

Kinship on TV¹

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During recent years, DR the Danish public service television station has launched several documentary serials that focus on kinship and genealogy. Serials such as *Sporløst* (Find my family), *Ved du hvem du er?* (Who do you think you are) and *Slavernes slægt* (Slaves in the Family) all focus on biological kinship either as the primary topic of the series or as an organizing and meaning giving device that provides a point of identification that can simultaneously serve as a vehicle for telling other stories.

All of the serials, however, privilege a biocentric notion of kinship and a tight relation between biological kinship and identity, taking for granted that knowing one’s biological kin automatically leads to a better understanding of one’s personal identity. The paper discusses the possible implications and consequences of this conceptualization of kinship, and it is argued that while the serials reproduce biocentric notions of kinship, they also in practice illustrate how pragmatic kinship is.

¹ An expanded version of the analysis of Find my Family will appear in *MedieKultur* (Frello. Forthcoming). In Danish.

KINSHIP ON TELEVISION

Over the last 5–6 years Danish public service television (DR) has aired at least four serials that one way or the other focus on people searching for their unknown relatives. While one of them, *Slaves in the Family*, creates a narrative that is focused on criticizing Danish colonial history through family histories (Frello 2004/2006; 2010, Marselis 2008), the rest of them are tightly managed concept-driven reality type tv.

The search for unknown relatives always – that is, in all of the serials – involve travelling to foreign countries. This is an interesting aspect in itself – what the image of the journey adds to the story about kin lost and found and how travelling out is metaphorically turned into travelling ‘home’ in some sense – home to your true identity (Frello 2008). However, in this paper I will concentrate on the specific construction (or constructions) of kinship that is going on, and on the possible consequences of this construction. I will use examples from two of the serials: *Find my Family* (Sporløs) and *Who do you think you are?* (Ved du hvem du er?). Both of these are internationally applied formats. *Find my Family* is Dutch (originally titled *Spoorloos*) and *Who do you think you are?* is British.

KINSHIP, KINNING, RELATEDNESS

If you want to study kinship, the obvious choice is to turn to anthropology. Kinship has been a central topic for anthropology since the birth of the discipline. However, the role attributed to kinship and the theories applied in studying kinship have changed considerably. Basically there has been a move from a structural or functional understanding of kinship as a basic feature of culture, to an understanding that focuses on practice and discourse. This change means that kinship is not so much considered something stable that can explain other cultural phenomena. Rather it is seen as negotiable and changeable and dependent on relations of power.

Kinship, in our part of the world, has traditionally been understood in terms of blood relatedness. The “indigenous assumption in Euro-American folk beliefs” (Carsten 2000:8) is a biocentric (Howell 2007) and biogenetic one (Carsten 2004, Kim 2007, Yngvesson 2007). However, it is a notion that has a specific history and cultural context, and a notion that is under pressure.

If we look at kinship practices in our part of the world today, we will find that they come in very different forms. This is due to new reproduction technologies, new genetic knowledge and technology, and a considerable political and cultural change when it comes to rules and acceptance concerning homosexuals and transgender persons – including possibilities of parenthood for singles and non-heterosexual couples.

As Signe Howell points out, relations of kinship involve a process of kinning. It is not simply a question of establishing who is related to whom. Notwithstanding biology, kinship needs to be practiced in order to be. Therefore, some anthropologists also prefer talking about ‘relatedness’ rather than about ‘kinship’, because ‘relatedness’ precisely points to the fact that relations can be of many kinds, and that the important issue is not blood and biology, but the meaning that is attached to specific relations and how we practice them (Carsten 2000; 2004).

AMBIVALENCE: BIOCENTRISM AND PRAGMATISM

These reconceptualizations of kinship are very much in line with the general constructivist turn that the social sciences and the humanities have gone through during the last twenty years or more.

Meanwhile, popular media go on producing biocentric narratives about the decisive role of biology in securing a strong and stable sense of identity for the individual. In the kinship serials on Danish television, the biocentric narrative functions as a master narrative in the sense that it is a dominant narrative that denies its own narrativity (Somers 1994).

I will argue, however, that while the serials reproduce biocentric notions of kinship, they also in practice illustrate how pragmatic kinship is, and how much it depends on the process of kinning, no matter how biocentric the narrative is.

Hence, my argument is twofold:

- The master narrative of the serials is biocentric. And because it denies its own narrativity, it is also normative.
- Despite the denarrativization of the biocentric master narrative, there are considerable cracks in it, and this demonstrates that kinship is also always pragmatic.

DESCRIPTION OF THE SERIALS, FIND MY FAMILY AND WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?

In the following, I will give a brief description of the serials, Find my Family and Who do you think you are? and a few illustration of how the biocentric master narrative is conveyed.

Find my Family is a Dutch concept that has been exported to a number of countries, such as Denmark, Sweden, Australia and the United States. It is extremely popular in Denmark. It is usually in the top ten of non-news programs on DR.

In each program we follow a person who is looking for an unknown close blood-relative. Often the protagonists are transnationally (and transracially) adopted and have no memory of their birth parents. Or they were brought up by their Danish birth-mother, while their non-Danish father is unknown to them. The producers of the program organize a trip where they bring the protagonist to their country of origin or their father's home country in order to unravel the history and find the blood relatives. The search is completely planned, controlled and conducted by the producers. The protagonist has no active role in the search.

The programs are designed to evoke emotions. Emotions are part of the marketing of the serial. E.g., the description on the Swedish homepage on tv4 says:

“During the emotional travel back to the past, the participants are confronted with unknown parts of their lives and the missing bits finally fall into place.”

(“Under den känslofyllda resan tillbaka till det förflutna konfronteras de medverkande med okända delar av sina liv och de saknade bitarna faller slutligen på plats”.)

Hence, it is an emotionally charged journey even before it starts. In the programs, the close connection between biology, identity and emotion is constructed in a wide variety of ways through the use of images, voice-over, interview with the protagonist, music and the role of the journalist who is in charge of the search.

Furthermore, most of the protagonists contribute willingly to the biocentric narrative. The following quote can serve to illustrate this:

Well, it is like my whole life. It is so huge, you know. Because I lack a part of me. Because there are so many questions, you know. It is simply beyond description. It takes up so much room. And it will definitely make my life perfect. (Adriane) (Jamen, det er lige før, det er hele mit liv. Det er så utroligt stort, altså. Jeg mangler jo en del af mig. Der er jo så mange spørgsmål ikke også. Det, det er jo simpelthen ubeskriveligt. Det fylder meget. Og det vil i hvert fald gøre mit liv fuldendt.)

Who do you think you are? is a British format that has also been exported to several countries, including the United States and Denmark. In the program, we follow celebrities in search of their family history, assisted and guided by the producers. The search always involves a journey to far away places (at least in the Danish version), and it centers on the more colorful

ancestors and the hidden, dark stories. It concludes with the protagonist contemplating what he or she learned from the history, and these contemplations typically focus on how the identity of the protagonist changed due to the knowledge they now have of their family history. A small extract from the program on the Danish tv-journalist Puk Elgård can serve to illustrate this:

Puk Elgård realizes that her ancestors over a period of 300 years include both Vitus Bering, a famous Dane, who spent a large part of his life in Saint Petersburg in Russia, and a poor peasant who due to poverty drowned himself in a small pond. When she contemplates what she learned from the journey, she says, that she is happy that she found out that her family contains these contrasts, because: “All my life has been built on contrasts, so I am not surprised that I needed to embark on a trip like this in order to find out, where I came from” (Puk Elgård) (“Hele mit liv har været bygget op på kontraster, så det undrer mig ikke, at jeg skal sådan en tur for at finde ud af, hvor jeg kom fra”).

And she goes on emphasizing that:

If you don't have the pond [where the peasant drowned himself], then you don't have the golden domes [of the churches in St. Petersburg] either. Then you don't realize it. You don't appreciate things. (Puk Elgård) (Hvis ikke man har vandpytten [som husmanden druknede sig i], så har du heller ikke guldkuplerne [i Sankt Petersburg, hvor Bering slog sine folder], så ser man det ikke, så sætter du ikke pris på tingene).

BIOCENTRISM AND PRAGMATISM

Both serials are overtly biocentric in their basic presentation of kinship. And this biocentric notion of kinship also carries with it an essentialist notion of identity: The basic claim they make is, that when we dig out the truth about our ancestors, we dig out the truth about ourselves.

However, they also both convey cracks in this master narrative, and therefore they also demonstrate that although kinship may be conceived primarily in terms of blood relations. And although blood relatedness may be imagined to be decisive for our identity (as when Puk Elgård tells us that she thought she might be Jewish, and that this possibility made her think that she needed to be involved in the synagogue). Still, the serials also demonstrate that even blood relations are pragmatically included in – or excluded from the identity.

In *Who do you think you are?* the pragmatism is very obvious. Even though the programs very much appeal to the idea of ‘finding yourself’ through learning about your genetic pre-history, still the main purpose is to tell entertaining stories. Sometimes the ancestors in question are very remote – e.g. a cousin to the great great great grandfather. Usually we are provided with a graphic illustration of the family tree, but in Puk Elgård's case, Vitus Bering is apparently so remote, so they give up even illustrating how the relation is. It is simply stated, that Puk is related to Bering who lived 300 years ago. And still, she concludes stuff about her identity on the basis of being related to him, as illustrated earlier.

In *Find my Family*, the pragmatic element is less obvious, but it is there. It is primarily seen in the hierarchization and the replaceability of primary relatives. In the serials, adopted children always look for their birth mother. They never mention the biological father. And they very often state that finding the birth mother will fill out a hole in their identity that has haunted them all their lives. However, when the mother cannot be found – or when she is dead or unwilling to meet them – then the father or some siblings are just as fine. The protagonists typically conclude that the hole in the identity has been filled and now they know who they are, somehow.

TENSIONS IN POPULAR NOTIONS OF KINSHIP

- Biocentric normativity versus practical pragmatism

People who cannot anchor their identity in the knowledge of close blood relatives are routinely met with questions concerning belonging or lack of belonging. They are confronted with the expectation that they lack something and that they must have a deep longing to fill out the presumed hole in their identity by finding their birth mother and/or father.

Examples from the literature on adoptees illustrate that no matter what adoptees may think about their own identity, still their identity is "discursively positioned as potentially crisis ridden" (Petersen 1009:19, my translation, BF).

This suggests that the preferred narrative of the media is not just about innocent entertainment. It has a normative function. Popular tv programs like *Find my Family* and *Who do you think you are?* contribute to this problem because they reproduce and naturalize the biocentric master narrative.

This fact does not, however, necessarily reflect a general exclusive support for a biocentric family practice among the majority of the population. People practice relatedness in all kinds of ways.

Therefore, on the one hand, the biocentric normativity of the programs is out of touch with current family practice. On the other hand, the ambivalence and pragmatism that is found in the programs reflects the ambivalence and pragmatism in everyday life.

What separates adoptees from others may not be some 'lack' or 'hole' in the identity due to not knowing their biological parents. Maybe what they 'lack' is a chance to participate in the general experiments with processes of kinning and de-kinning on par with people who are biological "secure". Knowing your biological ancestors is a privileged position. Not necessarily because it gives you knowledge of your 'identity' or because it makes you feel more 'whole' but because you are recognizable in terms of the biogenetic master narrative. You don't have to account for who you are in the sense that adoptees have to. And maybe this is an important aspect of what attracts audiences to programs like *Find my Family*.

As Yngvesson and Mahoney put it:

Adoption captures public imagination, securing the identities of those who observe from the safe location of entitlement to a 'whole' identity (Yngvesson and Mahoney 2000:83).

Furthermore, we who occupy this 'safe location of entitlement to a 'whole' identity' are free to experiment. We can look for points of identification in our family history and claim that 'blood is thicker than water'. Or we can denounce family altogether and create new forms of relatedness. We are not confronted with the suspicion that we are somehow 'unrelated' and therefore maybe also 'unreliable'.

Maybe what the adoptees 'lack' (if anything) is not 'knowledge' of 'themselves' and their 'identity', but rather the freedom to interpret biology as they please. Pragmatic kinship is for those who have a choice, while people who 'lack' bio-kinship lack the possibility of choosing.

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