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# **'Friends are the families we choose for ourselves': Towards the democratisation of relationships**

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**BPS POWS conference, July 2005**

## **Preface**

Delighted to be invited to talk on relationships

The complexity and uncertainty involved in what it means today to be a woman in this society, and our sense of connectedness to other women who in some way share that experience, expressed in my dream. Passing on a legacy we don't fully understand.

Going to talk about women's position in the family, and about emerging new patterns of relationships across society which are likely to signal significant changes in women's experiences in the future.

I will comment upon recent changes in family forms in western societies and upon the increasing importance of friendship networks in many people's lives. Drawing examples from popular culture as well as from social science research, I will discuss these changes as a form of 'democratisation' of relationships (Giddens, 1991; 1992; 1994) and reflect upon the implications this might have for women's sense of self.

## **1. Importance of relationships for women**

It is almost a truism to say that relationships occupy a place of central importance in women's lives in a way that is not so for men.

Soaps- aimed at women and always about relationships. Neighbours- will Susan and Carl get back together? Why did Lynne and Joe break up? How will Steph adapt to her role as step-parent?

Some, eg Chodorow (1978) have gone as far as to say that women's sense of self is defined in terms of their relationships to others.

She made sense of my experiences as a mother when my first child (male) was about 3 years old.

Writing specifically about family relationships, but her argument is that women and men grow into different kinds of people psychologically.

Briefly explain Chodorow.

## **2. Patriarchy and the family**

Many of women's close relationships have traditionally been located within marriage and the family.

The trend towards the nuclear family means women's range of relationships inside the family is reduced to husband and children.

The meaning of marriage in contemporary western societies has moved toward intimacy and fulfillment of needs.

So a small number of people have to satisfy our most fundamental emotional needs. Relationships outside the marriage, especially for women, are suspect- why should she need them? Friendships and shared confidences with women friends may be seen as putting in doubt the strength of the spousal relationship, and friendships with members of the opposite sex are regarded with suspicion.

But the family has been discussed by feminists and others as an institution serving the interests of patriarchal society.

It is probably true to say that, to some degree and for some women, their family relationships entail unequal expectations, responsibilities and duties, eg sexual double standard, domestic division of labour, caring roles both up and down- children, ageing parents, and increasingly today an ambivalent caring role towards grown up children who live at home due to poor earnings, even after gaining a university degree. These expectations, responsibilities and duties are related to persistent gender differences and inequalities in education and paid work. Often depressing to hear young female students on Gender talk as if inequalities were a thing of the past. As the sociologist Anthony Giddens (1999) points out, the contemporary nuclear family is undemocratic and based on inequality, especially for young people, women and those with non-normative sexuality.

Psychologists have in the main been unconcerned with the relationship between social structures and psychological phenomena- a mistake in my view. Women are renowned for 'low self-esteem', along with others in society located lower down the power hierarchy than white, middle class men. My view of the relationship between person and society- roughly SI- we internalise other's perceptions of us, behaviour towards us. In an unequal society, our lesser worth as measured by pay, voice, opportunities etc, all implicated in the family, not surprisingly manifests as a poor self-concept, the axiomatic case being women who suffer domestic violence.

So we may question the benefits of family relationships for women. And in this light, women's so-called 'flight from the family' is no surprise. Increasing possibilities for financial independence, for SOME women, has interacted with the modern, western conception of marriage and of the individual. Marriage is about fulfilment, the satisfaction of the individual's needs, both sexual and emotional, and it is everyone's right and duty to find happiness. If a relationship isn't giving you what you need, then if you can afford it (both financially and in the terms of other 'costs') it is now legitimate to end it.

The conventional nuclear family, while it continues to be a cultural ideal, is now one model within an increasing diversity of living arrangements in modern western societies (Cheal, 2000). Divorce rate steadily increased in 70s and 80s and levelled in 90s. Serial monogomy is now the prevailing pattern, and reconstituted families very commonplace. There is a plethora of new family arrangements with step-families, live-in partners, remarriage and so on. The chances that people will be living in a conventional 'nuclear' family in the twenty-first century are lessening as the years go by.

These changes indicate that people today, especially women, are less prepared to remain in unsatisfactory relationships and that they are giving their own personal needs for happiness and fulfilment a higher priority than previously.

Sasha Roseneil (2004a) argues that

"the hegemony of the the conventional family is experiencing significant challenge"

Writing about social policy, she says:

“Processes which sociologists refer to as ‘individualisation’ and ‘detraditionalisation’ are releasing people from traditional heterosexual norms. Participation in traditional family life is shifting from being a given to being a matter of choice, and people are driven increasingly by an ethic of individual self-fulfilment. Women’s greater economic and social independence, the decline of patriarchalism, and the normalisation of homosexuality are all challenging the social centrality of the conventional heterosexual couple and family.”

### **3. The family in television**

But if these are changes occurring in society, to what extent do we see alternative visions of family life represented in the mass media? Notwithstanding the certainly complex relationship between media portrayals and social attitudes, I believe it is nevertheless likely that the media, particularly TV, plays a considerable role in our understanding of what ways of life are possible for us.

And there is concern among social scientists about ‘television set family myths’, that images portrayed in soap operas and situation comedies are no longer realistic, that they are ‘cultural fantasies’ (Denzin, 1987).

But Roseneil (2004b) notes the popularity of TV programmes focussing on friendships, and suggests they acknowledge social changes not yet reflected within the social sciences, in particular the increasing importance of non-family relationships in people’s lives.

Her paper begins with the lyrics from the long-running American TV series ‘Friends’-

So no-one told you life was gonna be this way  
Your job’s a joke, you’re broke, your love life’s D.O.A.  
It’s like you’re always stuck in second gear  
When it hasn’t been your day, your week, your month, or even your year

*Chorus*

I'll be there for you  
(When the rain starts to pour)  
I'll be there for you  
(Like I've been there before)  
I'll be there for you  
(Cause you're there for me too)

Monica, Chandler, Ross, Rachel, Joey, and Phoebe epitomise the contemporary model of friendship. They share living space, support each other through the ups and downs of everyday life and therefore in many ways appear a replacement for the nuclear, biological family. Even the marriage between Monica and Chandler was accommodated for a while, before they broke away to form their own nuclear family in an idyllic house out of the city.

But I'm going to further explore the potential in TV for challenging conventional family forms by looking at the cult TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, which recently came to the end of its seven-year run. What it illustrates is not only the dangers of the nuclear family but also some of the implications of the alternatives we may replace it with. We will argue that *Buffy* does indeed offer an in-depth vision of an 'alternative family' that compares favourably with the traditional family, one that indeed reflects the experience of growing numbers of young people. However, *Buffy* refuses to paint a simplistic picture of real life, and we will argue that this alternative family is also seen to bring its own dangers that we must acknowledge. Its model of the alternative family is based upon non-hierarchical structures and individual freedom of choice. But in this 'democratised' (Giddens, 1999) family, individuals may hurt each other by leaving or by choosing not to meet each others' needs. Nevertheless, *Buffy* endorses the alternative family and offers the positive message that individuals can cope with and survive its drawbacks.

### **The premise of the show**

Sunnydale, California is a town built on the site of the 'Hellmouth', an opening to the underworld and as such is a magnet for all kinds of demons, including vampires.

Throughout history there has always been a Slayer, or a 'Chosen One' (use words from opening credits here) 'one girl in all the world' is given special strength and fighting skills for killing demons and vampires. Today's Slayer is Buffy Summers. Traditionally, every slayer is assigned a Watcher, a kind of Joda figure who mentors and trains the slayer. Buffy, as our contemporary Slayer, executes her demon-fighting duties with the help of her friends, Willow, Xander, Tara and Anya, and her younger sister, Dawn. Latterly, Spike, a vampire rendered harmless by an electronic implant in his brain, has also occupied an ambivalent position in the group.

In *Buffy* we see the nuclear family as ultimately failing its members in practice; it is inadequate and corrupt, and never lives up to its ideals. Family life as portrayed in *Buffy* displays a range of features recognisable in many real families: there is a general lack of communication and understanding between older and younger generations. We see the world of young people as full of terrors and dangers that parents cannot see (or refuse to acknowledge), parents may be absent or emotionally distant, there may be domestic violence or neglect. These young people therefore look to each other for the support, care and respect that their families of origin do not provide.

But *Buffy* also shows up and challenges the patriarchal family. We see this most clearly drawn in the season 5 episode aptly entitled *Family* (5.6). Willow's lesbian partner, Tara Maclay, is pursued by her bullying father and brother, who have come to Sunnydale to find her as she reaches maturity. They try to manipulate and control her (as it seems they did her mother) by convincing her that she is a demon.

In this episode the nuclear family is rejected because it is exploitative, particularly for young women. Mr Maclay tells them, 'we know how to control her ....problem.' It is easy to see this as a representation of social and religious constructions of women as needing to be restrained because they are in some respects evil. Keeping them obediently at home is presented as being in their best interest and in the best interest of society. *Buffy* unmask this as a poor excuse for obtaining women's domestic servitude and restricting young women's sexual behaviour.

This episode also establishes one of the non-genetic family's central tenets— belonging is based on free will:

Mr.Maclay: The girl belongs with her family. Hope that's clear to the rest of you (...)

Buffy: You wanna take Tara out of here against her will (...) You just gotta go through me

Dawn: And me (...)

Xander: You're dealing with all of us.

Spike: 'Cept me.

(...)Shot of Giles, Dawn, Buffy, Willow, Tara , Xander and Anya all standing together.

Mr Maclay: We're her blood kin- who the hell are you?

Buffy: We're family.

We are invited to acknowledge this group of friends as a better, kinder form of family than the nuclear alternative. But Spike's humorous insistence that he is not part of this and doesn't care what happens to Tara is not just incidental. He does not choose to commit to the new family. Spike's ambivalence about membership runs throughout season five; however, when he is most committed, they do not necessarily welcome him. The family is no longer the place where they *have* to take you in. It's the place you choose to be if they choose to have you.

### **Drawbacks of the alternative family**

But the alternative family has its own dangers. After Buffy's own (temporary) death at the end of Season 5, and the death of Buffy's mother, Willow and Tara move into the house, sleeping in the mother's bedroom, a symbol of their new parental role. After her resurrection in season 6, Buffy takes on the responsibility of caring for her sister and in all kinds of ways 'being a family' becomes more than just making statements about mutual support.

This family could not be more 'alternative': it's child, Dawn, is reared by two lesbian witches, a builder and his ex-demon fiancé, a disgraced English librarian, now running a magic shop, a sister returned from the dead (or, earlier, a robot pretending to be her sister) and her sister's secret vampire lover.



But this alternative family is unstable, constantly in flux, and there is a constant tension between the satisfaction of personal needs and the needs of other family members. Willow and Tara separate, and Tara leaves. Spike, who clearly cares for the young Dawn, is often excluded from the circle as a result of his tempestuous relationship with Buffy. As the lover of someone who is effectively a single mother, he temporarily and unreliably available to give attention and affection, and then absent. Buffy is devoted to her sister Dawn, but there are conflicts with her own needs. She is preoccupied with her own post-resurrection angst and enjoying a clandestine relationship with Spike. After Tara is killed, Willow's anger and grief leads her into an addiction to magic and she spirals out of control, putting Dawn in danger and losing her trust. No-one seems to have a well-defined role in this family, responsibility is uncertain and shifting, and Dawn is consequently neglected. Thus this unconventional family lacks the clear economic structure and sexual roles that can characterise traditional and nuclear families. It provides love and care, but inconsistently and unpredictably, with family members at times liable to give their own needs and desires priority. In some respects, then, a looser family structure will almost inevitably involve a degree of conflict as individuals negotiate their place within it. It may also lead to instability as people move in and out of the family.

### **A better alternative?**

However, despite the uncertainties of the alternative family, there may be benefits that ultimately outweigh them. Giddens called for the democratisation of family relationships, where the voice of individual members can be heard and carry weight. In Buffy's alternative family we see examples of this. As the family's child, Dawn is often involved in serious discussions. She chooses her home once her mother and sister are dead. There is no autocracy here and Willow, Tara and Xander offer Dawn the opportunity to discuss her concerns even when Buffy is strict or dismissive

The episode *Normal Again* (6.17) represents and illustrates the fundamental differences between the idealised version of the nuclear family and the non-genetic family. In this episode, Buffy, under the influence of a monster's poison has flashes in which she believes her

birth family has been recreated and she is in an asylum; the non-genetic family is a schizophrenic fantasy. She only has to reject the non-genetic family and she can return, sane and whole to her ideal family. The episode presents this as an agonising choice, a choice related not to love but to responsibility; in the end she chooses her friends. In the nuclear family she is the dependent, helpless, mad daughter. In the alternative family she is strong and the others need her to survive. She turns from her loving mother in order to rescue her alternative family, even though this means facing the fact that she has hurt them. The episode encapsulates the tension between the family forms shown in the series, particularly for young women. The nuclear family is cosy and secure, but within it they will always be children, their power restricted and their status limited. In the alternative family they have freedom, but also painful choices, heavy responsibilities and a fight to survive.

*Buffy* features young people coping with the inevitable changes that emerge from the democratisation of relationships and removal of legal and social compulsion. This may cause pain; but no more and possibly less than its predecessor. It is also shown to be survivable – you don't know what's coming, it may be tough but you'll get over it and there will (probably) always be someone there for you. This unconventional family form may well be more faithful to the experience of growing numbers of young people. The message contained in *Buffy* is that young people can and do cope with and survive its inevitable deficiencies and benefit from its strengths.

So alternative families, constituted by members who may not be genetically related, may be seen as creating opportunities for discussion and democracy, and there is no structural reason why the alternative family should be autocratic in its operation. It has the advantage that its members are not hierarchically organised. They do not feel obliged to follow the lead of a head of household. Thus they may ameliorate undemocratic behaviour towards children rather than feeling obliged to reinforce it. In this way the alternative family exposes children to multiple perspectives and provides supportive individuals to help when the main carer functions poorly.

Of course the trends that I have been describing are often seen in a very negative light, framed as the breakdown of the family, as the

loss of structures and relationships that are vital for the good of society as well as individuals. Here, individuals are seen as selfishly prioritising their own desires at the expense of those who need their care. But this view has been challenged by those who have conducted recent research in the area of social policy. For example, Deacon and Williams (2004) conducted research in a number of areas in the UK, specifically including those that represented some of the societal changes in family forms. Incidentally, one of the localities they included in their study was Hebden Bridge, where I have lived for over 20 years, and it is described as 'a former mill town now gentrified by middle-class professionals and 'new age' residents. This is an 'adult-worker' area and has high rates of births to cohabitants and a high proportion of gay and lesbian households.' Deacon and Williams found that: 'the choices people make are morally informed responses to changes in their circumstances, rather than simple expressions of individual choice or lifestyle.'

'In working through their dilemmas, certain practical ethics for adults and children emerged out of our research. These are the ethics which enable resilience, which facilitate commitment and lie at the heart of people's interdependency. They include being attentive to others' situation, accommodating one's own needs to those of others, adaptability to others' changing identities, and being non-judgemental and open to reparation. Children also valued fairness, respect, care, communication and trust in coping with changes in their family lives'. They argue we are not seeing 'moral decline' in this diversity, and that 'policy response should not just be to issue reminders of kinship obligations or exhortations to seek paid work'

And Carol Smart (2004) conducted interviews with parents, children and grandparents and says 'The choices people now have may be producing greater reflexivity and more attentiveness to others. The perceived normality of the 1950s nuclear family meant that it was easy to take family/spousal relationships for granted. But the post-divorce (extended) family needs to work at its relationships. In this, I suggest, lies the engine of many further transformations''

Angela Phillips argues that if we are to fully debate the issues around the benefits and drawbacks of alternative family forms, they need

dissemination through media. She is writing specifically about news journalism, but TV shows could be seen as legitimate vehicle.

#### **4. Conclusion: Are friends the new family?**

Of course society's alternative families are not typically composed of friendship groupings, and so the arrangement depicted in Buffy is not typical even of alternative families in real society. But Sasha Roseneil (2004a) argues that that our friendships are of increasing importance to us and that these relationships are to some extent taking over the functions that family relationships previously served. And Berry Mayall, (2000) reporting on the Children 5-16 project, a major ESRC research initiative (Research Briefing April, no 13.) reflects this trend. Even for children (or especially for them, as a relatively powerless group?) he found that friends were no longer just mates, people to hang out with and have fun with:

“Children spoke of friendships in terms of support: ‘telling each other everything’, ‘being there for you’.”

And there seems no reason why in future we should not see households becoming increasingly constituted by people who are connected through friendship rather than biological relationships.

If the family is changing and women's position in the family is also changing, if we are seeing the emergence of new patterns of relationships across society, with friendships coming to occupy a central place in people's lives previously reserved for spousal relationships, it seems likely to me that this signals significant changes in women's experiences in the future.

If we are truly seeing a move towards the 'democratisation' of relationships in the family, at least for some women, (and of course here I acknowledge that issues of class and ethnicity in particular may put a very different spin on these changes) this is likely to have implications for women's sense of self.

I would like to cautiously argue that, to the extent that women in future may become embedded in relationships and family groupings

that are non-hierarchical, where duties and responsibilities are negotiated rather than assigned or assumed and where group members have a right to be heard, this is likely to lead to positive outcomes for women's psychological well-being and sense of self. This is not to say that such arrangements are without their own difficulties and real dangers.

Need a good Buffy quote to finish.

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Extras

In addition, alternative families may have alternative value systems. It was traditionally accepted that the role of the family was socialisation and the transmission of values as well as psychological stability (Parsons, 1955; Zimmerman, 1947). In the case of the family of friends, however, the values transmitted may be subcultural rather than mainstream; this is illustrated in Buffy, as the perspective of this alternative family places the fight against demons and evil above mainstream values such as school attendance. In this respect it symbolises any family, those from ethnic or religious minorities for example, that chooses to place the values of its group, perhaps the need for religious observances, above the expectations of the state system.