

Divorce in Finnish women's life stories: Defining 'moral' behaviour

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Synopsis

The aim of this article is to examine how women with children define 'moral' behaviour in relation to the issue of divorce. The data consist of life stories written by married Finnish mothers who say that they have contemplated divorce or separation. The analytical focus is on how the decision process is narratively constructed. The theories around a feminist ethic of care provide the theoretical framework for the discussion, and I examine how concrete individuals in specific situations negotiate morality. The narrators present their decision to divorce or stay married as a moral dilemma and argue for their own solutions in moral terms. I also consider the consequences of using an ethic of care in the study of divorce.

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Theorists have located the main cause for the rising divorce rate in contemporary Western societies in individualization, coupled with developments in gender equality (e.g., Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1991). One result of these developments has been that women are now more independent financially, and are therefore more able to leave an unsatisfactory marriage. In addition, it is now thought to be more acceptable for parents with children to divorce and to place personal happiness before that of other family members. At the same time, there is much popular and scientific concern over rising divorce rates, partly believed to be the result of divorce being 'too easy'. In addition, there is concern that divorcing parents are acting somewhat immorally by putting their own happiness before that of their children. The purpose of this article is to examine the arguments that mothers who have contemplated divorce use for their decision to either stay married or divorce. Using the concept of an ethic of care, I analyze the life stories of married

Finnish mothers who say that they have contemplated divorce.

Tradition meets individualism

Current sociological theories chart the individualization process in (late) modern societies as an explanation for the changes in family life and values that have occurred in Western societies. According to these theories, life has become a planning project and the standard biography has been replaced by the biography of choice (Bauman, 2001, p. 147; Beck, 1994, p. 15; Giddens, 1991; Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). This destandardization of human life has extended to family relationships which used to be regulated by tradition but are no longer (solely) determined by tight universal rules and norms. Rather, they have to be constantly negotiated and justified (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995).

One aspect of such biographies of choice examined by Giddens is the emergence of the 'pure relationship',

which he defines as “a social relation which is internally referential, that is, depends fundamentally on satisfactions and rewards generic to that relation itself” (Giddens, 1991, p. 244). Consequently, individuals no longer remain in relationships because it is the done thing, but rather re-evaluate them constantly, terminating them if they view them to be unsatisfactory or beyond repair (cf. Giddens, 1992).

Giddens defines the pure relationship as a relationship between two adults, while the parent–child relationship, because it is defined by biological ties, remains different, more traditional. Biological determinism aside, Giddens does not discuss how the emergence of such a ‘traditional’ relationship within the context of the pure relationship affects the latter. Smart and Neale (1999) have pointed out that with the birth of children, the dyadic pure relationship becomes a triadic relationship with a different dynamic (cf. Simmel, 1950). Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) and Kuronen (2003) argue that the adult relationship and parenthood have become separate, with the one not being a necessary component for the other to exist.

Giddens and Beck do not discuss morality in connection with the pure relationship; it is as if, in the absence of absolute rules, couples in these relationships reach their decision to separate or divorce without reference to norms and without considering possible (moral) ramifications of their act. But the lack of absolute rules or norms cannot be equated with a lack of any guidelines or norms. There has been a fair amount of research on how morality and values manifest in family life. In their work on family responsibilities, Finch and Mason (1992) argued that, indeed, there exist no absolute responsibilities and obligations. However, they found that family members do feel they have obligations that are partly derived from shared cultural norms. These relational obligations are negotiated in the context of individual relationships and evaluated according to principles such as fairness and justice. This points to a further problem with Giddens’s ‘pure relationship’, i.e., its universal nature: the concept is not grounded in everyday practices and does not consider issues such as gender or ethnicity. Thus the concept is morally and contextually void.

Smart and Neale (1997) have argued, in line with Bauman (1995) that the eroding of absolute rules governing our lives has not led to an amoral society, but to a society where individuals are highly aware of their life choices being moral ones. This does not mean that the choices people make are necessarily better or more

‘moral’, but that “actions appear to the moral selves as matters of responsible choice—of, ultimately, moral conscience and responsibility” (Bauman, 1995, p. 43). Smart and Neale (1999) have further criticized the analyses of Giddens, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim for their lack of focus on ethics. Smart and Neale incorporate a discussion of a feminist ethic of care into their analysis of parenting after divorce or separation, and argue that people are competent moral philosophers (Smart & Neale, 1999). Divorcing parents do not abandon moral values but go through a process of balancing competing needs, obligations and value judgments (cf. Sevenhuijsen, 1998).

In their work on parenting in step-families, Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards, and Gillies (2003) have identified the obligation to put children’s needs first as an almost non-negotiable moral obligation, especially for women. This, however, does not mean that all parents define children’s needs similarly. In the process of positioning themselves as moral agents, the parents in Ribbens McCarthy et al.’s (2003) study came to different conclusions as to what constitutes moral behaviour.

Smart and Neale (1999) have examined the effect that having a child has on the relationship between divorced spouses. The purpose of this article is to examine what effect being a parent has on a relationship when it is in danger of breaking down. Similarly to Smart and Neale, I do so through the lens of a feminist ethic of care.

A feminist ethic of care

The concept of a feminist ethic of care has been developed by feminist philosophers (e.g., Benhabib, 1992; Tronto, 1993b), and has been applied by social scientists such as Sevenhuijsen (1998) and Smart and Neale (1999). The concept entails that what is moral cannot be determined through abstract principles, but has to be evaluated by taking into account the complex dilemmas facing concrete social actors (Tronto, 1993b, p. 248). An ethic of care requires a social actor to weigh the best course of action in a specific circumstance (Sevenhuijsen, 1998, p. 59). According to Benhabib (1992, p. 128), individuals exercise moral imagination when faced with moral dilemmas, and this imagination is based on dialogue and discourse.

Tronto (1993b, p. 249) argues that morality is defined not in terms of universal rights and responsibilities, but of particular relationships of care. Thus moral problems are expressed in terms of maintaining a web of relationships, which in turn help sustain moral autonomy (Benhabib, 1992, p. 51). Attentiveness, the

recognition of a need, is one of the moral aspects of caring (Tronto, 1993a, p. 127) through which a moral self seeks to understand the standpoint of others (Benhabib, 1992, pp. 9, 51). Another moral aspect of caring is responsibility (Tronto, 1993a, p. 131). But an ethic of care is not solely focused on caring for others. A morally mature person understands the balance between caring for the self and caring for others.

Life story narrators tend to present themselves in a positive light (Vilkko, 1997) as 'moral' beings and thus life stories contain accounts of moral dilemmas—or of everyday dilemmas from a moral perspective. Hence, in this article, I employ the concept of a feminist ethic of care to the issue of women's decisions over divorce in order to examine the ethical or moral dimensions that are involved in such decisions. Furthermore, a feminist ethic of care directs the analytical focus to take into account crucial issues such as gender and the balancing act of providing care for others and caring for oneself, particularly when children are involved. I examine how concrete individuals present their moral dilemmas regarding divorce, looking at the specific situations in which they have negotiated a 'moral' course of action.

Familialism and individualism in Finland

An important dimension in how individuals define moral behaviour is their social context. Therefore, in this section, I focus on the ideological climate in Finland in the past half a century to examine how divorce generally has been defined from the point of view of morality. There have of course been other factors, such as significant changes in the positions of women in Finnish society, that have also affected the phenomenon of divorce.

In Finland, there have historically been differences between social classes, and between rural and urban areas in divorce behaviour and attitudes towards divorce (Allardt, 1953; Koskelo, 1979; Mahkonen, 1980). The differences in family ideology can be traced back to traditional collectivism, or traditional familialism, based mainly on Christian values, and to modern individualism, as found, for instance, in social reformism (Allardt, 1953; Mahkonen, 1980). Familialism defines divorce as an act against the sanctity of the family, whereas individualism falls on the side of the individual's right to happiness. Elements of both can be found in family ideology in Finland throughout the twentieth century (cf. Jallinoja, 1984).

Since the 1950s, the increasing industrialization, urbanization and secularization, and rising level of

education have been accompanied by a liberalization of general attitudes towards sexual morality and divorce (Koskelo, 1979, pp. 57–61; cf. Stone, 1990). In addition, the emotional aspect of marriage has become more important than the financial aspect and individuals (especially women) have become more able to maintain financial autonomy outside a family context (Koskelo, 1979; Reuna, 1997). Consequently, individuals expect emotional gratification from marriage, the emphasis having increasingly shifted to psychological harmony and emotional intimacy between spouses (Jallinoja, 2000; cf. Giddens, 1992). The effect on women of these various social developments has been significant, as shown for example by Strandell's (1984) study, which concluded that younger generations of Finnish women began in the 1970s to question and discard the notion that a wife and a mother should sacrifice her own happiness for that of other family members.

Proponents of the individualistic view on families became more vociferous in the 1960s, demanding that people should have the right to decide for themselves when to end a marriage (Jallinoja, 1984, 50–51). Even proponents of familialism revised their opinions and during the 1960s accepted the view that 'destructive' marriages should be allowed to end (Jallinoja, 1984, 51). Changes in Finnish divorce law reflect the changing ideological climate. The old divorce law from 1929 was based on the idea of the common good of marriage that was to be protected (Mahkonen, 1980, p. 199). This was in 1988 replaced by new legislation that reflected the individualistic notion that people should be able to realize for themselves when their marriage had irretrievably broken down, without having to convince a court, an external authority, of this (Jaakkola, 1989).

The social changes have continued to the present day, although the disagreement between proponents of familial family views and individualistic ones still continues. It is, however, debatable whether Finland has become, or is in danger of becoming, the individualistic (and hence anti-familial) society feared by many (e.g., Jallinoja, 2000). Finnish people continue to hold relatively traditional views on family, for example preferring a family based on biological ties to being single, and professing that an 'intact' family is preferable to a divorced family (Ritala-Koskinen, 1994; Reuna, 1997). Many researchers, however, argue that the detraditionalization thesis as espoused by Giddens and Beck holds true also for Finland (e.g., Airaksinen, 1994; Eräsaari, 1994; Jallinoja, 2000).

Methodology

The data for this study comprise life stories written by Finnish women. These were collected in 1995 by a project called *Kvinnoliv i Svenskfinland* (Women's Lives in Swedish-Speaking Finland). The project was initiated by the Institute for Women's Studies at Åbo Akademi University in Finland. Brochures and bulletins were sent out, urging women to write their life story, with the result that 130 women contributed. Of these, I chose the life stories written by married mothers who write that they have contemplated separating from their husband while their children were still under 18 and living at home. The data were restricted in this way because in the general debate around divorce, most of the concern is expressed over divorces that occur among couples with minor children.

I found eighteen such life stories. Four of the narrators decided to go ahead with the divorce, while the remaining fourteen remained married. The narrators were born between the 1920s and the 1960s, and describe experiences of marital unhappiness from the 1940s to the 1990s, thus covering the post-war period of modernization and increasing individualism in norms concerning divorce.

Six of the life story writers come from an urban background, seven grew up in the countryside, and two in small country towns. Eleven narrators have a middle-class background, and four come from a working-class family. Three of the narrators do not say where they grew up, or whether they came from a middle-class or a working-class background.

The life stories are used as case studies, with the aim of understanding the subjective meaning of events and the connections between an individual life and the larger social context (Laslett, 1990, p. 416). As Graham (1984, p. 119) states: "stories are pre-eminently ways of relating individuals and events to social contexts, ways of weaving personal experiences into their social fabric". To the sociologist, studying life stories is useful for what they reveal about social life—culture "speaks itself" through an individual's story (Riessman, 1993, p. 5). The present study therefore focuses on the life stories as meaning-making constructs and on how the life story writers define 'moral' behaviour for themselves in the context of their own family lives when it comes to the issue of divorce. Of course the life stories are written with hindsight and do not offer a direct way into the experience of deciding over divorce. Therefore, the focus of this article is on how the narrators argue for the final outcome of their decision, either divorce or continuing with their marriage.

Problems external and internal to the relationship

There are four types of problem that the life story writers describe as the sources of their marital unhappiness: the husband's alcoholism, the husband's violence, unfaithfulness, and growing apart. Only one of the narrators describes that she contemplated leaving her husband because she herself had fallen in love with someone else. The narrators often list a number of sources of unhappiness, but usually highlight one as the root cause. As shown below, the types of argument used for staying or leaving are similar in the life stories that depict alcoholism and violence, while unfaithfulness and growing apart lead to a different type of reasoning.

The narrators with alcoholic and violent husbands see the problem of their marriage as lying outside their relationship, even outside their husband; violence and alcoholism are therefore not expressions of his 'inner core'. Thus it becomes understandable that not all of the narrators see their husband's alcoholism as a reflection of their marriage, and one narrator expressly states that it was not:

There was no personal antipathy between us, no grudges, no unwillingness to be together. The external circumstances had driven us to this point [of possible divorce]. (KLiv 14, born 1924)¹

The narrators who describe their husband's alcoholism often present the problem as originating in their husband's work which requires him to wine and dine customers or business partners:

Then came a time with many trips, evenings out, weekend courses, and so on, and the family saw father at home more and more rarely. Gradually alcohol came into the picture. It became worse and worse, and the 1970s is a time I would rather forget. (KLiv 114, born 1932)

The drinking increased. [My husband's] work "tempted" him because he could be away from home for weeks sometimes. In any case there was a lot of drinking, fights... (KLiv 9, born 1949)

Perhaps surprisingly, also a husband's violence is described as a problem external to the husband's character and thus not a problem in the relationship itself. The narrators whose husbands physically abused them describe ways in which his countenance or behaviour departed from the normal during the violent attacks:

But then I see his staring look, the one that always comes when at some point during his attacks he

becomes so livid that his whole physiognomy and psyche change. (KLiv 95, born 1943)

Previous research (e.g., Hearn, 1998; Hautamäki, 1997) has shown that when violent men talk about their violences against women (Hearn, 1998), they describe violence as residing within them, teased out by a woman's behaviour. In the life stories in this study, the narrators present the husband's violence as completely the opposite. His violence is not an expression of his 'inner core' or his 'real' nature, but an aberration that the narrators do not explain by referring to his personality. Rather than lying dormant within the husband, violence and alcoholism are presented as alien characteristics that invade him. This gives a key to understanding why the reader in many cases receives conflicting information about the husband: a brutal or alcoholic husband can also be described as "a good father". If a narrator portrays her husband's violent behaviour or excessive drinking as alien to his real character, it is possible for her to describe him as an essentially good man who can reform his ways. Alcoholism and violence therefore emerge as tangible problems that something can be done about.

In contrast, the narrators who say they have grown apart from their husbands perceive the origin of their marital problems to lie in their husband's personality. The problem is thereby an integral part of their relationship, and the narrators present it as more difficult to solve.

The narrators who tell that their husband has been unfaithful also tend to present this as an unsolvable problem. The pain may go away, but trust is hard to reinstate, and some painful scars are always left. Unfaithfulness is an act against the relationship itself, partially destroying it. One narrator describes a continued lack of trust: "Having to learn to trust one's husband again has been and is difficult, but each day is taken as it comes." (KLiv 119, born 1956). Another narrator indicates that were she able to forget her husband's infidelity her pain might go away: "Now the pain is no longer as 'sharp', but it exists – still – underneath. Will I never forget?" (KLiv 1, born 1932). A third narrator alludes to how her husband's affair with another woman permanently changed their marital relationship: "This did not lead to a break-up in our marriage, but our relationship was never the same and I found it very difficult to get over what had happened." (KLiv 114, born 1932).

Reasons for wanting to leave

In this section, I discuss the reasons the narrators provide for having wanted to leave their husbands. It is

important to keep in mind that only four of the eighteen narrators say that they ended up divorcing their husbands. As will be seen in the following section, for the other fourteen narrators, the arguments for staying weighed heavier. Of the narrators with alcoholic and violent husbands, the two who left their husband justify this action with the well-being of their children. The first narrator witnessed her husband's violent behaviour towards their child. Her husband was also a poor provider, using his salary on drink and other pleasures. The narrator says that she had no way of arguing with her husband: "I did not dare say anything, he got his fits of rage and then he hit me black and blue" (KLiv 81, born 1931).

The second narrator describes how her decision to divorce was prompted by her fear that her husband's aggressiveness would one day be directed against their new-born baby. The narrator describes how she realized, during the first violent attack soon after the birth of their son, that her child was also in danger:

My heart leapt because now it was no longer a question of just me. The worst was that the baby just then was on my lap to be "burped". Not even this stopped him! It was now that for the first time I seriously realised the danger that lay ahead! If he could not control himself in front of his small newborn baby, what would ever stop him? (KLiv 95, born 1943)

The narrator makes it clear that she is aware that leaving her husband was not solely beneficial to her son: "Was I hurting the child, when I in this way robbed him of his father?" (KLiv 95, born 1943). However, she emphasizes that her wish to protect her son from physical harm outweighed the potential damage of growing up without a father. Examined through the lens of an ethic of care, the narrator describes how she was faced with a complex dilemma and, after balancing competing needs, came up with what in her mind was the best course of action (Tronto, 1993b; Sevenhuijsen, 1998).

These two narrators are thus reasoning from the viewpoint of an ethic of care. A mother's most important task is to protect her children, which is what these narrators believe to have done by leaving their violent husbands. They have been attentive to the needs of others and themselves, and taken responsibility for these (cf. Tronto, 1993a). They are also maintaining and safeguarding a relationship, the one that is generally defined as the central family relationship, that of the mother and child. They portray their decision as finding a balance between the competing values of

lasting marriage and protecting children. These narrators recognize their decision as a moral one that has no easy solution (Bauman, 1995). Nevertheless, the second narrator expresses concern over the effect her divorce has had on her children. The fact that the first narrator does not do so can perhaps be explained by the 10-year age difference between them, with divorced women of younger generations being deeply imbued in discourses over the importance of male role models in the lives of children (cf. May, 2003).

Many of the other narrators with violent and/or alcoholic husbands took initial steps towards divorce, either moving away from home or filing for divorce, but in the end returned. They present their concern for the well-being and happiness of their children as a reason for why they intended to leave:

I and the children felt ourselves neglected, the shared moments and work between family members became all the more infrequent, besides these moments were characterized by stress, nervousness, fighting. (KLiv 14, born 1924)

I started to think more and more about divorce. Everyone suffered because of our conflicts. I knew that it was wrong but I could not manage any longer. It would be better for the both of us if I moved out. I started organizing the divorce papers without telling anyone. I had decided that I would move out. (KLiv 112, born 1947)

Also the children started to suffer from the disharmony even though this was seldom, as my husband very rarely showed himself at home. (KLiv 119, born 1956)

Thus these narrators also are relying on an ethic of care, arguing that as mothers, they are duty bound to consider the well-being of their children. As will be shown in the following section, these narrators present the well-being of their children also as a reason for in the end remaining in their marriage. This shows that what is best for children is not always self-evident, as many of the narrators feel that their children would have suffered whether their parents stayed together or divorced. This underlines the importance of examining concrete situations, not general rules or prescriptions when defining what constitutes moral action (cf. Tronto, 1993b). The individualization thesis barely mentions the issue of morality, let alone the concrete negotiations that individuals go through with themselves when weighing up various alternatives each with its own moral implications. Shifts in demography

such as rising divorce rates say very little about what such acts mean in the everyday lives of individuals.

The two narrators who describe themselves and their husbands as incompatible and decide to divorce use their own individual happiness as a reason for leaving. There are, however, significant differences in how they are able to justify their decision in relation to their children, which I attribute to the 30-year gap between the events described. The first narrator divorced her husband in the 1950s, causing a scandal. She implicitly accepts, or accepted at the time, the blame placed on her, and offers this as an explanation for why she agreed to give custody of their child to her husband:

In November 1948 I walked out of [my husband's] villa with minimal luggage – not much that was there was mine – after having promised him that he could keep [our son] with him. It was after all I who was unnatural and egoistic and furthermore impractical. He had persuaded me that he with his resources could better take care of the child than I could, we would co-operate over everything else. (KLiv 71, born 1920)

This narrator sees that she paid the ultimate price of losing her child in order to gain fulfillment in her life. In her case, the need to care for herself overrode the cultural imperative for mothers to stay with their children. The narrator makes it clear that she is aware that her decision did have moral implications. She describes this episode in her life in painful terms; painful both for herself and those around her, especially for her child and her mother:

It was not only [my son] who was affected by my actions—it is not too much to say that this destroyed mother. (KLiv 71, born 1920)

The second narrator left her husband in the 1980s. By this time it was more acceptable for a wife to leave her husband on grounds of irreparable breakdown of the marriage, and the narrator was secure in her knowledge that her financial situation was good enough to support her children. Like many other narrators, this narrator, too, says that she contemplated continuing her marriage for the sake of her children, but that in the end she decided that they would not benefit from living with two warring parents:

I thought for long that I should keep our marriage together for the sake of the children, but after many weeks of contemplation I realized that in that case I would be doing the wrong thing. Children do not

thank you afterwards for having done it and they cannot have a secure upbringing if the relationship between their parents does not work. (KLiv 48, born 1944)

The feeling of pain or guilt evinced by this narrator is different than in the previous life story. This is understandable, as the younger narrator did not have to give up her children, whereas the older narrator did, thus going against what is generally defined as 'proper' motherhood: a mother never puts her own happiness before that of her children and never 'abandons' her children. Thus the older narrator is unable to present her actions as fully morally justifiable. In addition, when the younger narrator divorced, in the 1980s, a woman who wanted to leave her husband was no longer defined as 'unnatural' or 'egoistic' as she would have been in the 1950s. Therefore, the younger narrator can say that leaving her husband represents an act of independence and courage, one she does not regret: "Once I had made up my mind, I realized it was the best decision in my life." (KLiv 48, born 1944).

So far, the life stories offer some support for Giddens's (1992) thesis that marriages today are based not on tradition, but on pure relationship. The narrators present their marriage as based on emotions, and as such prone to re-evaluation if this emotional bond undergoes change. The relationships described in the life stories are not ones that continue automatically or unquestioned. Thus, marriage is not taken for granted, but emerges as a relationship that has to be kept going through the efforts of the two adult parties involved. However, as I will show below, the fact that the narrators' descriptions of their *marital relationship* have elements of pure relationship in them, this does not automatically entail that they present their *marriage* in the same light. For them, there are other, often more important, reasons for keeping the marriage intact even after the pure relationship between husband and wife has withered. Marriage thus emerges as an institution that does not rest solely on the relationship between the spouses.

Reasons for staying

In this section, I examine the reasons the narrators provide for ultimately remaining with their husbands. In many of the life stories where the husband is described as violent or alcoholic, the narrators use their emotional bond to their husband as a reason for staying—even the two narrators who eventually di-

vorced stayed with their husband for years, and therefore their reasons are also examined here. The husband's violence or alcoholism had dented these emotions, but the emotional bond was not completely severed.

The difficulties at home did not get better with time. In pure desperation I took my belongings and moved away from [my husband], even twice, but always returned. The ties were strong, we had been married for so long, and of course there were still feelings, also on my part. (KLiv 116, born 1921)

The following narrator points out how there were also good times, and how these helped keep positive emotions alive:

At times there were calmer periods, a few weeks, months. Hope returned: imagine if we could after all build a future for ourselves. We had our love after all. Did we? Was this love? (KLiv 95, born 1943)

The narrators also present their husband's promises to mend their ways as a reason for continuing with their marriage:

And then all the straws I clutched at! He said that it was the last time! He will never, ever lift his hand against me. He promised. Begged for forgiveness. He begged me to come back. He cried and begged. This straw was enough for me. And I accepted it each time. Time after time. Only to be equally disappointed once again after a while. (KLiv 95, born 1943)

[My husband] promised solemnly never to drink again. He also stopped smoking and we bought a house. Six years went well, I thought. [My husband] started drinking again. He blamed it on the lack of jobs... (KLiv 9, born 1949)

Thus for these narrators, a moral course of action is to try to maintain the relationship with their husband, by emphasizing that despite the problems they still had an emotional bond with their husband, who after all did promise to try to mend his ways. The husband as a character seems divided in these life stories. On the one hand, he is the man who drinks or is violent, while on the other hand he is the man the narrator fell in love with and continues to have feelings for.

Many of the narrators argue for their decision to stay in their marriage within a family context—it is not only the marital relationship that matters, it is also the whole family that they have taken into account. Thus they see

their marital relationship not as a dyadic relationship, but as the basis for a larger web of relationships. And it is in order to maintain this web of relationships that they stay married (cf. [Tronto, 1993b](#), p. 249). Importantly, none of the narrators who stayed with their violent and/or alcoholic husband indicates that their husband ever hit their children. On the contrary, they point out that their husband was a good father: “But the children’s father was mostly nice towards them, and that helped a lot.” (KLiv 108, born 1935). Another narrator praises her husband’s parenting, despite his alcoholism and long absences from home: “he was a wonderful father when he was one. We always said quality before quantity!!” (KLiv 119, born 1956). The same narrator repeats this sentiment at the end of her life story, emphasizing how important it is for her that her children have a good father: “My husband is a very good father and this is very important since the children are the biggest piece of me.” (KLiv 119, born 1956). Thus these narrators define themselves first and foremost as mothers and position themselves as responsible for the continued existence of the whole family. Most importantly, it is their task to provide for and secure their children’s well-being. They present a good relationship with the father as a central contributing factor to a child’s well-being. Thus, if the father is a good parent, the mother must ensure that the father remains a part of the family even though on another level she may wish to end the relationship. In other words, these women see themselves as key to the success of the father–child relationship. Examined through an ethic of care, the narrators present their problems as moral ones concerning the continuing existence of a web of relationships (cf. [Tronto, 1993b](#)).

But some of the narrators with alcoholic and/or violent husbands present also other, less uplifting reasons for why they remained married. Some narrators recount how they gradually isolated themselves from friends and family in order to hide the fact that their husband drank and/or beat his wife. They write about how their husband gained almost total control over their lives, causing the narrator to modify her behaviour and actions:

I was to do as he wanted, wished, demanded, if not for anything else then for the sake of peace at home. [...] And he got me to give him a lift into town [to go drinking]. I was like any other alcoholic’s wife, again. I did as he told me to. (KLiv 9, born 1949)

Out in the streets I walked with downcast eyes so that he would not get the idea that I knew the men who walked past us. (KLiv 95, born 1943)

These narrators are in effect describing the ‘normalization process’ of violence ([Lundgren, 1998](#)). During this process, the violent man subordinates his female partner by isolating her and increases her mental dependency on him by alternating between violence and tenderness: “A man who with one hand caressed me and with the other hand beat me” (KLiv 95, born 1943). The abused woman at first tries to end the violence by modifying her own behaviour, but after a while this strategy becomes a way of surviving.

Thus we see that there are other forces than emotional involvement that can keep a woman married to an alcoholic or violent man. She may feel incapable of leaving him and beginning a new life on her own, or she may be afraid of his revenge if she attempts to terminate the relationship. In many of the life stories quoted above, the relationship no longer afforded any pleasure to the narrator—on the contrary, it was the source of great personal pain and anxiety, and was described as a prison.

In the life stories where the narrator says she had grown apart from her husband, such strong emotions, both negative and positive, as above are not presented. On the contrary, it is the lack of love, trust, and companionship that is the cause for the marital unhappiness. Children are presented as the reason for staying; the children are not to suffer:

I have thought that I will put up with it for the sake of the children until [my youngest son] reaches 18 but he is only 12 now so we will have to see how it goes. (KLiv 62, born 1951)

And even so our marriage has held. We celebrated our golden anniversary a few years ago. Of course I have been ready to pack my bags several times, but the children were not to suffer. I was myself a child of divorce and I did not want my girls to go through that experience. (KLiv 33, born 1922)

But he was a good father. He had patience and played a lot with the children. (KLiv 112, born 1947)

These narrators present the marital relationship as being as good as dead. The glue that keeps the couple together is again the narrators’ ethic of care towards their children and the family as a unit. They stay with their husbands in order to ensure that their children grow up with a father, a father who the narrators admit is a good parent. This leads me to concur with [Smart and Neale’s \(1999\)](#) criticism of Giddens’s concept of a

pure relationship as essentially too simplistic to capture how individuals live their family lives. The narrators in the present study describe how they have balanced the needs of their children with their own needs, and have decided that the former take precedence.

Also the following narrator, who herself fell in love with another man, decided not to divorce her husband on account of her children:

He wanted me to leave my family and follow him to [country] where he had his home but I could not build a new life by making three people unhappy, I just could not leave two small children and a sick husband. Now when I look back at it I think I did the right thing even though it was a very difficult choice. (KLiv 21, born 1926)

It is interesting to note again the effect that time has had on family relationships. As with the earlier example (KLiv 71), where the narrator only felt herself able to leave her husband if she let him have their child, the narrator above defines the situation similarly. She does not even contemplate taking her children with her, as most contemporary women would, but simply states that she could not face leaving her children. It is also noteworthy that she at this juncture points out that her husband was ill, thus underlying her ethic of care. In other words, she does not feel that a mother can leave her children, nor a wife abandon a husband who needs her care.

For the narrators, marriage is more than the relationship between themselves and their husband—it is the glue that keeps their family together. In all of the life stories the well-being of the children becomes central to the arguments for staying or leaving. It would appear that it is difficult to argue for leaving a marriage purely on the basis of a personally unfulfilling marital relationship, if the children are in no way seen to be at risk of harm (cf. Smart and Neale, 1997). It appears as though the life story writers wish to convince the reader that they have had the best interests of their children in mind. Most of the narrators thus present their marital decisions as those of a *mother*, not as those of an 'independent' individual.

Janet Finch (1989) proposes that in contemporary Western societies, family relationships and obligations are negotiated commitments rather than responsibilities taken for granted—family relationships nowadays have to be worked out. Indeed, the life story writers in the present material describe their marital relationships as relationships that need work and negotiation. Yet, the responsibilities that the narrators take upon themselves

as mothers reflect the traditional stance of a mother's automatic obligation towards her children (cf. Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2003).

In doing so, the narrators engage with a particular ideological framework, that of the dominant family ideology in Finland in the latter half of the twentieth century, which states, among other things, that two parents are better than one, and that marriages are based on emotions. The narrators seem to implicitly accept the nuclear family ideology as signaled by their portrayal of themselves and their actions within this framework. The narrators do this by presenting their children as central, and by presenting their acts as those of mothers, not of individual women.

Conclusion

The life stories do not describe 'pure relationships' but rather relationships that are constituted and maintained by a mixture of obligations and an ethic of care. In this balancing act, children are key. The life story writers ultimately construct their choices as ones they have made with the well-being of their children in mind. Both leaving and staying are constructed within this framework, either as leaving a father who presents a potential risk to the children's well-being, or as staying with a father who has a positive impact in their lives. Thus these life stories show that although in post-separation situations, the adult relationship and parenthood are separate (cf. Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Kuronen, 2003), this is not necessarily true for families before separation. The narrators portray these relationships as intrinsically linked.

Focusing on an ethic of care makes palpable the moral and ethical issues that confront individuals in various situations and how they define themselves as moral beings. The image of modern societies portrayed by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) and Giddens (1992) is somehow morally and contextually void. The image of individuals engaged in 'pure relationships' that last only for as long as the interests of the parties are fulfilled is not borne out by the life stories. Employing the concept of an ethic of care brings to light a different image of modern relationships, demonstrating how individuals are guided by moral and ethical considerations *for others*.

There are traces of the pure relationship in how the narrators describe their marital relationship, but pure relationships do not happen in a vacuum (cf. Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1996, p. 25; Smart & Neale, 1999). In the life stories in the present study, they are embedded within a familial framework, where other considerations and other relationships often take precedence.

Here lies an apparent contradiction between a modern view of adult relationships and a traditional view of parent–child relationships. An approach based on a feminist ethic of care is able to encompass this complexity: these women were individuals in adult relationships but also mothers who defined themselves as responsible for their children's well-being while also balancing their own needs and the needs of others.

Individuals facing moral dilemmas often have to find a balance between caring for the self and self-sacrifice. It is particularly the relatively powerless in society who are found to be too self-sacrificing (Tronto, 1993a, p. 141). From this point of view, the fact that so many of the narrators say they have sacrificed their own happiness in the face of powerful discourses on the superiority of the nuclear family, raises the question of to what extent gender equality and women's release from oppressive cultural practices has succeeded in Finland. It would appear that the narrators are to a significant degree guided by gendered prescriptions of what a mother's duty to her children and her family is.

The life stories illustrate how families with two parents are thus not solely based on the relationship between the parents, but also on the web of relationships between the parents and their children, which continues to be governed by (partly traditional) gendered discourses. Thus when children enter the picture, Giddens's genderless pure relationship becomes 'tainted' by tradition. And in the end, it would appear that the pure relationship is not defined by itself, but by this traditional relationship that in a sense envelopes it.

Endnote

¹ The excerpts from the life stories presented in this study are my translations from Swedish. I have translated the quotations into standard English, therefore dialects in the original are lost. However, I have tried to stay true to the form and style of the texts, which means that they are not all grammatically correct. If a narrator has, for instance, not used punctuation marks such as commas and full stops, I have not added them to the translation. I have provided the narrators with pseudonyms and anonymized the excerpts. In some cases, I have omitted a sentence or two, but never longer passages. These are marked as [...].

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