

FAMILY STORIES AND THEIR IMPORTANCE IN THE PROCESS OF CONSTRUCTING THE PAST AND SHAPING IDENTITIES

In the field of folkloristics attention has gradually moved away from the distant past to include also questions concerning the immediate past and private life besides the public one. This has brought also family traditions into the sphere of research. Earlier, private life was considered interesting only if it could help to understand broader historical processes. However, when talking about the construction of the past and the importance of stories in this process, many similar phenomena can be observed in the spheres of both public and private life.

The past has an important role in building both national consciousness and identity of smaller groups and individuals. History is actively used for giving meanings to the present and the future, and interpretations of the past also change in this process. Thus usage of the past is a two-way process, where ideas about both the past and the present can be changed. The past is not ready-made, and things that can not be found in the past can be invented and added there. The importance of stories where the past is discussed does not depend on their truthfulness. As an Italian proverb says "If it isn't true, it's well invented" (see Holbek 1990, 108). Family folklore deals mostly with negotiating the past and the present, as well as family relations through storytelling.

Folklorists have drawn attention to processes of remembering and producing ideologies. However, as far as individual people are concerned, they are not usually aware of these processes. Family storytelling is an everyday activity, and as such hard to notice. These stories about sayings and doings of family members in different times are a part of general chatting and reminiscing.

My study of family stories (Vuorinen 2000) has almost literally been doing fieldwork at home; my informants are mostly either my family members or friends and their families¹. In this article, I will examine the production of the past via storytelling, usage of stories in creating individual and group identities, and the meaning of the family for present day people².

Production of the past through storytelling

Storytelling is a means of negotiating the "real" course of events, rebuilding the past. As Steven Zeitlin et al. (1982, 16) stated, stories are not merely reports about the incidents, but instead they form an essential part of our experiences. Experiences take on a more concrete and verified form through storytelling. Families (as well as other groups) are selfish and have a selective memory, when it comes to what they want to remember and pass on. Only certain incidents of the past will evolve into stories. For example, family stories mostly deal with positive memories, negative things are rarely discussed, especially with people outside the (nuclear) family.

The past is not an unchangeable construction. It is all the time contrasted to the present and the future, and thereby acquires new, varying nuances. People change (sometimes unconsciously) their stories of the past to suit the current situations, but do not necessarily even notice these changes themselves, and may go on believing in these new versions of the story. Stories can be true for the teller without being it from the "objective" point of view. According to Marianne Gullestad, it is possible to ignore the dichotomy between facts and fiction, because a recollection can be inauthentic from one analytic point of view and authentic from another (Gullestad 1996, 33). The meaning of stories and memories does not depend on their veracity (truthfulness), but is rather connected to experiences and what people believe or agree to be true. As Elizabeth Stone states, it is sometimes easier to alter the fact to accord with conviction than to change the conviction (Stone 1989, 167).

Recollections are thus not copies of the moments experienced earlier, and instead of one truth, there exist many possible verities of the past. Through stories people construct their own lives and represent them to others. It is not what people remember or forget that is relevant, but how they make use of different things as a part of their personal stories in a given situation (Langenhove & Harré 1993, 96). According to Anni Vilkkö, the thing that lasts in us and in our memories is not enduring images, but instead their continual re-experiencing and reconstruction (Vilkkö 1997, 47).

In discursive psychology memory has been understood as thoroughly interactive activity. Usually when we think about the past, it is perceived in dialogues with other people, and in this conversation different versions of the past

are produced, maintained, questioned or disproved. (Saarenheimo 1997, 68.) When it comes to family stories, producing and shaping of memories in the discussions among family members are easily discernible. People are usually together reminiscing and telling stories, they are rarely monologues (cf. Allen 1990, 236). “Many times when somebody begins to tell something, others also start to reminisce. Often this develops into a kind of a contest; who remembers the funniest story”(N11)³. The past is thus created together, and other peoples’ memories either confirm or disprove (possibly) vague memories of an individual. Without this verification memories can fade away, and become dreamlike, unreal.

Family stories can be thought of as personal narratives representing the family as a unit (Stahl 1977, 34). The stories of the others function as a continuation of our own experiences and our memory, and these two can sometimes be hard to tell apart. Also people and events from that are not a part of our personal experiences become a part of our memory through storytelling. As one of my informants wrote: “In my opinion, the most fruitful, real and enriching storytelling situations arise from shared experiences and memories. – Shared ‘experiences’ and memories may have come into existence during the earlier storytelling situations. For example grandmother’s wartime memories have gradually become ‘my memories’” (N21).

Creation of communities and a feeling of togetherness

One of the most often mentioned effects of family storytelling in the answers of my informants was that it enhances the emotional bonds within the family, increases the feeling of togetherness and brings the family together. “Family stories reinforce our belonging to a (certain) group, a family. Does not matter if they are funny or sad, they connect us with a longer continuity” (N27).

Usually stories tell about nice things. They bring along good mood and often express mutual caring.

– With these kind of stories people make world a better place to live in: they do create a feeling of security just by being there, even though few people realise their existence. When many people know the same story, they share a secret, which they are allowed to spread. – (N32)

However, there also exist negative stories, which can be used to give a certain kind of picture of a person one does not like or has a disagreement with.

When stories are used for strengthening the feeling of togetherness, a division between us and the others is emphasised, and a dividing line is created between family (or a certain part of it) and the outside world.

In my opinion people emphasise their shared history and memories via family storytelling: even if the circumstances were sad, it is still something you can share with your family members and which creates a feeling of personal history. Stories also emphasise the difference in person’s behaviour in family circle and in public: many things said and done in a family circle are not meant for the ears of outsiders, and on the other hand they reinforce bonds inside the family. (N16).

Family members share the experiences and memories (often repeatedly reinforced), whereas for outsiders the meaning of these is not the same. A shared past reinforces the feeling of belonging to the present group. An individual can experience this also negatively, for example if family relations are exacerbated and one would rather like to break away from the family ties than to reinforce them.

Family is increasingly built on emotional bonds, and relations to some part of the family are usually closer than to others. This affects also the storytelling; in a way we can say that emotions pass on family folklore. Stories are adopted from those persons with whom one is ready to share the feeling of togetherness. As personal narratives (see Stahl 1989, 37), also family stories are one way to create and enjoy a sense of intimacy. Only ‘the chosen ones’ are given inside information and trusted with family secrets (Разумова и Квасникова 1998, 115).

Family stories as a shared experience construct the family and define its boundaries: who are part of the group, what is us, what keeps us together and do we last from one period of time to another. The borders of the family are not unchangeable, but are variable and constructed anew in changing life situations.

Changes in family structure are also reflected in the stories, which adapt to new situations or help to rebuild the family and mark its boundaries (for example after divorce or new marriage). Through storytelling it is possible to restore the sense of community and keep the family together at least on an ideological level, even if the family has in fact already split up. Stories help to understand the history behind the present situation, and to perceive the elaborate network of family life.

Storytelling often acquires an additional importance during the periods of changes and crises (see e.g. Finnegan 1994, 118). At different turning points in life, people make up stories to better perceive and understand their changed life situations. Stories can be used for doing grief work after the death of a close one, and for example having a baby may inspire reminiscences of one’s own childhood. Actually the changes that inspire narrating do not have to be radical at all. Also little changes in everyday life may get reminiscing started.

When a family is living together, storytelling is a natural part of everyday life. However, it is possible to observe

that willingness to tell stories increases, when family no longer lives together. “Now people tell more about being together, when we are so rarely together” (M3). Stories can be the most important thing connecting for example siblings in a situation, where they have moved on in different directions. “Stories are a part of reminiscing, in which everyone participates. For me and my brother, remembering our childhood is somehow uniting and nostalgic. In other respects we are very different, childhood is an easy and natural subject (of conversation)” (N18). According to Ruth Finnegan, instead of forgetting, memories can be cherished increasingly or even exaggerated if the family breaks up. Shared traditions can live on and have an influence a long time after people thought they already detached themselves from the family ties. (Finnegan 1994, 119.)

Through storytelling also the background of the events is discussed – how family ended up in the current situation. In this way the mutual understanding between family members or between generations may grow. “Family members of different ages understand each other better when they know also about things that they did not necessarily participate in themselves” (N25). Many stories also teach the younger generation survival strategies and strengthen the belief in one’s own talents on many levels. These stories tell about the perseverance of family members’, about surviving contrary to someone’s expectations and coming through difficult times. The main characters in these stories are markedly women.

This kind of “we will make it” attitude has been especially important in the stories of minority families. Rina Benmayor et al. (1987) have in their article emphasised the strategic value of the family lore of Puerto Rican immigrants in America. Stories give historical perspective to current struggles, reflecting the strength and ingenuity developed through coping with adverse circumstances, and encouraging also the younger generation to struggle and perseverance.

Family stories and values as an essential basis for individual’s identity and world view

The self does not develop independently of other people. An individual always exists to a certain degree in relation to others, other people. Family and family-type groups (see Goodwin 1994) have a great influence on where we locate ourselves, how we experience ourselves.

Family stories have a great effect on people’s identities. However, stories can have diverse meanings for different people at different times. Comments and evaluations connected with stories form an important part of them, and reveal the meanings people give to the stories and the events. When discussing the influence family stories have on identities of family members, it is important to notice the positions people take in relation to them: approval or opposition? Through family stories family members are characterised and given certain roles. This has a great influence on individual’s self image, but he/she can also try to oppose it, break away from a given role. Family members may perceive past as a private sphere, and interpretations about it introduced by others can be taken as a threat or interference and rejected.

People use family stories when representing themselves to others. They pick up their own favourites from the family story reserve, and start to tell these stories to their friends and close ones. Through these choices and revising of the stories people either build continuity or emphasise difference in relation to their family and (different) family members. They create a picture of a person they were, are, or would like to be.

As Stone has written, we remain affiliated with the families we grew up in throughout our entire lives. As we seek for role models at some points of our lives (look outside ourselves at others and hope to become something these figures represent), these models can be found instead of fiction or movies also among our own relatives. Stone sees this as a way of achieving independence and of realising our most personal ideals without jeopardising our connectedness to our families. (Stone 1989, 199 – 200.) It should be realised, that people do not necessarily find their parents or siblings to be the closest relatives: a more distant relative can also be a soulmate.

Also nowadays it is important for people to be aware of their personal and family history, to have a kind of storehouse of memories, where they can compare their new experiences and memories and seek answers to the question why they are the way they are, to increase their self-understanding. For some people searching and building of the self in adolescence is closely connected to a growing interest towards own and family history. Family stories about one’s own childhood as well as about more distant past serve as a medium for building a self image.

In different phases of life different stories become significant. Changes in family structure and lives of individuals are reflected in storytelling, which becomes topical especially in more and less important turning points of life. Some stories about the bygone events can be found anew only later. They become significant in a new way, when they support the individual’s image about him/herself and match his/her current stage of life, and he/she is able to find a personal meaning in them. Some of the facts are found irrelevant, some important. With the repetition and time stories get revised to fit one’s own style and hopes. Using different emphasising and re-interpretations, stories are adapted to tally with self image. (cf. Stone 1989, 224 – 243.)

Storytelling is an integral part of the experienced world. Through storytelling our world gets new, diverse meanings, and is made understandable for ourselves and others. Talking about difficult subjects sometimes makes them more understandable or acceptable, whereas some people choose to keep silent about the negative memories. This is also a kind of reshaping of the reality: people hope that things they do not talk about will be forgotten. However, also denied stories continue to affect thoughts and activities of family members. The stories that are kept secret can have so powerful imagery that the rest of the family picks it up in spite of the silence, and finally the story may be re-enacted. (Eskola 1997, 81; Byng-Hall & Thompson 1990, 223.)

In many families values and stories that have been maintained and repeated, work as a material with which family members can compare their own decisions and lives. Stories have left their traces on people's ways to react and interpret the world around them. (Eskola 1997, 62.) This effect continues to exist, even if an individual consciously wants to act the opposite way. Our own decisions and other families are always compared (in good or in bad) to childhood family.

John Byng-Hall has pointed out, that the stories heard in childhood appear to be such a powerful truth, that the implications of changing it would be profound: "I would have to change my image of myself and my family" (Byng-Hall & Thompson 1990, 217). If necessary, it is possible to expressly try to change the stories. If they have a disabling, negative influence, they can be re-edited, and thus also the experienced reality can be changed (cf. Byng-Hall & Thompson 1990, 224.)

When thoughts and memories are given the form of a story, they become more concrete in a way, and receive others' recognition. Experiences become more real when they are verbalised. Reminiscences and stories are one medium that can be of use when people are looking for different possibilities of a multidimensional reality and future. Even if it is not possible to free oneself from the past, the past can be harnessed for driving force to new wishes, hopes and plans (Alasuutari 1989, 84). People return to the past again and again, using it in different ways. The past is seldom useless or irrelevant.

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¹I have collected material via a questionnaire (43 written answers) and (group)interviews, using also my own memories, stories and experiences as research material.

²With the word family I refer both to a smaller family unit living together (in Finnish *perhe*), and to a larger circle of relatives (*suku*).

³References to my material are in a form N15, M9 or H4, referring to a certain woman (N1-N34) or a man (M1-M9) who has answered my questionnaire, or to an interview (H1-H10).

Pihla Vuorinen. Family stories and their importance in the process of constructing the past and shaping identities.

When talking about the construction of the past and the importance of stories in this process, many similar phenomena can be observed in the spheres of both public and private life. Family stories are actively used for giving meanings to the present and the future, and for creating individual and group identities. The meaning of stories and memories does not depend on their veracity, but is rather connected to experiences and what people believe or agree to be true. The past is thus created together, and other peoples’ memories either confirm or disprove memories of an individual. Through their choices and revising of the stories people either build continuity or emphasise difference in relation to their family and family members. Also nowadays it is important for people to be aware of their personal and family history, to have a kind of storehouse of memories, where they can compare their new experiences and memories and seek answers to the question why they are the way they are, to increase their self-understanding. The past is seldom useless or irrelevant.