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Kinship Reconsidered: Research on a Neglected Topic

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Across the Western world and in other nations with advanced economies, a remarkable transformation in family systems took place during the final third of the 20th century. The institution of marriage, once nearly hegemonic, lost its nearly universal appeal. Marriage now takes place later in life in virtually all nations with advanced economies, and, not uncommonly, it is delayed indefinitely. New family forms have proliferated gaining legitimacy in the 21st century as alternatives to heterosexual marriage. Specifically, a sharp rise occurred in the prevalence of cohabitation both as a prelude and alternative to matrimony; divorce and remarriage rates have increased in most nations, creating growing family complexity; the legitimation of same-sex unions has changed the form of the family; and, there is a growing level of voluntary childlessness. In 1960, 88% of all children in the United States lived with both their biological parents; this proportion has dropped to 65% in 2015 (Child Trends, 2015). The growth of non-nuclear families has been less dramatic in other Western nations than in the United States, but still widespread (Mortelmans, Matthijs, Alofs & Segaert, 2016; Heuveline, Timberlake & Furstenberg, 2003).

By now, these developments are old news to family scholars, but social scientists are just beginning to sort out the varied sources and consequences of these changing family practices in the Western nations. One of the less examined features of global change in family systems is how this transformation has altered kinship conceptions and practices, the topic of this review. This paper examines what we know and don't know about how kinship operates in contemporary Western nations, as an exchange and support system, a ceremonial group, and source of identity. When I initially undertook this review, I had hoped to include in a single essay, a discussion of how kinship works both in the standard form (wrongly described as "traditional") of the family and in various alternative structures that have sprouted up and become more prevalent over the past half century. However, I quickly discovered that there was too much material to cover in a single paper, so I was forced to divide my overview into two essays.

The first of these examines the history of kinship and contemporary patterns of kinship reported in recent literature, both in the United States and other Western nations in the standard, nuclear form (Stone, 1977). I conclude with a research agenda of largely unexamined questions about how kinship works in contemporary families throughout the Western world, the arrangement that William J. Goode (1965) referred to as the conjugal family form.

A second paper, currently in preparation, will explore how kinship notions have been expanded to a wide variety of alternative forms such as: families who divorce and remarry; cohabitating couples with children; couples and single-parents living in extended

households; families formed by assisted reproductive technology; adopted families and kinship care; and, of course, same-sex unions and marriages. Most of these so-called "alternative family forms" have only been examined one at a time rather than compared to one another as varied contexts of kinship. The question I examine in the second essay is how kinship is construed and performed *across* these different family structures and, particularly, when compared to the conjugal unit, the historically favored family arrangement of the West (Stone, 1977; Goody, 1996).

Family systems organize human reproduction, economic support of family members, childcare, socialization, and social placement by defining rights and obligations for parents and extended kin (Murdock, 1949; Davis, 1949). A second important function of family systems receives far less attention in the literature than it merits: the family is also a social arrangement responsible for giving its members a sense of identity and shared belonging through kinship connections including not only those inside the natal family household, but also among relations living elsewhere as well. From the perspective of evolutionary biology, kin recognition, protection, and support are mechanisms for selection and survival. This helps to explain why kinship conveys a powerful sense of belonging and diffuse emotional connection that enhances social solidarity among relatives (Sapolsky, 2017).

In recent years, some attention has been devoted to the ceremonial role of kin in studies of family life by cultural sociologists, but we have not yet fully appreciated the importance of kinship in everyday life. A recent and important exception discussed later in the paper is Jallinoja & Widmer, 2011. In contrast, there are literally hundreds, if not thousands of papers, devoted to the exchange of money and time within and across households (Swartz, 2009). While undoubtedly exchanges of resources are a critical feature of kinship systems, the importance of kin connections have been fully valued by an exclusive focus on time and money exchanges. I believe that family research has downplayed the role of collateral and extended kin (other than grandparents) that frequently constitute the ceremonial family, often providing members, not only tangible benefits but a profound sense of connection, social support, and identity.

When I first entered sociology in the 1960s, kinship was a vibrant area of research within the field of family sociology in the United States as well as in social anthropology in England and Continental Europe. This is far less true today. Even the most cursory examination of the current literature on kinship in the United States (and to a lesser extent in Europe) reveals just how is underdeveloped the topic area is in the recent literature in family sociology and demography. Over the past several decades only a scant body of research has been produced on how kinship is practiced in contemporary Western societies. In my search of the literature, I discovered only a few general reviews of kinship research describing studies undertaken in the past thirty years (Peletz, 1995; Stone, 2001; Carsten, 2004; Déchaux, 2014); only one appears in a sociological journal (Johnson, 2001). Empirical, or for that matter, theoretical studies on kinship in advanced societies remain relatively rare; comparative and cross-national studies, until quite recently, even rarer (Grandits, 2010; Heady & Kohli, 2010).

Within the discipline of anthropology, there have been some recent attempts to restore the study of kinship that fell out of favor after David Schneider's seminal writings in the 1970s (1966, rev. 1980) (Déchaux, 2014). Based on his study of American kinship, Schneider forcefully argued that much of the theory and research in classical anthropology had been misdirected because they were based on a biogenetic conception of kinship. He drew this conclusion from his fieldwork study on American kinship, though his empirical findings were only sketchily presented in his publications.

Kinship, contended Schneider, is a cultural construction, that cannot be derived from the "natural" world. In anthropology, a great deal of theory and research has been devoted to qualifying or elaborating Schneider's argument that overturned a century of previous research (Carsten, 2004; Déchaux, 2014). During the 21st century, only a small number of studies have appeared on the standard form of the family in Western nations. (See, for example, Newman, 2012; Murphy, 2011). Recently, however, there are some indications within anthropology of a growing interest in newer forms of the family, stimulated by the path-breaking research on gay families conducted several decades ago by Kath Weston (1991). This burgeoning body of research will be addressed in the second paper that is currently in the works.

A Brief History of Kinship Studies in the 20th Century

In the middle of the 20th century, the study of kinship in post-industrial societies was a "hot" topic in the sociology of the family, judging by the attention given to it in theoretical discussions and empirical research (Zeldich, 1964; Farber, 1966). Kinship research on contemporary, post-industrial societies has its roots in the writings of 19th and early 20th century social theorists such as Durkheim, Engels, LePlay, among others, who first speculated about how kinship systems changed as societies became more complex and a variety of institutions were devised to manage activities that had formerly been regulated by family practices in simpler, agrarian societies. Broad agreement existed that kinship systems gradually became simpler, less essential as support systems as societies moved from an agricultural to an industrial base. A rural past was largely assumed when the patriarchal family was the dominant institution that provided education, more education, and employment. A burgeoning historical literature demonstrated that early American practices gave enormous authority to elders and fathers to make decisions for women, children and youth, particularly in New England (Demos, 1970; Gordon, 1978).

Industrialization disrupted family control with the emergence of a job economy, undermining the power of elders to exert their influence over the young. This change, family theorists believed, resulted in a simpler family form--- a "nuclear" arrangement of two biological parents and their offspring, largely outside of the influence and support of extended kin (Goode, 1965; Laslett, 1972). This proposition became the subject of considerable debate both in the new field of social history as well as by sociologists who studied family systems (Sussman & Burchinal, 1959; Farber, 1966).

The earliest empirical examinations of the family as a social system in the United States emerged from the community and family studies of the Chicago School of Sociology in the

first half of the 20th century (Burgess & Locke, 1945). W. E. B. Du Bois (1899) can be credited with the first community study in the United States. The Chicago School writers paid close attention to how immigrants assimilated into American society and the significance of kinship ties in making this transition. This idea appeared in the early and now classic study by W. I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki (1918, 1920) of Polish migrants to the United States. The evidence that they assembled from letters and testimony from immigrant families showed how immigrants established strong ties to extended kin and neighbors in ethnic communities, who helped to guide the process of assimilation for newcomers to America.

Other researchers connected to the Chicago School of Sociology focused on how kinship operated to facilitate the migration of African Americans leaving the South in the decades leading up to and following the Second World War (Johnson, 1934; Frazier, 1939). Emerging from many of the ethnographic studies conducted in low-income communities in the middle of the last century of whites and blacks alike, researchers reported that the family boundaries were not nearly as tightly maintained as appeared to be the case among more privileged families in the middle-class (Clayton & Drake, 1945).

By the middle of the 20th century, a slew of studies, again primarily ethnographic, in both the United States and Britain continued the theme of how ethnic and kinship ties were intertwined in urban working-class communities. Research on social class, kinship, and community can also be traced to the appearance of Talcott Parsons' (1954) influential essays on the American family. Drawing on the kinship theory in anthropology, Parsons described American kinship relations as a product of our bilateral system (stressing neither the matrilineal or patrilineal lines) that produced what Parsons described as an "isolated nuclear family system."

Parsons contended that the American family's relatively shallow ties to either family line, produces a kinship system that structurally emphasizes loyalties to *both* husbands' and wives' sides of the family in equal measure. Accordingly, distinctions are not drawn in the terms used to describe collateral relations (aunts, uncles, cousins, in-laws) on one side of the family or the other as is done in kinship systems in which the maternal or paternal lines determine kinship obligations. Without strong loyalties to lineage, Parsons, and his followers such as Kingsley Davis (1949) and William J. Goode (1965), contended that the *nuclear family as a distinct unit* becomes more powerful and prominent in regulating social reproduction and family life.

Isolated from the influence of kin, the "conjugal family system," as William J. Goode described the Western family form, produced a potent domestic unit harnessing strong sentiments within the nuclear family (Lasch, 1977). Historians have observed that this family form became especially prevalent in the United States because of its immigrant origins and high level of geographical mobility (Nimkoff, 1947). The predominance of the nuclear family and its isolation from the influence of extended kin was, according to Parsons, a distinctive feature of the American family system. Though, as Goode (1965) observed, the dominance of the nuclear family system is, in fact, a distinguishing feature of Western family systems (Laslett, 1972).

Not long after the publication of Parsons' seminal essays, a stream of empirical studies began to appear in sociological journals that explored the presumed absence of strong kinship bonds in the United States and England. During the decades of the 1960s and 1970s, a number of researchers showed that kinship bonds both survived and thrived in the post-industrial economy (Sussman & Burchinal, 1962; Farber, 1966; Gans, 1962). British research on kinship, largely conducted by social anthropologists, echoed the same theme. Among others, Michael Young and Peter Willmot (1962), Raymond Firth (ed. 1956) conducted studies of working-class neighborhoods in East London showing that families were deeply embedded in extended kin networks supporting the nuclear family. Elizabeth Bott (1957) developed a theory reconciling the Parsonian claim by showing that strong conjugal bonds appeared to crowd out more active kinship relations in middle-class families whereas in working-class settings, the opposite was true. Weaker marital bonds and gender-segregated social networks promoted more intense relations with extended kin (For an extensive summary of this early research, see Bott's 1971 essay in the revised edition of her book).

Urban contexts among the working class were not the only setting in which kinship thrived in post-industrial America. Throughout rural communities, and especially in geographically isolated pockets of the United States, there was a large body of evidence to show how much families continued to be an enduring feature of the American family system (Adams, 1970; Lee, 1980). Although the U.S. family, according to historian Edward Shorter (1975), was "born modern," relations with extended kin, it appears in empirical research mentioned above, continued to be an important feature of family systems within the U.S. and among Western nations throughout the latter half of the 20th century.

Kinship in post-industrial societies remained "functionally important," researchers concluded, especially within the working-class and in less urbanized parts of the country. Eugene Litwak and colleagues (1975, 1959) in a series of qualitative studies demonstrated how kin continued to play an important role in mediating the family and the growing bureaucratic institutions such as schools, welfare agencies, and the health system. Kin in working-class and immigrant communities often acted on behalf of the family, helping to bridge relations to more formal organizations as well as the labor market. Granovetter (1973) extends this idea two decades later. While not explicitly employing the term, "social capital," Litwak, among others, discovered the potential power of social bonds as a "resource" for families with a limited ability to connect outside the confounds of the household and neighborhood. Although the exploration of how families use extended relations has not disappeared, it has not continued to be a topic of much research interest inside the field of family sociology apart from the considerable attention given to intergenerational exchanges, a theme that I return to later on in this essay.

As I noted in the introduction, this body of early research largely neglects the symbolic and ceremonial function that kinship plays in the Western family system. Beyond the early work of Bossard and Boll (1950) in the United States, the neglect of this topic in family sociology remains noteworthy. I will return to this topic in the concluding section.

Early Research on Kinship Among Disadvantaged Populations

In the final decades of the 20th century, following the publication of the Moynihan Report, there was a widespread belief, that the Black family was distinctively different in structure and family practices from other ethnic groups because of its African origins, history of slavery, and urban migration (Furstenberg, 2007, 2009). There was growing interest in the role kin played in survival of poor families, especially among African Americans living in single-parent households often with extended kin.

Much of that work was influenced by Carol Stack's important ethnographic study of poor black families in 1974 (Stack, 1974). Her study resonated with the findings of a number of fieldwork examinations conducted in roughly the same period. (See also Jeffers, 1967; Rainwater, 1970; Jarrett, 1995). Stack, among others, showed the benefits and burdens of close family ties, emphasizing the demands placed on poor families to share limited resources when crises occurred and the consequences when assistance went unreciprocated. Stack's research initiated an empirical quest to determine if kinship bonds were, in fact, stronger in black than white families, an inquiry that has continued to the present (Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2013). It also influenced my work on the kinship practices of teenage mothers and their families. I discovered that unplanned parenthood, especially when it does not lead to paternal involvement and ultimately marriage, establishes a strong matrilineal tilt in the kinship system (Furstenberg, 2007).

While there has been considerable attention to the role of kinship in poor families, far less is known about how kinship works among the highly privileged (See, for example, Warner, 1942; Hollingshead, 1949). Apart from intriguing observations about kinship bonds among the upper class by E. Digby Baltzell (1966) sixty years ago, remarkably little attention has been given to the way that families in the top decile, much less the top one percent, deploy resources through schooling and inheritance to maintain privilege from one generation to the next. We do know that educational homogamy and union stability have been rising among the well- educated, likely leading to a growing of family resources at the top (Smits, Ultee & Lammers, 1998; Mare, 2016). While it is widely acknowledged that privilege is maintained through the transmission of material resources over generations, only recently have social scientists begun to look at how this practice of resource provision works over the life course to advantage children born into well-off families. Moreover, in recent decades as the concept of social capital became increasingly popular in social science, researchers, myself included, began to consider kinship as a social resource that is unevenly distributed (Furstenberg & Kaplan, 2007; Parcel & Dupur, 2001)

Family Systems in Comparative Perspective: Persistence and Change

Change in the Western model of the family has continued to occur apace in the first decades of the 21st century in the United States and Canada, other Anglo speaking nations, and Europe, as well as in many parts of the developed world (Oláh, 2015; Child Trends, 2015). Scholars have accordingly begun to conduct comparative studies of family patterns cross-nationally, picking up on the early efforts of Goode (1965) and a few of his contemporaries to address specific economic, technological, demographic, and ideological drivers of new

ideals and practices in family systems. The motivation for comparative research emerges from the competing explanations of why change occurs in family systems and how it is diffused; this perspective has been applied more recently to the developing world (Pesando et al., 2018).

This line of comparative studies has provided an assessment of how family systems in economically advanced nations are responding and adapting to exogenous conditions depending on history, culture, and existing institutions such as educational systems, the polity, and religious values (Breen & Buchman, 2002; Meyer, 1977; Cook & Furstenberg, 2002; Mayer, 2009). Among wealthy nations in the West, there is clear evidence of convergence in family formation practices such as postponed home leaving, later and less marriage, lower childbearing, and greater movement toward gender equality. At the same time, considerable divergence remains and could be increasing in the first two decades of the 21st century both between and within countries (Billari & Liefbroer, 2010).

A slender but growing strand of this research has investigated changing *kinship practices* in comparative perspective. As I reported earlier, kinship relations have been examined almost exclusively through the lens of how intergenerational ties and levels of support and exchange have been changing in advanced economies (Dykstra et al., 2006). Specifically, it has been largely assumed that intergenerational exchanges between mid-life parents and their adult children and offspring constitute *the* important arena of action in Western kinship systems.

Cross-national studies on change in family systems reveal longstanding cultural and historical patterns that differentiate parts of Europe and the Anglo-speaking world that can be traced back over centuries and even millennia (see Goody, 1996). Goody, like Goode, argues that it is necessary to understand that countries change from different starting points depending on their history, culture, and demography. He views existing kinship systems as a mediator of change but kinship obligations are, at the same time, a potential site in which change occurs.

Demographic scholars have previously identified important regional variations in kinship practices across geographical regions, between, and within nations (Iacovou, 2002; Kertzer, 1989). In a path breaking demographic research, Hajnal (1983) identified a demographic divide that has separated Eastern and Western Europe for centuries; across this divide, family systems have displayed sharp variations in family formation patterns and household structures (Wall et al., 1987). Early marriage and a greater prevalence of intergenerational households have been far more common in Eastern Europe than Western Europe (Wall et al., 1987). Similarly, research comparing Northern and Southern Europe has persistently revealed differences in the age of home leaving, marriage, and childbearing (Iacovou, 2002; Lesthaeghe, 1983). Mediterranean countries display higher levels of what has been labeled as “familism” than generally occurs in Northern Europe, especially Scandinavia (Reher, 2004; Leitner, 2010).

Esping-Andersen (1990, 2016) in a series of influential writings hypothesized that these regional differences are linked to a typology of distinctive “welfare regimes” that emerged over time in different nations establishing alternative arrangement in state/family

relationships. These varying political cultures take the form of a welfare system that allocates responsibilities to government, families, and individuals. Thus, individuals and family systems express expectations and enact practices that are informed by exposure to these different cultural and institutional frameworks (Heady & Kohli, 2010:397). This assumption recalls C. Wright Mills' (1957) observation that individual biographies and life scripts are embedded in institutions in flux in modern societies (Buchman, 1989; Mayer, 2009).

Although a large body of research has explored the alignment between welfare regimes and family patterns, the empirical evidence supporting Esping-Anderson's general theory is mixed at best: it remains unclear whether Esping-Anderson's categorization of welfare regimes is, in fact, related to family systems or discrete patterns of change within family systems. Only a few comparative studies have examined the data to ascertain whether kinship practices differ across the typology of welfare regimes he constructed.

In one of the earliest of these studies, Hollinger and Haller (1990) used data from the International Social Survey Program (ISSP) to compare kinship contact in seven nations that were selected because they represented varied welfare regimes. They discovered, consistent with Esping-Anderson's theory, that the Anglo-speaking countries that are grouped in the Liberal Regime--- Australia, the United States, and Great Britain--- have sharply lower levels of co-residence and contact with relatives (living outside the home) than do West Germany and Hungary, and especially Italy.

The incidence of contact conforms to the principle of *genealogical order,* a dominant feature of Western kinship: after spouse/partners, interaction is highest with parents (outside the home); and, conversely older parents spend the most time with children, next with adult siblings, followed by other relatives (See Rita Jallinoja & Widmer, 2011). In part, this correspondence is maintained by differing patterns of geographical proximity among family members. Co-residence and levels of geographical mobility explain an important share of the country-level differences according to Hollinger and Haller (1990). Residence patterns among family members are both an indicator of the importance of kin ties and close proximity facilitates the high levels of interaction, especially in the Mediterranean region.

Hollinger and Haller (1990) present similar findings for patterns of exchange and support in times of need with the spouse (assuming one is present) being listed as the person/s from whom help is most expected, then parents and/or children living outside the home, siblings, and other kin. In the entire ISSP sample, a relatively low figure, about five percent, report that they look to other relatives (beyond parents) for support, in addition to children and grandchildren. These findings are based on data collected 30 years ago. It is difficult to know whether national-level differences would still look the same today, following similar patterns across the nations represented in the study. The best recent data on exchanges of time and money among kin come from SHARE, a multi-country study that collected information on kin identification and contact as part of its overall mission to study the health and security of older adults in Europe and other nations with advanced economies (Aassve, Meroni & Pronzato, 2012; Kohli, Hank & Künemund, 2009; Litwin, 2009).

A recent paper by Ganjour and Widmer (2016), paralleling the work of Hollinger and Haller reaches similar conclusions revealing significant variations by region in reliance on kin. Their analysis that relied on configurations of kinship also failed to find that kinship practices reflected differences in welfare regime though it should be noted that about a quarter of their sample had a profile of high involvement with extended relations with siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, and other extended kin.

In a policy brief reporting on eight nations in SHARE, both qualitative and quantitative data were collected and compared from rural and urban sample sites. Both within and across countries, large differences emerged both in the level of how many kin were recognized and how contact occurred across rural and urban sites in all countries. The findings strongly point again to large within-country differences. Urban Italy looks more like urban Sweden than it does rural Italy. Overall, the frequency of kin contacts shows general regional differences, especially a Northwest and Southeastern divide, but the within-country differences remain prominent, as large as the between-country, differences (European Policy Brief, European Commission, Brussels, 2010).

The SHARE dataset has been used extensively to chart country-level differences in intergenerational support among adult children and their parents. Based on a series anthropological and historical case studies, Heady and Kohli (2010) have provided the most extensive discussion of intergenerational and gender ties across Europe and of how they are linked to public policy regimes. They provide extensive empirical support showing that reliance on public vs. private support for the family varies across regions, between Northern and Western Europe on one side and Southern and Eastern Europe on the other. Public support systems do not “crowd out” private support in the family, but they do appear to relate to the intensity of support both for children and the elderly (Brandt, Haberkern & Szydlik, 2009; Brandt & Deindl, 2013). Thus, comparing the Nordic countries with the South, notable regional differences exist in the level and intensity of intergenerational co-residence, exchange, and in the prevalence of childcare provided by grandparents.

In his work with Heady and elsewhere, Kohli and collaborators report that the flow of resources in all countries represented in the SHARE study is downward from older parents to their adult children and grandchildren rather than upward. High levels of resources and time provided to seniors (from their children or grandchildren), only occur later in life when parents become infirmed. This is not to say that children and grandchildren do not provide assistance, but the level appears to be very modest, until the death of a spouse or a serious illness occurs to a parent. Even then, if a spouse or partner is present, children’s involvement is limited. Typically, children do not assume a great deal of oversight or care when an able spouse is present in the home.

Kohli’s observation that flows (financial especially) go downward in Western family systems may be somewhat biased because reports from SHARE come exclusively from the older parent generation: reporters (whether they be children or adults) almost always say that they *give* more resources (time and money) than they *receive.* This bias, notwithstanding, both Kohli and Albertini (2007) find that support from kin, especially from parents to children and grandchildren, remains a very prominent feature of all Western societies. Only in rural

areas where families live in close proximity do we see much evidence of broader networks of kinship support involving a greater share of contact with and assistance from extended kin. Evidence of such involvement is generally more common in Southern and Eastern Europe where levels of co-residence and geographical proximity remain much higher than in the Northwestern nations.

Albertini (2016) provides an excellent, recent review of the growing body of comparative research on intergenerational exchange across nations, based on the first three waves of data from SHARE. His findings reveal a picture of country-level variations based on reports from 17 nations, grouped by regions that also represent different balances of public and private support. Regional differences in the level and intensity of intergenerational exchange appear to reflect longstanding cultural and demographic differences mentioned earlier, but there is little evidence of a close correspondence of kinship patterns to particular welfare regimes.

Within families for all the nations examined, high levels of intergenerational flows occur. Consistent with earlier reports (also largely based on SHARE data), financial assistance by parents to their adult children is relatively common even in countries with strong systems of public support, as occurs in Scandinavia. Assistance (time spent) between parents and their adult children flows in both directions. There is strong evidence that childcare assistance by grandparents is also widespread: in virtually every nation, a majority of grandparents report that they provide assistance though in the Mediterranean region, grandparenthood is more institutionalized, especially among less affluent and educated parents. In the Nordic countries, grandparent care is also common. Where there are supplemented state sponsored institutions to provide childcare, there are higher levels of participation by women in the labor force. There is little evidence that the assistance supplied by family members comes from extended kin (aunts, uncles, cousins, and the like).

In recent study by Nauck, Groepler, and Yi (2017), levels of kinship contact were contrasted between two Western nations, the United States and Germany, and two Asian countries, Taiwan and China, to examine how Western and Eastern cultural systems influence patterns of home leaving and co-residence. As might be expected, large differences were observed in the timing of leaving home among young adults, but again, the authors found that the results did not fit a simple typology of individualistic vs. collectivistic. Just as Jack Goody (1990) speculated, patterns of kinship across regions are only loosely aligned to broad cultural ideologies. To be sure, cultural and political systems are indeed correlated with kinship arrangements, but there appear to be many more conditions operating to affect the level, intensity, and patterning of kinship bonds.

There appears to be a good deal of commonality in the findings from comparative research on family patterns in the West and, to a much lesser degree, in wealthy nations in Asia (Furstenberg, 2013). First, most of the “action” within families is confined to the conjugal family where a clear and widespread *genealogical order* exists in the provision of assistance by relatives: spouses and partners give and receive very high levels of time and emotional support to their adult children in conjugal families; financial contributions from parents to their offspring are also very prevalent, but only in rare circumstances do children help their parents out by giving money or significant, material assistance. Time commitments in the

form of errands, household help, and social support flow in both directions, although it appears that more support comes from parents than vice versa until late in life.

Assistance in the form of childcare by grandparents is frequent, regardless of region or nation, although it is more intense in Southern than Northwestern Europe (Aassve, Meroni & Pronzato, 2012; Settles et al., 2009). Co-residence is more common in Southern and Eastern Europe in large measure because of lower levels of economic development and urbanization. Beyond the conjugal family, there is little evidence to suggest that extended kin play an important role in assistance or care of family members. This last conclusion should perhaps be tempered on methodological grounds. For the most part, researchers have not directly delved into how extended kin participate in providing assistance to their relatives, although results from SHARE suggest that kinship obligations may be circumscribed when it comes to extended kin outside of natal family members. A further qualification is that little if any extent comparative data, address the ceremonial role of kin.

Recent Research on Kinship Relations in the United States: The Conjugal Family System Reconsidered

Comparative research done over the past several decades seems to suggest that the United States resembles the other Anglo-speaking countries and parts of Continental Europe in the range and intensity of kinship bonds. We begin by examining some evidence from the Health and Retirement Survey (HRS), the counterpart to SHARE in Europe. Like the results from SHARE, the preponderance of interest related to kinship has focused on intergenerational exchange and, the lessons learned, not surprisingly, resemble findings from the comparative research summarized above.

A recent analysis of HRS data by Margolis and Wright (2017) looking at the flow of intergenerational resources across generational units finds that the vast majority of Americans who are above the age of 50 provide support to children and grandchildren. The burden of obligations is highest among mid-life adults, the so-called sandwich generation, in their 40s and 50s, who often face demands both upward and downward from elderly parents and adult children (and grandchildren). About two out of three older American are part of two or three generational families, and, the great majority of individuals report providing assistance to their children. Conversely, only about five percent say that they have *no* kin on whom they rely; the proportion rises with the age of the respondent. Predictably, the level of flows are highest when there are three generations, but the vast majority of the elderly both provide (money and time) for their children and/or grandchildren. The ratio of giving to receiving is about two to one, up until age 70 when the intergenerational flows become more even; that is, almost as much help is received from descendants as provided to them by parents. (The reports come from parents or children who are older than 50). This finding echoes the results of intergenerational flows from SHARE reported by Kohli, Albertini, and others.

A huge literature exists in both the United States and other nations with advanced economies on the determinants of patterns of family support across the generations--- when, why, and how parents and adult children (and their children) help each other out through the provision

of money, help, and emotional support (Keene & Batson, 2010; Swartz, 2009; Silverstein & Giarrusso, 2010; Luecher & Pillemer, 1998). In recent years, this literature has been advanced both by the growth of nationally representative, longitudinal studies that span across the generations as well as high quality three-generation samples (Bengtson, 2001). It is beyond the scope of this paper to review in any detail this rich and copious literature, the determinants and consequences of intergenerational exchange. Reviews of the findings from two and three generational studies abound, discussing the results of this long tradition of inquiries going back to Rossi and Rossi (1990) (See also, Jackson, Jayokody, & Antonuci, 1996; Pilkauskas & Martinson, 2014; Birditt et al., 2012). I will, however, offer a few observations about this line of research that closely echo the findings from comparative studies discussed in the previous section.

First, the impact of geographical proximity is huge: children who remain near their parents both receive and give more than those who live farther away. When adult children live close to their parents (or parents move to be near their offspring), both may reflect emotional closeness that could affect residential choices as well as need for assistance within the parent-child dyad (Compton & Pollak, 2009).

Second, while gender differences frequently appear in the intergenerational exchange---women are more active kin keepers---there is some evidence that the significance of gender may be diminishing over time. Still, women are continuing to do the lion's share of the domestic and care work, but the gendered nature of kinship exchange may be lessening (Oláh, Richter, and Kotowska, 2014; Kahn, McGill, Bianchi, 2011; Agree, & Glaser, 2009). Third, there appears to be differing patterns of assistance related to social class and ethnic affiliation, but many of these differences are not consistent across studies, suggesting that researchers may have more work to do in unraveling the circumstances that lead to more or less reliance on the family across race/ethnicity and social. But there is general agreement, that patterns of co-residence, material assistance, and social support may be markedly higher within ethnic, and especially recent immigrant communities, and may reveal different patterns by social class (Kane, 2000).

There are reasons to suspect that intergenerational exchanges could become even more intense in the coming decades. As the population ages, it is likely that the situation of the sandwiched, the middle generation, will be more burdened by care duties for elderly parents while they continue to provide assistance to their children. Grandchildren, themselves, might too play a more active role in caring for elder grandparents because they are more likely to be living with their parents.

The age of home leaving in the United States and in most other Western nations has steadily risen with the growth of higher education accompanying a delay of entrance into the labor market. The period of economic dependence on parents has increased markedly in recent decades; the longer period of semi-autonomy among young adults creates a special challenge for future cohorts in balancing cross-generational demands in the conjugal family and its immediate extensions. Moreover, geographical mobility has declined significantly in the past two decades in the United States. An increase in geographical proximity to family could contribute to greater reliance on kin if young people remain closer to their natal

households. Finally, a decrease in the generosity of public support after retirement could also alter the patterns currently in place. These changing trends could intensify the flow of time and money across the generations in the near future.

Relations With Kin Outside of the Conjugal Family

I have noted throughout this review that very little attention has been given to patterns of contact and support provided by family members outside the conjugal household and its extension to adult children and their offspring who have moved from the natal household: almost everything we know about kinship relations is confined to the assistance that flows within and across households between parents, children, and grandchildren.

This body of research strongly indicates that the principle of generational order remains a powerful feature of Western family systems that recognizes that family responsibilities flow from marriage and parenthood, concentrating resource flows within the conjugal family system rather than disbursing them across a wider network of kin. It is, therefore, not so surprising that we know relatively little about patterns of contact and exchange among collateral kin such as adult siblings and their children (aunts/uncles, cousins and their descendants). And few studies provide details on the family dealings with in-laws and their extended families though, as we shall see, relations with in-laws appears to be one prominent arena in which kinship interactions take place (Santos & Levitt, 2007; Fingerman, Gilligan, VanderDrift & Pitzer, 2012).

There are many sources of data that contain questions on exchanges in the natal family between parents, their adult children, and their grandchildren, such as the National Longitudinal Survey of Young Adults, the Panel Study on Income Dynamics, and ADDHealth. To my knowledge, the only nationally representative study in the United States that has collected data directly on a wide range of kinship contacts, closeness, and assistance in a nationally representative sample is the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), conducted in two waves (1987–88 and 1992–94) at the University of Wisconsin.

The NSFH contains some of the only and most systematic information that we possess on interactions and exchanges from a wider network of kin even though the data is now 30 years old. Most analysis of the NSFH provides information on the exchange of time/services and money across the generations between parents and their children and grandchildren; this information has been widely examined by the research community (See list of publications of NSFH, https://www.ssc.wisc.edu/nsfh/bib.htm#kincontact). The NSFH also collected information on exchanges with some categories of extended kin, notably siblings, in-laws, and a catchall category of “other kin” that has been examined far less frequently. Only a small amount of the data collected has been examined in published papers.

It is important to keep in mind certain limitations that inevitably restrict the value of demographic and social surveys that provide reports of contact and aid received from kin categories outside the natal family. Concerns have been raised about the quality of the data in social network studies that relied heavily both on the skills and persistence of interviews

and the commitment of the respondent to deal with a long series of repetitive questions (Paik and Sanchagrin, 2013).

The NSFH includes several sets of questions about exchanges and communication among potential kin, although the categories of kin of non-residential kin are restricted to: parents, children, siblings, and "other relatives." Grouped in this latter category are aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, nephews, in-laws and more distant relations. Almost certainly, had the interview contained questions that asked explicitly about *each* category of relationship on *each* side of the family (tedious though it might be), it might have revealed more contact, exchange, and support from extended kin than is reported in the amorphous grouping of "other relatives." Only a single set of questions in the first wave of the NSFH provides information among young adults residing with a partner about in-laws and quasi-in-laws (among unmarried partners).

These limitations notwithstanding, the data from the NSFH reveals much greater contact with kin than has generally been assumed from studies that have not explicitly inquired about relations with relatives outside of the nuclear or parental household. Most notably, NSFH data reveals that siblings have frequent contact and close relationships into adulthood although, as might be expected, some variation exists in contact and quality across sibling relationships. *Still, more than three quarters counted one or more of their siblings among their closest friends; only one in ten report that they do not get along with one or more of their siblings.* Perhaps, this information is censored or idealized, but it still indicates a surprisingly strong bond exists among siblings even in adulthood. By ignoring the interpersonal and ceremonial importance of family bonds that are collateral or outside of the parent/adult child dyad, the importance of kinship ties has not been adequately acknowledged. This conclusion echoes the findings reported earlier from analyses using the International Social Survey showing considerable contact and involvement with relatives outside the household (Ganjour & Widmer, 2016).

In an intriguing analysis, Lynn White (2001) used the NSFH data to examine contact between adult siblings over the entire age span. The proportion of those who have contact with living siblings when they are adults is high; *upwards of 50% have reported being in touch on at least a weekly basis or more, in their twenties, and this level remains almost constant over time.* Just over half the sample who are 70 or older reports seeing or talking to at least one sibling *once a week or more.* Exchange of assistance is common among siblings when they are under the age of 30--- especially if they live nearby. Assistance between siblings dips in mid-life, and then rises notably after age 70 especially for those who are in close proximity. While the analysis is based on cross-sectional information in the two waves of the NSFH, it indicates that most adult siblings remain involved and perhaps even become more interdependent in later life. These results are not so surprising, but they reveal that collateral kin ties have been seriously neglected, in part because of the absence of good data (See, Cicirelli, 2013).

Given findings revealing high levels of contact, communication, and assistance among adult siblings, it raises a host of questions about whether we have adequately appreciated what the role of kin outside of the immediate family plays in the Western family system. Siblings are

close in the “genealogical order;” and, it is hard to imagine that when strong sibling bonds exist--- which appears to be common--- there is not spillover to relations in the next generation. We have paid too little attention to collateral relations that are created through sibling ties, among aunts, uncles and their respective nieces and nephews, and, of course, relations among cousins.

When I conducted a Google search for research on kinship relations among cousins, I discovered that little if anything had been done on this topic: virtually all the references for research about cousins were devoted to variations among “cousin marriages” across the states. In some states this practice is permitted and in others not. Apart from an interest in the legality of marriage between cousins, there has been no attention to how frequently siblings form lasting bonds after childhood (or even during childhood). Yet, there is good reason to suspect that many Americans retain strong ties to one or more cousins in their adult years if we extrapolate from the data on adult sibling bonds in later life. The durability of these ties constitutes a structural feature of Western kinship that deserves some attention, at least in how families are organized as ceremonial and social units.

As I mentioned earlier, a small literature exists on relations among in-laws. In the NSFH, a module of questions asked about the quality of relationships with in-laws though few of the results of this module have appeared in published research findings. The reports from NSFH suggest that relations between in-laws are generally positive and can be emotionally intense--- that is, for marriages and partnerships that are intact. The vast majority reports in the NSFH that they have regular and frequent contact with both parents-in-law and siblings-in-law. Not surprising, the data suggests that in-law contacts are important features of kinship relations in the United States (and probably in other Western nations) that remain unexamined in the literature on the family. White’s (2001) analysis of interactions among siblings over time suggest the possibility that strong bonds might develop among siblings-in-laws; and, indeed the NSFH data point to that result: close to 90% of respondents with in-laws report that they get along well. As was the case among siblings, *over half* counted one or more of the siblings-in-law as among their closest friends. This finding might surprise some observers of the family, but it is completely consistent with White’s findings on the endurance of sibling ties.

Consistent with these results, the NSFH provided parallel information on the level of closeness with parents-in-law. The vast majority of respondents in the NSFH report positive relationships--- rating them five or more on a scale from 0 to 7--- with their spouse or partner’s parents. Over 70% say that they have good or excellent relations with the parents of the partner. The small literature on the determinants of the quality of relations indicates again that geographical proximity with in-laws is an important predictor of close relations. This finding calls to mind the observation made by George Homans (1951) many years ago: high interaction between two individuals increases “liking” except when it doesn’t!

To summarize from the only source that provides reliable data on kinship ties beyond the nuclear family, the NSFH results indicate that kinship networks are typically wider and more emotionally intense than has previously been acknowledged in the general sociological literature on the American family system. In all likelihood, the sheer difficulty of collecting

detailed data on relations with extended kin has led to an under-estimation of their significance in the everyday life of families in the United States and probably more widely in the West.

Collateral kin such as siblings, their partners and children, establish lines of family solidarity and support that are based on horizontal rather than vertical lineage. In a bilateral kinship system such as those existing in the West, where ties are reckoned on both sides of the family, potential kin expand exponentially with each new generation. Still, it remains an open question how family members preserve ties that extend collaterally and incorporate horizontal relations in ceremonial events. Most Americans may not know a “third cousin,” the respective great grandchildren of siblings, but the data from NSFH indicates that many more retain relationships with distal family members including second or third cousins than we might have imagined.

Why should we care about these relationships if they are not the direct source of intimate support and material assistance? In the first place, we do not really know how much exchange actually takes place with extended kin because this information has not been adequately measured. The flow of contact and exchange is thought to be infrequent; however, data from the NSFH suggests that we may have underestimated the level of contact and exchange from more distant kin extrapolating from the findings on siblings and their partners.

The broader kinship system may also provide a range of “weak ties” that are enacted when assistance is needed by family members. At this point, we can say very little about the workings of kinship networks because we don’t really possess data on the scope of interactions and the way that they are used. Kinship connections beyond the natal family may be an important source of information, emotional support, and perhaps even material assistance when families need help.

In an ongoing study of middle income families, participating families mention getting or giving help from aunts, uncles, cousins, and other relatives. Using a cousin’s vacation, accompanying an aunt to the doctor, or giving tutoring to a nephew are the kinds of assistance that appear to be relatively common. A recent study of social networks in Europe reveals that family members constitute about half of personal network members in Switzerland. In Portugal, their share is close to 95% (Wall, Widmer, Gauthier, Česnuitytė, & Gouveia, 2018).

But even if this speculation about the flow of information and assistance turns out to be overstated, there are other good reasons for understanding how kinship operates as a protective and supportive context to family members as they perform certain ceremonial or ritual tasks such as celebrations, weddings, funerals, reunions, and the like. Cultural sociologists have considered family events as important ways of “performing” or “doing” family, but the under-attention to this area of family life is notable. While there is a tradition of research in this area going back to Bossard and Boll (1950), the significance of family rituals and ceremonial events have not been given its due in scholarly studies of family life.

A recent European collection of writings on this topic edited by Jallinoja and Widmer (2011) makes an effort to correct the impression that extended kin don't count for very much. This collection of papers picks up on an understudied area in family and kinship, the occasions, rituals, and events that bring families together as a larger social unit. In one of the papers in this volume, Jallinoja examines obituaries showing that listing in death announcements follow the principle of genealogical order, emphasizing the conjugal family, with the spouse/partner accorder priority, followed by children, living parents, and siblings (sometimes including their partners). Related research suggests that this rule operates in accounting for who is present for important celebrations such as Christmas and other holidays though the studies to date are too few to confirm Jallinoja's observations with any confidence.

A second *principle of equity,* identified by Jallinoja, operating within the family system, deems that both sides of the family of married individuals are to be represented equally at such occasions as marriages, religious ceremonies for children, and other important family events. Of course, it remains an open question whether and how this principle is in fact enacted in practice. The research on the ceremonial family, as I have noted throughout, is underdeveloped. The principle of equity will figure importantly in the second essay that I am preparing on kinship relations in variant family forms where marriage may not occur.

This is one of many promising areas for future research on the conjugal family system relating to how kinship is practiced in the conjugal family system. There has been far too little attention to important linkages that take place across households of former members such as siblings and their families. As fertility has declined, it is likely that relations among siblings and their families may also be diminishing. However, it is also possible that they may take on added significance in an era when communication and contact has become easier, especially with the advent of social media. In the future, data from these contacts and exchanges may become available.

Research using the Internet may also provide opportunities to develop demographic profiles of kinship networks that have hitherto been beyond the reach of conventional survey research. By sampling individuals who could be asked to provide a complete listing of kin with whom they are in contact, we might be able to construct kinship networks for representative samples that are built from reports collected over time and space. Such data would permit social demographers to inquire about important compositional features of kinship networks that can be examined over time and space. For example, we might want to know how much kinship networks vary by ethnicity, social class, gender preference and the like. It would be no less important to know whether networks themselves are becoming more or less heterogeneous. How are kinship networks changing over historical time and how are they modified throughout the life course. Such questions are currently beyond our grasp; we do not possess the data to answer them. It should also be obvious that it would be extremely useful to be able to compare kinship networks across family forms, a topic that I will return to in the next paper.

Conclusion

The literature that I have reviewed in this essay was mostly limited to the conjugal system, nuclear families formed by marriage. Much of this work flows directly from Parsons' observations on the functioning of the "isolated nuclear family," the term he borrowed from anthropology to describe our bilateral system that places emphasis on the conjugal bond and the ties formed by marriage that extend equally to both sides of the family. Intense bonds formed by marriage, parenthood, and grandparenthood continues to serve as the central axis of our kinship system at least so long as marriage occurs, children are born, the parental marriage survives, and the next generation repeats the process. But, as I noted in the beginning of the paper, this set of conditions no longer prevails in many, if not most, American families. Marriage has been the lynchpin of our kinship system, creating a network of ties between families joined together in matrimony. How is kinship created when individuals no longer follow the traditional model of marriage and parenthood?

Leaving aside the important issue of how variant forms of the family construct and enact kinship and how much the form of the family affects both the reckoning of bonds and the flow of resources, I have argued throughout that we require new sources of data that contain more specific information on how Americans, living in all types of families, construct their kin and interact with them both in ceremonial and everyday circumstances. In short, we would make large advances in our understanding of how kinship operates if we developed methods to examine the demography and sociology of kinship in American society. Our exclusive focus on intergenerational ties leaves unexamined a host of important questions on the workings of our family system beyond the confines of the natal unit.

Taking a page from recent work in Europe on the ceremonial significance of kinship, we also need cultural and family sociologists to examine more closely how families is "enacted" both in formal events such as births, union formation, funerals, birthdays, reunions, and occasions when families get together. The decisions that create these events need more careful scrutiny if we are to peer further into the operation of kinship in the United States. The happy news for researchers is that there is a lot of important work to be done.

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