put them to the closet and had bought more beautiful ones from the shop. The pies that I’ve made were too thick and ugly. After that I didn’t bake pies ever again.

I was also good in knitting. I often left my work in the corner of the sofa where it was ready when I wanted to start to knit again. However, most of the times I couldn’t find it but it was taken to my bedroom. In my bedroom the roof light was poor so it was impossible to continue my work in there. When this kind of “cleaning” went on too many times I just pulled out the knitting needles, crabbed the unfinished work into paper and pushed it to the closet!

 […]

I also remember one sickness day My mother was naturally upset with my illness but I still can’t understand why she once brought a dinner plate on the floor next to my bed!?? It was like I was a dog to whom you throw some food. Tears were falling again and the bad mood was increasing. No-one is sick for fun. After spending six weeks at home I got a diagnosis from a doctor: reaction heat. It was necessary just to get up and do outdoor exercise. Any reason for getting tired was never looked for.

I was already 40 years old when my mother got an idea to buy together a smaller apartment for me where I could move when she’ll pass away. So this was done. However, secretly I did cry and hoped that I could move already then. My mother thought that it was possible for me to move but like this, living together, it was cheaper. Cheaper? It took 10 years more before my mother died at the age of 82 and I could move to my own flat at the age of 50.
PS. All this emotional pressure during my life have caused the need to take once a day one pill of Cipramil (medicine for mental condition) for the rest of my life.

Personal moments and the moment of telling are linked with public moment of time. Vilma Hänninen’s (2000) concept of social stock of stories describes the ideas, stories, myths and ideologies we can take advantage of when we constitute our own stories of our own lives. The problem arises if we don’t have any models for our specific experience or the model excludes, restricts, controls, silences or oppresses us. One significant point in our project is to look at gender which construes our possibilities to tell our personal stories of our own lives. We as women are restricted by cultural narratives on family relations to talk about our experiences of conflicting or irritating family relations. However, our data has a large number of these kinds of relations. Is that when you live in a harmful family relation there are no narratives which would help you to cope with the situation.

Eija’s data example

“Eija: Do you feel, somehow, is it somehow that other people automatically that always somebody is giving advice even if you don’t ask but you are telling something?

Susanna: Yes, specifically your kin. I am such a person - it is my self-growing-up-project at the same time with becoming a mother - even if that is not going to success easily, but I am quite sensitive to other people’s sayings. Then I grumble behind or I let it be. But I have noticed with the child that it doesn’t work like that. I have to be able to say at the moment that don’t do that or don’t step in. Of course as nicely as possible. But I haven’t been able to do that yet. And then I have grumbled at home. And I am extremely nervous when somebody has stepped in something crushingly crucial matter. For example, I have grumbled for a week when Heikki’s sister taught me how to care a child. I got very angry about that. I couldn’t say at the moment to her that could you just trust me.

[...talks about how his sister showed her how to change a baby...]

But I still didn’t say anything though. And then she gives me a display that how she cares the baby and with a heavy hand. Even Heikki’s mother has looked that fortunately and I got consolidation of that it was not only my sensitivity. She took the baby for a wash very sharply and took her to the caring bottom. And I even didn’t say anything. Nothing. Afterwards I thought about it for a week. I thought that how could she handle stranger’s child so and with what rights she gives me advice and my partner already said that come away from the circle of anger that you just go around and it doesn’t just help. That next time you will say something. But would I say something, I don’t know. But you should grow up in order to be able to say. That it is my child and I decide how to go along. I should get some strengthening somehow and think that I am allowed to say and I don’t even need to explain. Because I somehow always think that I can give that kind of reason now, but I don’t need to do so. They are questions of choices. I can only say that we do in our way. And period. And don’t need to. That I am not obligated to explain anybody why I do things in my way. That
is such. Now I was pleased when I noticed that I can say to my mother. [...] I could say very briskly that you cannot let the baby cry in that way. It may sound weird that it was a big step but it was a very big step for me. I could just say and there is nothing into question in that. So if she let the baby cry because she thought that the baby’s lungs would strengthen, she may do so but not when I am present. But that was so clear, I had so clear opinion that you may not let the child cry. [...] But if it comes more subtle matters that gets me, that somebody meddles but it is not such an important matter, so maybe I am not capable to say that what if you don’t step in at all. That I have to think such things a lot. That I notice that how much more, when it is not only question about myself but the baby as well, so I should be brisker as an adult- -.”

**Conclusions**

Melanie Mauthner (1994), when explaining sister relationships, refers to Johnson (1986, 287) who sees power operating in a way that ignores salient issues for subordinate groups and privatises the secrecies of the oppressed. However, Mauthner (1994) sees that there is a possibility for a private language that can be used “in private” and/or with the researcher, a language of emotions and power relations. In our data women’s autonomy is something to be considered through specificity of power relations, family relations, confidence and distrust, closeness and distance, female sexuality, mothering and home as a specific place for women. Power in family relations that are emotionally and morally loaded is different from power in any other relations.

The relationships between women have a paradoxical nature when viewed through different cultural narratives. On the one hand, a contemporary family is not defined as tightly as earlier and different kinds of families, step-families, one-parent families and gay-families, have blurred the boundaries of family. Families are more about relations than a stable condition (Marin 1994, 18). Families appear to be a context of fluid and changeable relationships, as well as a site of intimacy and emotional growth not only for children but also for the adults (Silva & Smart 1999, 6). Family relations are often presented to be full of attachment, love and caring. Home and families are seen as safe havens where evil world can’t reach. Furthermore, we presume that motherhood is an easily available and often the only model for all women’s relationships.

On the other hand, women are also linked tightly to home, private sphere and this may be one of the reasons for complexity of woman-to-woman relationships. Public sphere is allocated to men and to their competition. It has been assumed that women are not as competitive as men but we suggest that home and private sphere are scenes for both competence, and consequently, competition between women (Linn & Breslerman 1996). Is this the reason why there is seldom room for solidarity between women in the same family? Is it so that at home women are forced to compete with each other?

All these cultural narratives about family relations and woman-to-woman relations share common features: they have a long history and they are strongly normative models. Many family relations lack non-normative and alternative narratives. Gender is one crucial issue to be taken into consideration. Especially women often
face huge expectations concerning all their family relations. According to Raija Julkunen (1995), Judith Stacey states that kinship, in general, has been feminised. Janet Finch (1989, see Julkunen 1995) argues that kinship relations are more about moral than emotions. Ruth Linn & Sara Breslerman (1996) suggest that when researching the problematic relationships within the family, there should be sensitivity towards women’s self-definitions. They make a distinction between “connected” (relationships are mediated through the activity of care) and “separate” (relationships are mediated through rules) orientations in self-definitions. Furthermore, we assume that as the main characters of female kinship, the aspects of responsibility and care are tangible but the aspects of rights, rules and power balances are somehow tacit. Or more specifically, it can be asked what the rules of these intimate, private relations are (Linn & Breslerman 1996).

We consider that these themes are crucial and visible in our data. We would like to discuss what kind of options there are to construct a research narrative in which our interpretations, the theoretical themes presented above and studied women’s storied experiences would discuss with each other. Our aim is to constitute a narrative which would demonstrate the crucial themes of women’s family conflicts and would voice silenced experiences. Where are the stories about negotiating and respecting the autonomy between women or the stories of maintaining the boundaries between women?

References


SUNY series in the philosophy of education. The State University of New York Press.


Authors:

Eija Sevón
University of Jyväskylä, Family Research Unit, P.O. Box 35, FIN-40014 University of Jyväskylä, Finland, eijasevo@edu.jyu.fi

Marianne Notko
University of Jyväskylä, Family Research Unit, P.O. Box 35, FIN-40014 University of Jyväskylä, Finland, mknotko@yfi.jyu.fi