Family Experiments By Rachel A. Buddeberg

There is a loud and clear call for deliberative democracy within the writing of many pragmatists, including feminist pragmatists. Judith Green (2008) wants to deepen democracy. Erin McKenna (2001) puts forth the task of developing goals that can lead us to more democratic living. Both build on John Dewey's writing that proposes to make democracy a way of life. Although they outline various ways of getting closer to such democratic living, i argue that we need to question the centrality of the nuclear family if we want to live their visions¹.

Following Dewey's suggestion to evaluate "inherited institutions" (McKenna 2001, 86), i examine the nuclear family's implication for democratic living. There are several ways in which the nuclear family prevents deepening democracy: It reinforces hierarchy and biological bonds, prevents exposure to difference, and enables an attitude of devaluing friendship. Most importantly, it does not teach children how to seek out difference and make democracy a way of life. Dewey asks philosophers to go beyond evaluation. He calls upon us to develop experiments that can be implemented to replace existing institutions with new ones that are more in alignment with our ultimate vision (Dewey 1920, 192). Thus, i present a potential experiment: An intentional community that is designed to be training ground for deep democracy for both children and adults. This community builds on ideas advanced by Iris Marion Young and Erin McKenna. I incorporate my own experience at Hayes Valley Farm to advance a way to safeguard diversity, which addresses some of the dangers Young and

¹ To emphasize the equality between you and me, i prefer using a lowercase "i."

McKenna seem to assume away, particularly our human tendency to move from diversity toward homogenized groups.

1. Democracy As A Way of Life

Judith Green (2008) suggests that there are two strands to democracy. We are mostly familiar with the first strand: Representative democracy. Yet to fully develop democracy – to radicalize democracy – we need to develop the second strand to help democracy become a "way of life," argues Green (2008, 233). Only by living this second-strand democracy can we become a truly democratic society. This Jeffersonian strand includes local active participatory democracy, incorporated into civic society and "practices of daily living" (159). Direct citizen participation functions in addition to the representative strand as a counterbalance and complement. Yet, many democracy theorists dismiss this participatory strand as impractical. To counter these critiques, Green documents examples of citizen participation – compiling an encouraging body of empirical evidence of participatory democracy. These examples, drawn from past and current US American events, show the feasibility of a deeper democracy, giving social hope, and thus provide a foundation we can build on (161). Green urges that developing this secondstrand, participatory democracy is crucial to strengthening representative democracy. Without this counterbalance, democracy as a whole is endangered because it becomes too easily transformed to benefit the few (195).

Green closes her book by motivating us as individuals to pursue this deeply democratic life, which requires from us a more committed and active approach to democracy than voting once a year. She points out that the evidence she presented suggests that second-strand participatory democracy can counter the meaning-void identified by Victor Frankl (247) by

providing us with opportunities for active living, including "an active role in future forging" (248). By being active participants in our lives, both on a personal and a social level, our lives become more meaningful. Thus, a deeper democracy will benefit both individuals and societies at large.

While Green's deep democracy remains sketchy – partly on purpose as she argues that the task of a full vision is too large for any one person and the requirement for one person to develop strategies contradicts the very idea of participatory democracy (240) – Erin McKenna (2001) offers more details by incorporating feminist critiques and approaches to expand Dewey's ideas. McKenna advances a feminist and pragmatist process model of utopia including many of the aspects Green found in her empirical evidence (3).

McKenna's process model of utopia incorporates several of Dewey's key concepts. I first summarize those concepts and then outline how McKenna uses them to advance her model. "Lived experience" (84) is the conscious process of evaluating our past and current experiences to guide our future in such a way that it provides us with greater opportunities for fulfillment (84). This requires the active approach to living Green mentions. We structure our experience through our understanding of the environment in which it happens (135) thus acknowledging our relational nature to that environment (85). Future possibilities are constraint by our present, yet, when we design our futures, we are also designing the possibilities of change into those futures, since the constraints themselves can be changed. Thus, lived experience reflects the "dynamic ordering" and "rhythm" of our lives (85). We become actively involved in our experience through this process (85). Lived experience requires critical intelligence (135). Critical intelligence is the process of critically examining our

past and present to find opportunities for change. We evaluate what is working for us and what is not. This process entails that we critically examine our social institutions and advance, especially at the societal level, experiments for replacing institutions that are no longer serving us. This experimental approach is an idea borrowed by Dewey from science (87). The experimental results are again critically evaluated to ensure that we can live fulfilled lives (87).

Most important for this view of experience is Dewey's view that humans are interdependent with other people and our environment. Once we recognize our interdependence and act with critical intelligence from that recognition, we become "unified individuals." As unified individuals, we adapt to our physical and social environments, which we also change to fit our visions (86). This continuous adaptation makes end-states impossible, thus Dewey introduces "ends-in-view." Ends-in-view capture the idea that means and ends are interrelated: Once reached, an end-in-view can become the means for a new end-in-view. This interrelatedness requires that the means and the ends need to be consistent (86). For example, if we want a nonviolent society, moving toward that society with a violent overthrow of the current system is inconsistent (95).

Dewey envisions incorporating these concepts in a society he calls a Great Community, which is based on "associated living" (99). Associated living values plurality as necessary for growth. Without exposure to diverse perspectives, we cannot become reflective thinkers; we cannot grow into unified individuals. Social arrangements become problematic if they "narrow our perspectives and constrain our critical powers" (99). Associated living, thus, pushes us toward lived experience by forcing us to critically examine our habits through dialogue with

others (100). Dewey sees this happening within small communities enabling face-to-face interactions.

The primary feminist critique of Dewey's Great Community model is this reliance on small communities (131). The worry is that face-to-face communities perpetuate, rather than help us overcome, existing inequalities and require us to conform to social norms that ignore diversity. To counteract this worry, McKenna introduces Iris Marion Young's work to "strengthen Dewey's pragmatism" (132). Young's ideal city life offers to balance the anonymity of the city with exposure to diversity (133). City life brings people together to address common problems, such as street repair, but it does not impose social norms that require people to live a certain way, as might be the case in a face-to-face community, which has not yet achieved Dewey's ideal. Participatory democracy is then lived in transitory communities that emerge to address specific issues or pursue particular goals. Citizens of the city will be involved in multiple communities, which underscores the interdependence and interconnectedness of all. Yet it is not clear how Young's city life would prevent establishment of social norms within these transitory communities, especially when they remain in place for a considerable amount of time since some problems cannot be resolved quickly.

From both Green and McKenna, building on Dewey, two themes emerge. First, democracy requires active citizen participation – not merely representation – and that requires citizens empowered to participate. That is, we need to train people's critical intelligence so that they can be "critical, flexible, and open-minded" (McKenna 2001, 135). Second, recognizing and valuing diversity is crucial. Feminists worry that in Dewey's approach diversity will be ignored or, worse, suppressed for "the good of the community." Young proposes city

life as a means to counteract this worry. As McKenna acknowledges, though, her ideal might not be enough (134). I return to this worry when i suggest a specific experiment. Before we get into experiments, though, we need to evaluate a social institution: The nuclear family.

2. Evaluating the Nuclear Family

McKenna stresses the importance of education in advancing Dewey's process model "to create socially responsible citizens embedded in the method of intelligence and experimentation" (101). Yet, she is strangely silent about the institution that provides – for better or worse – the first education: The family. As far back as Aristotle, the family has been seen as the central building block of society (Aristotle 330 BCE, 1252b, 1253b). Today, it trains future citizens for at least the first five years of a child's life. As Dewey points out, the family is one of the institutions that can help people "grow and find their specific capacities and functions" (1920, 188). He also calls for an intelligent examination of "inherited institutions and customs," which includes figuring out the problems they were designed to address and then evaluating whether they successfully do so (1929, 273). If the family is to help children develop into unified individuals, people who recognize their interconnectedness and know how to flex their critical intelligence, does it lay an adequate foundation? Dewey's list of several more questions for evaluating existing institutions is best summarized with the most important one: "What sort of individuals are created?" (198)

The model of the nuclear family is based on a hierarchical structure with the father as the head of the household ruling over his wife and children. Although this model has changed, allowing heads of households of either gender, children still remain unequal members of the

family because they are viewed as too immature to make important decisions². Children thus learn that there are hierarchies, that there are those who lead and others who follow – a message hardly conducive to participatory democracy. Nuclear families also tend to teach inward focus: Biological ties are viewed as more important than friendships (Gerstel & Sarkisian 2006). Spending time with family members is expected as a social norm. This reduces the time available for reaching out across difference and developing diverse ties to as many people as possible, a crucial aspect of responsibility as defined on pragmatist grounds (Heldke 2001). Dewey was equally concerned with the impact of small social groups, which promote "fixed habits" and thereby "restrict the formation of critical powers" (cited by McKenna 2001, 99). He did not include the nuclear family in his list of groups, though his concern applies since its narrow focus makes it a similarly "problematic [...] social arrangement" (99).

Nuclear families also enjoy preferential treatment. The more traditional a family, the greater are its financial benefits. For example, the US federal tax benefit to married couples is largest for couples where one partner earns significantly more than the other³. Families with children are supported – assuming they meet certain standards. This governmental support ties into the most pernicious way the current nuclear family model undermines democracy: Through the development of a set of stereotypes – singlism and couplemania. Singlism is the stereotyping of singles as immature and selfish, at bottom not full individuals (DePaulo &

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² A view all too often reinforced by family courts who claim that children cannot decide what parent they might want to live with in the case of divorce. The fear is that they have been influenced by a parent – a fear that is not warranted based on empirical evidence. (See, for example, Hoult 2006)

³ For more information, including sources to data analyses, please see http://www.unmarried.org/federal-incometaxes.html

Morris 2005). Couplemania is the flipside, which overvalues the couple leading to the preferential treatment as well as the reduced importance of friendships. In addition to undermining the value of friendships, which could be built to value diversity, stereotypes are deeply shaming mechanisms that teach us that we are not worthy of love and belonging (Brown 2006). Shame prevents empathy, therefore impacting our interactions with others negatively (Tangney & Dearing 2002). In order for us to communicate across difference, we need to develop empathy since that allows us to connect with others, a crucial skill for participatory democracy.

For all these reasons, i suggest that the nuclear family is not a good building block for a democratic society. It does not train us for critical intelligence, limits exposure to diverse people, and sows the seeds for stereotypes, undermining ways of connecting across difference.

3. Philosophical Experiments

The role of philosophy, according to Dewey, is to assist in resolving social and moral problems (Dewey 1920, 26). To accomplish this, as i alluded to before, he not only calls for an evaluation of existing institutions but also for the development of experiments designed to test replacement of these institutions. According to Dewey, the role of social philosophers is to advance "hypotheses to be used and tested in projects of reform" (192). He bases his idea on a view of science that allows us to develop experiments to figure out how we can move closer to our ends-in-view, our flexible goals (McKenna 2001, 87). Philip Kitcher (2011) reinforces this call asking for "exploration of alternatives that are better suited to the problem-background of our own times" (257).

Experiments without evaluation criteria are risky, if not useless. Thus if we want to advance an experiment for an institution to replace the nuclear family, we need guidelines. McKenna (2001) distills five criteria for the critical evaluation of an end-in-view from Dewey. First, the end-in-view needs to include ways of preparing people for "deep democracy" through education and socialization, especially by active participation, which becomes both a means and an end-in-view (97). This includes the promotion of participation by all members of society so that they can develop their critical intelligence (108). Second, in developing an end-in-view, we need to take into account present circumstances, as well as past developments, and thus ground the end-in-view in what "is already going on." This requires that the end-in-view be as realistic as possible (98). Third, the end-in-view must be flexible, that is, we observe and interact with the changes. We remain open to adjusting both the experimental process and the end-in-view itself. Fourth, the end-in-view is completely integrated with the means to reach it. The means can enable us to move closer to the end-in-view by teaching us skills we need to attain the end-in-view and can also be useful in achieving other ends-in-view (99). Finally, the end-in-view helps us be open to new possibilities and thus promotes plurality as we learn that a larger variety of experiences allow us to grow more. It helps us realize our interdependence, which further opens us to possibilities (99). Good ends-in-view, McKenna summarizes, support our growth as individuals and as society (100).

As i have outlined in section 2, the nuclear family model is problematic for several reasons. The nuclear family is an end-in-view – an institution that is supposed to prepare

children for life in a democracy⁴. Therefore, using the McKenna/Dewey criteria for an end-inview, we can sharpen my critique further. The nuclear family does not prepare for participatory democracy (criterion 1) and it discourages plurality because of its inward focus (criterion 5). The third criterion calls for a critique from a historical context. As Stephanie Coontz has pointed out, the nuclear family has shrunk over the last 50 years (2005). It was not until the 1950s that the male breadwinner model became economically feasible. Prior to that, a family was expanded through the presence of boarders who would contribute rent income and also provide diverse viewpoints. Finally, the nuclear family also falls short of the fourth criterion: It does not teach the skills necessary to thrive in a two-strand democracy. Before i advance my experiment, i outline exactly what those skills are that we need to learn in order to make deep democracy a reality.

4. Democratic Skills

As Green (2008) advocated, deep democracy exists along two strands: A representative and a participatory strand. Most current democracies emphasize the representative strand and relegate the participatory strand to the sidelines. Green urges that it is precisely that strand, though, that makes democracy possible and allows it to flourish. Incorporating participating in our way of living is the best preparation for two-strand democracy (198). Green presents many examples of citizen activism but they are centered around adults. McKenna (2001) recounts an essay written by Dewey that allows us to glean what elements are important in the education of children (101). The essay is geared toward a vision of schools but it is applicable to any

⁴ I realize that this was not the original goal of nuclear families but within the context of the democratic societies we live in now, it makes sense to assume this as at least one of the goals, possibly the most important.

childhood education. The primary purpose of education and socialization is to rear "socially responsible citizens embedded in the method of intelligence and experimentation," which requires that we learn to observe, reflect, judge flexibly, and be able to envision ends-in-view (101). This is crucial for participatory democracy but, as Green points out, also to living a fulfilling, meaningful life (248). The utopia Dewey presents shows adults and children interacting to allow them to develop critical intelligence in an environment that supports experimentation by eliminating fear of embarrassment. Children learn to be open-minded and ready to envision solutions to existing problems.

The growth and development of children is best encouraged by using the "plurality and complexity of modern society" to promote it (McKenna 2001, 100). This requires that children (and adults) have "critical and flexible habits of mind." These minds emerge when we grow through social interactions (99). Social interactions with as many and as diverse people as possible are absolutely crucial within pragmatism: They are necessary to reach objectivity and truth. Jane Addams (1892a) stresses that a social good, in order to be a true social good, requires everyone's input. It cannot simply reflect the views of an elite or of a small group of people. Although Addams seems to have adults in mind, Polish child advocate Janusz Korczak (1921) urges us adults to respect children as human beings: "Children don't become human beings – they already are!" Thus, children's input is important for a good to be fully social.

Additionally, as Lisa Heldke (2001) points out, a pragmatist view of objectivity ties it to the responsibility to seek out diverse viewpoints. Acknowledging responsibility simply means

⁵ My translation

to note that there are other participants in inquiry and that they bring their experience and needs to the table. Fulfilling responsibility requires listening to others' experience, to understand their situation, and to recognize one's contribution to that experience (86). Expanding responsibility goes beyond the immediate concerns of inquiry to include related concerns that might influence the situation (86). Assessment after this expansion includes determining if the inquiry participants can fulfill the new responsibilities (87). If they cannot, participants need to account "for a decision not to meet them" (86). An inquiry process can thus be made more objective by working with the question "how can this inquiry be made more responsible?" (87). Including children can make inquiry more responsible.

To enable participatory democracy, then, children need to be exposed to many viewpoints and learn to listen to others critically, yet, respectfully, to move closer to responsibility and pragmatist objectivity. This trains them to be the unified adults Dewey envisions who are embedded in the method of intelligence. In addition to learning critical thinking through doing, though, children by being exposed to diversity as something positive that adds crucial information to our points of view and learn to value diversity. One of the most crucial skills enabling these developments is the ability to communicate by establishing empathic connections. We can communicate across difference, understanding the other's experience from their point of view. This is also an important requirement of participatory democracy (McKenna 2001, 112), so learning it through practice as early as possible is vital.

Communication helps us "learn to be human" and incorporate democracy into our lives (Dewey cited in McKenna, 116).

5. Intentional Families

As i have argued, the nuclear family does not provide this exposure to others, which is fundamental to the pragmatist view, nor does it teach us empathic communication. Instead i suggest we experiment with intentional families – social groups that are brought together with the goal of helping everybody involved grow, especially the children. Because these intentional families are designed to teach participatory democracy, they cannot maintain the adult-child hierarchy. With Korczak, they demand that we view and respect all persons involved as human beings, no matter what their age. The preferential treatment of biological ties will be lessened because children have many adults to interact with, not limited to their biological parents⁶. Basically, these intentional families incorporate democracy as a way of life. In this section, i draw on my experience with intentional communities to suggest how such intentional families can incorporate the pragmatist ideas while being mindful of the feminist critiques of small communities.

To be feasible training grounds for a democratic way of life, intentional families need to bring together a diverse set of people – diversity across ages, genders, sexualities, classes, races and ethnicities, at minimum. As Iris Marion Young (1990) suggests, the city provides much of that diversity, despite Jane Addams' caution that a city can also contribute to division (1892, 17). To utilize a city's diversity, something like Addams' settlement house could function as an intentional family, also allowing for a more realistic way of moving from the nuclear family model to intentional families. Addams' Hull House offered various activities that were designed

⁶ Here is a story that recounts one child's experience with a larger pool of adults to draw from: http://www.lafayettemorehouse.com/choose_family.html#communities-ben (Please note that i find a lot about the Morehouses problematic, still, this story illustrates some aspects of what an intentional family might offer).

to empower people while reaching across differences (1892b). As a settlement house-style, the intentional family would bring together people who live in their various homes, eventually transitioning to living with the intentional family. Drawing on a city's diversity, a settlement house can utilize Young's city life by encouraging people to consciously work, play, and learn together across differences moving toward common ends-in-view.

To fully incorporate preparation for participatory democracy, intentional families would draw on governing styles from intentional communities. Decisions would be made by modified consensus, which allows people to "step aside" from a decision if they do not agree with it but feel they can live with its adoption. Everybody who can verbalize their opinions is encouraged to provide their input. Sometimes children have ideas that can move an adult group beyond an impasse⁷. Adults learn to listen to children and help them articulate their concerns and ideas. This encourages free and open communication. The decisions made can include larger issues, such as where to go on vacation or whether to move, or they might be delegated to sub-groups within the family who handle, for example, what to grow in the garden. These project groups allow for more involvement with the communication processes because they are smaller and they avoid paralysis by drawing input only from those directly involved with a project.

To address the feminist worry that small communities – such as intentional families – might perpetuate rather than overcome oppression, i suggest testing several safeguards. First, like Young's people in city life, the intentional family is embedded in a larger community. The interactions with that larger community offer more opportunities for exposure to diversity,

⁷ For example, Mark Lakeman from City Repair Portland recounts how a child helped adults see all the resources available in a community by simply drawing a map of a block and then listing skills people can offer.

which in itself might already counter any normative pressures within the intentional family. However, a more pro-active safeguard would be the formation of two project groups: A conflict resolution group and a diversity monitor. Members of the intentional family would populate these groups – again ensuring that children are involved. The conflict resolution group brings together people who are especially skilled – or interested in developing those skills – to resolve conflicts using communication tools. It would be imperative that this group is called upon even to mediate small conflicts because even seemingly small disagreements could simmer and undermine the family. Plus, smaller conflicts provide practice to handle larger conflicts. Such groups are usually part of intentional communities, such as Hayes Valley Farm. However, at Hayes Valley Farm, diversity remains an issue, especially when it comes to decision making, as there are several strong leaders who tend to unintentionally silence people who are less outspoken. In a family, such tendencies might be even more prevalent because adults are often more verbally skilled than children. Thus, i suggest that a group is designated as diversity monitors. Diversity monitors would ensure inclusion by ensuring that people feel heard and are encouraged to become involved by addressing any concerns that might prevent involvement. They would be charged to actively monitor whether as many people as possible are included in the intentional family itself and during decision making within the family. They can also function as ombudspersons who listen to concerns from those who might not feel comfortable bringing the concerns to the larger family. To avoid that the monitors become desensitized to the normative pressures within the intentional family, the members of this monitoring group rotate across family members. Additionally, monitors interact frequently with monitors from

other families or groups to ensure that their consciousness can be raised about any lack of diversity they might have overlooked.

6. Proposal Evaluation

We can evaluate the experiment in intentional families along the McKenna/Dewey criteria for a good end-in-view outlined in section three. Since intentional families are designed to prepare children for participatory democracy, they meet the first criterion. The suggestion to start with settlement house-like intentional families that do not require people to move out of their nuclear families but provide opportunities to grow within a virtual family is meant to address criterion 2. Flexibility is of outmost importance as children and adults learn to live with each other and make decisions together collaboratively, ensuring that the third criterion is incorporated. Additionally, each project could have build-in feedback loops that allow for regular assessment of projects with particular emphasis on inclusion. Since the intentional family requires active participation in decision making via consensus, people not only learn those skills but use them for ends-in-view other than participation in the larger democracy. This fulfills the fourth criterion. The fifth criterion is, again, part of the design of intentional families. The diversity monitors also promote plurality by ringing an alarm when pressures to conform might arise. These monitors help to address the feminist worry about small communities: They are tasked with actively preventing normative forces. Thus, their incorporation in the experiment goes beyond Young's suggestion to grow deep democracy within city life, which is meant to passively ensure diversity.

Suggesting intentional families seems like a radical departure from the way we currently live, despite a transition phase that meets the second criterion. It might be easier, we could

argue, to make nuclear families more democratic. In fact, they have already become more democratic by replacing the male head-of-household with a more egalitarian set of partners. However, the worry that nuclear families are too insulated to enable learning participatory democracy remains. Although a household of parents with children could practice consensus, the hierarchical dynamics between adults and children are likely to remain strong. They emerge simply by adults' greater life experience, which is not diluted by the presence of other children. A nuclear family might not be large enough to offer enough diversity, something that could be ensured when designing an actual intentional family. Finally, because intentional families draw together people across differences, they do not treat couples preferentially, thus counteracting the stereotyping of singles and the overvaluing of nuclear families, which is prevalent in current ways of living.

In this paper, i propose an experiment for living together as intentional families, which would allow us to learn and use the skills necessary for participatory democracy, especially communication across difference. This active, embedded, daily learning better prepares children for active citizenship than nuclear families, thus ensuring, that both strands of democracy – representative and participatory – are lived. Based on pragmatist and feminist critiques of current models of democracy, i outlined specific ways of ensuring that intentional families do not perpetuate oppression but rather teach – and practice – valuing diversity. An experiment on paper, though, is not sufficient. The final test of my proposal will have to be through its implementation.

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