



'The words we use really matter, for they shape people's view of themselves and of their fellow citizens. In an open, tolerant society, people possess the freedom to choose how they define themselves and others'

Frank Furedi wrote these words in an article for The Australian on 14 April 2012 - an article I read with interest because it raised some important issues for me. Furedi is right of course, but he didn't leave it there. He also said that words could be used to diminish our identity. That's true too when we think of the damage words of abuse can do. But he was not referring to words of abuse - the word he was referring to is 'carer'. He felt that being called a 'carer' when one is a son (as in his case) or other family member devalues the ties with those we love and care for most. He believed his relationship with his mother was being redefined in a negative way when he was called a carer.

I have heard parents of young children with profound disabilities refuse to be called carers. They see themselves as mothers or fathers, not as carers.

I discussed Furedi's article with colleagues. One colleague did a little off-the-cuff research within her own family to find out how they related to the term 'carer'. Not one of them had any close affiliation with the term, but they knew it and understood what it meant for them in terms of supports. One (an eighty two year

old with a sixty year old son with an intellectual disability) said 'I have no idea what it means but I use the money to get Rob's crafts materials because it keeps him happy'. Another said 'love this carer thing because now I get people to come in and help me to shower Joe and it only costs me \$4.00 an hour and then every year I get a bonus. They can call me 'a cow' if they want to and I would be happy with it because I am not doing it all on my own any more'. Another, who is no longer on any carer payments, said 'I felt so guilty getting that money because it was for my mother but I just couldn't afford to do what was needed. I took the money and put petrol in the car. I wasn't really a carer; I was just taking care of Mum'. (This one was fascinating because she was the primary carer for her mum but didn't see that it was valid to call herself a carer because others occasionally helped in the caring role).

Another colleague said to me when asked what the word 'carer' meant to her, 'As a 'mother' my role in the mental health system was diminished. As a 'carer' it is enhanced. As my son's primary carer in the NSW mental health system I can receive information from his treatment team - being his mother is not of itself enough. I can quite happily be both.'

So how important is it that the word 'carer' is used to describe someone who cares for someone of any age who has a disability, chronic illness, mental illness, drug or alcohol issues or is frail and aged? Can it really make a difference? I think it does. Does accepting the description 'carer' mean your relationship with your son or daughter, husband, wife, mother, father diminishes your familial tie as Furedi suggests? I don't think so.

I have to say I am a mother, daughter and also a carer. Being called a carer does not diminish my role as mother or daughter, I am still a mother, still a daughter, but also a carer. In fact, it is because I am a mother and a daughter that I am a carer.

For me the most important issue is that the words/roles 'mother,

'daughter' and the word/role 'carer' are not mutually exclusive. They co-exist. I am both a mother and a daughter and I am also a carer. In saying I am my son's and mother's carer in no way denies the importance of family ties. The term 'carer' is essentially a political construct. It denotes a role and function that is greater than the 'normal' role that our society expects of mothers, fathers, sons, daughters. As such it acknowledges the 'extra' - and thus the need for support and inclusion.

Politically and socially having a descriptor like 'carer' has advantages. We must, as a movement, do better in explaining these advantages. We now have carer legislation that can be used to help explain the need for the term, and how its purpose is not to diminish biological connection but rather to acknowledge the 'over and above what is normally expected in, say, a parenting, role'.

This is profoundly important for young carers whose societal role as a child or adolescent is totally turned upside down when they become carers of parents.

Having one word, 'carer', makes legislation, policy, supports, so much more simple and clear - it is the function that is being described, not the biological connection which is, for most of us, more powerful and important.

Of course individuals can choose whether or not they want to identify with the term 'carer'. Let's hope however that they understand that embracing the term adds strength to a movement of carers across Australia working to improve the lives of other unpaid family carers without whom this nation would be sadly diminished.

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