Aging and Family Policy: A Sociological Excursion

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The contemporary focus on family policy and old age has become increasingly important in social discourses on aging both within the discipline of Sociology and social policy practices of welfare institutions that attempt to define later life. Using the United Kingdom as a case study, sheds light on wider current trends associated with aging in United States, Canada, Europe and Australia. Social welfare is a pivotal domain where social discourses on aging have become located. Narratives are 'played out' with regard to the raw material supplied by family policy for identity performance of older people. Therefore, grounding developments in 'narrativity' provides a sociological framework to assess the changing discourses associated with family policy and older people as advanced through different policy positions.

Key words: *aging; narrative; family; grandparenting; social policy*

Introduction

A startling continuity across North America, Europe, and Australia, is that different governments recognize that the 'family' is essential for social and economic needs; epitomised famously by former UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's view that there is 'no thing such as society only families' (Biggs and Powell, 2000, 46). Families are made up of interpersonal relationships both within and between generations that are subject to both the formal rhetoric of policy discourse, and the self-stories that

connect them together. The concept of family is an amalgamation of policy discourse and everyday negotiation.

The rhetoric of social policy and the formal representations of aging and family provide a series of spaces in which identities can be legitimately performed. The 'success' of a family policy can be assessed from the degree to which people live within the narratives of family created by it. Further, the relationship between families and older people has been perpetually re-written in the social policy literature. Each time a different story has been told. It can be argued that the family has become a key site upon which expected norms of intergenerational relations are being built.

The structure of the paper is fourfold. First, we commence by mapping out the emergence of neo-liberal family policy and its relationship to 'family obligation', state surveillance and 'active citizenship'. Second, we can highlight both the ideological tenets of the subsequent social democratic turn and effects on older people and the family. Third, research studies are drawn on to highlight how 'grandparenting' has been recognised by governments in recent years, as a particular way of 'storying' the relationship between old age and family life. Finally, we explore ramifications for researching family policy and old age by pointing out that narratives of inclusion and exclusion co-exist if a sense of familial continuity is to be maintained.

The 'Master Narratives' of Aging and Family Policy: Neo-Liberalism and Social Democracy

Political and social debate since the Reagan/Thatcher years in US/UK, has been dominated by neo-liberalism, which claims the existence of autonomous individuals who must be liberated from 'big government' and state interference (Gray, 1995). Indeed, Walker and Naeghele (1999) claim a startling continuity across Europe is the way 'the family' has been positioned by governments as these ideas have spread across France, Italy, Spain and Denmark .

Wider economic priorities, to 'roll back the state' and release resources for individualism and free enterprise, had become translated into a family discourse about caring obligations and the need to enforce them. Further, it appeared that familial caring was

actually moving away from relationships based on obligation and toward ones based on negotiation (Finch & Mason, 1993). Family commitment has, for example, been shown by Pike and Bengtson (1996), to vary depending upon the characteristic caregiving patterns within particular families. Individualistic families provided less instrumental help and made use of welfare services, whereas a second, collectivist pattern offered greater personal support. Whilst this study focussed primarily on upward generational support, Silverstein and Bengtson (1997) observed that 'tight-knit' and 'detached' family styles were often common across generations. Unfortunately, policy developments have rarely taken differences in caregiving styles into account, preferring a narrative of 'individualized' role relationships.

There has been a developmental challenge to the hegemony of neo-liberalism through a social democratic alternative (Giddens, 1998). Indeed, social democratic policies toward the family arose from the premise that by the early 1990's, the free-market policies of the Thatcher/Reagan years had seriously damaged the social fabric of the nation state and that its citizens needed to be encouraged to identify again with the national project. A turn to an alternative 'third way', emerging under Clinton, Blair and Schroeder administrations in the US, UK, Germany and other parts of Europe (Walker and Naeghele, 1999), attempted to find means of mending that social fabric, and as part of it, relations between older people and their families. Despite the return of neo-liberalism under George W. Bush in US from 2000–4, the social democratic alternative has a venal presence in the UK. The direction that the new policy narrative took is summarised in UK Prime Minister Tony Blair's (1996) statement that 'The most meaningful stake anyone can have in society is the ability to earn a living and support a family'. Work, or failing that, work-like activities, plus an active contribution to family life began slowly to emerge, delineating new narratives within which to grow old.

Both Giddens (1998) in the UK and Beck (1998) in Germany, both key proponents of social democratic politics, have claimed that individuals are faced with the task of piloting themselves and their families through a changing world in which globalization has transformed our relations with each other, now based on avoiding risk. According to Giddens (1998), a new 'partnership'

is needed between government and civil society. Government support to the renewal of community through local initiative, would gives an increasing role to 'voluntary' organisations, encourages social entrepreneurship and significantly, supports the 'democratic' family characterised by 'equality, mutual respect, autonomy, decision-making through communication and freedom of violence'. It is argued that social policy should be less concerned with 'equality' and more with 'inclusion', with community participation reducing financial dependence.

Through a growing awareness of agism, the influence of European ideas about 'social inclusion' and North American 'communitarianism', families and older people found themselves transformed into 'active citizens' who should be encouraged to participate in society, rather than be seen as a potential 'burden' upon it (Biggs, 2001). A contemporary UK policy document, entitled *'Building a Better Britain for Older People'*, is typical of a new field of western policy, re-storying the role of older people :

"The contribution of older people is vital, both to families, and to voluntary organisations and charities. We believe their roles as mentors—providing ongoing support and advice to families, young people and other older people—should be recognised. Older people already show a considerable commitment to volunteering. The Government is working with voluntary groups and those representing older people to see how we can increase the quality and quantity of opportunities for older people who want to volunteer" (1998).

What is striking about this is that it is one of the few places where families are mentioned in an overview on older people, with the exception of a single mention of carers, many of whom 'are pensioners themselves'. The dominant preoccupation of this policy initiative is toward the notion of aging as an issue of lifestyle, and as such draws on the growth of the 'gray consumer' (Katz, 1999).

Whilst such a narrative is attractive to pressure groups and voluntary agencies; there is, just as with the policies of neoliberalism, an underlying economic motive which may or may not be to the long term advantage to older people and their families. Again, as policies develop, the force driving the story of older people as active citizens was to be found in policies of a fiscal

nature. The most likely place to discover how the new story of aging, fits the bigger picture is in government-wide policy. In this case the document has been entitled *'Winning the Generation Game'* (2000). This begins well with "One of the most important tasks for twenty-first century UK is to unlock the talents and potential of all its citizens. Everyone has a valuable contribution to make, throughout their lives". However, the reasoning is explained in terms of a changing demographic profile: 'With present employment rates' it is argued, 'one million more over-50s would not be working by 2020 because of growth in the older population. There will be 2million fewer working-age people under 50 and 2 million more over 50: a shift equivalent to nearly 10 percent of the total working population".

The 'solution' "third way" is to engage older people not only part of family life but also in work, volunteering or mentoring. Older workers become a reserve labor pool, filling the spaces left by falling numbers of younger workers. They thus contribute to the economy as producers as well as consumers and make fewer demands on pensions.

Most of these policy narratives only indirectly affect the aging family. Families only have a peripheral part to play in the story, and do not appear to be central to the lives of older people. However, it is possible to detect the same logic at work when attention shifts from the public to the private sphere. Here the narrative stream develops the notion of 'grandparenting' as a means of social inclusion. This trend can be found in the UK, in France (Girard and Ogg, 1998) Germany (Scharf and Wenger, 1995) as well as in the USA (Minkler, 1999).

Situation Grandparenting

In the UK context the most detailed reference to grandparenting can be found in an otherwise rather peculiar place—namely from the Home Office—an arm of British Government primarily concerned with law and order. In a document entitled *'Supporting Families'* (2000), 'Family life' we are told, 'is the foundation on which our communities, our society and our country are built'. . . . 'Business people, people from the community, students and grandparents' are encouraged to join a schools mentoring

network. Further: "the interests of grandparents, and the contribution they make, can be marginalised by service providers who, quite naturally, concentrate on dealing with parents. We want to change all this and encourage grandparents—and other relatives—to play a positive role in their families". By which it is meant: 'home, school links or as a source of social and cultural history' and support when 'nuclear families are under stress'. Even older people who are not themselves grandparents can join projects 'in which volunteers act as 'grandparents' to contribute their experience to a local family'.

Whilst the grandparental title has been used within the dominant policy narrative; bringing with it associations of security, stability and an in many ways an easier form of relationship than direct parenting; it exists as much in public as in private space. It is impossible to interpret this construction of grandparenthood without placing it in the broader context of 'social inclusion', itself a response to increased social fragmentation and economic competition. Indeed it may not be an exaggeration to refer this construal of grandparenting as neo-familial. In other words, the grandparent has out-grown the family as part of a policy search to include older adults in wider society. The grandparent becomes a mentor to both parental and grandparental generations as advice is not restricted to schools and support in times of stress, but also through participation in the planning of public services (Better Government for Older People, 2000).

This is a different narrative of older people and their relationship to families, from that of 'dependent' and 'burdensome'. Older people are now positioned as the solution to problems of demographic change, rather than their cause. They are a source of guidance to ailing families, rather than their victims. Both narratives increase the social inclusion of a marginal social group: formerly known as the 'dependent elderly' (Biggs and Powell, 2000).

First, each of the roles identified in the policy domain, volunteering, mentorship and grandparenting, have a rather second—hand quality. By this is meant that each is supportive to another player who is central to the task at hand. Volunteering becomes unpaid work; mentoring, support to helping professionals in their

eroded pastoral capacities; and grandparenting, in its familial guise, a sort of peripheral parent.

Second, there is a shift of attention away from the most frail and oldest old, to a third age of active ageing. It is striking that a majority of policy documents of what might be called the 'new aging', start from age 50. This interpretation fits well with the economic priority of drawing on older people as a reserve labour-force (Winning the Generation Game, 2000).

Finally, little consideration has been given to the potential conflict between ageing lifestyles based on consumption and those more socially inclusive roles of productive contribution, of which the 'new grandparenting' has become an important part. Chambre (1993) claims volunteering in the US decreases in old age. Her findings indicate the highest rates of volunteering occur in mid-life, where 66% volunteer. This rate declines to 47% for persons aged between 65–74 and to 32% among persons 75 and over. The UK charity, Age Concern, stated: 'One in ten grandparents are under the age of 56. They have 10 more years of work and are still leading full lives'.

What emerges from research on grandparenting as it is included in people's everyday narratives of self, indicates two trends. First, there appears to be a general acceptance of the positive value of relatively loose and undemanding exchange between first and third generations. Second that deep commitments become active largely in situations of extreme family stress or breakdown of the middle generation.

On this first trend, Bengston (1985) claims that grandparents serve as arbiters of knowledge and transmit knowledge that is unique to their identity, life experience and history. Similarly, Levinson (1978) claims grandparents can become mentors, performing the function of a 'life guide' for younger children. This 'transmission' role is confirmed by Waldrop et al's (1999) report on grandfathering. According to Roberto (1990) much US work on grandparenting has focused on how older adults view and structure their relationships with younger people. For example, Cherlin and Furstenberg (1986) found that African American grandparents take a more active role, correcting the behaviour of grandchildren. Research by Kennedy (1990) indicates, however, that there is a cultural void when it comes to

grandparenting roles for many white families with few guidelines on how they should act as grandparents.

Girard and Ogg (1998) suggest that grandparenting is a political issue in French family policy. They claim that most grandmothers welcome the role they have in child care of their grandchildren, but there is a threshold beyond which support interferes with their other commitments. In the UK, Hayden, Boaz and Taylor (1999) claim that 'when thinking about the future, older people looked forward to their role as grandparents' and that grandparents looked after their grandchildren and provided them with 'love, support and a listening ear', providing childcare support to their children and were enthusiastic about these roles. Coupled with this, the Beth Johnson Foundation (1998) found that older people as mentors had increased levels of participation with more friends and engendered more social activity.

Although, studies on Japan (Izuhara, 2000), the US (Schreck, 2000; Minker, 1998), Hispanic Americans (Freidenberg, 2000), and Germany, (Chamberlayne and King, 2000) provide little evidence that grandchildren are prominent members of older people's reported social networks.

Grandparental responsibility becomes more visible if the middle generation is for some reason absent. Thompson, (1999) reports from the UK, that when parents part or die, it is often grandparents who take up supporting, caring and mediating roles on behalf of their grandchildren. The degree of involvement was contingent however on the quality of emotional closeness and communication within the family group. Minkler, (1999) has indicated that in the US, one in ten grandparents has primary responsibility for raising a grandchild at some point, with care often lasting for several years. This trend varies between ethnic groups, with 4.1% White, 6.55% Hispanic and 13.55 African American children living with their grandparents or other relatives. It is argued that a 44% increase in such responsibilities is connected to the devastating effects of wider social issues, including AIDs, drug abuse, parental homelessness and criminal justice policy.

It would appear that grandparenting activities are rarely an integral part of 'social inclusion'. Minkler's analysis draws atten-

tion to 'race' as a feature of social exclusion that is poorly handled by policy narratives afforded to the family and old age.

Conclusion

Each policy phase of the Reagan/Thatcherite neo-liberalism of the 1980s and early 1990s, the Clinton/Blairite interpretation of social democracy in the late 90s, or the Bush administration, leaves a legacy. Moreover, policy development is uneven and subject to local emphasis, which means that it is quite possible for conflicting narratives of family and later life to coexist in different parts of the policy system. Each period generates a discourse that can legitimate the lives of older people and family relations in particular ways. Part of the attractiveness of thinking in terms of narrative, that policies tell us stories that we don't have necessarily to believe, is the opening of a critical distance between description and intention. Depicting policies as stories, rather than realities, allows the interrogation of the space between that description and experiential relations.

In terms of critical reflection,we need to ask what does the examination of social policy discourse and everyday stories of family and aging tell us?

First, a significant element in the 'riskiness' of building aging and family identities under contemporary conditions may arise from the existence of multiple policy discourses that personal narratives have to negotiate. Future research on the management of identity, should, then, be sensitised to the multiple grounds on which identity might be built and the potential sources of risk and uncertainty may bring.

Finally, the multiple sources for reconstructing stories 'to live by' and the tension between legitimising discourses and alternative narratives of self and family, would suggest that identities are managed at different levels of awareness. There are implications here for the practice of social research. The story that the researcher hears and then records may be tapping a particular level of disclosure, depending in how the research itself is perceived. Stories of aging and family provide a rich seam for theorizing and researching the positioning of identity performance and social welfare practices.

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