

## **A Dialogic Discovery on Family with Renate Dabrowski & Fabio Calvi Guidetti**

Alejandra Iveth Alcocer Denis  
Mérida, Yucatán, México

### ***Abstract***

*This article is derived from the analysis of an unfinished dialogic inquiry that seeks to explore what certain people from different countries think about the meaning of family as well as the meaning that the three co-investigators glean from the expression “we’ve gotten a bit off the track of what family is” (spoken by one of them during the dialogue. Perspectives on the concept of family are diverse. This investigation explores and seeks to understand these perspectives from a critical and respectful position. This article is a creative and collaborative document that draws on anecdotes, metaphors, and reflections.*

**Key words:** *family, perspective, co-investigator, conversation, transformation, social discourse.*

### **Introduction**

It was on two occasions that Renate, Fabio and I got together to talk about a subject that *touched* me, as Shotter and Katz (1996a) would say, in its simplicity and complexity. The concept of “family” is apparently simple to explain, and we assume that everyone shares the same definition. In reality, it is not so. It becomes more complex when we realize that people construct a personal definition. My attention was drawn to the discovery that something supposedly simple had more facets and possibilities.

Our get-togethers took place at Renate’s house and were accompanied by red wine, the silence of the night, and the fresh air. I was interested in knowing what the three of us thought about the meaning of family, given our different viewpoints (one of us being from Germany, one from Brazil and one from Mexico). I taped the conversations and took them home to work on the transcriptions.

In the process of this investigation I allowed myself to be positioned two ways: as researcher and as co-researcher. I formed part of the conversations held with my two collaborators Renate and Fabio, who contributed to the richness of the dialogic analysis with their ideas, opinions and reflections. Having to switch back and forth between the two positions meant that my presence as a researcher did not exclude me from being a participant in the dialogue. This had been very useful at the moment of facilitating the conversational process. For example, when I asked the question “what do we think family is?” I had to ensure that all voices were valued. I was also conscious of being able to contribute my own ideas and exchange them, thus placing myself in a new position. My curiosity was awoken when I played the role of the researcher. However, I also discovered

that my intention had always been to enjoy our conversations to the maximum. This occurred when I acted as a co-researcher and allowed my voice to be shared and heard.

The subsequent reading of the conversations made me recognize that the experience of being both researcher and co-researcher awoke the *passion* in me by the words expressed by Renate: “*we’ve gotten a bit off the track of what family is.*” This expression acquired meaning in the scene of our conversations.

Because of its dialogic nature, I will add a few fragments to this document that stem from an analysis of our conversations.

### **What Attracted Me to the Three of Us, as Co-Investigators**

Some people from Germany, Brazil, and Mexico hold similar ideas in relation to the concept of family. The work of Burman (1998), and Carter and McGoldrick (2005), awaken an interest in knowing what people from different geographic locations think. It has been quite an adventure immersing myself in the ideas that these authors provide about distinguishing how people define “family.” Each one of us, drawing from our own cultures and socio-historic experiences, creates an image of what family is and converts it into a perspective.

### **Who We Are: Some Autobiographical Aspects**

Renate is a 77 year old woman who lived the passage of the Second World War. She was only six years old in 1944. Her experience in a concentration camp has shaped her conception of family.

**Alejandra:** *Germany is a country that makes me think of great composers of classical music, inventors, Nazis, beer, sausage and pretzels. Renate is a very dear friend and was my German professor.*

Fabio is 33 years old and has lived happy moments with a lot of close family life and physical contact. An important member of his family is a Mason.

**Alejandra:** *Brazil is a country that reminds me of bossa nova, samba, carnival, tropa de elite, soccer, favelas, caipiriña and parties. Fabio is my husband and a great companion.*

I am 30 years old. I was 14 when my mother died. Since then my life changed. I have lived under the protection of my father, my brother and Chabe (my nanny) to the care and cover of my younger sister and then my own physical and economic independence.

**Alejandra:** *México is a country that makes me think of Catholicism, a culture and history of fighting for liberty, fiestas, mariachis, tequila, jarana and ‘comfort food’.*

I based my description of these countries on my travel experience and what I have read as well as pleasant conversations with friends from Brazil, Germany, and Mexico. I do not intend to generalize my comments, as I mentioned before. These are only a product of my experiences.

I find it interesting to note that Spanish is not the native language of my co-researchers. As readers will notice further on, they have different levels of familiarity with the language. On some occasions I will put an expression or word in English in parentheses in order to make the text more understandable.

### **A Definition of Family Emerged from our Conversations**

**Fabio:** *Who is really family? Family is who is closest to you. And the family doesn't necessarily have to be somebody that's a blood relative: you can have such a good friend, such a true friend, that he's part of your family. It's whoever is with you at all times. That's the main thing.*

**Renate:** *Who ahhhh who you consider your familia (family). Not only my mom, my dad, my brothers, sisters...everyone who loves me and that I love.*

**Fabio:** *It's whoever you can count on and share your anguish, your happiness, your achievements, your failures, your conquests, your personal problems. And if you're an only filho (child), if you're a son who has no brothers and sisters ok. Who is, who is going to be your brother? Your brother is going to be a good friend.*

**Renate:** *Yes. But I'm going to say, to think of a good friendship warms the heart. To me yes, I say all my friends are familia (family) and I do everything possible for them.*

Based on the above, it can be appreciated that there is no difference when we speak of family and friends. To mention one or the other refers to the same thing.

### **We've Gotten a Bit Off the Track of Family: An Expression that Emerges in the Dialogue**

The following text shows how I became so passionate about the expression.

**Alejandra:** *I was asking myself: What exactly is it that attracts me so much about the conversations? I would read them, take notes, and have internal dialogues. I would ask myself: Alejandra, where would you like to position yourself? What would you like to have a good long talk about? What is there in this particular subject that makes you react so strongly? And how are you being invited to talk about it?*

My interest in "we've gotten a bit off the track of what family is," had to do with the words Renate spoke. It's probable that it was the way I focused on her words that made me ask myself why she thought that. And when I read what we had said and what I had said, I realized that the same thing was happening to Fabio and to me.

The following example clarifies what happened to us as we talked.

**Fabio:** *Ale, who do you consider to be your family?*

**Alejandra:** *My family. I think you are referring to my dad...*

**Fabio:** *Whoever you want.*

What was happening was that as we advanced, we kept returning to the traditional definition of family. I may have experienced it as “a step backwards” due to my present position, referring to constructionist ideas which include the existence of different types of families. I should mention here that my *passion* wasn’t necessarily shared by Fabio or Renate. I found that it was wonderful to recognize that we didn’t share the same passion, to be reminded of the need to be careful in assuming that we and others share the same meanings, experiences, etc..

“Why?” is a cause-effect question that I feel can become a conversational question. Why we got off the track of what family is has caught my attention. It is because we are still at the mercy of the “great social discourses.” That leads me to ask myself how we learn what family is and how that relates to what the three of us think it is.

### **Voices that Offer their Perspective on the Concept of Family**

**Renate, Fabio and Alejandra:** *Family is mom, dad, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents who are related by blood.*

At some point in our conversation the three of us included friends in our shared perspective. In this way we pointed out that there is a family related by blood and a family that isn’t.

**Renate, Fabio and Alejandra:** *Friends are family.*

We later discussed how people become family and what leads us to this transformation of the way we see our friends.

**Renate, Fabio and Alejandra:** *Family isn’t necessarily blood-relatives. It’s whoever you choose it to be; it’s whoever your heart tells you it is.*

While these conversations continued we spoke more about friends. I think we confronted ourselves with what we had learned and what we had been taught. These ideas were affirmed by scientific books, school, religion, radio, television, words to a song, mom and dad, the government, the neighbor, the grandmother, the Masons, and other sources. The following section explores a few examples.

### *Quotations and a Few Narrations I've Listened to*

**Films:** In movies like *Cheaper by the Dozen*, the family is represented by a heterosexual, married couple and their twelve children who live under the same roof. However, cartoons like *Snow White* and *Despicable Me* reflect a type of family that differs from the traditional one. In the first, the seven dwarves and the princess are family. In the second, the three orphan girls are adopted by Gru and form a family.

**Catholicism:** It has taught us that there is a father God, a mother who is the Virgin Mary, and earthly and celestial children. This then defines family—conformed by a heterosexual father and mother, married under the Catholic Church, with children and very defined roles.

**Biology:** It shows us that the life cycle of living beings is to be born, grow, reproduce and die, and that a family would be those who are descendents of a common progenitor and that have blood ties with one another.

**Fabio:** *This family isn't exactly the family we, at least the three of us, were talking about. Here we always add someone else.*

**The Universal Human Rights Declaration (1948)**, in Article 16 sustains:

Family is the natural, universal and fundamental element of society and has the right to the protection of society and State. (translated from the Spanish version).

**Carvallo (2009)** affirms:

The nuclear family is historically found to be rooted in the social changes introduced by the European Industrial Revolution in the work world (elimination of the family salary and individual payment for hand labor), migration from the fields (where the form of subsistence depended on the family) to labor housing in the cities (where the form of subsistence was individual, born from the interchange of hand labor by the individual for money). This combination of circumstances opened space for the perfect horizon for action of the occidental subject, emancipated from the crutches of the traditional community, but now demanded and exploited by the mega industrial machine of production and for the consumption of finished products. In this new form of highly rationalized life in which “one lives to work,” the extended family is cancelled as being inoperable, unsustainable and conflictive with the new economic infrastructure that demands a new social and individual praxis. (p. 8, translated from the Spanish version).

**Psychology:** “Historically, in the mental health field, family meant the traditional unit of mother, father, and child or children. This was the family system referred to in psychological research

and family therapy.” (Anderson 1999, p.123). Burman (1998) distinguishes in the terminology used in developmental psychology texts as heterosexist and ethnocentric suppositions that define the nuclear family as the normal family.

The above allow us to visualize more closely that the *family* has a socio- historic origin. It is the result of a series of economic, political, religious, bio-psycho-social interests, among others. Therefore, I feel that it is not an element that should be considered as something natural or universal, but instead is a socially constructed concept.

Following, I will offer ideas—from authors as well as some that emerged from my conversations with my co-investigators—that present a more open and diverse perspective of family.

**Goolishian and Kivell (1981, quoted in Anderson, 1999)**, state: “Today it is nearly impossible for family to have a singular meaning in a sociocultural sense. Because families include many sizes, shapes, and varieties, including those related by blood and those not.” (p.123).

**Anderson (1999)**: “In my view, there is no such thing as the family. (...) As I see it, the family is a reality based on communication.” (p.122).

**Renate, Fabio and Alejandra**: *The definition of family is totally complex. In the case of friends, the one who makes them family is oneself. The definition of family is a personal definition that each person has.*

I suppose our definitions of family are a modified traditional definition that includes families with one progenitor as well as work families and families of friends.

### **Confluence of Three Elements: the Jewish-Christian Idea, Experience and Meaning**

#### ***Jewish-Christian Idea***

At times we would sustain the traditional family definition and later we would release it. It was as if we would letting the rope slide between our hands and then tighten it once again. This vision, whether or not we were getting a bit off the track of what family is, is ours. There may be those with a different opinion.

**Alejandra**: *Why is it that we kept tripping over the definition of traditional family? You find yourself walking at a certain rhythm and later fail to notice the little stone that hits your foot and makes you stumble. You catch your balance and continue walking and there's the stone. This time you notice it's there. What do you do with it? You step around it; you continue on your way; you pick it up and take a good look at it; you throw it away; you play with it; you carry it along with you...*

**Fabio**: *I don't see a confusion of thoughts or understanding. There are parts where we focus on our points of view.*

**Alejandra:** *We kept getting stuck on the traditional family. And then we go back to not only friends in the family, but also those from the Masters program, work...*

When I was in primary and middle school, Sunday was family day at the school. They organized activities for parents and children. I remember the piano concerts, volleyball and basketball tournaments, and my parents and my brother Carlos and my sister Laura being there. On Sundays we also went to mass.

Some of the voices I hear:

**My father:** *This is the family;* **Silvia,** a client: *I don't have a family;* **Lynda,** a Protestant workmate: *On Wednesdays I go to the Temple with my family;*

**Rodrigo,** a priest: *You will have children and form a family;* **Rossana,** a cousin: *We went out to eat—just the family.*

### ***Socio-Historic Events Experienced***

**Renate:** *The Holocaust and the loss of my mother and brother and the memories sent me to live somewhere else: In Mérida, as well as in Italy and in Spain, where my friend are..*

**Alejandra:** *I have made friends family. Having ventured to live in Canada has been a great experience for me. There I met the most incredible of friends: Imke. We have maintained our relationship for seven years. Since then, Vancouver has become a home for me. Jude, my housemother (my “adopted” mother), is there.*

**Fabio:** *Just by the simple fact of calling someone a friend, he's family. To arrive in a new country, Mexico, where you start meeting people and you say these are my Mexican friends and these are the Brazilian ones...*

### ***Meanings***

Our feelings moved us to form an opinion from another standpoint, but “reason” kept taking hold.

Below are some of our own thoughts and those of others that came out during the dialogic analysis from a critical posture.

**Alejandra:** *This isn't how it is. We're getting a bit off the track of what family is. This isn't what we've been taught. We can't contradict what family is.*

**Ayora (2010):** Rocío, Paco and I coincide with Gergen (2003), when he explains that constructionism does not mean abandoning the traditional values, but instead, it extends their

range. Therefore whatever product we can see becomes positive. In addition, it mobilizes the dialogues that discuss values or results. (p.34, 35).

**Fabio:** *Family is whoever I want to be my family. Whoever my heart chooses to be part of it. The situation we live—economic problems, different religious battles, power, different social classes who clash on a daily basis, personal battles, lack of culture and education in the villages—directly change the concept of family. For me, the word family means much more than a simple word. It means love, help, pain, happiness, deception, pride, hopelessness, gratitude, Father, Mother, Brothers and Sisters, Aunts and Uncles, Grandparents, Cousins and...FAMILY FRIENDS or simply brothers who don't share our blood.*

In this sense, I am of the opinion that the confluence of these three elements—the Judeo-Christian idea, our own experiences, and the meanings we attribute to them (meanings we co-create in the relationship)—permeate our points of view and the opinions we have regarding any subject.

*We got off the track of what family is*, is just a perception, a point of view, an opinion, that has moved me. If I doubted at any moment, I now realize that I have chosen to stick with the idea that: friends are family. To be moved implies dynamic thinking.

*We got off the track of what family is*, is only a creation of our conversation.

*We got off the track of what family is*, has allowed me to explore paths that had remained hidden and that we hadn't talked about before.

*We got off the track of what family is*, is an invitation to reflect on what we say and the things we left unsaid.

*We got off the track of what family is*, comes from a modernist conception. And some of us have dared to question it.

*We got off the track of what family is*, is characterized by the inclusion of new voices.

*We got off the track of what family is*, for some it does not exist and is not mentioned.

*We got off the track of what family is*, critiques but does not disqualify.

*We got off the track of what family is*, has become a recently discovered treasure.

*We got off the track of what family is*, can mean more and more things. Therefore it is unending.

*We got off the track of what family is*, is only one conversation among many. It is to start a conversation, look at it, and later begin others with it.

*We got off the track of what family is*, can transform you.

### **An Invitation to Dialogue with Us**

I considered it convenient for the dialogic analysis to add more perspectives on what others thought about what I had written. I decided to do this for my own curiosity. I requested the collaboration of some workmates to include a few more voices from Mexico. I also asked members of Fabio's family to incorporate voices from Brazil; and Imke, my German sister, to add another voice from Germany.

### ***Some People from Mexico***

**Yadira:** *For my husband, family are friends, based on a romantic conception, because it is a nonobjective feeling, since you don't see it out of personal interests. It is a soul-mate that has the fragility of being broken by a certain act. He becomes known. A friend ceases to be family by distance, disagreement, death... It is said, but the evidence points a different way.*

*My friend Lupita is part of my family. She is always present in our family dynamics, during cold times, when things are difficult and when they've matured. She is taken into account when we plan for Christmas and New Year. I have been with her at the birth of her children and that is why I see her in this way. A friend tells me: "I don't know what Yadira would do without you! You are my motor. You inspire me. You have no agendas." She considers me her family.*

**Rossi:** *Friends are from friendships of adhesion. Due to a social context I adhere to another. If one of my husband's friends goes to the house, she becomes another friend, but without the feeling of "You can count on me; I'm with you." That's as far as the relationship goes. It's protocol. Therefore friends are not family.*

**Lynda:** *From a realistic point of view, for me friends are not family. Friends are something special. They are there at happy times and unpleasant ones. A friendship can end no matter how close you were. For me, my family is my mother, my father, my brothers and sisters, my daughters and my husband. A friend won't always be with me, but my mother and father will. Blood is a stronger union. My grandparents, aunts and uncles and cousins are a consequence of what I call my family. But neither they nor friends are indispensable in my life, but I can be there for them.*

*Friends give us fun, laughter, emotional support, but family takes up time, worries you, and costs you economically because you can't deny the help. A friend is an extra in your daily life and family is a permanent satisfaction. I need to feel them, I need to be with them, and that doesn't happen with a friend. It's hard for me to think that someday I could lose my father, mother or my daughters because that would be an irreparable pain and I don't know if I could get over it or heal from it; it's something I don't think would happen with a friend. The pain of losing a friend can be healed.*

**Dorita:** *I think it is correct to see friends as family. Yes, I do believe that. I consider friendship to be a tight union between two people that is characterized by being able to be who you really are with that person and you can share your happiness and sadness, time and space, and feel free no matter what their sex, social condition or genetic characteristics are. Friendship goes farther than any social, demographic, economic or political variables, or creed. And when you find someone like that, he becomes a brother. For this reason I consider a friend family and he will be with you in the good times and in the bad and you should have him by your side. It's someone you give to without expecting anything in return.*

**Sayda:** *It's a question of spending time together. When you spend a lot of time with a friend he becomes part of your family. It's the closeness because sometimes you spend more time with friends than with your parents, children... and because of this you come to consider them part of your family life.*

### ***Some People from Brazil***

**Suely:** *Friends can be your counselors, accomplices and companions more than other relatives. Friendship with some people is what gets you ahead, consoles you when you have problems, vibrates over your success, and listens to what you say without judging you, but gives a sincere opinion. Like the music of Milton Nascimento says: "A friend is something to keep at the left of your chest, inside your heart..." I have great and beloved friends that are very much loved brothers.*

**Angela:** *Many times friends are more family members than those who have blood ties to us. It doesn't matter if we don't find them each time we want, but what matters is that when we find them, the happiness and complicity fit as if we were together every day. Friendly family and familiar friends are the same thing.*

**Paulinho:** *From the moment you realize who your real friends are—those who are there and will be by your side in happy or difficult time—they become part of your family. To nurture these friends as brothers is what makes us complete. Kisses to you, blood-family and friends-family.*

**Neide:** *Close friends are part of our everyday life, so naturally they are members of our family even though they aren't blood of our blood. A friend is by our side to share unique moments and convert them into unforgettable ones. At certain times a friend becomes father and mother: he gives advice, pulls our ear, and watches out for us. At other times we are equals and we relate like brothers: we talk, dream, fight and open up to think and solve, we enjoy and we find each other after sharing.*

### ***A Person from Germany***

**Imke:** *Friends can substitute family. When family members die, we are only left with friends. Friends are the family we choose. Family isn't always by blood. It's the people who are in your life and that want you in theirs. It's those who accept you for who you are and love you.*

### **Final Reflection**

This article was written after the dialogic discovery that emerged from the conversation between three people. It became creative and collaborative as well-known authors, common people, and dominant discourses became involved in the dialogue, generating ideas and exchanging viewpoints.

This article reveals that some people—of different geographic, socio-historic, and cultural backgrounds—see friends as family. At the same time, there are those who see the traditional family as the only possibility.

It's up to us whether we speak of *families* instead of family. I find it useless to discard the idea of traditional family or to bury it, as it will always be there. Instead, we can consider that there are other families, so as not to fall into a discursive trap: that is, designating *a* family as the only valid one. In this way, family can be understood from different perspectives and each one offers explanations and understandings that are coherent with its own truths.

### References

- Anderson, H. (1999). *Conversación, Lenguaje y Posibilidades, un lenguaje Posmoderno de la terapia*. Argentina: Amorrortu.
- Ayora, D., Chaveste, R. y Vadillo, F. (2010) *Prácticas socioconstruccionistas y colaborativas. Psicoterapia, educación y comunidad*. Mérida: Unasletras.
- Burman, E. (1998). *La Deconstrucción de la Psicología Evolutiva*: España: Visor.
- Carter, B. y McGoldrick, M. (2005). *The Expanded Family Life Cycle: Individual, Family, and Social Perspectives*. 3a Ed. Person: E.U.A.
- Carvalho, H. (2009). *La familia nuclear. Nacimiento, desarrollo y muerte de una institución social*. Recuperado el 25 de marzo de 2014 de: <http://laviagaussiana.wordpress.com/2010/02/21/la-familia-nuclear-nacimiento-desarrollo-y-muerte-de-una-institucion-social/>
- Declaración Universal de los Derechos Humanos. (1948). Recuperado el 7 de marzo de 2014 de: [http://www.sipi.siteal.org/sites/default/files/sipi\\_file\\_file/declaracion\\_universal\\_derechos\\_humanos.pdf](http://www.sipi.siteal.org/sites/default/files/sipi_file_file/declaracion_universal_derechos_humanos.pdf)
- Gergen, K. (2003). *An Invitation of Social Construction*. Londres: Sage.
- Shotter, J. y Katz, A. M. (1996a). Resonances from Within The Practice: Social Poetics in a Mentorship Program. *Concepts and Transformation, 1 (2/3)*, pp.239-247. Recuperado el 25 de marzo de 2014 de: <http://pubpages.unh.edu/~jds/Beinum3.htm>

### Author Note:

Psych. Alejandra I. Alcocer Denis, M.P.  
 Psychotherapy Master, Instituto Kanankil A.C., Mérida, Yucatán. México.  
 Grupo Médico Carranza. Mérida, Yucatán. México.  
 Individual, family and couples Psychotherapist.  
 E-mail: [aalcocer.gmc@gmail.com](mailto:aalcocer.gmc@gmail.com)

### Translator Note:

Cindy Bauserman Wheelock, LHF  
Instituto Kanankil A.C., Mérida, Yucatán. México.  
E-mail: cbauserman@hotmail.com