Institutionally “Chosen Families”: Supportive or Counterproductive?

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Just like families themselves, the notion of and our experiences with family are highly diverse. For many people, “family” conjures feelings of love, care, support and closeness. For others, family is complex, less positive and possibly even uncomfortable. Regardless, the concept of family plays a powerful role in our understanding of the world and our sense of belonging within it.

Since family is so often associated with a sense of stability, safety and support, some organizations and institutions throughout society adopt a “family narrative” to invoke a sense of closeness, mutual responsibility, solidarity and/or unconditional support among group members.

This can take diverse forms, such as when management discusses or frames teammates as “work families” or colleagues refer to their “work spouses.” Other examples include religious and cultural institutions, which sometimes use this narrative to strengthen their community ties.

Sometimes, universities employ the idea and language of family on their campus communities by framing relationships between students and older guardian peers, house presidents and administrators with familial language and labels (e.g. brothers/brotherhood, sisters/sisterhood or using parental-role language for university staff).

While these “family narratives” are often used to create a sense of belonging, support and structure, there are some ways in which this arbitrarily imposed notion of family can be problematic for students seeking personal development at this important life stage.

Universities create “campus families” – but students often seek independence

Young adulthood is an important time for personal growth, gaining independence and finding and/or developing our identity (or identities). Many young adults make the decision to pursue post-secondary education to further their understanding of the world while preparing for a career later in life. This transition into adulthood can leave many students feeling vulnerable, especially if they have never lived away from their families, communities and other sources of familiarity and comfort.

At this stage in their lives, living in residence or on campus provides many students with increased independence while also creating and maintaining a familiar communal, “home-like” environment. On small campuses, this is sometimes taken a step further, deliberately structured into what is often known as residence (or campus/university) “families.” Small universities sometimes opt for familial language to foster relationships and a sense of close community even if their artificial “family” includes thousands of students and faculty (even though many will never meet).
For those who have a safe and satisfying relationship with the concept of family, this “family narrative” may be welcome. Research shows that social networks and relationships – particularly among family – are critical to everyday life and well-being and can serve as a protective factor. This is supported by data from the 2013 General Social Survey, which found that 86% of Canadians with close ties to five or more relatives were satisfied with their lives, compared with 75% for those with one to two close family members, and only 69% for those with no close relatives.1

As such, it’s not surprising that many of these young adults are drawn toward forming tight social circles to feel supported when their own families may be far away. This may be particularly true for young women in Canada, who have been found to report a greater number of close family connections than men in the General Social Survey.2 However, many young adults look forward to being away from their families (and perhaps even the idea of family) to develop independence, regardless of their actual relationships with family members. But while such family narratives may be well-intended, they may inadvertently leave students feeling infantilized and act as a barrier to the personal growth they seek during these important years.

“Family” framing suggests safety but can gloss over bad behaviour

The use of family narratives can cause more problems and interfere with the personal growth of young adults. Due to the emotional connotations of “family,” individuals may feel a richer sense of intimacy and responsibility than if they thought of themselves as a team or community. Some might feel pressure to protect and support their campus “family” regardless of their behaviours or actions. In the context of university, the artificial family structure can work to excuse or hide abuse or violence. As the literature clearly points out, issues of personal safety, such as sexual violence and residence hazing, are prevalent on university campuses across North America.

Some students feel that problematic behaviours and harmful practices are sometimes hidden, overlooked or excused due to feelings of “family loyalty.” Some students feel that problematic behaviours and harmful practices are sometimes hidden, overlooked or excused due to feelings of “family loyalty”; students may feel discouraged from speaking out about experiences with campus violence, while university administrations feel the need to protect their reputations as safe, “family-like” spaces. As a result, instances of sexual, physical and emotional abuse that occur within campus and residence communities are often underreported and dealt with inadequately, as discussed by Rachel Browne in her Maclean’s article “Why Don’t Canadian Universities Want to Talk about Sexual Assault?”3

“Family” setting isn’t desired by all young adults

The family model that is adopted by universities is often based on the traditional “nuclear family” (married, cisgendered, heterosexual couples with children). This particular family structure might resonate with some but certainly not all students (e.g. those from lone-parent or skip-generation families, or those with same-sex parents), some of whom may feel excluded as a result.
If young men living in all-male residences face physical violence or humiliation by members of their “brotherhood” through hazing or initiation practices, they may feel hesitant to report the incident(s), as it could be seen speaking out against the “residence family” as a whole, rather than just the perpetrator(s). For example, at one university in Nova Scotia, young men in one all-male residence receive nicknames based upon the behaviours of the men who came before them; they have little control over their own identity within their “campus family.” While the older “brothers” know the backstories behind these nicknames, the students themselves do not know the origin of the name they are dubbed, thus carrying with them the humiliation of the behaviours of others.

While many individuals claim that the brotherhoods in these all-male residences can work to challenge the narratives of masculine friendship and intimacy, others experience varying degrees of abuse and harassment in the buildings that are deemed to be their “family” homes.

Young women who experience sexual violence on campuses with these “family narratives” may feel hesitant to come forward, again, in fear of uncloaking the realities of the “campus family” life. When they do come forward, many young women are put in a situation where they must step into a “victim role” in which they are searching for the support of their paternal leaders, instead of seeking justice for the crimes that are committed against them.

For students who are queer or gender non-conforming – some of whom may have difficult relationships with their families at home – patriarchal and heteronormative family narratives may work to further exclude these groups. For queer youth, in particular, the notion of family may be more complicated, and having that narrative perpetuated into their university experience can leave them feeling excluded, unsafe and unwelcome.

As young people grow into adulthood, relationships based on love, care and support play an important role in supporting their well-being. The artificial “family narrative” that is developed institutionally, however, may not necessarily be a springboard for the development of truly “chosen” families.

A chosen family is not based upon a hierarchy of age, gender or power; chosen families are developed more organically through love, inspiration and support. Understanding the importance and beauty of the chosen family is fundamental for understanding the complexity and diversity of families, family life and family experiences in Canada and around the world.

Chloe Brown is a recent graduate of St. Francis Xavier University, where she was a senior reporter at The Xaverian Weekly.

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2 Ibid.