

Family Quackers or the Nuclear Family Conspiracy: Family Patterns in Human and Animal Societies

ANGHARAD PARRY JONES

During the WSCF-Europe study session entitled Family: Expectations and Exceptions, held at the European Youth Centre in Strasbourg in March 2007 the group examined the theories and realities connected to the concept of family. This article seeks to explore further the idea of 'alternative families,' to ask 'what is alternative about them' and in doing so to try to understand more about the concept of family.

What is a family?

Nuclear families (that is one mother, one father, two or three children, oh and usually a dog) are seen as the norm in western societies; however, many of us live or come from non-nuclear families. Are these non-nuclear families less functional than the nuclear model? Is the nuclear family the epitome of the evolution of the family unit, or is it a convenient tool used by those who wish to control, categorise and organise society? Are extended families, where there is some concept of the same units seen in nuclear families but with strong links and relationships transcending those units, of our ancestors somehow obsolete in this fast moving, money focused, technological age?

A constructionist view of society sees the family as the core unit of civilization. This definition however does not require any actual relationship between its members. The concept of the nuclear family reduces families to functional units that



Angharad Parry Jones graduated with an MA in Theology in 2005 from Liverpool Hope University. She was Gender Issues co-ordinator for the European Regional Committee of the WSCF from 2005-2007 and currently works as a pastoral assistant in an Anglican Church in London.

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produce and raise children who, after reaching maturity, leave their original units to make one of their own—continuing the cycle.¹

When the participants at the study session were asked to give a definition of the 'concept of family' there were a number of core functions that were agreed on, for example that a family is, or at least should be, a place of nurture and is of prime importance in the shaping of an individual's identity. However, defining what constitutes members of a family and how this nurturing should occur was an issue of great debate. Dr Walter H. Smith Jr. of the Western Pennsylvania Family Centre defines family thus:

The family emotional unit consists of living person related through marriage, birth, adoption and strong continuous attachment. In this view of family, there are no generational boundaries. The family emotional unit functions and adapts as a single interlocking set of relationships, guided by relationship forces which have automatic responses to threats and stresses. (Smith, 2001). Some share a household, while others live thousands of miles away. Some members are dying and others are just born. Some have strong affiliation and constant contact, and others are distant and isolated. Some are functioning well, and others are not. Yet, all of these behaviors fit together into a single functioning emotional unit that is continuous over centuries. The family unit shifts and changes as it adapts to stress, threats and challenges, but from a broad perspective, these fluctuations do not alter the course of its functioning.²



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This definition attempts to contain the nuclear family, the extended family, some alternative families and an aspect of ancestry which ties an individual family unit to others through common bonds. I say that the definition includes only some alternative families as Smith's definition would not include groups of adults living together and not raising or nurturing children, as in a monastery for example.

Alternative family concepts

During the study session the participants were asked to consider the following alternative family arrangements:

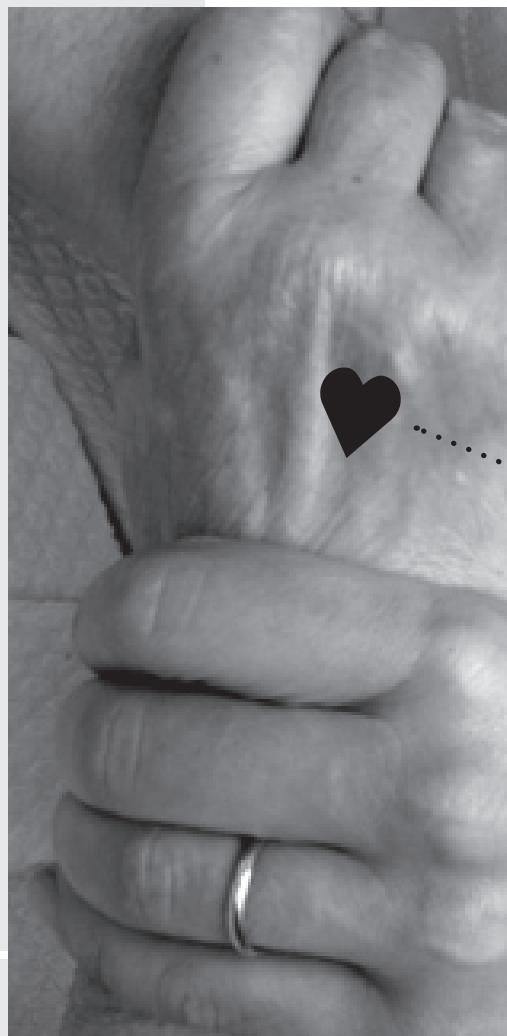
1. A 45 year old monk who entered the monastery at 18
2. A 15 year old girl with two mothers
3. A 29 year old man rejected by his natural parents and living in a commune
4. A 85 year old woman who has no living relatives living in a nursing home with 20 other men and women over 70

They were asked to bear the following questions in mind:

1. Does this person have a family?
2. How would this person define their family?
3. How would this person link "love" and "family?"
4. How would this person define their identity in relation to family?

The purpose of this exercise was to try to establish what emotional and practical functions the participants attributed to a 'family,' and whether the 'ideal' of the nuclear family actually meets those criteria or whether other groupings fulfil these criteria better for some people.

What surprised me most about this exercise was that the majority of the participants took the nuclear family model as their basic criteria and judged the alternative family arrangements against that criteria. Therefore the second of the four situations to a family was judged as the closest to the nuclear ideal, although this gave rise to some debate over maternal and paternal roles in a family. The 85 year old woman was



thought to have lost her family, implying that a family is irreplaceable and that the raising or nurturing of children is the primary focus of family.

The Animal Kingdom

The concept of the nuclear family is often projected onto the animal kingdom; cartoons and the media in general play a large role in this misconception. For example, in the Disney adaptation of Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, new characters are added to create a 'more acceptable' view of family. In the book Hathi is a lone wild bull

elephant but in the film he becomes a colonel with a wife, Winifred, and a son, junior. This is completely at odds with elephant behaviour in the wild. Once elephants have reached adolescence they live in groups according to their biological sex. The 'family' or child-rearing group is matriarchal, raising and educating the young elephants until they reach adolescence when, if they are female, they become part of the nurturing group or, if they are male, they leave to join a band of bulls. Both groups are termed as families although only the female group has the nurturing role.

According to a recent study, altruistic responsibility, sharing and co-parenting are much more the norm in the animal kingdom than is commonly realised:

As many as 220 birds and 120 mammals, including African wild dogs, chimpanzees, naked mole rats, lions, bee eaters, kookaburras, pied kingfishers, and Seychelles warblers, are all found to

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help rear other's young to a lesser or greater extent. In many cases the helpers postpone their own opportunity to mate.³

The study, by researchers at the University of Edinburgh published in the journal *Science* in April 2002, has shown that animals in the same biological families forgo having offspring of their own in order to help in the nurture of the offspring of their relatives.⁴ According to this study this behaviour goes beyond the idea of 'extended families' to group living.

Ducks

While I was preparing for the study session in March, several mallard 'families' were born and raised in the garden of the community in which I was living. I found myself quite interested in the dynamics of these duck 'families.' Having been brainwashed by the nuclear family conspiracy, I assumed that there would be a mummy duck, a daddy duck and some baby ducks—this was not the case. In the first instance there was one hen and two drakes and in the second there were two hens and three drakes – all working together to nurture and raise one brood.

There has been significant research into duck behaviour in the last 10 years, leading to a better understanding of the nurturing of their young.⁵ These studies both reaffirm the observations cited above and illustrate that breeding and nurturing are not always the primary objective of family groupings.

For me, what is most interesting about the behaviour of the mallards and other animals is that these groupings are not exclusively for the raising and nurturing of offspring. The members quite often stay together for many years, being joined occasionally by some of their offspring, raising more chicks but also nurturing each other.

Back to People

If, as the nuclear family concept would have us believe, the only real function of a family is the production and nurturing of more human beings, why do the majority of family units remain functional beyond the moment when the offspring leave the nest? Is the family, the basic unit of society, a place only for nurturing children or is it a place for the nurturing of each of the individual members? This means, at its best at least, that in the basic unit of society each and every individual has a place both where they are valued, where they love and are loved.



What's love got to do with it?

Love is a concept that most optimists at least connect to family, although it is unfortunate that this can be devastatingly lacking in some cases. If we connect the concept of love to families, then these ideas of nurture and intrinsic personal value are both encompassed and elevated from mere duties and responsibilities to a fully human response to the other.

In this case, a family becomes the embodiment and incarnation of love. A family is a basic unit with members that both nurture and are nurtured; value and are valued; love and are loved. This place does not necessarily have to be where the raising of children is the primary focus. In fact for a great deal of people, whether they are children, parents or anywhere in between, this is not the place where nurture, value and love happen. Anywhere a set of relationships has these three aims as a focus is a family—alternative or otherwise. In other words, to paraphrase St. Paul, a family is the perfect opportunity for love to come to fruition;

Families are patient and kind. The members do not envy, do not boast, are not proud or rude. They are not self-seeking, not easily angered, and keep no record of wrongs. ... A Family always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.⁶

In Conclusion

If the family is the place for nurturing and feeling valued and loved, how do we make sure we foster these principles in our relationships? Is the nuclear family model the best model in which to cultivate these values or can we learn something from the animal kingdom about shared responsibilities and group living? Should we really dismiss an alternative family concept out of hand because it does not resemble the nuclear family in some way?

SUGGESTED READING

Parsons, Talcott & Bales, Robert Freed, *Family, socialization and interaction process*, Glencoe, Free Press. 1955
Walter H. Smith, Jr., Ph.D., "Change and the Development of the Family Emotional Unit", Pittsburgh Family Systems Conference and Symposium September 23 - 24, 2005
Report of the WSCF-Europe/COE Study Session *Family: Expectations and Exceptions* to be published 2008.

(ENDNOTES)

1 Parsons, Talcott & Bales, Robert Freed, *Family, socialization and interaction process*, Glencoe, Free Press. 1955
2 Walter H. Smith, Jr., Ph.D., "Change and the

Development of the Family Emotional Unit", Pittsburgh Family Systems Conference and Symposium September 23 - 24, 2005

3 John Pickrell *National Geographic News* October 23, 2003

4 Stuart A. West, Ido Pen & Ashleigh S. Griffin 'Cooperation and Competition Between Relatives' *Science* 5 April 2002:Vol. 296. no. 5565, pp. 72 - 75

5 Hillary Mayell, *National Geographic News*, December 10, 2001 and Markus Öst et al, 'Condition and coalition formation by brood-rearing common eider females', *Behavioral Ecology* Vol. 14 No. 3: 311-317

6 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 adapted and paraphrased

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