Family Stories: Communicative Values, Interactions, and Burdens

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My father-in-law had four brothers and one sister; all are now deceased. The six siblings from Alabama had a total of 19 children. At the rate their blood, adopted, and step-relatives are being added to the family, I've lost track of all the grandchildren and great-grandchildren. When my wife's family comes together every 2 years for their extended family reunion, I am both overwhelmed and fascinated by the event. I was orphaned at birth and have always understood family in a very different context. This is my initial reaction to her family reunions:

> Driving through the rural South, I soak in the beauty of the landscape. I think the South has gotten a "bad rap" from those living in the fast-paced northern cities. There is something calming about the peaceful nature of the terrain. Pulling into the site of the reunion, my heart begins to race. I've been with my wife for over 20 years, but I've never fully acclimated to this gathering. As soon as I stop our loaded car near the lodging, my wife pulls away the restraining seat belts, breaking free from the long drive. Immediately she starts locating the once-close but now distant, siblings, cousins, and other relatives. Story time begins. There are stories from the past, stories from the present, exciting adventure stories, and stories of pain and loss. I have been embraced by this family, so I too must share stories. It is disconcerting because I don't know how much to share. As a result, I carefully edit my stories; it's an old foster home trick—tell a story, any story, just not the whole story. After a weekend (2 full days) of sharing, we part ways. All of us, including me, look forward to meeting again in 2 more years.

As an ethnographer, oral historian, and researcher, I rely on stories to conduct my field research. I listen to individuals and family members (biological and nonbiological) discuss their past and present relationships. By using open-ended interviewing, I explore the strength of family bonds by focusing on and analyzing the stories that once-displaced children and their family members or surrogate family members tell about the childhood experiences and family-life happenings of these children when they were in foster or adoptive care.

It is clear to me that as new family configurations develop, family members rely on the most ancient of traditions—the oral tradition—to strengthen the bonds that tie families together. Lodging and clothing for protection from the elements, water and food for nourishment and growth, and contact with other living creatures throughout infancy are all basic human needs. It is through natural processes of satisfying these needs that kinship bonds develop and that communication is appreciated. For humans to get a sense of meaning in their lives, beyond the struggle for survival, they create language and story the events of their lives. Everything we know about natural and human experiences has been given to us in story fashion. Even the most sophisticated mathematical equations and inextricable religious doctrines are translated into narrative for comprehension. Stories

are one of the most natural ways to express ourselves, and storytelling is a method for relating experiences and placing them into a context. Walter Fisher (1984, 1985a, 1985b, 1987, 1988, 1989) posits this as the "narrative paradigm" of human communication.

While the narrative paradigm has its detractors (Farrell, 1985; Lucaites & Condit, 1985; McGee & Nelson, 1985; Rowland, 1988, 1989; Warnick, 1987), the value of storytelling to humans is not a novel concept. From ancient cave paintings and Sumerian scripts to modern novels and broadcast news stories, humans have always sought to story their experiences. In addition, scholars throughout the ages have used the power of narrative to advance their notions (i.e., Aristotle, 1907; Barthes, 1974; Propp, 1968). Today, narrative inquiry is situated in multiple disciplines, and storytelling is utilized on all sociocultural planes. Many successful storytellers, from griots and politicians to anthropologists and ethnographers, use the work of contemporary narrative scholars to advance their craft. While the influences of narrative are not denied by today's societies, the necessity of storying for *human survival* seems to lose momentum as the species gets older and more involved with human issues on a high-tech global scale. The personal story tends to be trivialized. With this in mind, this chapter strengthens the tenet that storytelling is a necessity for kinship bonds and therefore a root communication device necessary for family, community, and global sociopolitical and ideological movements.

Family Stories: Communicative Interactions

In her edited book, *Family Communication: Theory and Research*, Lorin Badsen Arnold (2008) declares, "Without communication families wouldn't exist at all" (p. 103). She notes that communicative interactions are needed to form kinship bonds and develop rituals such as coupling, birthing, and parenting. In her writing, Arnold uses multiple works to reflect on stories as a significant communicative element within families. In the same volume, using the work of Didier Coste (1989) and W. G. Kirkwood (1992), I forward the idea that the following relationships exist between stories and family communication:

> (1) Stories help us explain what is happening in our families; (2) Stories are used by primary caretakers in families to provide examples of beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviors; (3) As individuals, we use stories to convince other family members to recognize our points of view; and (4) Stories help us to dream, both as individual family members and as family units. (Leoutsakas, 2008, pp. 136–137)

Expanding on the notions of Coste and Kirkwood, stories are extremely important for relating and perpetuating a family history. These five interactions provide a foundation for determining the ways in which storytelling is used to develop necessary kinship bonds. The interactions can be understood as discussed in the following sections.

Stories Are Extremely Important for Relating and Perpetuating a Family History

As people seek family relationships and experiences or are birthed or placed into families, the family history is of primary importance. It helps determine the family members' identities and behaviors. Newly formed families story their experiences to form a group identity and forward their values to new family members. Established families story their experiences to justify their existence and to perpetuate values. Individuals in families, however, may have conflicting values (consider a religious

figure and a criminal figure being part of the same family), but the family story remains consistent. In the minister and criminal scenario, the family story will honor one set of values and reject the other set, and the stories within the family may tell of each individual's development. The goal of the family history is to establish points around which members can psychologically and emotionally connect (or justify severing relations) with other family members. At times, the historical stories are painful, as in the case of the death of a child, and at other times, the stories are fond remembrances.

Stories Help Us Explain What Is Happening in Our Families

Many cultures, including those in the United States, have greetings that request information about family status. In English, "How are you?" or in Spanish, "Como está?" between friends often implies that a personal and family narrative is warranted. In addition, every intact family has stories about family members (the crazy aunt), the development of the family (Grandma and Grandpa's illnesses), additions to and subtractions from the family (births, adoptions, deaths, and so on), and events impacting the family (from the mundane to the tragic and/or exciting). These stories, like the families themselves, tend to evolve over time as more information becomes available. The stories are also strongly influenced by both the storyteller and the listener. The storyteller is often influenced by his or her perceived involvement in the happenings, and the story is often influenced by the depth of the connection the storyteller has with the listener (the story of little brother's first date is going to be told differently to a mentoring big brother than to his adoring but critical parents or to friends he is trying to impress). Depending on the importance of the story, it will be rendered a historical place in the family's chronicle, useful for perpetuating the family's history or used as an anecdotal story to be told on occasions such as family reunions.

Stories Are Used by Primary Caretakers in Families to Provide Examples of Beliefs, Values, Attitudes, and Behaviors

In general, all stories help forward or teach beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviors that we hold dear. In order to preserve the family culture, some consider this the primary purpose of family stories (Jorgenson & Bochner, 2004; Stone, 1988). And while this is a primary function of family stories, some of the most canonized stories told in families of all societies are the spiritual and religious stories that have been retold for centuries. So the stories need not originate from familial experiences. Value-focused stories told within families provide a basis from which to draw positive and negative conclusions. When we read or hear stories of those in the family who do poorly because of their behaviors, the message is, "Don't act like them and you won't end up like them." When we hear or read stories about people known to the family who have excelled, the message to us is, "Be like them so we all can be proud of our family heritage." Primary caretakers use these stories as lessons, teaching through the process of sharing their beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviors in narrative form. Naturally, some of these qualities suggested by the stories are socially acceptable and often reinforced by society (e.g., don't lie, don't steal, don't kill, and so on), but this narrative interaction can also create cultural dissonance for listeners when family values differ from social values. Children growing up in gang-style, crime-based, and institutionalized families (e.g., strict military, noncompromising police, or extremely religious families) often struggle with the paradoxes of their lives. In addition, a more subtle dissonance can be created with stories when surreptitious conflict is expressed through disparaging narrative (e.g., if your mother really loved

you, she wouldn't . . . ; your stepdad doesn't care about you because if he did, he would . . .). In family relationships where blood relations do not exist, it is up to the surrogate parent figures to use stories from their own lives to create these morality narratives. Often when blood-related family members are not present, some of the anti–birth family messages are very subtle or framed as assistance, but children still get the messages. These value-laden stories, rife with negative and positive examples, assist in all stages of child development.

As Individuals, We Use Stories to Convince Other Family Members to Recognize Our Points of View

In every group, power is shared, alliances are formed, communication occurs, and negotiations take place. Families are no different than any other group. Infants and young children teach adults early on in their relationships that it is not enough for adults to be older or physically stronger to have power. All it takes is one person expressing self-will to show power fluctuations. All family members must take into account the beliefs, values, attitudes, abilities, and behaviors of the other members when expressing points of view for a family to work together well. Often individual points of view of family members are similar, thus reinforcing the bonds of the family, but there are always sticking points when family members cannot agree on a blended point of view. It is at these times that negotiation is necessary and individual family members rely on narrative persuasion to forward their points of view. Adults use such stories to get children to eat certain foods (e.g., "I used to hate fish too, then . . ."), adolescents try to convince caretakers that activities will be okay (e.g., "My friend's parents let them . . . , so I should be able to as well). This type of narrative reasoning is found throughout family constellations. At times, it is adults trying to convince children or other adults; other times, it is children trying to persuade adults or other children. While we can all come up with lighthearted persuasive stories we have witnessed, it should be remembered that many children and caregivers use stories as incendiary devices in very serious family situations or as a means to realign the family. Think how hurtful it is when adopted children say, "You're not my parents . . ." to their adopted parents. Stories related to politics, religion, personal tragedies, and traumatic histories can all be used as disengaging impeachments that sever family bonds.

Stories Help Us to Dream, Both as Individual Family Members and as Family Units

Stories from the past help families plan for the future. As family members plan for the future, they encourage hope, a basic element for human survival. If we can place an experience or several experiences into a narrative form, then we can decide what to do differently or similarly in the future. Often because of difficult childhood circumstances, adults dream of a better future for their own children and relatives. In the United States, college became highly sought after as more and more parents perceived it as a means of advancement for their children. Similarly, children will often follow the paths of adult figures in their lives who have stories they admire and want to imitate. Family dreams, however, need not be altruistic. Families positioned in war zones, ghettos, extremely high poverty areas, and other violent situations often use stories from these environments for survival. The stories are negative influencers that simply state, "Watch out for this, or the family as we know it will no longer exist." Such stories are usually followed with educational stories that show how to navigate the dangerous situations.

Family Stories: Communicative Burdens

Stories told (and often retold) within families are not without complications. Stories can be manipulated, changed over time, fabricated, and used as divisive instruments and are subject to misunderstanding or limited recall. Family stories (as with all stories) are told from a subjective point of view—the view of the teller. The stories emerge from a place in which tellers frame their stories from what they know (or think they know) based on what they remember or think they (or another person) experienced, and tellers relate the stories in such a way that they can live with the stories' outcomes and still maintain a level of credibility within the family. Fundamentally, storytellers don't want to be viewed as liars by their kinfolk unless they are telling stories for entertainment purposes. Both memory and manipulation have significant influences on our family stories. Focusing on these two burdens, it becomes obvious that family stories are crafted to meet the needs of families, and "truth" or veracity of recall often has less of an important role in family storytelling.

Memory

Many grandmothers and grandfathers, the constant brunt of forgetfulness jokes, have probably been relegated to that place in the family stories because of the biological effects of aging on memory. Memory is affected by age, but memories and the stories we tell from our memories are not exclusively affected by the aging process. Continuous research into what we remember or forget shows that our memories are affected by biology, trauma, suggestion, imagination, and sociocultural pressures (Fivush & Neisser, 1994; Loftus, 1997; Schacter, 2002; Van der Kolk & Fisler, 1995). Often, repressed memories are beneficial in coping with traumatizing events. Think of sexually abused children or returning war veterans with post traumatic stress disorder who are trying to socially adjust to their experiences. Some personalities show a high susceptibility to suggestion. There are numerous case studies exposing professionals who induced false repressed memories in patients undergoing hypnosis and police who induced false statements from witnesses through the power of suggestion.

The imaginations of children (and adults) lead storytellers to a new "truth." For example, as loved ones age or die, we often see those surrounding them begin to diminish their character defects and hold their attributes in higher esteem. In addition, remembering our own positive personal

characteristics and minimizing failures is a way to reinforce the characteristics we want to develop (Carey, 2008). Finally, sociocultural pressures affect how we remember situations. Think of the 1960s—a time during which many U.S. families were divided over a broad number of issues, such as the Vietnam War and civil rights. Even with massive amounts of media footage, that era and family involvement (or noninvolvement) in the events of the era are often remembered by the actions of a few in the family, including the political leanings of the family.

Manipulation

By lying, family stories are easily altered. Whether "little white lies," lies of omission, lies arising from kindness, or totally invented narratives, lies are used to manipulate or to fabricate the family's stories. Both researchers and purveyors of popular culture agree that everyone lies (Boser, 2009; Bronson, 2008; Feldman 2009; Feldman, Forrest, & Happ, 2002; Gramzow & Willard, 2006; Kim, Kam, Sharkey, & Singelis, 2008; Kornet, 1997; Tyler & Feldman, 2005; Tyler, Feldman, & Reichert, 2006; Willard & Gramzow, 2009). Children learn to lie at early ages, and this ability is perceived as a sign of intelligence (Bronson, 2008). They often lie to avoid getting into trouble or to meet the perceived desires of adults guiding their lives. Rather than diminishing with age, lies become more complex and sophisticated with age. Think of the characteristics assigned to salespeople, lawyers, advertisers, and politicians—each spinning truths for profit. And consider how we as individuals link our self-presentations and identities to the things that we say to others and that we want to believe about ourselves. Exaggeration is not out of the question.

More collectivist cultures tend to expect members of society to lie as a sign of respect for the group culture (Kim et al., 2008). As in collectivist cultures, many of the stories told to organize, sustain, and perpetrate families contain intentionally or unintentionally manipulated elements. To protect family members from harm, we often soften our stories. Those who do not are perceived as rude, obnoxious, or brutally honest. Fabrication is often based in an effort to look good so that the storyteller is not demonized, and memory seems to reinforce the small fabrications so that they become canonized over time.

The great equalizer of false memories and manipulations of family stories is the group's memory. When stories are told in the family context, different sides of stories are exposed by individual family members. With enough witnesses to the telling and the collective memory of the story by the whole family, it is hoped that stories can remain fairly accurate (and, if not accurate, at least consistent). Still, stories told in home environments are most influenced by the designated tellers of the stories and the family members. Often the family spokesperson takes the telling position and, as such, is also placed in the role of memory keeper. Not surprisingly, most family stories can be expected to evolve over time.

I have one final comment about the storytelling process within families. Every family unit has its codes that trigger often-repeated stories. For example, when my wife is called "the matriarch of the family," it is the code for her siblings to remember that she is the firstborn—the one who is expected to remember their parents the most completely. "Matriarch" conjures up images and stories of grandparents and childhoods. These are stories of their youth, adolescence, and young adulthood—the good and the bad. Code statements are found in all families. The simple mention of an old home address can trigger the stories that surrounded that home, or a mere remark about a person causes all the old interactions with that person to resurface. Often these are enjoyable conversations because the family is looking backward in time. They do not have to cope with the stress they felt at the time of the event. Even the trauma of childhood losses can be minimized by adults when the losses are treated

historically. These code words and code comments are wonderful vehicles for initiation of rich and fulfilling family conversations.

Summary

My wife's family has a strong Methodist background and thus celebrates the Christmas holidays. For many years during our early relationship, she and her siblings would gather as a family unit at their parents' home. Having grown up in foster homes and institutions, neither religion nor the religious holidays held any deep significance for me. I have few childhood memories (fond or tragic) surrounding the religious holidays of my youth. After my wife and I were together for a few years, a strange thing happened:

> Billy (named changed to protect the guilty), the youngest of my wife's four siblings, stopped by the house on Christmas Day with his family. Billy, who was married and had two young children at the time, was beginning to establish family traditions of his own. Shortly after his arrival at his parents' house, he asked if we had made "the traditional Christmas Eve chili." I, of course, had no knowledge of the traditional Christmas Eve chili, so I did not react. Strangely, however, no one else in the family seemed to know what he was talking about either, so they sat around the living room trying to help Billy sort out his memory. In the early years, they remembered the traditional home-cooked meal and leftovers. And, in the later years, they remembered the traditional Chinese dinner on that occasion, but no one knew about the traditional Christmas Eve chili. Being the youngest of his brothers and sister, the assumption was that this tradition was started after the other three siblings had left home. A check with their parents, however, produced no memory of ever having had traditional Christmas Eve chili. Yet Billy was adamant. The family was stumped. Billy finally realized he was remembering Christmas Eve dinners with his college roommate's family.

I chose this family story to close this chapter for several reasons. First, it is a wonderful example of how family stories emerge. Second, it shows the use of code words. The phrase "traditional Christmas Eve chili" is now code for the story and for anyone in the family who has a false memory. Third, it shows how family values are manifested within family stories. The story shows the importance of maintaining family traditions in my wife's family. Fourth, it shows how Billy could not convince the family of the validity of his memory because he could not furnish the other family members with enough stories about past chili-eating occasions during the holidays. Finally, and clearly, memory (with some possible manipulation) has an active role in this family story and, as such, shows how family histories get constructed from memory with the use of stories.

The traditional Christmas Eve chili story is a simple example of a set of complex processes. With today's evotypical families in the United States, family stories are far more complicated, addressing an extremely broad number of issues. Stories are constructed about family issues from past marriages to births, from divorces to addictions, from race to adoptions, and so on. Yet the oral tradition remains instrumental for making sense of familial evolution. A student presenting a poster at the Eastern Communication Association's annual conference in 2011 shows her understanding of the significance of stories when she writes,

> A student presenting a poster at the Eastern Communication Association's annual conference in 2011 shows her understanding of the significance of shared stories when she notes that her family narratives contribute to her family's identity and her own self perceptions. She writes, "These processes have shaped the way we function as a group, as well as my individual sense of self. By partaking in these meaning-making processes regularly, my family is able to constantly contribute to our uniqueness as a unit and continue to uphold our identity." (Ball, 2011)

Family configurations and issues are ever expanding, and so are the stories emerging from contemporary families. In the past, I have shown how storytelling can be used to address health issues (Leoutsakas, 1996), orphaning issues (Leoutsakas, 2003, 2004), and family issues (Leoutsakas, 2008). While storytelling is an ancient tradition, it is a viable method for explaining and understanding the origins of new families, complex family issues, the development of modern families, and the activities and values of today's families.

Discussion Questions

1. What is it that makes storytelling necessary for human survival?
2. When considering the relationship between stories and family communication, why does this author believe that stories are "extremely important"?
3. Can you cite a narrative from your own family that has provided examples of beliefs or values that are endorsed by your family?
4. Explain narrative reasoning and how it may differ from individual family members.
5. How do stories help us to "dream" both as individuals and as family members? How do stories from your past help your family plan for the future?

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