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Kin Relationships

Kin relationships are traditionally defined as ties based on blood and marriage. They include *lineal generational* bonds (children, parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents), *collateral* bonds (siblings, cousins, nieces and nephews, and aunts and uncles), and ties with *in-laws*. An often-made distinction is that between *primary* kin (members of the families of origin and procreation) and *secondary* kin (other family members). The former are what people generally refer to as “immediate family,” and the latter are generally labeled “extended family.” Marriage, as a principle of kinship, differs from blood in that it can be terminated. Given the potential for marital break-up, blood is recognized as the more important principle of kinship. This entry questions the appropriateness of traditional definitions of kinship for “new” family forms, describes distinctive features of kin relationships, and explores varying perspectives on the functions of kin relationships.

Questions About Definition

Changes over the last thirty years in patterns of family formation and dissolution have given rise to questions about the definition of kin relationships. Guises of kinship have emerged to which the criteria of blood and marriage do not apply. Assisted reproduction is a first example. Births resulting from infertility treatments such as gestational surrogacy and in vitro fertilization with ovum donation challenge the biogenetic basis for kinship. A similar question arises for adoption, which has a history

going back to antiquity. Partnerships formed outside of marriage are a second example. Strictly speaking, the family ties of nonmarried cohabitantes do not fall into the category of kin, notwithstanding the greater acceptance over time of consensual unions both formally and informally. Broken and reconstituted families are a third example. The growth in divorce, remarriage and the formation of stepfamilies has created complex kin networks in which relationships between people who have blood ties are not sustained, and kinlike relationships exist between people who have no blood ties. The “chosen families” of gays and lesbians are a fourth example. Their extended family networks, often including former lovers, former spouses, friends, children from heterosexual marriages, and children acquired through adoption or the use of birth technologies, are personally constructed rather than governed by rules of blood and marriage.

The diversity in networks of kin relationships is relatively new, and scientific and lay vocabularies have difficulty keeping pace with social reality. The field does not have terminology for new and complex kin relationships. The term ex-granddaughter-in-law, introduced by Gunhild Hagestad, serves as an example: Not only do scholars need to get used to the idea that grandchildren can be middle-aged adults with families of their own, but the field lacks the words for relationships shaped by divorce and remarriage.

In scientific texts, the terms “quasi” or “fictive” kin are often used to denote relationships where the traditional rules of kin membership do not apply. These terms carry the connotation that there are “real” family relationships (defined by blood and marriage) and “other” family relationships.” There is a need to rework the definition of kin relationships to take better account of social reality. Insight can be gained from the practice of law, where regulations regarding adoption, guardianship, gay marriage,

registered partnership, inheritance, visiting rights, and maintenance obligations are being developed. Increasingly, conceptualizations of kin relationships need to consider construction and flux, rather than take an assumed established structure as their point of departure.

Characteristics of Kin Relationships

An essential difference between kin relationships (other than the marital tie) and nonkin relationships is that the former are “given” whereas the latter are “made.” The family of origin forms a constellation of relationships into which a child is born and that exists independently of that individual. This constellation of relationships is, however, very dynamic. It changes as new generations are born and old generations die. Positions within intergenerational chains shift as children become parents, and parents become grandparents.

Endurance is another distinctive quality of kin ties: They continue to exist even if dormant. Nevertheless, as research on the consequences of divorce for intergenerational family ties shows, they are not inalienable.

Though one’s family of origin is “in no sense chosen,” to use the words of Janet Finch and Jennifer Mason, there is an element of choice regarding which kin ties are honored. Research findings show that these choices are guided by, among other factors, kinship norms. In most western societies, the normative obligation to provide support is weaker for genetically more distant family members. Norms are also weaker for ascendent (up lineal lines) than descendent (down lineal lines) kin. The strongest kinship norm is the obligation toward children, followed by that toward parents. Cross-cultural research finds variations in the prioritization of kin relationships. An emphasis on lineal

bonds is more typical of Caucasian and Asian families, whereas an emphasis on collateral bonds is more typical of Black families.

Kinship norms do not form a set of preordained rules. As Graham Allan states, kin solidarity in western societies is permissive rather than obligatory. The norms do not require mutual aid. Under specific circumstances (e.g. poor relationship quality, large geographic distance), it is socially acceptable to deviate from them. A strong theme in research on practices of support and care is that kin responsibilities are negotiated interactively. Sometimes negotiations are overt and explicit, but more often they are implicit. Important elements in the negotiations are shared histories, relationship quality, conflicting commitments, and the personalities of those involved.

The negotiation of kin responsibilities is more likely in individualistic (Euro-American) cultures, which stress independence, self-sufficiency and the pursuit of personal goals, than in collectivistic (Islamic or Confucian) cultures, which stress kin-group membership and the submission of individual goals to the needs and wishes of the family. A collectivistic orientation is also characteristic of ethnic minorities and lower income groups in western societies. The avoidance of disgrace is a strong motivator to comply with family demands.

Kinship relationships do not exist in isolation. They form a network of bonds of varying intensity across time and across members. The interdependencies between kin network members are crucial to understanding kinship behavior. The concept of “linked lives” is often invoked to describe the ways in which decisions taken by a kin network member or events taking place in the life of a kin network member have repercussions for others. Grandparenting research, for example, has documented the consequences of

middle-generation divorce for contacts with grandchildren. Contacts might improve, worsen or remain unchanged, depending on the quality of ties with the parents of the grandchild. Sibling research has shown that the decision to provide help and companionship to parents is structured by expectations about what siblings will do. Those who have a sibling who is emotionally closer or lives nearer to the parent are less inclined to step in and help. “Kinkeeping” is another concept that captures how kinship operates as a network. Specific family members, often women, fulfill the role of keeping others informed about what is happening in the family, organizing get-togethers, and encouraging direct interactions. Kinkeeping serves to facilitate access to others.

Perspectives on Kin Relationships

Research on kin relationships is more readily associated with anthropology than with sociology and psychology. Literature searches using the word “kin” produce many more references to anthropological work than to studies conducted in sociology and social psychology. Typical for anthropology is that kin relationships are studied as a system that is crucial to the organization of society. In an attempt to understand the orderly functioning of small-scale societies in the absence of state or governmental institutions, anthropologists tend to view kinship as providing a stable political structure and a basis for social continuity. Classic anthropological studies focused on the way in which political groupings, which were recruited through kinship, protected their economic interests and passed their property on. Kin group membership, marriage rules, and matrilineal versus patrilineal succession are central to these studies.

Research on kin relationships in sociology and psychology is scattered throughout the literature, appearing under headings such as intergenerational relationships, sibling

relationships, and grandparenthood. The adult parent-child bond has been studied more extensively than any other kin relationship. Research on extended kin such as aunts and uncles, nieces and nephews, and cousins is sparse. Information on these sets of relationships most often comes from studies of childless older adults. A consistent finding is that extended kin figure more prominently in the social networks of childless older persons than in those of aging parents. While primary kin (parents, children, siblings) generally remain significant throughout life, qualitative studies show that, for some, extended kin fulfill unique supplementary functions—as family historians, mediators, mentors, and buffers in conflict. Given the dominant research focus on the nuclear family, little is known about the conditions under which special bonds between extended family members are developed.

Though the research on kin relationships conducted by sociologists and psychologists is generally not framed as research into the organization of western societies, it does provide insight into their structural and institutional characteristics. First, this field of research contributes to an understanding of sources of social inequality. Work on intergenerational transmission, for example, reveals the ways in which advantages and disadvantages are passed on from generation to generation. Transmitted resources are both material (gifts, inheritances, financial support) and nonmaterial (cultural and social capital, norms and values, educational and professional opportunities). Studies using kin network characteristics as determinants of life chances form another example. Findings consistently show that kin support has a positive impact on health independent of potentially confounded factors such as socioeconomic status, health-risk behaviors, use of health services, and personality.

Second, research on kin relationships is informative about mechanisms underlying social cohesion. Part of this research is based on the premise that kin relationships serve as bridges between social groups. For example, families are one of the few contexts where people of different ages meet and interact. Analyses of marriage patterns reveal whether people marry in or outside their social circle. Another strand of research focuses on kin relationships as a critical basis of social control. Strong interdependencies imply that the behavior of fellow family members can be called into question. Given increasingly egalitarian relationships, the direction of social control is not only from the old to the young, but also the other way around.

Third, research on kin relationships provides insight into processes of modernity. This is achieved by examining the changes in kin relationships that accompany changes in economic conditions, labor market arrangements, government provisions, laws, and cultural climate. A leading question is whether given economic and social circumstances facilitate or require particular kinship patterns. Family sociologists writing in the 1950s argued, for example, that a nuclear family system with its self-contained units was best suited to meet the mobility requirements of industrialized societies. More recently, migration scholars have attributed the rise in transnational families, where members live across national borders, to the growing wage gap between poor and rich countries and the increased demand for care services in developed countries.

Pearl A. Dykstra

Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute, The Hague

See also Aunts and Uncles, Relationships with; Extended Families; Families, Definitions and Typologies; Families, Demographic Trends; Families, Intergenerational Relationships in; Fictive Kinship; Kinkeeping; Sibling Relationships.

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