Shifting patterns of parental love? *Supernanny* and the search for democratic intimacy

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Abstract
The surprisingly popular television program *Supernanny* presents a narrative of family healing through the application of new techniques of disciplinary control. But is this a story of children learning to behave, or of parents learning to love? In this paper, I apply Anthony Giddens’ ideas regarding the democratisation of private life to consider competing models of parental love in *Supernanny*. I suggest that attention to this important and central emotion may have important, but as yet under-researched, implications for understandings of the contemporary family.

Introduction
In the early months of 2005, Australian television network Channel 9 broadcast a program that became a surprise hit: *Supernanny* placed parenting in the spotlight, encouraging people around the nation to consider whether they, too, needed a ‘naughty spot’ for dealing with their child’s ‘unacceptable behaviour’. Picking up on the program’s popularity, magazines, talk shows and current affairs programs ran stories questioning, sometimes reinforcing and often debunking, the childrearing and discipline methods of nanny Jo Frost.

It is not my intention here to discuss the merits or otherwise of the particular parenting techniques proposed by nanny Jo Frost in *Supernanny*. Rather, my examination of *Supernanny* is part of a much larger project, in which I am exploring how parenting and parent-child relationships are represented and (at a later stage of the project) experienced in contemporary Australian society. In particular, I am interested in examining the ways in which ‘love’ is associated with the parent-child relationship.

The project is in part a response to calls for the sociology of the family to encompass greater attention to the role of emotions and ‘emotion work’ in addition to and in
interaction with attention to the structural and institutional contexts of the family (e.g. Jamieson 1998). But attention to the role of ‘love’ in parent-child relationships is also important in its own right, as a potential means of illuminating the motivations behind decisions that people make regarding both having and raising children. Greater understanding of the emotional dimension of these decisions may have important implications for our understandings of a whole range of issues connected to parent-child relationships, including, but not limited to, fertility, work-life balance, childcare provision, school funding, and health issues such as childhood obesity.

As a ‘reality television’ representation of family life, *Supernanny* presents an interesting opportunity for considering representations of ‘love’ in parent-child relations. I am not assuming that this program is an unproblematic representation of reality or that it necessarily reproduces experiences of parent-child relationships. But I do agree with those theorists who argue that popular media texts are popular in large part because, in spite of their polysemy, they succeed in articulating dominant cultural models or problems (e.g. Hall 1980). Thus, I argue that an analysis of the surprisingly popular *Supernanny* will reveal some of the dominant ideas currently informing understandings and practices of the parent-child relationship.

**Methods**

I was alerted to the popularity of *Supernanny* as I collected media materials for a broader analysis of representations of parent-child relationships. I recorded six one-hour episodes over a seven-week period between April and June, 2005. For the purposes of this discussion, I will focus on only one episode. After viewing each of the six episodes at least twice, I am confident that this particular episode is highly representative of all episodes in the series, and that the substance of my analysis could be applied to any of these episodes. This is in large part because all episodes of *Supernanny* follow a distinctive format that has three stages. First, the unruly behaviour of a family’s children is put on display while the parents plea for help from nanny Jo Frost. Second, Frost instructs the parents on a range of techniques for managing the children’s behaviour. Third is the resolution: the parents are left by Frost to test the techniques on their own;
they inevitably fail to some degree; and Frost again comes to the rescue. She reinforces the new techniques and then leaves amidst hugs and tears of gratitude from yet another successfully transformed family. This success is emphasised in a brief ‘Family Update’, during which viewers see the family enjoying each other’s company and hear both parents and children testify to the immense improvements in their lives. The uniqueness of each episode relies on the relatively minor variations that distinguish each family, including the particular behavioural problems emphasised, and the ages and number of children in the family.

The episode selected for this discussion was advertised as one in which a child makes the claim that ‘Supernanny is going to fail’. The Collins family live in Britain, and are comprised of Jason, a father who works outside the home, Karen, a mother who remains full time in the home, and their four children: Ben (aged 10), Lauren (8), Joshua (6) and Joseph (2). I conducted a content analysis of the program after viewing it several times and transcribing the subtitles and speech. I was particularly interested in the narrative of the journey from ‘bad behaviour’ to ‘good behaviour’ and how this might be connected to shifting representations of expressions of love.

‘Love’ in Supernanny

Love is a central theme in *Supernanny*. Although Frost is apparently called in to correct the behavioural problems of the children, it is clear in the start of the episode that these parents are also seeking help regarding their family’s ability to ‘love’. During a display of the children biting, hitting and spitting at each other, Karen expresses her concern about her husband’s relationship with the children, saying ‘I think Jason’s too hard; I don’t think he gives them enough love really’. For Jason, the problem lies in the deterioration of his relationship with his wife: ‘we’ve lost a source of our love for each other; we just don’t agree on the way we discipline the children, so we end up fighting with each other’.

In the second phase of the episode, Frost explicitly addresses this problem of love. As always, she follows her initial observation of the family with a ‘Parent Meeting’, during which she emphasises a positive in the family dynamic before telling the parents what needs to be fixed. She tells Karen and Jason:

*TASA 2005 Conference Proceedings*
The children are very energetic and they’ve got lots of love for one another. They are close, and that’s really lovely to see. But, it’s mob rule in this house. Your four children control the parents here. The aggression is just absolutely disgusting.

The parents agree, and repeat their plea for help, after which Frost returns to the theme of love in the following way:

Frost: where [Jason is] firm with the children, [Karen is] weak with the children. Where [Karen] won’t tell them off, Jason has to tell them off. That is not working … Karen why can’t you tell your kids off?

Karen: I don’t know. I just don’t like seeing them upset.

Frost: your kids love you. Your children love you, obviously. [Karen begins to cry] Karen, your children won’t turn around and go ‘I hate you’ because you’ve decided that you need to put house rules down. You’re so scared that your kids are going to grow up and not love you. Am I right or am I wrong?

Karen: yes, it’s true.

Having identified and stated the problem, Frost asks Karen and Jason for their commitment to changing their family. Then, the ‘Teaching Period’ begins.

During this phase of the program, Frost introduces several techniques to discipline the children. Each of these techniques involves identifying bad behaviour in the child, explaining that the behaviour is unacceptable, separating the child from people and/or toys, and then restoring the child to the family and/or their belongings after they apologise. Several common features are emphasised in all of these techniques, including the minimisation of intimidation and aggression. Thus, parents should be eye-level with the child, rather than standing over them, no aggressive tone or behaviour is used, and separation from the family is not accomplished via locked doors or physical restraints. The parents are encouraged to remain calm and rational throughout encounters with their emotional, disobedient children.

Frost also introduces other elements to the family household. A daily routine is created and displayed, with clear guidelines as to what needs to be done, when and by whom. In most episodes, this new routine stipulates that the father contribute more time to household tasks and to playing with the children. The children are encouraged to play
games with each other and with their parents, and the parents are instructed how to behave with their children, including: ‘give them lots of praise, lots of encouragement, have fun with the kids’, ‘make sure that you tell the children your expectations for them, so that they can meet them’, and ‘please reward the children, because they’re doing as they’re told’.

When Frost leaves the family for their test run, the viewer is left in no doubt that the children appreciate her presence. Indeed, this is the first time that we hear the children using ‘love’, when they say to Frost ‘we love you’. During this test run, Karen more actively disciplines the children, saying: ‘it’s easier to take a toy away now, because now I know it’s for the best; I don’t feel so sorry for them’. The problem that Frost now addresses is the authoritative behaviour of the father. Through a role-play technique, she asks Jason to reflect on how he might appear to his children. He comes to acknowledge the need to change his behaviour, saying: ‘I learned that I didn’t have to be this big nasty person standing over the children, pointing my finger and telling them what to do; it made me understand’.

The family Frost leaves behind at the end of the program are successfully transformed. Amid images of the family playing games and enjoying meals together, Karen comments:

Joseph woke up this morning, and said ‘Mummy I love you’, and that just felt really nice after me getting tougher yesterday, trying to discipline him; it just sort of showed me they still love you and don’t hate you for being tough on them, which is really nice.

Jason, too, perceives a significant difference in his relationship with his children, saying: ‘previously I didn’t see them as children, I just saw them as a mob; but now I don’t see them as a mob anymore … it really, really has made me enjoy living; because previously we didn’t enjoy it, we didn’t have a life’. Finally, Karen sums up the moral of the story as viewers watch the happy family playing outside:

It’s taught me as a parent that you can still be a good parent and put the discipline in place, rather than thinking that you are being a good parent by just letting the children do what they like. Because in the end, you’re not really doing yourself any favours, or the children.
Discussion

A key source of the appeal of reality television programming is ‘the opportunity it affords viewers to scrutinise the ordinarily private behaviours and responses of others’ (Lumby 2003: 19). By making private practices publicly visible, *Supernanny* provides the opportunity for a personal problem to become identifiable, in Mills’ (1970) terms, as a public issue. While most media commentators argue that it is the deplorable behaviour of some young children that is the public issue of interest in *Supernanny*, my observation is that the public issue is, rather, the negotiation of competing discourses of love. The narrative journey that promises hope for viewers is only superficially one of a transition from poorly-behaved children to well-behaved children; more important, I argue, is the discussion of how parents – and in particular mothers – might both give and receive love in more satisfying ways.

In the opening scenes, the dominant model of love is that of romance: an idealisation of the other based on irrational and private emotions that transcend any efforts to control them (Illouz 1997; Wilding 2003). Karen’s idealisation of her children is such that she refuses to reprimand them, and willingly gives them control over the household as a strategy for securing their happiness. Karen is a clear example of the romantic love narrative: her children, in typical romantic form, are initially aloof and hostile, and she patiently waits for the inevitable moment of recognition, in which ‘her love causes her to become loved in return, dissolves the indifference of the other and replaces antagonism with devotion’ (Giddens 1992: 46).

Jason, on the other hand, practices an alternative, authoritative model of love, according to which experts ‘advised parents not to become too friendly with their children on the grounds that their authority would become weakened’ (Giddens 1992: 98). As the sole disciplinarian in the family, his efforts ensure that the children obey him. However, the cost of this authority is the loss of intimacy – both in relation to his children and in relation to his wife.

For Anthony Giddens (1992), both of these models of love are flawed as the basis of modern intimacy. He argues that modernity is constructing a new social order, in which the ‘pure relationship’ is replacing old ties based on traditional rules and obligations of
kinship. For Giddens (1992: 184-92), democratisation has shifted from a male project of the public domain to one that now includes the previously feminine private domain of intimacy. The key features of this democratisation lie in the securing of ‘free and equal relations’ between autonomous individuals. In a democratic environment, inequalities of power are actively reduced in the interests of ‘relating to others in an egalitarian way’, and social norms of obligation give way to the negotiation by individuals of ‘the conditions of their association’. In those cases when one individual is unable to negotiate – as might be the case with an infant – all actions in the relationship nevertheless ‘should be capable of counterfactual justification’ (Giddens 1992: 191-2). The resulting pure relationship is ‘a relationship of sexual and emotional equality’ that transforms intimacy from a potentially oppressive form into ‘a transactional negotiation of personal ties by equals’ (Giddens 1992: 2-3).

While Giddens’ argument focuses primarily on sexual relationships, he does suggest that it also applies to parent-child relations, in which there should be ‘close emotional ties … with a stress upon intimacy replacing that of parental authoritativeness’ (Giddens 1992: 98). He admits that some see this development in negative terms: ‘as parent-child ties approximate more and more to the pure relationship, it might seem that the outlook of the parent has no primacy over the inclinations of the child – resulting in a ‘permissiveness’ run riot’ (Giddens 1992: 109). This would appear to be a good description of the Collins family prior to Supernanny’s intervention. But then how do we explain the transformation of this family into a more cooperative dynamic?

The techniques that Jo Frost introduces to families in Supernanny fulfil the elements of democratic actions. The requirement for counterfactual justification is met with the writing up of rules and routines for the family, and by the imposition of a regulated and predictable response to sanctioned behaviours. Egalitarianism is implicit in the requirement that parents meet the eye-level of their children, and that they avoid aggression and anger in their communications. The sorts of behaviours that become ‘unacceptable’ for both children and parents are those behaviours that might impinge upon the rights of others within the family to enjoy their own autonomy. The process is one of removing emotional or irrational responses to ‘unacceptable behaviour’ in order to
better achieve the primary benefit of the pure relationship – intimacy in its most satisfying form.

The success of the strategies suggests that Giddens is correct when he claims that a ‘liberalising of the personal sphere would not mean the disappearance of authority; rather, coercive power gives way to authority relations which can be defended in a principled fashion’ (Giddens 1992: 109). Indeed, it does seem that the democratisation of the private sphere represents a model of hope for all social relations, worthy of an optimistic – even utopian – view of the future.

However, a number of questions remain unanswered, and worthy of further exploration. For example, if, as Giddens suggests, the democratisation of the private sphere is an outcome of modernity, then why is it that Frost is needed to intervene in this family’s dynamics? Are they a rare example of a poorly socialised family group? I would suggest not. Given the popularity of the program, it would appear that the particular problems that this family experience articulate issues that many families might be responding to and negotiating (see also Jamieson 1998: Chapter 3).

It is important to acknowledge that Giddens’ (1992) analysis is based on an examination of self-help literature, which shares a great deal in common with the therapeutic narrative of *Supernanny*. This narrative assumes a movement from one historical model of (romantic) love to another, arguably better, model of (confluent) love. What gets ignored in this narrative is the ways in which multiple models of love might coexist and compete with each other simultaneously across time (see Evans 2003). In this one episode, at least three different models of love are presented: authoritative, romantic and, finally, confluent. It is interesting to ponder whether the ‘problems’ of the family in the beginning of the program actually arise from the tensions between competing models of love, rather than the faulty nature of both models and the superiority of the single model that Frost introduces. Perhaps Frost’s success lies in her efforts to unify the expectations of the family regarding their practices and experiences of loving relationships.
Conclusion

Attention to the question of ‘love’ as it is represented in *Supernanny* highlights the co-presence of multiple models for expressing this complex emotional state. On one level, it does appear that the narrative of *Supernanny* reinforces Giddens’ argument that the private sphere of sexual and familial relations is undergoing democratisation, and that this represents an opportunity for a utopian future. However, accepting this explanation would require us to ignore the competing claims for dominance of a variety of models of love within the parent-child relationship. It is this latter diversity which, I would argue, deserves greater empirical attention. Rather than focusing solely on the structural features of families, such as whether they are single- or dual-parent families, single- or dual-income families, or hetero or homo-sexual families, what new insights might we gain into the nature of the family by focusing on the representations and experiences of love that are assumed to underpin their practices of interaction? A focus on addressing this question could result in an exciting new chapter in the sociology of the family.

References


