

Turning into my Mother: ageing and the ambivalent experience of family resemblance

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Family Resemblance

- Family resemblance as ambivalent experience and a force to be reckoned with
- Two cases to illustrate some of the issues
- Implications for how we understand the experience of ageing

Example 1 – Susanna and her parents

- A family portrait on the occasion of Susannah's graduation.
- A way of introducing some key themes in understanding resemblances.

Jennifer: Right. Okay. And do you think that there are resemblances between you?

Susanna: Yeah. Definitely. I mean, mostly I get that I'm a fifty-fifty split exactly of both of my parents.

Jennifer: Right. Right.

Susanna: A lot of people say I look just like my dad, and a lot of people say I look just like my mum.

Jennifer: Okay.

Susanna: So, I mean, I always get the family resemblance thing, everyone's always saying, you know, you look so much like

Jennifer: "My you look like" /

Susanna: "My, you look like each other." So (laughter) erm, yeah, basically.

Jennifer: And what do you think? Is it a fifty-fifty thing? What do you think?

Susanna: I think so. I think so. I mean, in photographs, I can always see a definite, like, I think it's a definite fifty-fifty split, to be honest, yeah.

Jennifer: Right. Okay. And which bits?

Susanna: Well, (overlapping)

Jennifer: Which fifty percent do you get from each? Okay.

Susanna: the nose and eyes and, from my dad.

Susanna: And face shape. Actually, most from my dad. And then, I don't know, just something about my mum's face that looks a little bit similar to mine.

Jennifer: Kind of a, rather than specific features, a kind of

Susanna: as the whole, kind of, package rather than individual things

Jennifer: Okay. Aw! (to Eleanora who is smiling proudly)

Eleanora: I'm happy to look like her, or happy to have her look like me, or whatever. (laughter)

Jennifer: What do you two both think? I mean, do you agree with that?

David: Yeah. Yeah.

Eleanora: Well, actually, I, I think that, I do think Susanna looks considerably more like her father, than she does like me.

(overlapping)

Jennifer: Right. (overlapping)

Susanna: Got the same shape eye bags.

Eleanora: Although, although I've also been told that we have similarities.

Jennifer: Yeah.

Eleanora: I have similarities with her. I can't actually work out what they are specifically.

Jennifer: Right.

Eleanora: So I would agree with what Susanna said.

Jennifer: Right. Okay.

Eleanora: Erm, yeah.

David: Agree with all of that.

Jennifer: You agree with all that?

David: Yeah.

Susanna: There we go.

Jennifer: And how about other resemblances in the family, do you, do you resemble anybody else in the family, or...

David: No.

Susanna: No.

Eleanora: Mmm, yeah, you do, er, the, no?

Susanna: No.

David: No. She's got a brother, and you couldn't tell they were related.

Susanna: Completely different.

Jennifer: Really?

Susanna: A hundred percent different.

Eleanora: Not on Dad's side of the family?

Susanna: No, I don't think that I look like anyone else in the family, especially not my brother.

Jennifer: Right. But you do, do you?

Eleanora: That's interesting, cos I was under the impression that you thought you looked more like, erm, dad's side of the family.

David: No

Susanna: No.

Jennifer: Right. Okay. Well

Eleanora: And I, I always think that Susanna's skin is more like my husband's side of the family. Erm, yeah, because they're, they're even, even paler than we are.

Jennifer: Right.

Eleanora: So, erm

Jennifer: What about in temperament and personality and that kind of thing?

Susanna: Erm, I couldn't answer that (long pause)

Eleanora: Well (overlapping)

David: I can, I'll answer that, Susanna's much more like me, because we, we do things very quickly, we multitask, we get everything done, we've got no patience, er, and we don't, we don't, sort of, do things slowly, we don't wait around, we don't like wasting time, we hate wasting time. So in that sense, if we're doing something together, we get it done really efficiently. (overlapping)

Jennifer: Right.

David: And we, we both move at quite a speed.

Susanna: Yeah. I agree with that.

Jennifer: You agree with that?

Susanna: Yeah. I agree. So definitely, I think, personality more on this side.

Jennifer: Okay.

Eleanora: But can I add, I'd like to add something, cos that's absolutely right, there's no way I can keep up with them in terms of speed, but I'm more extrovert, erm, and Susanna's more like me in that way I think.

Jennifer: Right.

Susanna: Okay (doubtfully).

Jennifer: You agree with that? You're not sure?

Eleanora: you don't, you don't look like you do agree.

Susanna: (making a face in disagreement)

Whatever you think (dismissively).

Jennifer: You can talk about it later.

(nervous laughter)

Susanna: Yeah.

Eleanora: No, fine, but at, at a party, I, erm, okay. (overlapping)

Susanna: Okay. Whatever. No. Sorry. (overlapping)

Jennifer: And do you have your picture taken together very often?

Susanna: No.

Eleanora: Not often, no. Occasionally.

Jennifer: You don't like it?

Eleanora: Oh, I do.

Susanna: It's fine.

David: It's fine, fine.

Jennifer: Okay. Well, I'm sorry, I've prolonged the agony.

Susanna: No, it's good, no, it's good. It's good.

Jennifer: Okay.

Susanna: It's all right. It's a happy occasion, we'll all just smile and enjoy it

Turning into her mother?

- A brief encounter, becomes highly charged quite quickly
- Moments (occasions, role of photos), and striking resemblances that hit you (including we the audience)
- Visible, sensory, in/tangible, undeniable - quality and character of resemblance. Aura – relational association.
- Negotiation, resistance, delight, ambivalence, tension. Different positioning, alliances. Part of existing/ongoing power dynamics. Resemblance matters.
- Familiar discourse, narratives and counter narratives – these things have been debated before (life narratives)
- Potent and sticky. A force to be reckoned with. Hard to shake off

Example 2 – Isabel, aged 55

Isabel's son and her ex husband

Isabel: But they're quite similar in not being... settled down, grown up people. And yet he hasn't lived with his father since he was two years old so there's no nurture about it then, so there's a nature thing there...I think there must be something that's just there in that because that's such a strong resemblance in a way that I think there must be some gene thing there. Yeah,

Jennifer: Do they look alike?

Isabel: They ... don't really look alike.. Actually they do look a bit alike. They sound alike.

Jennifer: Do they? Their voices?

Isabel: Yeah, their speaking voices. It's their voices and mannerisms

Jennifer: That's interesting isn't it where that comes from.

Isabel: Particularly, because... Well obviously they've had connections with him but not the close kind of connections that you'd get when you get, you know, such similarities. So his laugh may be the same and his hand gestures can sometimes be the same; the tone of his voice can be the same. So it's a nature thing isn't it?

Isabel and the generations of women in her family

Isabel: Well physically my sister and I are absolutely like peas in a pod; we are peas in a pod. Now more so. There was a time when we weren't, she's fair and I have, I wasn't fair before I got it coloured erm, but we're very similar, my sister and I are very similar and we've become more similar I think.

Jennifer: In the kind of people you are as well as how you look?

Isabel: Yes... Yeah although she's more timid than I am... Er no, timid is the wrong word, that's a valued word isn't it. Reticent I think. (long pause) (Then)...I think there's the bossiness which runs through our family, the female line which I don't think is a particularly admirable trait

Jennifer: (Laughing) It has its uses though?

Isabel: (laughing) but it's got us through a few scrapes probably, this toughness of mind but I don't think it's a particularly attractive trait and er, impatience. My mother and I, well we all three actually, we all three have that (*her mother, herself and her daughter*)

Isabel: Yep. Yeah so there's definitely a female thing which is very strong in my family and some of it isn't terribly admirable as I say.

Isabel and health resemblances

Isabel: We carry weight in the same way, we both, we all struggle with that. Erm... I've got a gammy right knee which is exactly what my mother started with before she got arthritis so there are definitely physical tendencies that are similar. I'm just trying to do something not to exacerbate it but yes arthritis is bound to hit me quite soon I think. 'Cos I look at her when she started and I think she was just about the same age as me.

Isabel and her grandchildren

Isabel: (granddaughter) is just very like (daughter), in fact she's exactly the same as (daughter) because I was thinking now of course they take photographs of children all the time and families don't they? But we didn't take many photographs when my children were young so I've got few photographs and I couldn't have told you what (daughter) looked like as a baby. But the moment I saw (granddaughter) I keep calling her (daughter's name) because she is so strongly like her. Not just physically but in her way she carries on really (laughs). She's a very strong character

You know how it is when older generations constantly muddle up your name and that's exactly what I'm doing. I can't even remember quite whether my son is you know is I can't remember what sort of relationship I have, with the different, you know I've lost it really. Sometimes, is it my sister or my daughter you know! Jennifer: Well it's not surprising if everybody will look alike is it? You know, what are you meant to do?

(Laughter)

Isabel: It is interesting, but (granddaughter), it's really struck me when I saw (granddaughter), not as a tiny baby but as she is now. She's walking now and moves around, yeah, she's just like her...Yeah, I shall be calling her (daughter's name) before too long...I'm trying desperately still to call her (granddaughter's name).

What kind of force is family resemblance?

- **Mysterious, magical, ethereal**
- **Capricious and puzzling**
- **Living**
- **Relational**

A mysterious, magical, ethereal, in/tangible force

- ‘Genetic’ (formerly ‘blood’) or ‘nature’ as magical metaphors or tropes, not literal scientific explanations.
- Spirit, aura, ghostly presences
- Fleeting, in/tangible, flashes of recognition, coincidence (evidential quality of recognition by a stranger, fateful quality)
- Expressing things we cannot (science cannot) understand
- Yet wholly familiar and intimate – traits, expressions, physicality of intimates including self. Highly sensory, and extra sensory too.

A capricious and puzzling force – especially when played out over time

- Unpredictable - popping up unexpectedly, or in surprising mixes
- Skipping generations
- Growing into (and out of) resemblances
- Resemblances 'coming out' (in the end, in unexpected places, down the generations)
- Make different sense from different viewpoints (over time and lifecourses)
- A sense of fate and inevitability for some
- Adds to the fascination and potency

A living force

- Resemblances are lived, experienced, animated, done
- Can have energy, strength (or weakness)
- Can have a gender (a 'strong female thing')
- Alive across generations and time, irrespective of individual mortality, with its own unknowable life course
- Kinaesthetic, in movement and gesture
- Physical, embodied, but fused with character, mode of being – mindful bodies. We cannot sustain a mind/body separation when theorising resemblances
- Sensory, in sound, sight, smell, texture/touch
- Atmospheric, in auras and things difficult to express ('just something about him')
- A mind of their own – capricious, unpredictable, living according to a script that scientists and ordinary people can't understand

A relational force/a force of kinship

- Resemblances are experienced, recognised and make sense only *in relation*
- They are seen as living in the kinship somewhere, ready to 'come out'. An essence or aura of kinship
- Kinship seen as played out and taking shape in and through time/generations
- They express a radical yet completely familiar relationality or kinship that people experience as inscribed into the very essence of themselves and others
- They are part of agentic/elective relationality (eg people cultivate resemblances, or delight in them, or resist or tame them) yet they are not contained within it. Unwanted and surprising resemblances. Power dynamics – resemblances are done and done-to people.
- They require acts of relational memory, recognition, animation, activation. *Visceral* memory

Some implications in relation to ageing

Ageing and reckoning with the force of family resemblances

- Helps to show complex ways in which mind/body separation is unsustainable. Helps to show how experience involves in/tangibilities. The experience of living.
- Questions the idea of the individual self, or individual appearance.
- Older people
 - the life/generational view. Becoming the expert resemblance spotter – the one with the view across generations (muddling people up). Decisions about when to withhold knowledge/perception (Gender politics in resemblance expertise). Complex power dynamics
 - Issues around kinship in time, ‘slotting into place’, mortality (immortality?), inevitability and fate. The meaning of life and death. What does it mean to be turning into my mother? People gently puzzled and perplexed about this.