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1996

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Abstract

Families are an important source of social support, and little scholarship exists regarding how family members stay in touch and provide support for one another. Kinkeepers are said to provide support and keep family members informed about one another, yet there has been little research on who family kinkeepers are and how they communicate and enact this role. Two studies were undertaken. The first study used surveys to provide demographic data on kinkeepers and to ascertain information on their activities. The second study used diaries and interviews to document the activities of a set of kinkeepers and to describe outcomes of kinkeeping communication. These studies revealed that kinkeepers are mostly females between the ages of 40 and 59 who use the telephone and personal visits predominantly. Five outcomes of kinkeeping communication were identified: providing information, facilitating rituals, providing assistance, maintaining family relationships, and continuing a previous kinkeeper's work.

Researchers and practitioners have stressed the importance of social support, those behaviors that let individuals know they are valued and part of a network of care and collective responsibility (Cushman & King, 1986). Albrecht, Burleson, & Sarason (1992) stressed the importance of social support, seeing it as "the cornerstone for the quality of human life" (p. 149). One prominent line of social support research has been to document the significant physiological and psychological benefits of receiving support (e.g., Albrecht & Adelman, 1987; Cutrona, Russell, & Rose, 1986; Dickson-Markman & Shern, 1990). A second group of researchers has concentrated on describing the different types of support behaviors people use (e.g., Barbee & Cunningham, 1995; Cutrona & Suhr, 1992; Gottlieb, 1985) and on modeling the process of social support provision (e.g., Richman, Rosenfeld, & Hardy,

1993). Several typologies exist for categorizing types of social support and there has been some consistency in the types of support of across studies. For example, Cutrona and Suhr's (1992) typology is typical, identifying five types of support: informational support, tangible assistance, esteem support, network support, and emotional support.

Researchers studying support have tended to focus on support that is given to another in response to stressful life events (e.g., Albrecht & Adelman, 1984; Clunk & Cline, 1986; Cutrona, 1986; Cutrona & Suhr, 1992; Winstead, Derlega, Lewis, Sanchez-Hucles, & Clarke, 1992). While social support is indeed important in stressful situations, Barnes and Duck (1994) pointed out that giving and receiving support do not occur only in times of crisis but are also part of everyday interactions in personal relationships. They highlighted the importance of studying everyday supportive interactions as these will form the basis for support given in times of crisis.

Several scholars have echoed this call to study everyday support as *communication.* Burleson, Albrecht, Goldsmith, and Sarason (1994) maintained the need for a communication-based approach:

> What does it mean to study support as communication? For us it means studying the *messages* through which people both seek and express support; studying the *interactions* in which supportive messages are produced and interpreted; and studying the *relationships* that are created by and contextualize the supportive interactions in which people engage. (p. xviii)

When looking to study everyday supportive interactions within personal relationships, families represent one of the most important sources of informal support. Families provide a buffer and help one another cope with stress, difficult transitions, and other problems, often keeping at bay the need for more formal social support services (Maguire, 1991). As well as helping during times of stress, families provide support through everyday interactions as well. The nature and provision of informal support within American families has changed dramatically, due to such factors as the geographic mobility of families; parents, especially women, working outside of the home; smaller families; and longer lifespans of family members, necessitating support for elderly family members (Arliss, 1993; Pearson, 1993). In order to be able to provide the necessary physical and/or emotional support for one another, families must develop some way of staying in touch and sharing information about family members' status, accomplishments, and needs.

While family social support is certainly important, surprisingly little scholarship exists regarding the way family members stay in touch and provide support for one another. Gerstel and Gallagher (1993) pointed out that "In contrast to earlier research, this more recent scholarship suggests that the contemporary extended family does not simply persist. Someone expends a great deal of time and energy to maintain it" (p. 598). It is unlikely that the provision of support is shared equally by all family members and, in fact, these behaviors may become the role of specific individual(s) within families (di Leonardo, 1987; Gallagher & Gerstel, 1993; Gerstel & Gallagher, 1993). The individual who takes on a greater share of family support has been called a "kinkeeper." Rosenthal (1985) stressed that one part of the kinkeeping role is that of a family gatekeeper, that is, "efforts expended

on behalf of keeping family members in touch with one another" (p. 965). Rosenthal (1985) saw kinkeepers as "important communication links between family members" (p. 969).

Since that time, scholars indicated that kinkeeping involves more than sharing information, it comprises of a wide variety of other types of supportive behaviors (di Leonardo, 1987; Gallagher & Gerstel, 1993; Gerstel & Gallagher, 1993; Leach, 1991). di Leonardo (1987) described the broad role of the kinkeeper:

> The work of kinship encompasses a variety of activities, including visits, letters, presents, cards, and telephone calls to kin; services, commodities, and money exchanges among kin; and the organization of holiday gatherings. It also includes the mental or administrative labor of the creation and maintenance of fictive kin ties, decisions to intensify or neglect ties, and the responsibility for monitoring and taking part in mass media and folk discourse concerning family and kinship. (p. 194)

Although kinkeeping is potentially a very central role in families, it has not been widely studied (Aronson, 1992; di Leonardo, 1987; Gallagher & Gerstel, 1993; Gerstel & Gallagher, 1993; Leach, 1991, 1993; Rosenthal, 1985; Waite & Harrison, 1992). Rosenthal's (1985) expansive study of the division of labor in families first identified the role of a kinkeeper and reported that 52% of families had a kinkeeper and, while kinkeepers may be women or men, 72% of the kinkeepers identified were women. Researchers demonstrated that both men and women believe that it is largely the responsibility of women to help keep in touch with and support family members (Aronson, 1992; di Leonardo, 1987). In their study of women's kinkeeping activities, Gallagher and Gerstel (1993) found that married women gave more help to kin than did widows, while widows provided more support for friends.

Leach (1991) conducted an exploratory study of the communicative activities of kinkeepers and found that personal visits and telephone calls were the communication channels used most frequently by kinkeepers. Kinkeepers reported that they engaged in a wide variety of supportive activities, including passing on information and keeping extended family members in touch with one another, compiling a family genealogy, upholding family rituals and traditions, and organizing family reunions.

To date, however, there has been little systematic study of who kinkeepers are and how they enact this role. Similarly, there has been no comprehensive study of the different types of supportive behaviors kinkeepers enact within the family. Since there has been relatively little scholarly inquiry on the family kinkeeper role, the purpose of our research was to study the incidence, enactment, and outcomes of kinkeeping communication in families.

Kinkeeping Activities

Along with sharing information about and among family members, previous literature indicated that kinkeepers may be involved in other communication-based activities that support and maintain family relationships. Leach's (1991) study indicated three activities in which kinkeepers reported they were involved: family rituals and traditions, family reunions, and family record keeping.

First, kinkeepers may be centrally involved in family rituals (Rosenthal & Marshall, 1988; Troll, 1988). Based on the work of Goffman and others, Braithwaite and Baxter (1995) identified rituals as communicative events "involving a structured sequence of symbolic acts in which homage is paid to some sacred object" (p. 179). Rituals function to preserve family identity and to maintain a family's belief system (Braithwaite & Baxter, 1995; Cheal, 1988; Reiss, 1981; Whiteside, 1989; Wolin & Bennett, 1984), and participation in rituals is related to the health of a family (Imber-Black, Roberts, & Whiting, 1988). Rosenthal (1985) found that "families with kinkeepers are more oriented toward ritual occasions" (p. 972). While rituals can, and do, take place without a family kinkeeper, some forms of family ritual may be facilitated by a family kinkeeper, for example, Troll (1988) noted that children are enticed into keeping family rituals by heads of families and by kinkeepers.

Second, for many families, reunions represent important events in the maintenance of family ties as they offer a chance for reminiscence and sharing family history and bringing distant family members together (Lindahl & Back, 1987; Moss & Moss, 1988). We suspect that family members enacting the kinkeeper role would be involved in supporting, if not organizing, family reunion rituals. The nature of the kinkeeping role would seem perfectly suited for involvement in family reunions, and Lindahl and Back (1987) indicated that family reunions generally have an "appointed organizer and often a family historian" (p. 31), either of whom is likely to be a kinkeeper.

Third, many families participate in different types of family record-keeping, such as keeping a family tree, and the nature of the kinkeeping role suggests that kinkeepers may participate in these activities. In a survey of 130 men and women, Lindahl and Back (1987) found that the majority of respondents reported that they had a family member who kept some type of family records. The authors continue, "This person may be what other researchers have referred to as a kinkeeper, someone responsible for maintaining communication links among family members" (p. 32).

As noted, there has been little specific research on who family kinkeepers are and how kinkeepers communicate and enact their role. Thus, two studies were undertaken. The first study, using a survey methodology, sought to provide demographic data on kinkeepers and to ascertain information on some of their kinkeeping activities. The second study, using diaries and interviews, sought to document the communication of a group of kinkeepers over a period of time and to ascertain the types and functions of kinkeeping communication within families.

Study I

Our first goal was to obtain information on the incidence, demographics, and activities of kinkeepers. In this study we wanted to get a picture of the kinkeeping role using a large group of respondents. Three questions guided this research:

  RQ1: What is the perceived incidence of kinkeepers in families?
  RQ2: For families with a kinkeeper, what is the sex, age, and position of the kinkeeper within the family?

RQ3: To what extent do families with kinkeepers participate in three related activities of kinkeeping: family rituals, family reunions, and keeping a family tree?

Method

A survey instrument, designed to provide information on the incidence, demographics, and activities of kinkeepers, was completed by students in basic communication classes in four U.S. universities. We sent the questionnaires to different parts of the country since we were located in the southwestern United States and were concerned about potential over representation of one ethnic minority group in our sample.

After providing basic demographic information about themselves (age, sex, and ethnicity), respondents were asked whether or not they believed they had a family kinkeeper (they were asked to indicate if they had a kinkeeper, did not have one, or did not know if they had one). Respondents were provided with Rosenthal's (1985) definition of a kinkeeper as "a person in your family who is responsible for keeping members in touch with one another" (p. 966). If respondents indicated they had a family kinkeeper, they were also asked to provide demographic information about the kinkeeper (age, sex, and relationship to respondent). Last, the questionnaire asked about whether their family participated in three potential activities of kinkeeping: family rituals, family reunions, and the maintenance of a family tree.

Results

Demographic Data
Three hundred and fourteen respondents completed the survey instrument, 179 males (57%) and 134 females (43%). The respondents' ages ranged from 17–50, with a mean of 21 years. The majority of respondents were Anglo-American (76.4%), followed by Hispanic-Americans (13.69%), African Americans (5.09%), Asian-Americans (1.9%), and Native-Americans (1.59%).

Our initial concerns about the large number of Hispanics in our sample prompted us to compare Anglo and Hispanic respondents on whether or not they had a kinkeeper. Because they represented such a small percentage of our sample, other ethnic groups were not included in this analysis. We analyzed this data in a 2 by 3 test of independence chi-square. Ethnicity served as one variable and kinkeeper (presence, absence, or don't know) served as the other variable. Because only four Hispanics indicated they did not know if their family had a kinkeeper we used Yates' correction in this analysis. Results indicated that there was no difference between Anglos and Hispanics in terms of the presence or absence of a kinkeeper (Chi-Square [2] = 0.58, p = ns). Given no difference between Hispanics and Anglos the remaining statistical tests were not differentiated on the basis of ethnicity.

When asked if they believed their family had a kinkeeper, 188 (60.06%) of the respondents indicated they did, 92 (29.39%) indicated they had no kinkeeper, and 33 (10.54%) said that they did not know if they had a kinkeeper. Of the 188 respondents who indicated they

had a kinkeeper, 159 of these (84.57%) indicated that their family kinkeeper was female (female kinkeepers were identified by 54.26% of males and 30.32% of females). Only 15.43% of the kinkeepers identified were male (male kinkeepers were identified by 5.32% of the males and 10.11% of the females).

Kinkeepers ranged in age from 20 to 70+ years, however, 69.5% of the kinkeepers were from 40–59 years, 35.8% were 40–49 years, and 33.7% were 50–59 years of age. The number of kinkeepers in the 60–69 year age group dropped to 11.8%, followed by 6.4% for those people 70+ years. When asked to indicate their relationship to the kinkeeper, 51.4% labeled the kinkeeper as their mother, 9.8% as an aunt, 9.3% as a grandmother, 7.7% as their father, 4.9% as themselves, and 4.4% as a sister. The remaining responses were divided among other types of family members.

Participation in *Kinkeeping Activities*

The three potential outcomes of kinkeeping, participation in family rituals, family reunions, and keeping family trees, were examined in order to determine whether or not levels of participation in these activities differed between those respondents who believed they had a family kinkeeper and those who believed they did not. These data were analyzed using z-tests for proportional differences (Smith, 1988). People with kinkeepers were compared to those without kinkeepers (those who were not sure if they had a kinkeeper were excluded from the analysis).

When looking at kinkeeping and family rituals, participants were asked to indicate whether or not their family participated in the following family rituals: birthday celebrations, funerals, weddings, traditional meals, and holidays. The results indicated that only birthdays ($z = 6$, $p < .01$) and weddings ($z = 5.16$, $p < .01$) showed a significant difference in participation by respondents, based on the presence of a kinkeeper. We also noted that families who had a kinkeeper indicated a greater participation in traditional meals and funerals, although it is important to point out that this difference was not statistically significant.

When they were asked whether they participated in a family reunion, results indicated that respondents with kinkeepers (53.35%) were more than twice as likely to have family reunions as those respondents who did not (23.64%, $z = 4.68$, $p < .01$). Finally, when asked if their family kept a family tree, results indicated that 86% of all respondents did not participate in keeping a family tree. However, those respondents with kinkeepers (10.54%) were significantly more likely to have a family tree than those without a kinkeeper (2.56%, $z = 2.28$, $p < .05$).

Discussion

Concerning incidence and sex of kinkeepers , the results of Study I were relatively similar to previous research. In our study, 60.06% of our student respondents felt they had a family kinkeeper, compared to Rosenthal's (1985) stratified sample, which reported 52%. In our study, 84.57% of the kinkeepers were women, which was higher than Rosenthal's (1985) finding of 74%. We would explain these different perceptions to the divergent nature of the subject pools of our study and Rosenthal's which we discuss below.

In terms of their age, most of the kinkeepers (69.5%) were between the ages of 40–59 years. For many kinkeepers, whether female or male, this is a time of life when careers may be more established, and when children are more becoming more independent or, in some cases, leaving home (Pearson, 1993). Thus, our results showed kinkeepers enacting the role at a time in their lives when there may be increased opportunity for these kinds of time-consuming activities. However, even when conditions are not optimal, many women still find the time to maintain family ties. Waite and Harrison (1992) found that amount of time, health, and money did not affect women's contact with kin, although it did not affect their contact with friends. The decreasing numbers of kinkeepers in the older groups (60+ years) indicates that participation in the role has diminished by this time of life, most likely due to the lack of desire or inability to perform the role by elderly family members, and indicates there is simply a diminishing number of elderly people in the family pool. It stands to reason that the role may be "handed down" from older to younger family members as older family members retire from the role or pass away.

In terms of position in the family, 51% of the kinkeepers were identified as the respondents' mother and only 4.5% a sibling. This was quite different than Rosenthal's (1985) study, which found 51% of the kinkeepers to be a sibling of the respondent. When coupled with the fact that more of our respondents perceived kinkeepers to be women, we attribute this difference to the fact that the mean age of our respondents was 21 years while Rosenthal used a stratified sample resulting in older respondents. It stands to reason that younger respondents perceive that their mothers fulfill the kinkeeper role and kinkeeping duties are taken on by a female or male sibling as family members age. One interesting finding was that men were more likely than women to identify a female as their family kinkeeper. We speculate that younger men are simply more likely to look to women, most often their mothers, to fulfill the kinkeeping role, but our results do not allow us to know why they identified the person they did.

Finally, results of this study provided a preliminary indication that kinkeepers take part in activities that are central to the maintenance of family relationships and family identity. Results indicated that families with kinkeepers were more likely to participate in certain family rituals, were twice as likely to hold family reunions, and were significantly more likely to have a family tree than those who did not. However, our results did not shed light on the specific part the kinkeeper played in any of these activities. Although we imagine that a kinkeeper would likely initiate or be involved in the planning and implementation of these family activities, this goes beyond the scope of these results. Also, since the closed-ended questionnaire did not allow respondents to expand on these and other kinkeeping duties, there is a need to find out what other activities, if any, are the purview of kinkeepers in families.

While Study I provided a starting place, giving some suggestion of the incidence, characteristics, and selected activities of kinkeepers, we still did not know how the kinkeeping role is enacted in families. We wanted to get a clearer picture of what kinkeepers do and how they communicate as they go about fulfilling their role. Further, we wanted to know the outcome of kinkeeping in families, that is, what is the function of this role for family members and for kinkeepers themselves?

Study II

To begin to answer the questions raised from the first study, the purpose of Study II was to gain a more in-depth description of the enactment and outcome of kinkeeping as a communicative activity. To meet our goals, we posed four research questions:

RQ1: How frequently do family kinkeepers communicate with family members?

RQ2: What communication channels are used by family kinkeepers?

RQ3: What are the outcomes of kinkeeping communication and the kinkeeper role for families?

RQ4: What are the outcomes of enacting the kinkeeping role for the kinkeeper?

Method

Study II used the "diary: diary-interview" method (Weider & Zimmerman, 1976; Zimmerman & Weider, 1977). Zimmerman and Weider's method involves asking participants to keep a detailed diary for a specific period of time, followed by in-depth interviews using the diary entries as a starting place for interview questions. Entries into the diary may be open-ended or guided by a series of questions, as was the case in our study. Zimmerman and Weider (1977) argued that the diaries are especially useful as they provide the researcher with the ability to approximate firsthand observation with "the possibility of gaining some degree of access to naturally occurring sequences of activity" (p. 489). Rather than recalling and reporting activities long after they occur, participants are asked to write about events as close to their occurrence as possible. Follow-up interviews allow researcher and participant to discuss the interactions described in the diaries and to delve more deeply into the topic at hand.

Names of potential participants were obtained for this study via an appendix to the questionnaire from Study I (included in the southwestern region only). Respondents who completed the questionnaire had the option to provide the name and phone number of their family kinkeeper, who was then contacted to determine her willingness to participate in Study II (all kinkeepers identified were women). Through this process, 12 kinkeepers were identified by the southwestern respondents and, when contacted, all agreed to participate in the study. Of the original 12, 10 kinkeeper participants followed through, keeping a diary for two weeks. Nine kinkeepers completed both the diary and interview portions of the study (the tenth participant became unavailable for the interview).

The overall design of the study was in the qualitative/interpretive tradition (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975). The goal of interpretive work is the identification of recurring patterns of behaviors and meanings. From a qualitative/interpretive perspective, the researcher does not target a certain sample size but, rather, stops collecting data when recurring patterns are identified (Katz, 1983). Although the findings presented below are limited to the particular sample of kinkeepers we were able to secure, our respondents provided us with ample data in the form of 112 diary entries and 153 pages of interview transcripts.

The Diary

The kinkeepers were asked to keep a chronological diary of all contact initiated with kin for a period of two weeks. Participants were provided with a notebook containing 20 diary forms; one form was to be completed each time the kinkeeper initiated contact with another family member. Participants were told they could obtain more forms at any time. This diary form asked participants to indicate the date, the person with whom they communicated, the location of the family member, and the channel used (sending a card, telephoning, sending a letter, personal visit, or they could describe another type of contact). Finally, each form asked the participant to describe her purpose for communicating with the family member and the content of the communication (what they talked/wrote about). Prior to distributing diary forms to participants, a self-identified kinkeeper used the diary forms to keep a practice diary. She provided feedback to the researchers which they used to clarify the questions asked of respondents.

After the diaries were completed and collected from participants, the contents of the diaries were analyzed and categorized by type (recipient of contact, frequency of contact, channels used, and outcomes of contact) using a constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).[1] There were 112 incidences of kinkeeping contact which were analyzed. Following Zimmerman and Weider's (1977) model, these data were used to develop the questions for the interview portion of the study.

The Diary-Interview

According to Zimmerman and Weider (1977), the interviews serve the purpose of allowing researchers and participants to explore and expand what was written in the diaries. In the interviews kinkeepers were asked to provide demographic information about themselves and were asked to estimate how often they contacted and received contact from family members in the two-week period.[2] Kinkeepers were asked to explain why they chose the communication channels they did. Kinkeepers discussed how long they had been a kinkeeper, why they took on that role, and whether they expected another family member to succeed them. Kinkeepers were asked to describe the greatest benefits and drawbacks to functioning as a kinkeeper and, finally, they were asked what their work as a kinkeeper accomplished for their families and for themselves. All interviews were audiotaped, allowing the interviewer to concentrate on the interaction with the participant rather than on note-taking (Braithwaite, 1990).

The interviews were transcribed, resulting in 153 pages of single-spaced interview transcripts for analysis. These transcripts, along with diary data, were analyzed via a qualitative content analysis using a constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The analysis procedures were interpretive/qualitative in nature as to maximize the rich information interviews provide (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975; Braithwaite, 1990; Spradley, 1980). The interpretivist sees experiences as constructed through words, symbols, and behavior of persons, and, through this approach researchers endeavor to identify patterns of meanings and behaviors (Braithwaite, 1990; Katz, 1983). First, all diary and interview data were read in their entirety to develop a sense of these data as a whole before analyzing responses to the individual research questions. Second, data were categorized by type to create a description of both the kinkeepers and recipients of kinkeeping communication, the frequency of

contact, and the channels used. Third, the outcomes of kinkeeping communication for the family and for the kinkeeper were analyzed and data were categorized by the different outcomes identified in the diaries and in the interviews. Twelve reasons for contact emerged from the diary data and no attempt was made to arrange these reasons into more refined categories until after the interviews. After interviews were completed and transcribed, the outcomes of kinkeeping were analyzed and categories were refined and collapsed into five outcomes of kinkeeping communication. Finally, all data were again read in their entirety to check the analysis and to choose exemplar statements representing the different categories.

Results

Kinkeepers and Recipients of Kinkeeping Communication
The first part of the interview gathered demographic information about the nine kinkeepers and the family recipients of kinkeeping communication. All of the kinkeepers lived in the southwestern United States. All were female; seven were Anglo-American and two were Hispanic-American. The kinkeepers ranged in age from 28 to 67, with a mean age of 49.69 years.

Looking at the recipients of kinkeeping communication, the majority of family members contacted were female (66%) versus males (34%). Several of the kinkeepers indicated a preference for talking with women, for example, one explained that "I guess I communicate better with women" (4:44).[3] Another said that, "I guess I really get along with my sisters and my close friends. We keep in close contact, we know each other's doings, and offer suggestions about what they should be doing" (6:100). While some kinkeepers consciously chose to contact women, others said that it made no difference whether they spoke to women or men. In terms of location, 48.73% of recipients lived in the same city as the kinkeeper, while 72.83% lived in the same state.

Frequency of Contact
In all, the 10 kinkeepers contacted family members 112 times in the two-week period, with a mean of 11.2 contacts per kinkeeper in that period. Frequency of contact varied by kinkeeper for the two-week period, ranging from as few contacts as 5 to as many as 21. When questioned about the representativeness of the two-week period in which diaries were kept, most participants stated that the number of contacts recorded in the diaries were typical for a two-week period but indicated that there are constant fluctuations in contact.

In the interviews, participants also were asked to estimate the number of kinkeeping-related contacts they received from members of their family in the two-week period. They estimated the initiation of contacts by self and by other family members to be about equal. One participant judged that family members contacted her as much as she contacted them, or perhaps a little more. She explained, "I'm kind of the center of the family, everything revolves around me, so they do more calling" (4:66).

Communication Channels Used

The diaries showed that the telephone was used much more heavily than any other type of communication channel (71.42%), followed by visits (20.53%), letter writing (4.46%) and sending cards (2.68%). In the interviews, participants discussed their preference for telephoning. While a few of the participants said they did write to family members occasionally, the majority agreed that the telephone was their channel of choice due to convenience and urgency. One respondent offered this explanation for the preference of telephoning over letter writing: "Well sometimes things come up that you just need to address right then, and you really want to *talk*, you don't want to write and wait for a response" (8:136). Another kinkeeper indicated that she thought letter writing was a "lost art" (4:65-6).

Outcomes of Kinkeeping for the Family

Results from both the diaries and interviews were merged into five outcomes of kinkeeping communication: providing information, facilitating rituals, providing assistance, maintaining family relationships, and continuing a previous kinkeeper's work.

Providing information

Many kinkeepers perceived that their role started in response to the family's need for information, as this kinkeeper noted, "They're all concerned about each other—they won't call them, but they like to go through me, they like to go through Mom. Then they can hear about everybody" (7:122). When talking with family members, kinkeepers regularly requested information about such issues as family members' health and status, which they selectively passed along to others. Kinkeepers felt that the need for information was especially salient when families were widely dispersed geographically. For example, one kinkeeper described how her family had spread out from the southwestern United States to Canada and Taiwan and was "getting more global all the time" (6:97).

Facilitating rituals

In the interviews, participants made it clear that the kinkeeping role goes beyond simply contacting family members and giving out information. All of the participants discussed their role in family rituals, especially family gatherings and holiday events. Kinkeepers recognized that they were often the "impetus" for family rituals (8:143). One kinkeeper recalled how she became responsible for holiday meals: "I started cooking Thanksgiving dinner about five years after my husband and I were married. My mother-in-law never did it again. . . . I enjoyed doing it, so I just did it" (8:143).

The family rituals described went beyond holidays. For example, one kinkeeper explained, "Sometimes my sisters call up and say, 'do you want to make up something for a party?' . . . Everybody says that I'm always throwing a party, but it's just the family" (5:85,93). Another kinkeeper reported hosting a Sunday dinner two to three times a month:

> It's not every weekend, but it's probably at least two a month or more, depending upon birthdays . . . and when I do that I cook these great quantities of food and they all come over and eat it. We call it the "feeding frenzy," but I do that a lot. (4:63,82)

Providing assistance

Some kinkeepers revealed that they provided family members with financial or physical assistance or that passed along information about the need for assistance to a family member who was in a position to provide help. Those kinkeepers who felt they were in a position to help family members with finances often did so. After helping one child to buy a car, and loaning another the money for the down payment on a home, one kinkeeper stated:

> If we didn't want to give it to them we wouldn't have. I know what it was, my husband and I growing up, you know, the hard times, and now that we've got it a little easier, if I can help somebody I'm willing to do it. (1:14)

Kinkeepers also took on the role of providing physical assistance to family members. For example, one kinkeeper explained the physical help she gave to her mother-in-law "helps him [her husband] with this responsibility . . . . my greatest fear is that my mother-in-law will be in the house with me. By doing this other thing, it, I suppose, helps him feel good about himself and everything" (4:75). Besides providing assistance, this kinkeeper was also able to meet her own goal of keeping her mother-in-law from having to move in with them.

Family relationship maintenance

Kinkeepers perceived that their activities provided a sense of family togetherness or maintenance, as was mentioned by participants like this one:

> In a way, [kinkeeping is] kind of an attempt to keep the family together. With everybody being so far apart it's hard. It's kind of an attempt to say "this is what holds us together" even though we're far apart from each other and can only rely on once-a-week or once-a-month phone calls, you still have the tie that binds. (6:116)

An additional challenge to family relationship maintenance faced by kinkeepers was whether and how to include ex- and blended family members into the communication network. As one kinkeeper told her soon-to-be ex-daughter-in-law, "Y'all can get a divorce, but *we* can never get a divorce.' . . . That friendship is important to me because of my granddaughter" (4:76–77). Participants discussed the challenges of including family members as families become divided. One kinkeeper reflected:

> I've been married four times, and I've had children by all those marriages. And all these children are half-brothers and sisters, but they also have other family units. . . . But, I've tried to give them a strong sense of my side of the family and their relationships with each other. (8:147–148)

Continuing a previous kinkeeper's work

Several interviewees indicated that their kinkeeping role was a continuation of the work of a previous family kinkeeper. Some perceived that the role was "handed down" to them, for example, when a previous kinkeeper had died, as this participant explained:

> I think it started mostly when his mom passed away . . . we would all go to her and she would know what was going on within the family. And then when she passed away, it's like the whole family went their own way. So, then, I don't know how, but somehow everybody started coming to me . . . they could just go on and on not know what's going on or who's doing what. . . . But yet, it's just really convenient for them to every once in a while have someone who's gonna call up and say, "hey, everybody's doing this." (2:26–30)

Other kinkeepers did not have the role handed down to them explicitly but saw a need and filled the position, for example, as an older family kinkeeper could not keep up with the workload or as the family became separated geographically.

Outcomes for the kinkeeper

Benefits of kinkeeping. In the interviews, kinkeepers were asked to discuss what being a kinkeeper accomplished for them. Participants were unanimous in experiencing significant benefits from being a family kinkeeper, and, overall, found great satisfaction in enacting the role. One participant expressed the advantages of kinkeeping to be, "Well, I think the biggest is that, to a great part, it satisfies something that I enjoy doing" (8:139). Another replied, "I guess that I'm keeping the family together" (2:32).

Another benefit to the role was functioning as the family gatekeeper and participants were aware that they possessed a great amount of information and realized they made choices about how, when, and to whom information was disseminated. One kinkeeper explained, "Oh, yeah, because then I know what's going on with all the kids. They usually call me if something's happening, something's going on, and I pass it on to the rest of the kids" (7:127–128). Another kinkeeper said, "If they give you good news, then I get to call and share it with them" (2:32).

Drawbacks to kinkeeping. While participants identified mostly benefits to being a kinkeeper, there were two drawbacks discussed. One drawback discussed by several participants was being easily drawn into family conflicts or "caught in the crossfire" of family quarrels (8:139). The second disadvantage discussed was the workload of the kinkeeping role:

> When we grew up and we were doing this when we were young and married and starting, everybody pitched in. This new generation . . . I have daughters-in-law that don't pitch in; it doesn't seem to bother them to see me do all the work, and so I do it because I want to be with my children and my grandchildren. (9:156)

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Another kinkeeper expressed, "Sometimes they ask too much. And I'm usually the one the family calls . . . but it's real hard for me to say 'no' to my family" (3:47–48).

Discussion

Study II provided us the most detailed picture to date of the everyday activities and outcomes of kinkeeping communication in families. These results revealed kinkeeping as a complex role, encompassing a variety of behaviors. Kinkeepers revealed a gatekeeping function in their role as kinkeeper. Gatekeepers may be very powerful in families as they solicit information and decide to whom, and how much, information will be disseminated (Pearson, 1993). Gatekeepers have the power to change or distort messages and gatekeepers will be very influential determinants of whether a family communicates effectively or not (Pearson, 1993). In addition, providing physical or financial assistance to family members also positions kinkeepers to obtain first-hand information and access to family members and their problems. In our study, kinkeepers reported that they recognized risks of taking on the role, such as finding themselves in the midst of conflict between family members. And, while kinkeepers may be bystanders to conflict, we can also imagine the possibility that conflict also may be a byproduct of kinkeepers' behavior at times. Perhaps not surprisingly, kinkeepers in our study did not present themselves as sources of family conflict. As with all self-report data, participants may be reluctant to present themselves in a less-than-positive light. We do not know if kinkeepers are more involved in family conflict than are other family members. This would be meaningful information for researchers to try to ascertain in future studies.

Besides a gatekeeping role, kinkeepers were instrumental in the maintenance of relationships between family members and in the initiation and enactment of family rituals. Clearly, the fact that all these kinkeepers were female plays some part in these findings. Aronson's (1992) study reported that both men and women believe that women are responsible for keeping family members in touch with one another and women have been found to be more likely to initiate certain family rituals (Braithwaite & Baxter, 1995). The fact that most kinkeepers are female is consistent with Wood's (1994) description of the cultural expectation that women are "supposed to care about and for others and to be nice, responsive, supportive, and friendly" (p. 85).

Finally, it is interesting to note that the kinkeepers did not highlight one specific activity or outcome of kinkeeping as more important than the others. This seems to be consistent with what relational maintenance researchers have found. For example, in their study of marital couples, Dindia and Baxter (1987) discovered that while some strategies are used more than others, relational satisfaction was not related to a particular maintenance strategy. Rather it is a combination of strategies, or even the effort expended itself, which is important for maintaining relationships. Our results suggest to us that what is important, at least from the perspective of the kinkeepers, is the quality of the relationship rather than the specific types of supportive messages used, and this seems to be consistent with the claims of other scholars as well (Burleson, 1990; Miller & Ray, 1994). What these present studies did highlight is the complex nature of the kinkeeping role. While playing a gatekeeping role, kinkeepers also provide many types of social support for family members.

Our results provided examples of all of the types of support behaviors identified by Cutrona and Suhr (1992): informational support, tangible assistance, esteem support, network support, and emotional support.

Conclusions

Taken together, these two studies create a profile of the role of the family kinkeeper, one vehicle for the provision of social support in families. Kinkeepers are most often female and most often function in the role between the ages of 40–59 years, at a time of life when careers are more stable and/or children are likely to be less dependent. Often the role is handed down or taken over from an older female in the family. Since the kinkeeping role was identified in 60% and 52% of families in our study and Rosenthal's (1985) study respectively, we can say that more than half of families appear to have a person who functions in this role. We suspect that the incidence of family kinkeepers may be even higher than these two studies indicate. Given that the perception of the incidence of a family kinkeeper was identified by only one family member in each study, it is possible that the reported incidence would be higher if the perspectives of multiple family members were examined. Some family members may not be aware of the activities of a family kinkeeper, even if one exists. We speculate that not all family members are fully appreciative of how supportive communication is disseminated in their family. We would suggest that future studies on kinkeepers take into account the perspective of multiple family members of differing ages to gain a more complete picture of the kinkeeper role.

Kinkeepers in our study reported that they initiated contact with family members an average of eleven times per week, mostly by telephone, followed by personal visits. Interestingly, our participants did not seem to be overly concerned with the cost of telephoning. This is consistent with Waite and Harrison's (1992) study, as they found that money and time did not affect the amount of contact middle-aged women had with kin (although limited resources did significantly reduce the amount of contact with friends).

Our studies provided a more complex picture of kinkeeping activities than did earlier research. One weakness of our method was that we asked kinkeepers to complete a diary entry only when they initiated contact with another family member. We erroneously anticipated that kinkeepers would be the ones to initiate contact with kin. To help correct this, we asked the interviewees to discuss how often family members contacted them during the diary period. While just an estimate, our results indicated that initiation of contact was not made solely by kinkeepers. We suggest that kinkeeping needs to be studied as an exchange relationship. This is another reason to look at kinkeeping from the perspective of multiple family members as suggested earlier.

Previous research, including our own, treated the kinkeeper role as one carried out by a single individual and the question arises whether kinkeeping may be done by multiple individuals. We predict that many families have more than one kinkeeper and we also wonder whether kinkeepers function to tie different family networks together. If a kinkeeper is responsible for one segment of a family, do they then share information with kinkeepers in different portions of the family? In this way, networks of kinkeepers may act as hubs who connect with one another and who service their own "broadcast areas." This

internetwork communication may be more common than we realize, particularly when we consider the expanding distances in families due to geographic mobility, divorce, and blended families. Although outside the focus of our studies at this time, this raises interesting questions for future research on kinkeeping and is consistent with those who suggested the importance of viewing social support as network-based (e.g., Gottlieb, 1985; Miller & Ray, 1994; Pilisuk & Minkler, 1980; Tolsdorf, 1976).

Limitations of our studies do provide useful guidelines for future researchers. First, in the diary portion of the study, kinkeepers were asked to record activities for only two weeks. While we realize that kinkeeping activity will vary over different periods of time and seasons of the year, feedback from our participants told us that it would be too much to ask them to keep diaries for a longer period. We suggest a longer-term study which includes participants keeping diaries during different times of the year. This will allow researchers to track kinkeeping activities over the calendar year, while avoiding participant fatigue. A second problem, discussed earlier, was that we made no provision for kinkeepers to indicate the number of times they were contacted by family members. Although we asked participants to discuss this in the interviews, their responses were post hoc estimates only. Clearly, researchers need to look at kinkeeping from the perspective of kinkeepers and from other family members as well.

This leads to our last suggestion: although relevant and interesting insights into the communication of kinkeepers were acquired in our studies, future research using larger numbers of kinkeepers and including members of the families they serve, would contribute more to our understanding of the kinkeeper role and how social support functions within family communication networks. We also would suggest that a network view of supportive relationships include kinkeeping activities occurring outside of the boundaries of "traditional" family ties, as usually delineated by blood or legal status (Arliss, 1993). While kinkeeping has been studied within more traditionally structured families, we know that social support comes from non-kin or fictive kin sources as well, and this is especially important to understand as we move into an era of postmodern family configurations. In a recent study, Gallagher and Gerstel (1993) highlighted the need to expand the study of kinkeeping to what they call "friend keeping." In an increasingly mobile culture and, given changes in the status and forms of families, friends may provide even more support than in previous generations and may, in some cases, substitute for blood or legal kin. As scholars broaden the definition of what it means to be a family and look at families in terms of networks of support, kinkeepers will likely play an even more central role in the maintenance of family relationships and certainly warrant further study.

Notes

1. In the diary portion of the study, kinkeepers were asked to describe both the content and the purpose of the contact. Analysis of diaries revealed that participants' responses did not distinguish between the content and purpose of their messages. Therefore, both categories were collapsed and analyzed as outcomes of kinkeeping.

2. Analysis of diaries and a check-in with participants during the diary period indicated that while they engaged in kinkeeping when they initiated contact with family members, they also engaged in kinkeeping when family members contacted them. While it was too late to collect diary data about family-initiated contacts, kinkeepers were asked to discuss this in the interviews and to estimate how often family members initiated contact with them.

3. Interview transcripts are cited as suggested by Braithwaite (1990), citing participant number, and page from the transcript. Hence 1:12 would reference participant #1 and page 12 of the interview transcripts, which were numbered sequentially from first interview to last.

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