



St. Thomas University

A narrative ethics for person-centred care

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promoting best practice in dementia care

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Thesis:

That a narrative or storytelling approach to ethics is better aligned with person-centred dementia care than the current dominant ethical framework of principlism

- Outline of principlism
- Critique of principlism
- Role of narrative in person-centred care
- Toward a narrative ethics

Health care ethics:

Dominated by principlism

- Autonomy: Self-governance or being able to act freely in accordance with a self-chosen plan
- Beneficence: Doing good or contributing to the welfare of others
- Non-maleficence: An obligation not to inflict harm on others
- Justice: Providing fair and equitable treatment

Claims of principlism:

- Universal – while people may disagree because of individual beliefs or cultural practices they cannot disagree on the moral standards underlying those beliefs
- Principles are simple, accessible and culturally neutral
- Generate a common moral language
- Cluster together a common set of moral issues

Mis-alignment between principlism and person-centred care (PCC):

- People are unique, local, embodied – abstract, ‘universal’ principles not appropriate
- Principles are not universal but embed Western ideas and assumptions – do not address cultural diversity
- PCC engenders moral character – principlism excludes such from consideration
- PCC focuses on individual’s needs and relationships – principlism does not allow for special moral obligations based on relationships

Problems with principlism (2):

- No concept of personhood – persons are simply objects of ethical reasoning
- Individuals are ethically substitutable – no recognition of uniqueness
- PCC focuses on the ethics of relationships with individuals, principlism reduces ethics to a sub-set of decision-making theory
- Principles take precedence over people making the decisions

Two stories:

Mum's dog

Dinner with Elsie

Why storytelling might help

Humans as storytelling beings

- We make sense of ourselves
- We understand our experience and the world in and through narrative, others and the world through stories
- We communicate through stories
- Stories do not simply exist in the world but **act** in the world – they make a difference

PCC recognises the importance of storytelling through its focus on/use of:

Life histories (e.g. StoryCorps, Life Story Network)

Reminiscence (e.g. CIRCA)

Memory boxes

Storytelling (e.g. TimeSlips)

Therapeutic narrative relationship

Values histories

The ethical encounter:

- The meeting of two (or more) narrative beings
- Constituted and communicated narratively
- Produces narratives that act in the world

The ethical encounter is also:

- Unique – the meeting of the Self and the Other
- Irreducible to pre-determined principles, theories or policies

“To reduce the Other who calls me as a unique self in the face-to-face to a set of a priori moral principles is a violence to her alterity.” (Robbins, 2000)

Stories are unique, local, contextual

Stories are culturally diverse in content and form

- (e.g. Chinese narrative theory relies less on linear emplotment, consistency of voice or mimesis)

Stories allow for, and often centre upon, special relationships

- (to family, friends, to those to whom we have made promises e.g. Taken, Liam Neeson)

Stories deal with characters and relationships

- so all are part of the story
- all have a particular role to play
- they are thus un-substitutable

Stories play a part in character development

- who we are is constituted (not reflected) in the stories we tell (George Bailey in *It's a wonderful life*)

Criteria for a narrative ethics:

Emergence from background

- Does the story make sense against the background of what we already know?
- Are the important characters in the person's stories still 'acting in character'?

Narrative repossession

- Authorship
- Narrative environment
- Form

Prevent narrative foreclosure:

- Dead ends, where the future is already locked into certain possibilities
- The point of no return where one must decide whether one can continue in one's story the way one has been
- Irrevocability – a sense of impossibility in changing or repairing what has been done
- Existential despair - no possibility of reopening one's narrative, and that the end and/or death is imminent.

Establish a live-able narrative for all parties

Accommodate complexity, richness, irony,
multiplicity

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