

On being a 'good' mother: The moral presentation of self in written life stories

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Presenting a moral self

- 'Moral life takes place in storytelling' (Frank, 2002: 17)
- Vocabularies of motive (Mills, 1940)
- Personal narratives as 'a moral philosophy of how one ought to live' (Ochs & Capps, 2001: 46)
- 'Good' parenting: making moral choices in relation to children (Smart & Neale, 1999; Ribbens McCarthy *et al.*, 2003)

Life stories

- Kvinnoliv i Svenskfinland (translation: Women's lives in Swedish-Speaking)
- *Written* life stories – a Finnish peculiarity?
- Two sets of life stories (n=31)
 1. Women who have contemplated divorce (n=18 – 4 ended up divorcing)
 2. Women who are/have been lone mothers (n=17 – including 4 from above)

Putting the children first

- Can a wish to divorce be morally defensible?

The problems came with my husband's career advancement, he worked longer hours, the business dinners became more usual, his consumption of alcohol increased. The children and I felt we were neglected, the moments together and shared family activities became less frequent, besides which they were characterized by stress, nervousness and fights. (KLiv 14, born 1920s)

The children began also to suffer from the discord even though it was less frequent because my husband rarely showed himself at home. (KLiv 119, born 1950s)

- Deciding not to divorce – the importance of the ‘good’ father

But he was a good father. He had patience and he played a lot with the children. (KLiv 112, born 1940s)

- Deciding to divorce – protecting children from harm (the ‘bad’ father)

The child [sic] was seven weeks old when [my husband] for the first time went into a rage. My heart leapt because it was no longer a question of just me. The worst was that the baby at that moment was lying on my lap being ‘burped’. Not even this stopped him! This was the first time I seriously realized the danger that lay ahead! If he could not stop himself in front of his own newborn child, what would ever stop him? (KLiv 95, born 1940s)

I thought for a long time that I should keep our marriage together for the sake of the children, but after thinking about it for many weeks I came to the conclusion that this would be wrong of me. Children do not thank you afterwards for having done so and neither can they have a secure upbringing if the parents' relationships is not working. (KLiv 48, born 1940s)

- The 'press release' (Wiersma, 1988):

They were also rigidly adhered to, almost like a code, and—when heard as a group—sounded almost uniform. (Wiersma, 1988: 210)

Being a 'good' lone mother

- **Successful parenting (older generation)**

When I look back at my life I often wonder how I managed it all, all my children graduated and they set off in their lives without any student loans. (KLiv 61, born 1920s)

- **Successful parenting (younger generation)**

The most important thing in my mind was that I provide my children with safety, that I be physically and emotionally present. I always answered their questions and dressed them nicely. I let them dirty their clothes if they were having fun, and did not want to cut their playing time short. In the evenings I tried to study parenting, I attended courses and sought information also from the baby-well centre. I so wanted to be a good mother, so that my children would feel that they were loved. In fact I think I succeeded in this quite well. (KLiv 87, born 1940s)

His openness has held. He remains social by nature, there's clearly nothing wrong with his self-confidence because the teachers both at his school and his music school say that he is an intelligent and harmonious boy with good self-confidence. From the little boy who used to accompany me to choir performances he has developed into a good piano player and even sings in a choir. He has friends and enjoys both reading and playing ice hockey with the kids from the neighbourhood. (KLiv 95, born 1940s)

Narrating a moral dilemma – spoken vs written data

- Face-to-face interviews provide more scope for presenting ambivalences and potentially 'risky' material
 - Based on phased interaction and dialogue
 - Possible to gauge audience reaction as narrative being told
- Written life stories do not offer this opportunity for dialogue or for ensuring the audience's positive judgement
 - More cautious presentations of self, formulaic 'press releases'
- Personal narratives: moral 'cleansing' and seeking exoneration