

‘Surely the most natural scenario in the world’:

Representations of ‘Family’ in BBC Pre-school Television

Abstract:

Historically, the majority of work on British children’s television has adopted either an institutional or an audience focus, with the texts themselves often overlooked. This neglect has meant that questions of representation in British children’s television – including issues such as family, gender, class or ethnicity - have been infrequently analysed in the UK context. In this article, we adopt a primarily qualitative methodology and analyse the various textual manifestations of ‘family’, group, or community as represented in a selected number of BBC pre-school programmes. In doing so, we question the (limited amount of) international work that has examined representations of the family in children’s television, and argue that nuclear family structures do not predominate in this sphere.

Keywords: Family * Community * Pre-school television * CBeebies * BBC * Gender

In 2009, *Daily Mail* journalist Laura Kemp discussed watching CBeebies with her young son, and she was vocal about the fact that she didn't like what she saw:

The message is clear: nursery is normal, fun and nothing to be scared of. But as a stay-at-home mum, I feel undermined, undervalued and angry.

Not a single programme in the channel's repertoire is set at home with a mother - which is surely the most natural scenario in the world...

But why am I left out - the woman who chooses to care for her own child? In its paranoid desperation to embrace every minority group, [she notes the apparent ethnic diversity of the channel] the BBC has overlooked the traditional family (Kemp 2009).

(Smith 2009, 10) (Jones 2008, 50-4)

Kemp further argued, from the Tory inflected perspective of the *Daily Mail*, that 'Old Auntie' had become the 'Government's ventriloquist's dummy by piping out Labour's send-mums-back-to-work mantra ...' (Ibid). Putting to one side the problematic suggestion that the stay-at-home-Mum is the most natural representation of motherhood, Kemp's article actually raises some fascinating questions about how pre-school television represents the concept of the 'family'. Although she positions the apparent absence of the traditional family, or at least the relationship between the stay-at-home mother and child, as somehow a *recent* representational shift in pre-school television culture, the image for which Kemp yearned has not been predominant for some time. As historical research has shown, early BBC television for children – under the explicit banner of *Watch With Mother* – sought to situate itself in relation to '1950s notions of motherhood and family life' (Steemers 2010, 21). In

response to increasing concern about whether very young children should be watching television unsupervised, or indeed watching television *at all*, the rhetoric of *Watch With Mother* sought to foreground the notion that television was ‘safe, maternal and homely’ (Oswell 2002, 64, cited in *Ibid*) (although that is not to suggest that the programmes contained in *Watch with Mother* focussed on the mother/child relationship in any simple way (see Oswell, 2002, 63-5)). Yet this containment within the domestic, and the discursive and institutional emphasis on the mother-child relationship, only enjoyed dominance for a short period, as more mothers sought paid employment, as more children were in childcare, and as more and more children viewed on their own (Steemers, 2010, 20). The late 1950s and into the 1960s, for example, had already seen the emergence of teams or communities of characters in programmes aimed at young children such as *Ivor the Engine* (1958-1963), *Camberwick Green* (1966), *Chigley* (1969) and *Trumpton* (1967) (see Northam, 2005). Similar tropes continued into the 1970s and 1980s with well-known programmes as diverse as *Bagpuss* (1974), *Captain Pugwash* (1974-5), *Pigeon Street* (1981) and *Postman Pat* (1981-). As David Buckingham et. al. note in passing, there is a strong tradition of community-based storytelling in British pre-school television which can be traced across the decades (1999: 54). Crucially, there is also a longer tradition of children’s fictional media eschewing a primary emphasis on the family, as in many ways related to the fact that children’s fictional media often places the child protagonist, rather than the child’s familial context, at the centre of the narrative world (see Wojcik-Andrews 2002, Honeyman 2005).

Indeed, Dafna Lemish’s (2012) piece on representations of family in children’s television - focusing on Australia, Canada, Kenya, New Zealand, South Africa and the USA - is actually entitled ‘*Without a Family: Representation of families in children’s TV around the world [our emphasis]*’. Yet such existing studies, which emerge more from Sociology and Psychology rather than Television or Media Studies (and often have a strong quantitative emphasis) (see also Callister et al 2007), assume family to *mean one or more adults with a dependent child or children*, attesting to the ways in which ‘biological blood ties’ operate as a central discursive structure in naturalising traditionally normative conceptions of ‘familyness’ (Chambers 2001, 2). In addition to this, such a conception appears to be based on a very limited, and we argue here generically inappropriate, conception of what ‘family’ might mean in pre-school television culture. Pre-school television not only invests in disparate

groups of characters, primarily communities or friendship groups, but also relishes anthropomorphic adventures, and has done throughout much of its history. In fact, the insistence on measuring conceptions of family in pre-school television via definitions (once) applicable to programming for adults is a clear example of how children's television culture offers particular interpretative and methodological challenges for academic study.

Yet analyses of the representation of the family in British pre-school television appear to be non-existent. This in part reflects the fact that many of the key books on the representation of the family *on* television have emerged from the American context (e.g Taylor 1991, Bryant and Bryant 2008), although Tincknell (2005) is a notable exception in the UK. But this neglect also reflects the fact that a good deal of work on British children's television adopts either an institutional *or* an audience focus, and Buckingham's point that the texts aimed at children have been more neglected than the child audience (1995: 5), remains entirely pertinent where the study of television is concerned. Individual texts are rarely given serious consideration (and in relation to British pre-school television, existing analyses have tended to converge on particular canonical examples, such as *Teletubbies* (1997-2001) (e.g Buckingham 2002, Bignell 2005)). This neglect has also meant that issues of representation in British children's television – including those of family, gender, class and ethnicity - have been very infrequently analysed in the UK context.

Our interest here emerges from the fact that, even the most cursory glance across pre-school television suggests that representations of the nuclear family do not appear to predominate. Rather, British pre-school programmes appear to favour a proliferation of loosely connected groups and communities of friends and cohabitants which, in scholarly terms, makes the only piece of note here Jean Northam's analysis of how community-based programmes, from *Camberwick Green* and *Trumpton* to the later *Bob the Builder* (1998-), constitute particular 'rehearsals of citizenship' (2005, 246). As we explore, although far from new, these more expansive structures can be conceptualised in the light of changing definitions and constructions of 'the family' within the context of late modernity – a topic which has been widely debated within social theory (see Chambers 2001). Attesting to the 'conceptual deficiency' of the term, Chambers observes how 'it is no longer possible to

discuss the subject [of the family] without framing the word in inverted commas, signifying the ambiguity surrounding it' (2001, 1-2). In approaching the 'family' as 'an active site of transformation' and change (Ibid: 2), our use and understanding of the term is based on the notion of a 'kinship network' (Chambers, 2001: 2) - a group of characters brought together through friendship, group co-habitation or employment – which continues to perform some of the same processes of socialisation as the traditional family (Moran 2002, 47). Given that the family has been approached as 'a focal point for the exercise of power and the production of subjectivities' (Chambers 2001, 26), regulating, for example, the assignation of gender roles or the shoring up of the (white) nuclear family as the norm, a key issue is whether these seemingly extended structures of familiness enable more flexible or democratic forms of identity and interaction.

In this article, we analyse the various textual manifestations of 'family', group, or community as represented in a selected number of BBC pre-school programmes – principally *Mr Bloom's Nursery* (2011-), *The Octonauts* (2011-) and *Everything's Rosie* (2010-) -all of which are screened on the BBC's pre-school channel CBeebies. As such, our methodology is primary qualitative in approach, and part of the impetus for this article emerged out of a dissatisfaction with the limitations of the quantitative approaches to representation which have dominated international studies of children's television. In this regard, we are specifically interested in the detail of how these families function and coexist, looking at this in terms of narrative structures, character roles and aesthetics. At the same time, in order to demonstrate the prevalence of the representations we are concerned with, we also include *aspects* of quantitative data in indicating broader representational paradigms that were at work across CBeebies programming during the period of study (September, 2013).

The (in)visible family of children's television

The transformation of the concept of the family has been seen as a key social trend characterising late modernity, as shaped by a diminishing investment in the institution of marriage, increasing levels of divorce, the rise of the single parent family, reconstituted families and single sex families (Lemish 2012, 151). Closely linked to reflexive models of

selfhood, emphasis has been placed on 'chosen relationships' (Giddens, 1992) and what has been conceptualised as 'families we choose' (Weston, 1991), or what Chambers refers to as 'hybridised familialism' (2001, 116). These concepts are often, although not exclusively, explored in relation to gay and lesbian identities, and the extent to which 'queer' sexualities untie 'sexuality from gender' and thus create 'gender trouble' by undermining traditional binary restrictions (Ibid, 29, see also Giddens 1992). Whilst these 'families of choice' might be understood as existing at the 'vanguard of change in meanings of familyness' (Chambers 2001, 29) such changing imaginations of family are not only associated with queer configurations. As Estella Tincknell notes in *Mediating the Family*:

The sheer range of *non-familial* relationships in media and on film is symptomatic of the ... cultural shifts [in the concept of the family].... Indeed, the overwhelming popularity of media texts which feature – and celebrate – friendship and flexible networks of relations as a legitimate alternative to the family suggests that these transformations have already been recognised as an enduring feature of contemporary life [original emphasis] (2005, 134).

For the purposes of our argument here, it is problematic that Tincknell refers to these representations as 'non-familial', as this position again functions to shore up the centrality of the biological, nuclear family as *the* family 'norm'. It also immediately discounts the suggestion that groups of characters based around friendship, co-habitation or work (as seen in everything from the sitcom to reality TV) can continue to perform some of the same processes of socialisation as the traditional family (Moran 2002, 47) – a definition that is central to our analysis here.

Scholars have charted considerable shifts in the representation of the family on television since the 1990s, foregrounding the appearance of diversified and less hegemonic mediations of what 'family' might mean (Tincknell, 2005, Bryant and Bryant, 2008, Robinson and Skill, 2008, Douglas, 2008). In contradistinction to this, and to our argument in the introduction, the very limited attention offered to children's television in this regard (Lemish 2012, Callister et al, 2007) has observed that it tends to 'glorify and perpetuate the traditional nuclear family order as the central and normative structure' (Lemish 2012, 153),

whilst *also*, and somewhat paradoxically, noting that ‘families are not very visible on children’s television’ at all (Ibid, 155). After analysing a sample of 431 shows (screened in 2007 in Australia, Canada, Kenya, New Zealand, South Africa and the USA), Lemish reported that:

... 67% of the programs did not portray any family structures at all. It is particularly striking that only 25% of programs targeting pre-school children had families in them, in comparison to 42% of programs targeting school-age children. This finding seems counter-intuitive, as we might assume that the family is more central for the healthy development of younger children (Ibid, 155).

In terms of its role as an agent of socialisation, television has been seen as playing a potentially crucial role in shaping childrens’ conceptions of what ‘family’ might mean (Callister et al 2007: 142) and this dovetails, as indicated below, with some of the central ideological aims inherent to the BBC’s remit of public service. It may also be the case, as the quote from Lemish hints, that the importance of television’s pedagogic role here is seen as especially critical for the preschool audience (who are often perceived as more ‘vulnerable’ and ‘impressionable’, and who are at the beginning of their socialisation). Nevertheless, what is problematic in Lemish’s discussion above is the assumption that the ‘healthy’ development of the pre-schooler depends on its exposure to a ‘normative’ nuclear family structure. Even if we put this to one side, her makes clear that the criteria of the human nuclear family (one or more adults with a dependent child or children) leaves a great deal of pre-school programming unaccounted for. Indeed, Lemish (2012, 55) observes how the animated programmes – which frequently feature non-human characters – (LaMarre 2008) - dominated the sample, and how these texts were the least likely to invest in ‘family’ structures. This not only assumes a very restricted definition of family, but it crucially leaves unanswered how such programmes *do* function, and how they negotiate social relations, kinship, difference or belonging.

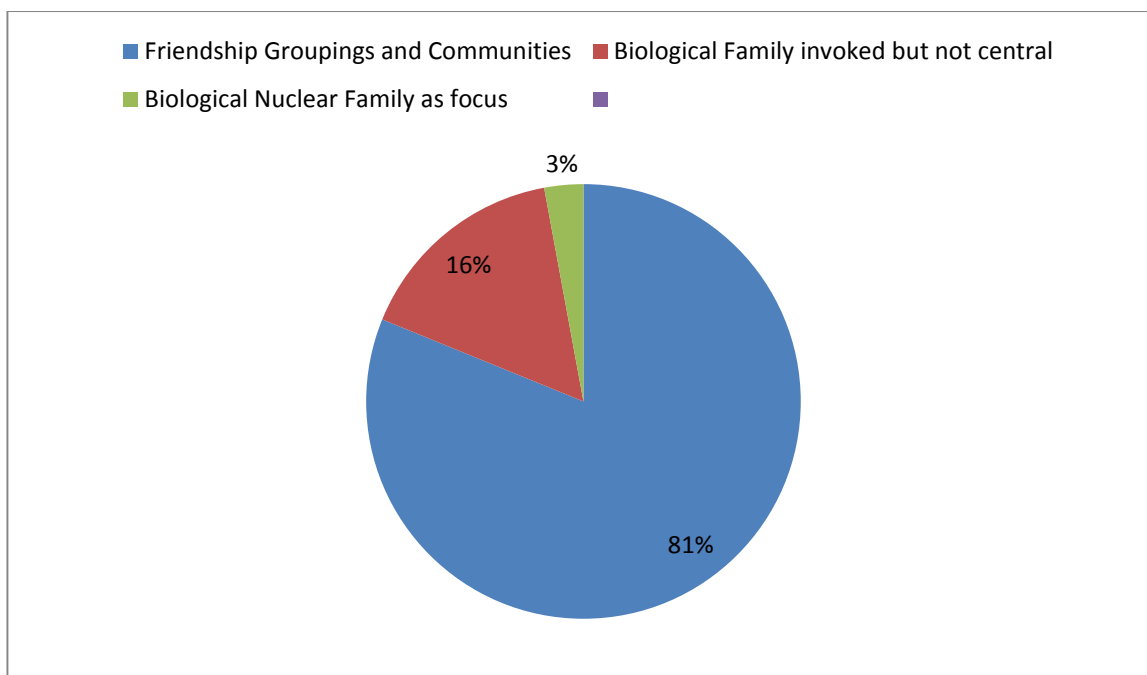
Although a full discussion of the politics of anthropomorphism is beyond the scope of this article, such representational strategies are central to children's media (Delano Robertson, 2014: 21) and there is an established tradition of using anthropomorphic characters to 'translate complex ideas about politics, society, and personhood (ibid 22, see also Wells 2009). In fact, Franklin suggests that animal characters appear to be 'good to think about what it means to be properly human' (1999, 9, cited in Delano Robertson 2013. 23). Based on the evidence from BBC pre-school television, we would add to this that they also appear to be useful for thinking about what it means to be part of a group, team or hybridised 'family' – not least of all because the diversity of species (or the mixture of 'human' and animal characters) provides a basis for distinct demarcations of difference within a group setting. As such, notions of equality, difference and belonging are regularly foregrounded as narrative concerns to be worked through.

The CBeebies family

CBeebies was chosen as a focus for this article because the tradition of children's television in Britain has been dominated by the public service model developed and articulated by the BBC (Lury 2002, 16, Messenger-Davies 2010). Furthermore, and despite competition from other subscription channels, or the free-to-air offerings of CiTV and Channel 5, CBeebies remains the most popular destination for pre-school television in the UK (Burrell 2013), and it enjoys an international reputation. Despite the emphasis on a pre-school audience, CBeebies targets children up to 6 years old, with the majority of programmes being aimed at children aged between 2-6. The service license of the channel requires it to 'offer a range of programming designed to encourage learning through play in a consistently safe environment for children aged 6 or under', ('CBeebies') and although this emphasis on 'play' suggests informality (and in fact a looser educational agenda than US pre-school television) (see Steemers 2010), the content still aims to 'support the school and pre-school curricula'. The programmes clearly also aim to offer pedagogical lessons – however playfully – on questions of moral citizenship, with an emphasis on tolerance, a respect for difference and the dynamics of co-existence and co-operation. Indeed, in line with its wider remit of public service, the idea of children's television promoting particular notions of 'civilisation, citizenship and cultural diversity' (Northam 2005, 249) (see also Oswell 2002) has been

fundamental to the BBC's historical conceptualisation of children's programming. Representations of the family play an important role within this process, albeit in in what we suggest here are complex and contradictory ways.

Although this is primarily a qualitative analysis focused on a limited number of case studies, it is useful to locate the kind of representations we are talking about within the broader schedule of CBeebies programming. This enables us to demonstrate the significance of the representational paradigms we are foregrounding, whilst making clear that there *are* examples of programmes that *do* focus on 'traditional' familial configurations to some degree. In terms of coding the material, both researchers went through the list of the 69 programmes regularly broadcast by CBeebies in September 2013. We then used a combination of viewing (entire programmes as well as excerpts) and reading plot descriptions to ascertain what the recurrent narrative focus of each programme was. (We should also state that many of the programmes were already familiar to us from the everyday viewing routines of our own children). Although we knew that we were interested in analysing programmes that did not focus on a nuclear family (and that the channel broadcast a large number of such texts), we did not use apriori codes, but rather categorised the material according to the dominant themes which arose. In using the approach above, it was clear that there were three categories in which the nuclear family was either narratively central, present but peripheral, or absent. In identifying the numerical prevalence of each category in the sample of 69 programmes, we were able to establish the frequency with which each configuration appeared – as set out in the diagram below:



First, it is striking that of the 69 programmes, only 4 of these, *Pingu* (2002-) (a stop-motion animation about a family of penguins), *Grandpa in my Pocket* (2009-) (a live action comedy drama focusing on the relationship between a magical shrinking Grandfather and his Grandson), *Woolly and Tig* (2012) (a live action drama focusing on a little girl's relationship with her talking spider), and the new *Topsy and Tim* (2013-) - based on the popular books which began in the 1960s - featured biological nuclear families as a significant narrative focus. Notably, *Topsy and Tim* caused considerable debate online and in the national press for being 'flabbergastingly sexist' - both in terms of its representation of gendered child and parental roles (e.g Winter 2013, Dixon 2013). The outcry here, whilst justly pinpointing the programme's rather regressive gender politics (which appeared to be based largely on the older books), may also attest to the scarcity of such representations within CBeebies output more broadly.¹

Second, there was a small but significant group of programmes where the action of the central characters was framed by, or included, a biological family, but where the family itself was not the central narrative focus. Programmes such as *Baby Jake* (2011-), *Charlie and Lola* (2006-) and *64 Zoo Lane* (2003-) use the familial setting as a contextualising but peripheral

structure, then going on to focus on the adventures of the children or anthropomorphic characters who are positioned as young. (In both *Baby Jake and Charlie and Lola*, the key characters *are* siblings, but the parents are essentially banished from the narrative worlds). Also within this category were programmes that *included* nuclear families within a larger community setting, such as *In the Night Garden* (2007-11) (the large Pontypine family), *Timmy Time* (2009-), *Postman Pat* (1981-) and *Me Too!* (2006-). Within these latter programmes, although the nuclear family is present, it is the activity of the community members and their expansive interactions which is the predominant narrative concern.

Yet the third, and by *far* the largest, category of programming, focused on looser networks of friendship groupings and communities defined by a range of different connections. This category was particularly broad in generic terms and encompassed programmes such as presenter-led live action shows (*Show Me, Show Me* (2009-), *Mr Maker* (2007-) and *Andy's Wild Adventures* (2010-)), as well as an expansive number of animated programmes which feature a range of communities of people and/or animals and toys. In addition to our case studies, these included examples such as *Cloudbabies* (2011-), *Abney and Teal* (2011-), *Driver Dan's Story Train* (2010-), *Raa Raa the Noisy Lion* (2011-), *Q Pootle 5* (2013-), *Sarah and Duck* (2013-), *Rastamouse* (2011-), *The Tweenies* (1999-2003) and *Old Jack's Boat* (2013-).

Although our interest here is in cultural representation, it is important to recognise that such extended casts of diverse characters also have an obvious economic imperative – even for public service broadcasters: communities of diverse characters enable clear opportunities to translate the programme into spin-off toys and merchandise (see Steemers 2010), whilst they also enable a greater number of narrative iterations. At the same time, the relative absence of traditional family structures has a long lineage within children's television culture in Britain, and cannot easily be framed as a more contemporary phenomenon (driven, for example, by increasing pressures of commercialisation and commodification). Furthermore, it does not seem entirely surprising that children's media, including television, might focus on friendship groups or communities at the expense of parental-led structures. As Judy Dunn has argued, friendships are not only 'a key contributor to children's growing understanding of the social world [but they] mark...the beginning of a

new independence from parents' (2004, 7) – a process that begins well before entry into the school environment.

The case studies that we selected to analyse in detail - *Mr Bloom's Nursery*, *The Octonauts* and *Everything's Rosie* – were all positioned in the third category outlined above, and were all well-established programmes screened on a regular basis. They were particularly chosen so that we could incorporate both live-action and animated forms, as well as the representation of both anthropomorphic and human characters. In addition, the selection of the case studies was shaped by discourses of gender: although *Mr Bloom* (like many CBeebies programmes) does not specifically adopt an obviously gendered audience address, *The Octonauts* and *Everything's Rosie* can be seen as operating under more 'masculine' and 'feminine' codes respectively – factors which we argue shape their representation of social interaction and identity.

Pedagogic Groupings: An 'ethos of sharing'

Each of the case studies that we examine here are episodic and organised around collective communities or groups of characters which pivot on 'highly individualised' (Northam 2005, 254) traits, personalities and roles. In *Mr Bloom's Nursery*, this community primarily focuses on the vegetable puppets, which includes Margaret the cabbage, Colin the runner bean, Sebastian the aubergine, Raymond the butternut squash and a bulb of fennel named Joan. The vegetables all live in Mr Bloom's shed and the programme focuses on their interaction between each other, and with Mr Bloom and the visiting children ('the tiddlers'). The programme is promoted by the BBC as offering 'a colourful, fertile allotment run by the green-fingered Mr Bloom... combin[ing] live action and puppets to show how young children can learn from the experience of nurturing plants and vegetables' (Lilinha nd). Although male presenters and characters are by no means uncommon in current pre-school programming (indeed male presenters have been part of pre-school programming from the earliest days of *Play School* (BBC, 1964-88)), the role taken by Mr Bloom is noteworthy for the ways in which the character is quite explicitly paternalised in relation to his vegetable charges. Although the children are represented as visitors to the allotment, Mr Bloom and the vegetables are represented as its dwellers, and at the crux of their relationship is the

existence of intimacy and affection. So as the vegetables sing in the repeated song 'Meet the Veggies', 'we love Mr Bloom!' (to which he replies) 'That's me!'

The Octonauts follows the exploits of a team of underwater adventurers who live together in the Octopod. In this regard, they are a workplace team, but one whose mode of existence is decidedly familial. They live together, are clearly demarcated from creatures that live outside of the pod (or 'home'), and rely upon each other for friendship, guidance and socialisation. As the title sequence suggests, the role of the group is to 'explore, rescue, protect' and each episode involves the characters helping a diverse range of sea-creatures who are in various forms of trouble or peril. The team is led by the authoritative polar bear Captain Barnacles, and includes Kwaazi (a pirate cat), Peso (a penguin medic), Shellington (a sea otter scientist), Professor Inkling (a monocled octopus), as well as two female characters: these are Daschi (a daschund who oversees the Octopod computers) and Tweak Bunny (the crew engineer). Although we would not suggest that CBeebies programmes are consistently segregated in terms of a gendered address, *The Octonauts* is more explicitly coded as a 'masculine' text. The programme is dominated by a blue and grey action aesthetic and the music in the opening title sequence – which is somewhat reminiscent of Lalo Shifrin's *Mission Impossible* theme - is fast-paced and structured by a pulsating percussive beat, with an emphasis on action and heroism.

In contrast, *Everything's Rosie* is more obviously coded as a 'feminine' text with a preponderance of pinks, purples and other bright colours, whilst the music in the opening sequence is gentle and melodic, with lyrics and images that emphasise friendship, community and sharing. In this respect, its construction echoes Ellen Seiter's discussion of the feminine aesthetic of *My Little Pony* which presents us with an 'idyllic outdoor world of flowers, birds, butterflies, bunnies and fun' (1995, 174). The show follows the adventures of a girl Rosie (with rag-doll hair) and her friends: Will, Holly, Big Bear, Oakley the oak tree, Saffie the cedar tree and Raggles the rabbit. Rosie and Raggles live in a pink playhouse which is set within an expansive landscape of lush grass, orchards, streams and play areas. Although Oakley is positioned as 'ancient' and the peripheral Saffie as incredibly wise, there are no adults present, and the programme focuses on the interactions and adventures within the young group.

Characters in pre-school television need to be easily recognisable and clearly defined (Steemers, 2010: 122), so individual characteristics are often accentuated and repeated in each episode. As anthropomorphic animals feature prominently in pre-school programming, these clear character demarcations can be readily signified at a visual level by distinctions, for example, at the level of species. However, similar strategies of definition and distinction based upon physicality, appearance and voice are not limited to animal characters: they can also encompass trains (*Chuggington* (2008-)), machines (*Bob the Builder* (1998-)), letters and numbers (*The Alphablocks* (2010-) and *Numberjacks* (2006-)), aliens and robots (*Q Pootle 5* and *Little Robots* (2003-)), as well as vegetables (*Mr Bloom*). So in *Mr Bloom*, one of the recurrent songs functions to introduce the vegetable characters and their personal characteristics, and as with Seiter's discussion of *My Little Pony*, each character has 'one personality attribute that is primary' (1995, 182). In some instances, the correlation between character and attribute is logical. So Colin the runner bean explains how 'I'm speedyyyyyy', and Raymond the butternut squash 'loves cuddles, you know.' At other times, the attribution appears to be arbitrary: so Sebastian is introduced by the song as a French singing aubergine.

As Buckingham observes, British children's television, particularly those programmes which emerge from a tradition of 'community-based' storytelling, often articulate 'an implicit pedagogy...[via]... lessons about tolerance and sharing...' (1995, 54), as well, as Northam analyses, discourses on the 'cooperative efforts of public-spirited citizens' (2005, 254). Although our interest is in the potential specificities of pre-school programming, it is notable that the closest conceptual comparison in this regard might be found in work on British soap opera. Christine Geraghty argues the ideals of the soap community are 'based on an ethos of sharing, an acceptance of each other's individual characteristics and a recognition that everyone has a role to play' (1991, 85) (although it should be noted that these ideals are far less likely to be attained in soap opera than they are in the pre-school programme). Such a paradigm is in evidence across all of our case studies here.ⁱⁱ Recurrent narrative tropes across the case studies, and indeed across this category of CBeebies output more broadly, consistently emphasise these issues and in so doing promulgate the 'implicit pedagogy' referred to by Buckingham above. In fact, these 'lessons about tolerance and sharing' are most clearly facilitated in groups which are *not* uniform or homogenous. Although it is not

our aim here to speculate on the intention of programme creators or producers, one of the implications of this is that this enables the programmes to explore the concepts of difference and diversity in both comprehensible and seemingly 'safe' ways. We might note, for example, the controversy that circulated around the BBC's most visible attempt to represent racial difference in CBeebies programming via the stop motion animation series, *Rastamouse*, a programme which features a Rastafarian band of crime fighting mice. Key to these debates were concerns around overt racial stereotyping as well as the appropriation of the Jamaican patois used by the characters. (e.g Wynne-Jones and Copping 2011).

Rastamouse is not the only CBeebies programme to feature ethnic diversity: a range of live action programmes such as *Something Special* (2003-), *Same Smile* (2009-), *Show Me Show Me* and *Mr Bloom's Nursery* routinely and deliberately feature children with different ethnic identities in a bid to interpellate 'a wide range of identities.' (Rivera and Valdivia 2008, 331). At the same time, such difference is not overtly explored and our suggestion here is that, with the clear exception of *Rastamouse*, animated series tend to explore 'difference' via less politically sensitive significations.

We can see an example of this in operation in 'A Tall Story' (3: 17) in *Everything's Rosie*, Raggles is depressed by his diminutive size and wishes he was big like Rosie and the others, so he tries everything to make himself taller. However, when Archie the chameleon gets stuck in the rocks by the Showground, Raggles fortuitously discovers he is the perfect size to rescue him. Another example can be found in 'Wheels, Wings and Crawly Things' (2:22) where Bluebird has a crash landing and loses confidence in her ability to fly. That Rosie and Will help Bluebird to overcome her fear seems to serve a dual purpose. On the one hand, it functions to identify and celebrate Bluebird's 'natural' air-borne destiny (and thus her specificity and uniqueness within their world), but on the other hand it also serves as a means of facilitating a quasi-parental role for all three characters: Rosie and Will are positioned as older and more knowledgeable supporting relations to Bluebird's anxious and capricious immaturity. Furthermore, in terms of thinking about how the community in *Everything's Rosie* can be seen to characterise the interactions between inhabitants within familial discourses, it is notable that the two wise trees, Oakley and Saffie, effectively function as grandparents. Both are characterised as patiently indulging the whims, troubles and pleasures of the younger inhabitants whilst also they are also clearly marked as bearers

of age, experience and knowledge. This example suggests that representations of 'hybridised familialism', do not necessarily undermine the values of more normative family structures (Chambers 2001, 116), although it is precisely this question of *how* the programmes in our sample negotiate, resist or conform to discourses about the family that is being explored here.

Teaming Up? Gender in the group-focused text

The family has also been understood, particularly by feminists, as a key site for the production and regulation of gendered identities (see Chambers 2001, 26). Given that part of our interest is in the extent to which these apparently more expansive and inclusive structures enable textual and political possibilities that exceed traditional conceptions of the nuclear family norm, gender has to be a central point of enquiry. As such, the ways in which masculinity and femininity are imagined and articulated in these group settings is a crucial indicator of how their interactions perform and regulate the cultural practices (and thus the cultural politics) of familialism. As noted earlier in the article, analyses of the politics of representation in British pre-school television are thus far scarce, leaving established and mainstream areas of study – such as gender –unexplored. The work that has been undertaken on the topic of gender representation and children's television often adopts the sole method of content analysis and tends to focus on the US or to be international in scope (see Mazzarella 2008). Furthermore, these studies tend to focus on programmes aimed at the older school-age audience rather than pre-school programming (and again, often tend to prioritise texts featuring human characters). As a result, their results are not directly translatable to our study here, either at the level of content or methodology. Nevertheless, this work has found that male characters continue to be considerably more prevalent than female characters; male characters are more likely to play the lead role, whilst female characters are more likely to be both attractive and 'frail' (Mazzarella 2008, Aubrey and Harrison 2004, Baker and Raney 2007, Gotz and Lemish 2012). In their study of 24 countries in 2007, Gotz and Lemish also found that female characters conformed to established gender stereotypes. They displayed better communicative abilities, were more commonly represented to be part of a team and were often seen to be on an equal footing with their comparable peers – a consequence, presumably, of the male characters frequently emerging as the leaders (2012, 24).

Our intention is not to confirm or refute such observations (given that we have not undertaken a large scale quantitative or qualitative study of gender representation in CBeebies), but rather to explore how gender is mobilised within the types of text that we are considering here. Yet it is worth noting that the large scale quantitative studies tend to focus on characters as static 'types', rather than considering the dynamic encounters between characters. It seems odd, for example, that Gotz and Lemish's (2012) brief discussion of the 'team' doesn't acknowledge the centrality of this paradigm to children's television more widely, nor how this might shape the representations and discourses of gender that are on offer in these texts.

It is certainly the case that particular behaviours, attributes and roles are clearly demarcated in traditionally feminine terms in our case studies. Moreover, signifiers of femininity are deployed at a visual level in ways which suggest a 'girlying' of femininity in contrast to unmarked or more visually neutral construction of masculinity. For example, the two female characters in *The Octonauts* are always adorned with hair accessories (a hairclip and a pink headband), while in *Mr Bloom* the female vegetables, Margaret the cabbage and Joan the fennel, are distinguished by their curled eyelashes and intermittent interest in explicitly 'female' accessories (including tiaras, jewellery and perfume). In the episode 'Super Spud' (2: 12) from *Mr Bloom's Nursery*, for example, Margaret is positioned as the worshipful fan whose idolisation of the character of 'Super Spud' (who appears in a boys magazine that the vegetables are reading) revolves around a traditional romantic narrative in which, crucially, she defers her own agency in favour of a fantasy in which she waits for recognition and rescue. Furthermore, in the episode 'Show and Smell' (2:3), Joan the fennel imagines herself as the softly lit model in a perfume advert. In both sequences, the female characters are distinguished by their objectification and containment within clearly demarcated 'feminine' spheres.

In *Everything's Rosie* there are similarly demarcated gender roles. Rosie frequently takes on a caring and nurturing role in her community, facilitating social cohesion by being attentive to the feelings of others. She is quick to recognise when one of the friendship group is

feeling unhappy or excluded, while she also plays the role of chief arbitrator in interpersonal disputes. In this regard, Rosie's construction echoes discussions of soap opera in which women are often assumed to be 'ideal readers...of people' (a skill which is valued in the genre, but which also tends to essentialise 'feminine' expertise and tie it to both the family and the domestic sphere) (Baehr and Dyer 1987, 13). For example, in 'Bluebird and the Tootleplinks' (2:14), it is Rosie who takes on a maternalised role in articulating the problem - that Bluebird feels left out from a group band due to her inability to play an instrument - facilitating a process of negotiation and resolving the tension by ensuring that all group members are able to play (and exist) harmoniously together. Furthermore, in 'Pirate Treasure' (2: 13), it is she who is asked to arbitrate (in a parental/maternal capacity) over who will get to be the Pirate Captain. In contrast, Will, the main male character, who appears to be of a similar age, functions very differently within their community. He is coded, via the gendered signifier of his red racing car, as being impulsive, headstrong and thus less attuned to the dynamics of personal interaction in the group. For example, in 'Raggles' Stupendous Breakfast Treat' (2: 11), Will and Holly go shopping for the ingredients for a special group breakfast. Upon their return to the community, Will proceeds to devour the treats in order to satiate what he proclaims is his 'vast appetite', thus disregarding the sacrosanct emphasis on communality and sharing.

Whilst Rosie, in a quasi-maternal role, effectively plays midwife to the aspirations of others, *The Octonauts* fits less obviously into a familial paradigm because the emphasis on the workplace community, rather than the semi-domestic sphere offered in *Everything's Rosie*, produces different modes of inter-character relationships. Yet that is not to suggest that the familiar gendered tropes are not apparent here. The two female characters in *The Octonauts*, Daschi Dog and Tweak Bunny, are positioned, via their technical occupation as marine photographer and crew engineer respectively, as embodying 'newer' and empowered forms of femininity. Indeed, in deliberately evoking such signifiers of 'female achievement within traditional male environments' (Tasker & Negra 2009:1) with no suggestion of impediment or inequality, *The Octonauts* in particular could be seen as offering an configuration of a postfeminist rhetoric of equality. However, this apparently progressive potential is undercut by the fact that these two characters are both marginal as

well as being largely confined to the environs of the 'home' base (the Octopod). So, whilst neither of the female characters is overtly positioned as a maternalised figure in the same way as Rosie, it is nevertheless the case that the white polar bear, Captain Barnacles *is* clearly coded as the authoritative, if benevolent patriarch of the crew. Indeed, Barnacles is distinguished by his Received Pronunciation accent which connotes gravitas, authority and rationality and is used to signify his position at the helm of a semi-military structure.

At the same time, although these structures may well perform some of the same strategies of socialisation / role assignation *as* the family, they also appear to allow for deviations from this. For example, Peso, the penguin medic in *The Octonauts* offers a form of masculinity that stands in stark contrast to Barnacles. Whilst his occupational role as a medic necessitates expressions of care and nurture, these traits come to define him and his role within the community of the programme – thus becoming the 'essence' of his character. Peso frequently encounters sea creatures outside of the Octopod with such opening lines as 'What happened to your tentacles? Are you alright? Do you need help?' and articulates his own role as helping 'any creatures who are hurt and sick.' Peso is positioned as less assured and confident than Captain Barnacles: he frequently seeks reassurance from his friends and is uncomfortable when put in a position of leadership. Moreover, his softly spoken voice has a notably higher pitch than that of Barnacles, in keeping with his more caring persona and differently articulated masculine identity. This apparent 'deviation' could similarly be applied to the character of Raymond, the butternut squash, in *Mr Bloom's Nursery*. Introduced as a character who 'loves cuddles', Raymond is consistently positioned as the most sensitive of the vegetable characters.

In some ways then, characters such as Raymond and Peso appear to respond to key shifts in the cultural configuration of masculinity and in particular a move to a more sensitive configuration of male identity (see Connell 2005, Edwards 2005). Furthermore, at a textual level they are precisely prompted by a move away from a family structure that is primarily organised around gender binaries. This is further explored via the character of Mr Bloom himself who, as we suggested at the outset, is explicitly set up as a paternal figure in relation to the vegetables. In some ways, then, Mr Bloom's position as a 'single dad' appears

to be in keeping with what Chambers describes as the political bid to 'reassert a new fatherhood at the centre of familialism' (2001, 100). Mr Bloom is consistently configured as a nurturing, protective and constant presence in the lives of both vegetables and 'tiddlers' and as the sole carer it is he who ameliorates arguments and disputes as well as ensuring the emotional well-being of his young charges. While the character seems, on the one hand, to epitomise this move away from the rigid construction of binary gender difference, on the other, his location within the traditionally 'masculine' environs of the allotment (often configured as an *escape* from the 'feminine' confines of the domestic sphere), serves to naturalise masculine nurturance in less overtly challenging or resistant ways. Indeed, the idea of the nursery clearly has a double meaning here, referring to both vegetables and children. In this regard, the programme exemplifies the contradictory dialectic that appears to be at work in these texts, toward imagining alternative configurations which nevertheless exhibit a desire to keep it all in the (traditional) family.

Conclusion

In the upbeat opening theme tune to the CBeebies' series *Topsy and Tim*, the lyrics explain how: 'This is our street/ It's where we live/ We love to play together/ Just like you, just like us/ And we'll be friends forever.' Part of the impetus behind our analysis here, however, has been to suggest that much of CBeebies programming, and certainly the case studies considered here, rarely dramatise such a *firm* textual and epistemological investment ('Just like you/ Just like us') in the nuclear family. Furthermore, whilst there are ways in which the case studies examined here are implicitly inflected by the BBC's institutional remit, many of the issues we have raised might well be seen as applicable to pre-school programmes on other channels, and in other national contexts, as well as to the wider study of children's media.

We entirely disagree - in terms of the national context, channel and timeframe used here - that children's television tends to 'glorify and perpetuate the traditional nuclear family order as the central and normative structure' (Lemish 2012, 153). There was little evidence that this was the case, either in the specific examples analysed or in CBeebies output more generally. Rather, the programmes clearly complicated traditional nuclear family norms, whilst offering structures of social organisation and community which did not entirely

eschew familial connotations and bonds. Although these paradigms did not appear to regulate gender as tightly as 'traditional' family configurations may, we have also found evidence to support Chambers' suggestion that such hybridised structures do not necessarily entail an 'overturning and replacement of familialism by qualitatively different *ideas* [original emphasis]' (2001, 117). This then supports widely discussed critiques of reflexive models of selfhood, which suggest that such utopian ideals neglect the continuing persistence of structural and social inequalities (pertaining for example, to factors such as gender and ethnicity) (Chambers 2001, 138, Adams 2002). Further to this, we would add that such textual nuances and their implications for thinking about the politics of representation in pre-school television are not amenable to the block-data approach of content analysis which has dominated the study of representation in this sphere. Such approaches not only tend to elide the representational specificities of the programming under consideration, they also tend to focus on characters as static types, as opposed to the dynamics of interaction which frequently form the narrative focus.

Nevertheless, we are keen to emphasise that our conclusions are tentative, not simply due to the size of the sample, but also because this study has raised as many questions as it has answered. One of the key challenges here has been analysing, from a contemporary perspective, a phenomenon that doesn't necessarily seem to be 'new'. The lack of attention to the programme text in histories of children's television (and in Britain, to questions of representation within that sphere) means that mapping generic shifts or trends is challenging, frustrating and complex. Although frameworks which foreground the reflexive significance of chosen relationships (Giddens 1992) or 'families we choose' (Weston 1991) may well offer some conceptual purchase and relevance in this regard, the programmes analysed here are part of a longer historical trajectory when it comes to thinking about how or why CBeebies focuses on the modes of kinship, friendship and belonging that it does. The ways in which groupings of characters may offer greater commercial and narrative opportunities, as well as the fact that friendships are central to children's understanding of their relationship with the social world (Dunn 2004, 7) may well contribute to an explanatory framework here, though clearly not exhaustively.

Although we have argued that the marginalisation of programme analysis is problematic for the advancement of the field, the undertaking of this study has also illuminated some of the methodological and critical complexities of such attempts. We are not the intended audience for pre-school television and therefore concur with Buckingham's suggestion that 'interpreting any children's programme...is fraught with difficulties' (2002, 58). We would also add to this the somewhat surreal experience of *writing* about the detail of such narratives (we sometimes found it absurd, for example, to be debating the 'essential' characteristics of a runner bean versus a cabbage), the incongruity of which is also shaped by the 'imagined subjectivity' of academia which functions to regulate how we write and for whom (Hills 2002, 11). Despite this, we would agree that pre-school programmes deserve and reward critical scrutiny (Messenger-Davies 2010, 147), and that such textual approaches have the potential to afford new insights and understandings into forms of 'invisible' and 'everyday' television (Mills 2010) that are often taken-for-granted.

ⁱ Although not part of our focus as it is broadcast in the UK on Channel 5, it is crucial to recognise that one of the most visible children's franchises in the contemporary British pre-school television market is *Peppa Pig* which does indeed focus on a traditional nuclear family norm.

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