THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 27, 2014

SESSION VI: ROLES AND BIOGRAPHIES

Jan TROST, Uppsala University, Sweden

FAMILY SECRETS

**Keywords**: secrets, skeletons, symbolic interactionism, interviews, metaphors

Secrets change by time. What was once a secret might become a non-secret and a non-secrete might become a secret. As an example: Recently we have seen legislation pro and against homosexuality. Some societies have changed from being conservative toward more liberal and some are acting in opposite directions. Changes of family secrets is likely going in the same way as do societal changes, or more correctly: they go hand in hand, with more or less of a lag connected to other family values.

My theoretical perspective is what usually is called symbolic interactionism (e.g., Addams, 1902, Simmel, 1908, Thomas & Znaniecki, 1918-1920, Mead, 1934, Blumer, 1969) which i. a. means an emphasis on defining the situation, social interaction, symbols, activity, and present time for the individual. Data on which the theoretical perspective is used are based on qualitative interviews and literature studies.

Some of the family secrets are based upon conflict in the family and some upon conflicts or occurrences outside of the family, but still can be family secrets. Family is here looked upon how the informant him or herself, or the one referred to, more or less clearly defines family, what is looked upon to be family at the specific event or occurrence.

An old Swedish saying is “what two know, everyone knows”. There is a lot of truths in that saying, but it is not the truth – there are varieties. For example, in a family unit a secret might be known to all, but not known by outsiders. When time goes the secret might be forgotten to some and some new members might not have any knowledge about the secret at all.

An example of a case in my data set: some years ago a son and his wife had a baby. When the baby was a couple of months old they visited the son’s parents for some days. One day just before dinner
the baby was cranky. The grandfather was very strict as to dinner attendance. The baby didn’t sleep. A hard word gave another hard word as an answer and eventually the grandfather told the baby’s mother to leave the next morning. The father of the baby was loyal to his wife. The father told all three to leave for ever. He had no son anymore. Early next morning they left and were non-existent for the old man and his loyal wife. Present at this occasion was a daughter/sister. Some years later the son and his wife divorced and the son moved back to his home town and was accepted by his parents. Another some years later I asked the daughter/sister about the tragic event. She denied that it had ever happened. A family secret where the skeleton is safely hidden – all the others have died.

Data from various cases dealing with suicide, denial of mental illness as well as unfaithfulness will be analyzed and interpreted with the theoretical perspective used.

References