

Reconceptualizing Advance Care Planning through Community-Based Educational Gerontology: A Narrative Analysis of a Documentary Case “The Lovers”

Waseda University
Wang Qianran

Research Overview

This study examines how end-of-life decision-making is negotiated within family relationships in China through a narrative analysis of a documentary case. It shows that older adults’ preferences are constrained by practical factors and family dynamics, and highlights the relevance of community-based educational approaches to advance care planning across ageing societies.

Purpose of Study

Advance Care Planning (ACP) is widely promoted as a means of ensuring individual autonomy in end-of-life decision-making. However, in practice, ACP discussions are often initiated in clinical settings at a late stage of illness, particularly in China, where family members frequently assume central roles as proxy decision-makers. While previous studies have emphasized the need to promote ACP through lifelong learning and community-based education, limited attention has been paid to how ACP can be operationalized in such contexts, especially in ways that address the relational dynamics of family decision-making.

The purpose of this study is to examine how end-of-life decision-making is constructed, experienced, and negotiated within family relationships. It also explores how narrative representations of lived experiences can inform the development of community-based educational approaches to ACP.

Research Methods

This study adopts a narrative analysis approach, drawing on Episode 2 “The Lovers” of the documentary *Qian Lang*. The episode follows an 83-year-old man with dementia (Mr. Chen) and his family, documenting the process from his admission to a nursing home to his eventual death. The individuals appearing in the documentary are treated as narrators, and the analysis focuses on their accounts, positionality, and interactions in key situations. By closely examining dialogues and scenes, the study explores how family members negotiate care arrangements and end-of-life decisions over time.

All audio materials from the selected episode, including dialogues and interactions, were fully transcribed. The analysis proceeded in several stages. First, the narrative structure of the episode was examined, with attention to key events, turning points, and the temporal unfolding of the story. Second, the analysis focused on narrators’ positionality, including how individuals positioned themselves in relation to illness, death, and other family members. Third, particular attention was paid to interactional dynamics, examining how different actors’ utterances influenced the progression of events and decision-making processes. Through this process, the study identifies how meanings related to end-of-life care and decision-making are constructed and negotiated within family relationships. Finally, the findings are interpreted from the perspective of community-based educational gerontology, particularly in relation to the concept of education–welfare integration.

Results and Discussion

The findings reveal that even when older adults and their spouses clearly express a preference for home-based care and remaining together, these wishes are often constrained by multiple practical factors, including physical decline, cognitive impairment, and caregiving capacity. For example, Mr. Chen repeatedly expressed his desire to return home while in the nursing home and showed strong emotional distress when separated from his wife. Although his wife, Ms. Shen, shared this preference, she was caught between her own wishes and the perspectives of her daughter and son-in-law, who emphasized the feasibility and safety of institutional care. During hospitalization, Ms. Shen again raised the possibility of bringing her husband home, but this option was ultimately rejected due to concerns about her physical limitations and the associated risks. At the end-of-life stage, the family reached a consensus to prioritize comfort care over aggressive treatment. However, after Mr. Chen's death, Ms. Shen expressed persistent regret about the decision to place him in a nursing home, suggesting that the emotional consequences of decision-making extend beyond the moment of choice.

This study argues that ACP should be reconceptualized as an ongoing, relational, and learning-oriented process rather than a late-stage medical intervention. It further suggests that community-based educational settings can provide a critical platform for earlier communication and reflection. While intergenerational communication has long been emphasized in educational gerontology, it is often conceptualized as interactions between older adults and younger generations such as children or adolescents. The findings indicate the need to broaden this concept to include communication across different phases within older adulthood itself—for example, between pre-older adults, younger older adults, and advanced older adults, as adult children are often situated in the pre-older or younger-old stages. Furthermore, situating ACP within the integration of education and welfare in community-based educational gerontology offers a promising approach to bridging the gap between individual preferences and their practical realization, thereby supporting more inclusive and collaborative decision-making processes in later life.

In conclusion, through a narrative analysis of a documentary case, this study highlights the practical dilemmas of implementing ACP in advanced old age and suggests the potential of embedding ACP within community-based educational gerontology. Future research should extend this work through empirical field studies to explore concrete approaches to implementing ACP in community settings.

Beyond the Chinese context, the findings offer broader international implications for ageing societies where family-centered decision-making remains prominent, contributing to global discussions on culturally sensitive and community-based approaches to ACP.

Keywords: Advance Care Planning, Older adults, Community-based educational gerontology, Narrative analysis, Decision-making