

Family Complexity and Kinship*

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Abstract

Increases in parental cohabitation, separation or divorce, and re-partnering or remarriage have generated an increase in the complexity of family and kinship ties. As a result, many scholars claim that family and kinship have become voluntary, with rights and obligations to be negotiated in the same way as those between friends and neighbors. This essay briefly reviews the demographic trends that have produced complex families and kin, and their projections into the future. It argues that kinship structures arising from stable nuclear family and kin networks provide a template for the organization of more complex family ties. Although a considerable degree of voluntariness can be found in ties among complex families and kin, rights and obligations remain structured in terms of blood and marriage, and are also strongly influenced by periods of coresidence. Guidelines do exist for relationships in complex families and kinship networks, and they can be used to further institutional arrangements that fit the circumstances of increasingly diverse types of families and kin.

During the twentieth century, and particularly since mid-century, intimate partnerships have undergone dramatic changes. Marriage is no longer required for couples to live together and have children. Couples have freedom to end their relationship, even when they have become parents. These trends are further along in some societies than others, but they are emerging in virtually all affluent “western” societies (Andersson, Thomson, & Duntava, forthcoming).

Because separation and divorce usually occur during the childrearing years, the trend is toward an increasing pool of single parents who return to the partnership market. High proportions form stepfamilies, and many have additional children with the new partner (Andersson *et al.*, forthcoming; Thomson, Lappegård, Carlson, Evans, & Gray, 2014). These events may occur in marriage(s) or non-marital cohabitation. The

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complexities introduced by such change pose considerable challenges for families and extended kin.

When couples marry, have only shared children, and remain together, biological relatedness, the legal tie between spouses, and coresidence form a strong bond with clear rights and obligations among family and kin members. When parents are not married, legal ties between partners are often unclear. When parents separate, re-partner, and/or have children with new partners, a chain of nuclear families and households is created where biological, legal, and residential ties do not coincide and may be unique for almost every individual in the chain (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994). Traditional guidelines (norms) for family and kin behavior do not seem to apply; relationships must be negotiated in the context of ambiguity, producing stress, misunderstanding, and conflict (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994).

In this essay, I argue that guidelines are in fact available and are usually applied to relationships in complex families. They can be seen as logical extensions of the structure of rights and obligations in stable nuclear family kin networks, where the dimension of coresidence takes on an independent role. Before outlining that argument and presenting the evidence, however, I provide an overview of the increase in complex families and kinship.

THE DEMOGRAPHY OF COMPLEX FAMILIES AND KIN

By the 1990s, births in cohabitation had surpassed those in marriage for a few countries (Andersson & Philipov, 2002); in most other countries, the percentages increased quite considerably between the 1990s and 2000s (Andersson *et al.*, forthcoming). Parental separation or divorce had also increased. In the early 2000s, about half of children in the United States and Russia were predicted to experience parental separation (including those born to lone mothers); in many other countries, estimates were between 30% and 40%. Children born to cohabiting parents have a much higher likelihood of parental separation than children born to married couples. The difference is, however, decreasing as cohabiting births become more common and cohabitation is viewed as more like marriage (Andersson *et al.*, forthcoming).

Children experiencing parental separation have a relatively high chance of acquiring a stepfather within 6 years of the separation and before they reach age 15— between 30% and 60% (Andersson *et al.*, forthcoming). While the pace of stepfamily formation seems relatively stable, the percentage of stepfamilies formed by marriage has declined in favor of cohabiting stepfamilies (Andersson & Philipov, 2002; Andersson *et al.*, forthcoming). Substantial proportions of stepfamily couples have a child together, providing a half-sibling for children born with previous partners (Thomson *et al.*, 2014). Most estimates of family complexity rely on reports of birth and partnership histories,

but only from one parent's point of view. From the child's point of view, family complexity is therefore underestimated.

A more complete picture is offered by Swedish administrative registers that link every person to each of their parents, allowing the identification of siblings born to the same or different mothers, to the same or different fathers. The percentage of Swedish residents who have at least one half-sibling increased rather steadily from 15% for those born in 1930s and 1940s to 30% for those born in the 1980s, and then plateaued (Thomson, 2014). Similar increases are likely to be observed in countries with high rates of parental separation.

Demographers have used rates of partnership, separation, and births to estimate the number and types of kin available now and in the future. In the United States, biological kin are declining, primarily due to smaller families, while step-kin are on the increase (Wachter, 1997). Murphy (2011) predicts a decline for the UK in the total number of biological siblings and an increase in former partners, step-relationships, and half-siblings. He argues that these trends will intensify as parental separation and re-partnering increase, though plateaus already reached in Sweden suggest some long-term stability in the mix of kin.

CONSTRUCTING FAMILY AND KINSHIP

The increasing complexity of families and kin networks is part of a larger trend toward individualization where rights and obligations depend not on family or kin membership but are inherent in the individual (Björnberg & Ekbrand, 2008). Nevertheless, families and kin remain important sources of material, social, and psychological support and are more than a loosely connected group of individuals. The core of family and kinship in individualistic societies remains the tie between parents and children, well regulated in law, in most cases supported by the sharing of genes, and strengthened by long periods of living in the same household. The consanguineal or "blood" tie between parents and children extends in weaker forms to siblings, grandparents and grandchildren, aunts and uncles, nieces and nephews, and cousins. Legal rights and obligations of extended kin are few, however; only rarely do they share households for any considerable length of time.

The second primary kinship tie is affinal or marital. Marriage links two intimate partners who are usually not related by blood. Their relationship is also regulated by law and they share a residence. By marriage, each spouse is linked to the other's blood kin (in-laws). Again, legal rights and obligations between in-laws are few, and lengthy co-residence is rare.

When couples have children together, the spouses' kin become linked by a combination of blood and marital ties. Parsons (1943) used blood and

marital ties as the basis for a model of American kinship, but the model is applicable to most if not all individualistic societies. He used the metaphor of an onion. Parents and children comprise the conjugal family at the onion's core. Outer layers represent extended blood or marital kin at varying genealogical distance. Distance is determined by the number of ties—blood or marriage—that link one kin member to another.

Using this calculus, the parent-child and partner relationships are closest, linked by a direct blood or marital tie. Full siblings are linked by blood—but indirectly, from child to parent and parent to sibling, a distance of two. During childhood, they share a common residence that brings them closer together, but in adulthood they do not. Grandparents and grandchildren form the lineal layer of the onion and are also at distance two (grandchild to parent, parent to grandparent). This is the same distance as the first layer of marital kin, parents and children-in-law. Aunts and uncles, nieces and nephews are at genealogical distance three, while first cousins are at distance four. Parsons (1943) argued that rights and obligations between kin and family members were ordered by kin distance.

A second system for structuring family and kinship is based on evolutionary theory and genetic relatedness (Pollet, 2007). Biological parents, full siblings, and children all have the same degree of relatedness because each shares half their genes with the other family member. Grandparents, grandchildren, aunts/uncles, and nieces/nephews share one-quarter of their genes with the corresponding family member; more distant biological kin are each related to the other at a degree of one-eighth or less. Neither spouses nor cohabiting partners are at all related from a genetic point of view.

According to evolutionary theory, genetic relatedness provides the motive for family and kin support—the survival of one's genetic material in the population. Senior members of the kin network will invest more in junior members with whom they share more genes. Even though they have no genes in common, partners (and their kin) may also have an incentive to invest in each other as a means of investing in children, grandchildren, siblings, nieces, and nephews. Junior members may also invest in senior members because they may provide care for junior members' children, siblings, nieces, and nephews.

The structure of relationships arising from stable nuclear families and their kin has been observed on a variety of dimensions and generally supports the onion metaphor. Although spouses are the most likely choice for a confidant, parents are more likely to be chosen than siblings and siblings more likely than more distant kin (Hoyt & Babchuk, 1983). In contact and exchange with kin, parents and children come first, and siblings second (White, 2001). Similar differences are found between blood kin and in-laws (Coleman, Ganong, & Cable, 1997; Goetting, 1990). The closer the genetic

ties between kin, the more likely they are to rely on each other for emergency help (Maxwell, Burton-Chellewa, & Dunbar, 2015) and the further they are willing to travel to visit each other (Pollet, Roberts, & Rim, 2013).

The structure of family and kin relationships has also been studied from a normative point of view, that is, what do people in general believe about rights and obligations to different sorts of kin? A few studies conducted in the United States are all consistent with Parsons' onion; obligations are stronger, the shorter the genealogical distance by blood (Nock, Kingston, & Holian, 2008; Rossi & Rossi, 1990). Similarly, rights and obligations of in-laws are weaker than those between adult children and their parents (Coleman *et al.*, 1997), at about the same level as adult siblings (Rossi & Rossi, 1990).

FAMILY AND KINSHIP IN THE CONTEXT OF COHABITATION, DIVORCE, AND COMPLEXITY

Cohabitation presents the first challenge to the rights and obligations that comprise a structure of family and kinship. Like married partners, cohabiters are not genetically related but live in the same household. In fact, it is coresidence that defines a cohabiting couple. Until a couple has children, however, the legal ties between the partners are minimal, no more than those of roommates.

When cohabiting couples have children, their two kinship networks are connected by blood. From an evolutionary point of view, births to cohabiting and married couples produce exactly the same set of genetic connections. From a genealogical point of view, however, the legal tie between the two parents may be undefined or only loosely defined (Perelli-Harris & Sánchez Gassen, 2012). Further, if cohabitation is viewed as less permanent than marriage, evolutionary motives for investment may be lower and rights and obligations weaker between the "in-laws".

Consistent with theoretical expectations, cohabiting step-parents are less likely to be identified as part of the family or household than married step-parents (Brown & Manning, 2009; Stewart, 2005). Obligations to live with an elderly single mother are weaker for a cohabiting than for a married adult child (Seltzer, Lau, & Bianchi, 2012). In the UK and the Netherlands, cohabiters have lower levels of exchange with partner's parents (Henz, 2009; Hogerbrugge & Dykstra, 2009), but no differences were found in the United States and Norway (Chesley & Poppie, 2009; Daatland, 2007; Wiik & Bernhardt, 2017).

The relative instability of cohabiting unions suggests that their place in kinship structure may be a preview of the way in which divorce alters kin rights and obligations. Divorce severs the marital tie but does not alter blood ties or change the genetic relationship of kin members to one another. From

an evolutionary point of view, therefore, divorce should also not alter any motives for investments in blood kin, but should weaken motives for investments in the ex-partners of blood kin. From a genealogical point of view, divorce may place former in-laws in the outer circle of friends and neighbors, with rights and obligations based on personal relationships developed during the period when the parties were kin. When the divorcing couple has children, however, parents-in-law remain grandparents to the couple's children, and the same goes for the child's aunts, uncles, and cousins. Kin relationships may become less like an onion and more like a chain of onion rings, where children from previous unions are the links (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994).

Re-partnering also has no implications for kin investment from an evolutionary point of view, but it produces a set of ties to the new partner's blood or marital kin. When the new partners already have children, a new type of marital kin appears, those labeled "step". If stepfamily couples have children together, genetics again comes into play with respect to half-siblings and their partially overlapping, partially separate sets of blood kin.

The complexity of such relationships has led to the claim that family and kin relationships are increasingly discretionary and variable (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994), and that kinship has become an achieved status based on principles of emotions, contact, and exchange that apply to all types of relationships (Maclean, Drake, & Mckillop, 2016). All is not chaos, of course. Parent-child relationships are constructed "almost automatically" (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994, p. 367). The question is whether anything else in kinship can be taken for granted or be used as guidelines for relationships in complex families and kin networks.

Table 1 suggests a possible starting point, building on Parsons (1943) genealogical onion. The first three rows simply reproduce the onion layers. Because a step-relationship is indirect, though a marital (or cohabitation) tie, we increase the distance between the corresponding biological kin by one. For example, step-parents are at distance two from their step-children (step-parent to parent, parent to child). Note that this puts the step-relationships at the same distance as an in-law relationship, as suggested by Cherlin and Furstenberg (1994).

According to the logic of genealogy, an ex-spouse or partner is connected only through blood ties to a child and the child's blood ties to the other parent ($1 + 1 = 2$). Otherwise, she/he disappears from the kin structure altogether. The ex's parents and siblings are also connected to the child's other parent only through the child, adding one to the previous count that had been direct through the marital tie of their child or sibling.

The shaded boxes represent the blood ties of kinship, quite few in relation to the in-law and step-ties. From an evolutionary point of view, neither current

Table 1
Genealogical Distance in Complex Families and Kin Networks

Core (1)	Distance 2	Distance 3	Distance 4
Spouses/partners	Full/half sibling	Sibling-in-law	Cousin
Parent-child	Grandparent/child	Aunt/uncle	Aunt/uncle-in-law
	Parent/child-in-law	Niece/nephew	Niece/nephew-in-law
	Step-parent/child	Step-sibling	Step-sibling-in-law
	Ex-spouse/partner ^a	Step-grandparent/child	Step-aunt/uncle
		Step-parent-/child-in-law	Step-niece/nephew
		Ex-parent-/child-in-law ^a	Ex-sibling-in-law ^a

^aPlacement in kin structure only if ex's had a child together.

nor ex-spouses/partners, in-laws, or any step-kin have an interest in investment, unless there is a motive through the children of a current marriage or partnership. One other difference from genealogy is that although full- and half-siblings are at distance two (still connected by a common parent), full siblings have twice as many genes in common as half-siblings and are therefore predicted to invest more in the relationship.

As predicted by genealogy and genetics, relationships between former in-laws are weaker than those with current in-laws and are closely tied to the existence of a blood tie through grandchildren, nieces/nephews, and so on (Goetting, 1990). Coleman *et al.* (1997) note that obligations of maternal grandmothers are explained in terms of help to the mother, while obligations of paternal grandmothers are explained in terms of help to the grandchildren. This may explain why obligations of paternal grandmothers are not viewed as lesser after divorce.

Step-relationships have generated a great deal of research, but mostly in simple comparisons to the corresponding blood relationship. For example, step-parents or step-children are frequently excluded from an individual's perception of her/his family, while such exclusions are rare in biological two-parent families (Stewart, 2005; Castrén & Widmer, 2015). Relationships and exchange with step-kin are almost always reported to be weaker than in the corresponding blood relationship (Arr'anz Becker, Salzburger, Lois, & Nauck, 2013; Bressan, Colarelli, & Cavalieri, 2009; White & Reidmann, 1992). Normative obligations toward hypothetical step-kin are also weaker than those to blood kin (Ganong, Coleman, McDaniel, & Killian, 1998; Hans, Ganong, & Coleman, 2009). Rossi and Rossi (1990) found that obligations to hypothetical step-parents were about the same as those to siblings, consistent with genealogical distances in Table 1.

Relationships with half-siblings are more consistent with the evolutionary theory of kinship than with genealogy. Contact frequency, emotional

closeness, and willingness to help are greater for full- than for half-siblings (Bressan *et al.*, 2009; Pollet, 2007; Tanskanen & Danielsbacka, 2014; White & Reidmann, 1992).

Overall, complex family and kin relationships do not seem to be completely unstructured in terms of rights and obligations. Expectations and behavior are reasonably consistent with a set of rules based on genealogical distance. In the case of the most complex family form, however, where families include half-siblings, two opposing forces are at work. First, half-siblings generate definitions of family that are more inclusive (Castrén & Widmer, 2015). At the same time, they represent divisions of rights and obligations toward separate networks of blood kin.

HOUSEHOLDS—CORESIDENCE AS A KINSHIP TIE

In kin-based societies, couples and children often live with their extended kin, and coresidence is the outcome of a particular kinship system. In individualistic societies, however, coresidence might more appropriately be viewed as a third type of kinship tie that can alter the structure of rights and obligations otherwise defined by blood and marriage. This is especially notable for cohabitation where the family is defined entirely by coresidence before children are born. Coresidence becomes a distinct family tie also after divorce. Divorced and separated parents do not live in the same household. Their children may live with one parent and not the other or with both. Some step-children and step-parents live together, others do not. Some half-siblings live together, others do not. Although extended kin by blood or marriage typically do not live in any of these households, their engagement with different types of grandchildren, grandparents, in-laws, aunts, uncles, and cousins is likely to be structured by who lives with whom.

In step-relationships, coresidence appears to generate rights and obligations. Coresident step-parents are usually expected to contribute to the financial support of their step-children (Ganong, Coleman, & Mistina, 1995; Maclean *et al.*, 2016), while non-resident step-parents may not. The longer step-parents, step-children, and step-siblings have lived together, the more similar are step-kin to blood kin in relationships or contact (Arr'anz Becker *et al.*, 2013; Kalmijn, 2013; Marsiglio, 1992; Schmeekle, Giarrusso, Feng, & Bengtson, 2006; White & Reidmann, 1992).

Coresidence is also a factor in the rights and obligations toward maternal versus paternal kin. Even in stable nuclear families with common children, most mothers are the primary parent, and women take a larger role in maintaining kin relationships. Thus, the gender-equal structure theorized by Parsons (1943) has generally in practice tilted somewhat toward maternal kin. When children live much more often with their mother than their

father after separation or divorce, the maternal tilt becomes even stronger, explaining the greater engagement with former daughters-in-law than with former sons-in-law (Goetting, 1990). Maternal half-siblings have more contact than paternal half-siblings (Pollet, 2007), and the longer half-siblings lived together, the more likely they were to be willing to help even in extreme situations (Bressan *et al.*, 2009).

THE FUTURE OF COMPLEX FAMILIES AND KINSHIP

There is no doubt that the prevalence of complex families and kin networks will increase in most affluent societies (Murphy, 2011; Wachter, 1997). Where complexity has become quite common, its prevalence may be reaching a plateau. Even at the level achieved in Sweden, however, those with completely nuclear kin networks—no separation, divorce, or re-partnering—will be a very small part of the population.

Complex family and kin networks might continue to be quite uncommon in some individualistic societies. From the early 1990s to the early 2000s, the prevalence of parental separation increased in both Spain and Italy. But it would have to more than double in order to reach levels already experienced in the Nordic countries and more than triple to reach levels in the United States. (Andersson *et al.*, forthcoming). Cohabitation is also likely to remain a more common feature of family and kinship in northern compared to southern European countries.

The countries where family complexity has increased least and is likely to remain at lower levels are characterized as strong family, weak state (Reher, 1998). Because the state provides so little, individuals rely much more on families and kin for support. The overall higher level of family/kin rights and obligations may still, however, be organized in an onion-like kin structure with stronger ties at closer genetic or genealogical distance. And the organization of step-kin and relationships with former partners presented in Table 1 could still apply.

In weak family, strong state societies, citizens hold a strong moral belief in the state's responsibility to meet individual needs (Björnberg & Ekbrand, 2008). Rights and obligations of family and kin arise not from their structural position but depend more on transactions. For example, parents may elicit support in old age by transmitting "moral capital" to their children (Silverstein, Conroy, & Gans, 2012). Rights and obligations may be based on general rules of distributive justice, where justice motives may arise from emotional closeness (Maclean *et al.*, 2016). The transactional approach to kinship provides no clearer guidelines to simple than to complex families and kin networks. Where negative emotions and perceptions of injustice arise from separation and divorce, transactional views of kinship likely hinder

the maintenance of ties between children and their non-coresident parents as well as that parent's kin.

The evidence we have so far is to some extent consistent with a transactional understanding of family and kinship, but it also suggests some structure as a basis for expectations and negotiations with family and kin members. Most research has focused on the structure of parent-child and step-parent/step-child relationships, rightly so in view of their centrality in the larger kinship system. Research on the outer layers of Parsons' onion remains sketchy; ignoring the outer layers essentially equates them with friends and neighbors where blood and marital ties do not exist and coresidence is rare.

The third dimension of kinship coresidence also deserves further theoretical and empirical attention. When blood and marital ties correspond completely with coresidence, it is a redundant feature of family and kinship structure. When they do not, it has clear implications for actual relationships and for the general expectations held by others for relationships in complex family and kin networks. Particularly important is to identify the history of coresidence with different family and kin members as a source of future transactional dimensions of the relationship.

The predominance of research on actual living kin is also somewhat limiting; what people do may not be the same as what they think they ought to do. The type of research pioneered by Rossi and Rossi (1990) in which vignettes systematically vary the hypothetical kin position, and the further development by Ganong *et al.* (1995) to sequentially provide additional information about the respective kin, could fruitfully be applied to the wider set of kin defined by cohabitation, separation and divorce, remarriage and re-partnering, and stepfamily births. We also need this type of information for a wider range of societies, particularly for weak states where the structural bases for family and kinship may be even stronger than the transactional bases.

By identifying the structure of relationships in complex families and kin networks—based on blood, marriage, *and* coresidence—it is possible to provide the guidelines that many family and kin members seek. Such information could also be useful in furthering the development of laws and other institutional arrangements to better fit the circumstances of increasingly diverse types of families and kin.

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