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Abstract

This study explored how participants discursively rendered volun-
tary kin relationships sensical and legitimate. Interpretive analy-
ses of 110 interviews revealed four main types of voluntary kin: (i)
substitute family, (ii) supplemental family, (iii) convenience family,
and (iv) extended family. These types were rendered sensical and

legitimated by drawing on the discourse of the traditional family. Except for the extended family, three of four voluntary kin family types were justified by an attributed deficit in the blood and legal family. Because voluntary kin relationships are not based on the traditional criteria of association by blood or law, members experience them as potentially challenging, requiring discursive work to render them sensical and legitimate to others.

> I was paying penance-in-advance, I guess for inflicting my family on him. (My *biological* family, that is – as opposed to my logical one –)
>
> <div align="right">(A. Maupin, 2007)</div>

The family is the most pervasive and central of human institutions. Scholars exploring the breadth of relationships underscore the importance of family, situating it as the "focus point for nearly all relational encounters. It is, truly, a masterpiece of the human experience" (Floyd & Morman, 2006, p. xi). Media portrayals of families, as well as the scholarly literature, focus most centrally on families comprised of blood and legal kin living within the boundaries of heterosexual marriage and in relatively autonomous family households (Fingerman & Hay, 2002; Galvin, 2006; Turner & West, 2006). Families come in different forms, many outside of the bonds of heterosexual first marriage; for example, single parent families, stepfamilies, adoptive families, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered (GLBT) families, grandparents raising grandchildren, and families that are child-free by choice.

Scholars across disciplines are advancing definitions of family that recognize the existence of families outside of blood and legal kin relationships, focusing their definitions around the question of whether a social network of non-related persons functions as a family (e.g., Coontz, 1999; Galvin 2006). While the boundaries of family are often contested, we chose to situate the present study in a social constructionist view of family. Galvin, Brommel, and Bylund's (2004) definition of family is representative of a social constructionist perspective on family:

> Networks of people who share their lives over long periods of time bound by marriage, blood, or commitment, legal or otherwise, who consider themselves as family and who share a significant history and anticipated futures of functioning in a family relationship. (p. 6)

This definition, representative of those who see the family as socially constructed, creates the opportunity to include non-legal kin as family (e.g. White & Klein, 2002).Whereas scholars are paying greater attention to a wider array of family forms and relationships outside of the traditional nuclear family (e.g., Ellingson & Sotirin, 2006), comparatively little attention has been directed toward those families formed outside of blood and legal kinship. Our interest in the present study centered on those persons perceived to be family, but who are not related by blood or law. In particular, the focus of our study was in understanding the ways in which participants discursively construct their alternative family relationships as "family."

Reframing fictive kin as voluntary kin

The relationships of interest in the study are most often referred to by scholars as *fictive kin* (e.g., Chatters, Taylor, & Jayakody, 1994; Ibsen & Klobus, 1972; Muraco, 2006), but they also are labeled as *chosen kin* (Johnson, 2000;Weston, 1991), *self-ascribed kin* (Galvin, 2006), *urban tribes* (Watters, 2003), *friend-keepers* (Gallagher & Gerstel, 1993; Leach & Braithwaite, 1996), *other-mothers* (Collins, 2000), and *ritual kin* (Ebaugh & Curry, 2000).

As with other "alternative" families, fictive families are often conceptualized by scholars through what they are not; that is, they are defined by how they are different from the conventional understanding of family, focusing on what fictive family members lack. For example, Floyd and Morman (2006, p. xii) defined fictive family as "family-like relationships that are neither genetically nor legally bound." This represents what Ganong and Coleman (1994) referred to as a deficit comparison model. This model is underscored when "alternative" family types (e.g., GLBT families or stepfamilies) are compared against traditional nuclear families and found wanting because of differences or lack of a common bloodline (Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991;Weston, 1991).

Whereas the term *fictive kin* appears most often in the literature, the term *fictive* is fraught with problems for us. Rather than focusing on the deficit model, we wanted to understand how persons involved in these relationships understand them. We agree with Weston (1991) who argued that the term *fictive* only adds to the stigmatization, suggesting that these are not "real" relationships. Based on Weston's work, we also considered the label *chosen kin*; however, this term is used in the literature to describe gay and lesbian families. Although some of the relationships we were interested in undoubtedly would be GLBT families (which are recognized differently from state to state), we wanted to broaden our lens to all non-blood and legal relationships. In addition, the term *chosen* positions members of these alternative families as objects of selection. In the end we opted to label these relationships as *voluntary kin* to talk about the breadth of family relationships represented in our study. *Voluntary kin* implies a mutuality of selection, rather than framing these relationships as asymmetrical structures of chooser and chosen.

Existing research on voluntary kin

It is important to note that voluntary family relationships are a longstanding relational form. Voluntary kin ties have been reported as early as the first century (Ruether, 1997), and are documented in many cultures (e.g., Ebaugh & Curry, 2000). The anthropological literature is rich in describing a variety of voluntary kin relationships. Perhaps the best documented is the concept of godparenthood, or co-parenthood. *Compadrazgo*, for example, common throughout Mexico and Latin America, is the linking of non-related families through godparent sponsorship of a child based on a special, non-familial relationship between the parents and the godparent (e.g., Kemper, 1982).

In the US, voluntary kin relationships have been studied in a variety of population groups. For example, a growing body of literature has documented among African American urban communities the importance of voluntary kin relationships to everything from child care to educational achievement (e.g., Chatters et al., 1994; Crosbie-Burnett & Lewis, 1999; Fordham, 1986). Stack's (1975) now classic work among inner-city blacks identified a complex system of voluntary kin relationships organized around functions of swapping (the reciprocal exchange of goods and services), child keeping, and need-based responsiveness.

Gerontologists and social workers have pointed to the significance of voluntary kin networks for the physical and mental health of older adults (e.g., Bedford & Blieszner, 2000; Johnson, 1999; Karner, 1998; Rubenstein, Alexander, & Goodman, 1991). As some older adults may outlive or find themselves estranged from their blood and legal kin, voluntary kin may enter to fill the void by providing important services. Voluntary kin may serve as a means to relieve blood and legal kin, both financially and emotionally, from the burden of caring for an elderly relative.

Researchers have also emphasized the importance of voluntary kin among working class families (e.g., Coontz, 1999), new immigrants (e.g., Ebaugh & Curry, 2000), gay and lesbian families (e.g., Muraco, 2006; Weston, 1991), and street families (e.g., McCarthy, Hagan, & Martin, 2002). Taken collectively, this research points to a variety of possible functions performed by voluntary kin, including a sense of belonging, emotional closeness, protection and security, and social support. Voluntary kin are likely to become increasingly important in US society given the presence of a high divorce rate and the number of stepfamilies (Schmeeckle & Sprecher, 2004).

Although this body of work is important in identifying voluntary kin relationships as functionally important to the various target populations under study, the concept of voluntary kin itself has been largely accepted as non-problematic. That is, the concept is understood as those unrelated by blood or legal ties who are important in a person's social network. The question usually ignored in this body of work is the native-point-of-view perspective on what voluntary kin mean to them, and how they account for these relationships to others. This issue is an especially important one, given that voluntary families are often viewed as somehow incomplete or irregular (Ebaugh & Curry, 2000).The very fact of their "alternative" family structure necessitates that they be rendered understandable and legitimate.

Understanding voluntary kin as discourse-created families

A perspective of communication as constituting relationships (Baxter, 2004) allows us to consider the ways in which families are created via discourse. This social constructionist perspective centers the negotiation of family identity and expectations in communication (Bergen & Braithwaite, 2009; Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Galvin, 2006). However, families that depart from cultural norms are even more dependent on discourse to define themselves internally and to those outside the family (Galvin, 2006). Given that voluntary kin relationships do not have blood or legal ties, understanding these families as formed in discourse led us to adopt social constructionism as the theoretical frame for the present study. Leeds-Hurwitz (2006, p. 230) explained that the theory is predicated on the assumption that "people make sense of experience by constructing a model of the social world and how it works" and the use of talk to "make things happen." Gergen (1985, p. 266) stressed that "social constructionist inquiry is principally concerned with explicating the process by which people come to describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world (including themselves) in which they live." From this perspective, relationships are constituted in communication, literally talked into being (Baxter, 2004). Family communication researchers adopting a social constructionist perspective focus on how families are formed, maintained, changed, and repaired through language use (Leeds- Hurwitz, 2006). Bourdieu (1996, p. 19) argued that we construct our sense of what is "real" through our language use. In particular, he indicated that there is nothing "natural" about "family"; rather, what counts as a "family" is a discursive construction: "But if it is accepted that the family is only a word, a mere verbal construct, one then has to analyze the representations that people form of what they refer to as the family." Bourdieu (1996) asserted that the discursive construction of "family" is ideologically steeped in that some forms of social relations (e.g., those built on blood or law) become valorized and legitimated whereas other "alternative" forms of family bear a heavier legitimation burden and are less accepted, on their face, as "real," "normal," or "natural."

In sum, whereas we know that voluntary kin are persons outside of blood and legal ties who are considered as family, we know little about how these relationships are discursively represented in native talk. Because there are no formal roles or expectations for the formation and enactment of voluntary kin relationships, they are especially discourse dependent. While there is agreement among scholars that voluntary families are potentially important for persons in these relationships, researchers have yet to study how members of voluntary families provide accounts of them to others and what different forms these families may take. As a first step in understanding the discursive constructions of voluntary kin, the following question guided our work:

• Research Question: What are the discursive constructions of voluntary kin relationships in the talk of members of these relationships?

Method

The researchers situated the study in the interpretive paradigm, focusing on questions of meaning from the perspective of the actors themselves (Baxter & Babbie, 2004; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Interpretive scholars seek both intelligibility and understanding by identifying the similarities in meanings that either phenomena or processes hold for the informants, rather than by investigating between-group differences (Bochner, 1985; Braithwaite & Baxter, 2008; Creswell, 1998). Interpretive communication researchers focus on symbolic modes of expression for their patterns of meaning (Baxter & Babbie, 2004). Given our goal of understanding voluntary kin from the perspective of those in these relationships, data for the present study were gathered during in-depth interviews with members of voluntary kin relationships. The research team was comprised of eight researchers from two large Midwestern universities and one medium-sized Western university.

Participants

The researchers interviewed participants who self-identified as having voluntary kin, which we defined as "those people who you perceive and treat as extended family, yet are not related to you by blood or legal ties." As per the guidelines of the three universities where the research was conducted, the participants were at least 19 years of age and reported voluntary kin relationships that had lasted for a minimum of one year. Consistent with the respective Institutional Review Board (IRB) approvals, participants were located via communication courses, departmental and campus listserves, or through personal and professional contacts as the researchers attempted to locate participants representing age, sex, and ethnic diversity. While there were persons of color among the research assistants for the research team and we made an attempt to recruit an ethnically diverse group of respondents, we were not as successful at representing diversity as we had hoped.

Interviews were conducted with 110 self-identified members of voluntary kin families. Ages of participants ranged from 19 to 76 years old, and the mean age was 29 years old. Eighty of the participants were female (73%). With regard to ethnicity, 88.1% were Caucasian/Anglo, 1.8% Latino (including Hispanic), 3.7% Asian/Pacific Islander, 1.8% Biracial, and 4.6% Other (including American Indian and Alaskan Native). The mean level of education reported at the time of the interview was approximately 15 years of schooling (junior year of college). Regarding occupation, 50.5% were current students at one of the three universities where interviews were conducted, 18.3% were academic faculty or education professionals, and the remaining 31.2% self-reported occupations in non-academic professional work and/or self-identified as homemakers or retirees. The voluntary kin the participants described ranged in age from 2 to 92 years old (mean age 35.74 years old), and were 53% female and 47% male.

Procedures

This sample of voluntary kin members participated in semi-structured, focused interviews (Kvale, 1996; McCracken, 1988).Those who volunteered to participate in interviews were contacted by members of the research team who scheduled interviews in a location agreeable to both interviewer and participant, including over the telephone. All interviews were audio taped with the consent of the interviewees. Participants were assured of confidentiality, in keeping with institutional policies to protect human subjects. Consistent with the practice of qualitative, in-depth interviewing (e.g., Kvale, 1996; McCracken, 1988), the interviewers probed extensively as follow-ups to interview questions in order to answer the research question as comprehensively as possible. Because we wanted to examine discursive constructions in informant talk, we maximized opportunities for participants to talk in as open and unstructured a way as possible.

Participants were asked to list all persons whom they considered voluntary kin and then to identify the one person they considered their closest voluntary kin. Thus, for this initial study, we asked the participants to focus on their closest voluntary kin relationship. Participants were asked to tell the story of the development of their voluntary kin relationship. Throughout the interview the researchers probed how these relationships were similar to and different from their other relationships. Participants were also asked to describe how often they interact and meet together face-to-face with their voluntary kin, to discuss their activities together, and to provide details about shared rituals and traditions. They were also asked to explain what they talk and do not talk about with this voluntary kin and how their communication was similar to, and different from, interaction with others. Participants discussed both the best features of, as well as any challenges they experienced with, having voluntary kin in their lives and highlighted how their expectations of voluntary kin were different from those associated with their other relationships. Finally, participants discussed interaction, if any, their blood and legal and voluntary kin have with one another.

Analysis of data

Data were 1475 pages of single-spaced transcripts from the 110 interviews. The researchers engaged in an interpretive analysis process (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) that took advantage of the large research team to analyze and establish validity of the findings. Adopting a social constructionist frame with these data, the interviews were regarded not as transmissions of fact; rather, they were viewed as communication events in and of themselves wherein participants were making sense and constructing representations of their voluntary kin relationships. To answer the research question, we examined how voluntary kin family relationships were communicatively constructed through accounts to the interviewer.

The analysis took place in four stages. First, all data were transcribed and distributed among the researchers, who immersed themselves in reading transcripts. To begin, the first and second authors engaged in open coding and analyzed 20%

of the data. It was apparent in this first stage of data analysis that voluntary kin relationships were not unitary. Thus, the analysis turned to establishing main categories of voluntary kin representations in the discourse, which became the exclusive focus of this study. These two authors conferred at several points in the process and refined main themes multiple times. Braun and Clark (2006, p. 82) described this process as searching for the "keyness" of a given theme, which is not a quantitative value but one that delineates a central insight into the research question, in terms of "a patterned response or meaning within the data set". The researchers used Owen's (1984) three criteria to establish a theme: (i) recurrence, (ii) repetition, and (iii) forcefulness.

Second, the first and second authors analyzed an additional 30% of the data to engage in what Smith (1995) referred to as clustering – combining similar voluntary kin types and producing four main categories of voluntary kin representations: voluntary kin as substitute, supplemental, contextual, and extended families. Theoretical saturation (Baxter & Babbie, 2004; Creswell, 1998) was reached after analyzing 45 interviews. As with the first round of analysis, the process was iterative, and the first and second authors consulted and then refined the category system multiple times. They prepared a detailed outline of the proposed results, including exemplars from the interview transcripts and sent this to the entire research team for study and critique.

Third, all eight members of the research team engaged in a validity check, known as investigator triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), via an interactive data conference. All eight members of the research team studied the outline of the results and exemplars representing the categories, and came together in a two-hour meeting and conference call to challenge and refine the analysis. Each of the four voluntary family types was discussed and critically scrutinized. The four categories of the analysis were supported and the team made refinements to the subcategories and theoretical explanations of the categories. In this process one of the categories (originally the "contextual" category) was renamed and refocused as "convenience" to better represent the nature of these relationships. The research team at this stage also noted that three of the four voluntary kin types were justified on the basis of articulated deficits in the participant's blood/law family. This led to a re-ordering of the discussion of the categories, placing "extended" family last, with the observation that this was the one voluntary family type not built on deficits, as we discuss in the results to follow.

Fourth, after the data conference was completed, the first and second authors edited the typology and distributed the findings back to the remaining members of research team. These research team members analyzed the remaining data against the typology, checking the themes in relation to each other and in the context of the larger set of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and identifying additional exemplars for the research report. During this stage, names and other identifiers were changed for the research report. Thus, in this iterative process all 110 interviews were analyzed and the validity of the analysis was checked multiple times.

Results

Four main types of voluntary kin relationships were discursively constructed in the interview talk of these family members: (i) voluntary kin as substitute family, (ii) voluntary kin as supplemental family, (iii) voluntary kin as convenience family, and (iv) voluntary kin as extended family. All four voluntary kin family representations were legitimated by drawing on the discourse of the traditional family. Three of the four voluntary kin family representations (substitute, supplemental, and convenience) were justified on the basis of some sort of deficit in the blood and legal family and were legitimated against that family type. Only one voluntary kin representation, the extended family, was constructed without the justification of deficiency in the family of blood or law. However, the discourse of the traditional family was nonetheless implicated in informant descriptions of this fourth representation, largely through talk about voluntary kin as add-ons to the blood/law family. The four voluntary kin family representations will be discussed in turn.

Voluntary kin as substitute family

In this first type of representation, voluntary kin were constructed as replacements for blood and legal family altogether, as the participant did not have contact with their blood and legal family. In the substitute family construction, the blood/legal family was not a part of an individual's life because of either death or estrangement.

Voluntary kin as substitute family after the death of family members. Several interviewees reported that their voluntary kin families were created after the death of family member(s). One 50-year-old woman related how Mike became a son to her after the death of her biological son, Carl:

> My son Carl met Mike at a rock concert . . . . Mike came home with Carl for meals, and we would have Sunday family dinner. He would come home for Sunday family dinner, and so I just got to know him. And I learned that his mother died when Mike and his brother were young teenagers. And it wasn't too long before they started calling me "Mom" and stuff. And we just developed into that kind of relationship. But when my son was diagnosed with cancer, he went into the hospital while we were out-of-town and Mike went and stayed with him for a day and a half until we got back. And Mike became pretty instrumental through the whole thing. And that's when we got really, really close . . . . And he did stuff with Carl and they stayed closer than a brother and he just became like my other son. And now he is my other son. . . . You know, he acts like a son and he is very loyal and he is very giving; he is very affectionate. I always give him a hug and a kiss every time he leaves. The fact that he started calling me "Mom" so early on, just made me started feeling that way. You know? . . . . When Carl was very close to the edge [dying], it occurred to me how much closer Mike and I had become. And I sent him an e-mail and I said, "Are we going to lose you too when this is all over, because I don't think I could stand to lose you too?" And he wrote me back and said, "Mom I would never let you lose two sons that

way – I am your son forever" . . . . It makes losing Carl be easier. Because Carl was my only son. It was a really difficult thing and if I cry please forgive me. It makes me feel like I'm not "sonless." No, because there's things you get from a son that you don't get from a daughter. (IV #67)

In this example, Mike started referring to her as "Mom" not long after they met, but it was only after the death of Carl that she started referring to him as her son.

Voluntary kin as substitute family after the estrangement of family members. In this category of substitute family we discovered that the participant and/or his or her blood or legal kin made the choice not to enact a family relationship, and there was little or no contact between the participant and his/her blood and legal family. While there were many participants who indicated they were not close with their blood or legal family, cases of total estrangement were rare and, in fact, we found only one clear case of reported estrangement in our data – a young gay man who described how voluntary kin relationships substituted for his estranged family:

> I have a lot of acquaintances. I don't have a lot of deep relationships with people. I just know a lot of people and friends with a lot of people. There's not many people I talk to on a daily basis. And when I think of relationships I look for consistency. It took about six months of consistency and talking um, four times, fives times a day to meet, you know, a relationship of a family member you know. I talk to him a lot more than family members. I think of him as a brother, so. And that hasn't changed, you know, after the first six months. It continues . . . . My parents got divorced, and all I've had was, um, my father was really abusive. My mother and I really had a faltering relationship after my parents got divorced. My father's a recovering drug addict, uh, prescription drugs and pain killers and we just had a lot of issues growing up that I kind distanced myself from my family. And also the biggest thing is probably my sexuality. My parents never really accepted me. They actually cut me off last, last January, so almost a year ago. (IV #32)

In both types of representations of voluntary kin as substitute family, the voluntary kin relationship was justified or legitimated to the interviewer based on an identified deficiency in the traditional family – death or emotional estrangement.

Voluntary kin as supplemental family

We heard a second type of voluntary kin construction in which the voluntary kin member was positioned to function as a supplement to, rather than a substitute for, the blood or legal family. The supplemental type was the most common of the four identified family constructions in the data. Participants whose voluntary kin were identified as supplemental told us that they maintained a relationship with their blood or legal family as well as with their voluntary kin. While they maintained a relationship with the blood and legal family, these relationships were constructed as deficient in one or more way(s), thereby providing a discursive legitimation of

the voluntary kin relationship. Four different types of supplementary relationships were constructed by our participants: (i) voluntary kin fulfills needs unmet by the blood and legal family as a whole, (ii) voluntary kin enacts a role not present in the blood or legal family, (iii) voluntary kin enacts a role present but underperformed in the blood or legal family, and (iv) voluntary kin enacts a family role for geographically dispersed blood or legal kin. Each will be described in turn.

Voluntary kin fulfills emotional needs unmet by the blood and legal family as a whole. In this first supplemental relationship, the participants expressed that they had some sort of relationship with their blood or legal family, but identified emotional needs voluntary kin met that remained unaddressed by their blood or legal family. Sometimes participants provided accounts in which they described a felt lack of acceptance from the blood or legal family. For example, this participant, a heterosexual 26-year-old male, expressed the following:

> I hate to say this but I'm not always as happy around my immediate family. I think there's more pressure to act and talk and think in a certain way and with Dan I feel more comfortable and I can be myself. (IV #97)

This unhappiness was attributed to the culture of non-acceptance in his immediate family, and it was offered discursively as a legitimation of his voluntary kin relationship with Dan.

Other participants experienced an emotional void in their family of blood or law because they felt somehow different from the rest of their family. The issue here is not one of criticism and non-acceptance so much as a lack of perceived commonality and the intimacy it affords. A gay 57-year-old male participant discussed the close relationship he has with Victor and Victor's son, Zack, compared to his blood and legal family:

> It is actually much more intimate. I mean we, Victor and Zack, we all know each other – the ins and outs and whatever. With my sister and her daughters, I don't really know that. They get married here and go over there and I don't really know that. And it's not that we're not close, I mean when we get together we have a good time, but it is just that our lives are divergent . . . . My sister is rather provincial. And for a gay person it is hard to relate. So we talk but things that are mostly surface. We never get into anything really involved. Victor is a very "metrosexual" type person. You can talk to him about anything. (IV #68)

A female participant accounted for the emotional closeness she felt with a fellow female voluntary kin in this way: "There's a real sisterhood and camaraderie amongst women, but it's just different than what I share with my husband . . . I don't think any relationship ever can give you everything you need; you need other relationships around you" (IV #108). The husband wasn't critical or non-accepting; as a male, he presumably couldn't understand the female life experience the way her fictive sister could.

Another participant, who told us that she functions in her voluntary kin family as the "daddy" of a family based on bondage–domination–submission– sadism–masochism (BDSM), invoked the same discourse of commonality and difference. When asked about what she talked about with her voluntary kin as compared to her blood and legal kin, she responded:

> Ah, certainly different than I would with my parents, um some different things I would talk to my sisters about. They're cool about me being into BDSM. [But] they certainly wouldn't have an interest. It wouldn't bother them to talk about it but they wouldn't have any interest in it. So it would be kind of stupid to have a conversation with them about it. (IV #16)

For this participant, the voluntary kin relationship was legitimated by constructing its contrast with the absence of involvement and interest by her blood/legal family.

Voluntary kin enacts a role not present in the blood or legal family. In this second type of supplemental relationship, the voluntary kin fulfilled a normative role that was presented as missing in the blood and legal family. That is, participants justified their voluntary kin relationship because the family of blood or law was somehow incomplete. One man discussed one of his voluntary kin as "like my own kid that I never had" (IV #68). Another participant referred to her voluntary kin as "pretty much like my grandfather that I never had. He would probably be like my grandfather" (IV #66). A third participant, a 76-year-old divorced male, explained:

> He [voluntary kin] never had a brother. He has two sisters. So I think he bonded to me quickly because he never had a brother. He tells people I am his brother. I tell people he is my brother. And we've just been together through all the rigors of the Ph.D. and then through the rigors of marriage and divorce and kids. He's godfather to my son Bart and he's a good godfather. He's come to all the weddings of my children. (IV # 50)

Voluntary kin enacts a role present but underperformed in the blood or legal family. In this third construction of voluntary kin as supplemental family, the voluntary kin member was presented as performing a role that existed in the blood or legal family, but was somehow not enacted well. One respondent's explanation illustrates this construction in its description of her voluntary kin relationship with her second mom:

> It's great because she is very supportive and affirming. And see I'm always kind of contrasting her to my real mother who isn't like that at all and so it feels comfortable and it feels nice to have someone who thinks you are an interesting person and they like to be around you. And sometimes I get the impression that she likes me better than her daughter. And so it just feels affirming and comfortable. (IV #57)

Unlike the first supplemental category above, in which the voluntary kin member was constructed as meeting emotional needs unmet by the blood/ legal family as a whole, the underperformance of this category was specific to a particular

role and constructed as a supplement to, rather than a replacement of, the blood or legal family.

Voluntary kin enacts a family role for geographically dispersed blood or legal kin. Unlike the other three types of supplemental voluntary kin families represented in our participants' talk, which were legitimated based on some deficit of need or some missing or underperformed role, in this fourth supplemental voluntary family type, the blood or legal family was presented as emotionally close, but geographically dispersed. Here, the voluntary kin stepped in to fill the void created in the geographical distance of blood or legal family. This category was exemplified by a retired teacher who played what she labeled a "grandfriend" role to her son-in-law's sister and her family. She and her husband hosted a "family dinner night" for them each week and she described this ritual:

> Their blooded grandparents are one set in Hawaii and the other set in Illinois, so there are no grandparents, you know official like, bloodline grandparents present, so we spend a lot of time with those kids and we would end up doing a lot of things that would be grandparental but they are not our grandkids in that sense and I'm very conscious of that and so we wouldn't invade someone else's relationship with those children so you know. (IV # 80)

The participant also talked about a grandparent's school event she attended with the children:

> Another event that was really touching for me was you know how schools tell the kids that they are going to have a grandparent event and invite your grandparents to come . . . . The one I really remember is when the grandparents had tags that said grandparents and a recognition of the difference was still a recognition was that I got a tag that said "grandfriend" and I thought that was charming. It was really, really nice because so many kids don't have grandparents in the immediate area. (IV # 80)

Several of the participants were quick to point out their sensitivity to the role of the "real" family member who was absent. As the "grandfriend" above did, some invented address terms for their role in order not to be seen as replacement family members who were absent because of geographic distance.

In sum, for the largest number of the participants, voluntary kin were legitimated as supplemental family. In this family type, the voluntary kin was presented as compensatory because of some deficit in the blood or legal family: unfulfilled emotional needs from the family as a whole, a missing or underperformed role, or physical distance. We found that while most participants reported that the blood and legal and voluntary kin members knew about one another, or may have communicated periodically, they were largely separate from each other.

Voluntary kin as convenience family

The third voluntary kin family representation was presented as forming around a specific context (e.g., the workplace), time period (e.g., a support group during a

12-step program), or stage of life (e.g., undergraduate college years). What characterized this type of voluntary kin was the context or temporal boundaries around it; in other words, these relationships were circumscribed by time or place. For example, one young man talked about his former roommate, Thomas, as his voluntary kin. He reminisced:

> I used to live with him right out of high school. So we would have every day face-to-face communication and stuff like that. But now he lives in Portland with his girlfriend. I lived in Portland with them too for six months. I actually moved out there with him. Just like to get adapted to life out there. I slept on their floor. And I think he would be the only person who would be accepting of me doing that. Nowadays he is really busy and I don't keep a hold of him that much. But once in a while, we will use Instant Messenger and talk about stuff. I might call them up on special occasions stuff like that. (IV #71)

This voluntary kin relationship was significant for a fixed period of time – during the participant's life transition after high school – but now that they both had moved on with their lives, the relationship was largely reduced to an occasional contact. In most cases participants expressed limited expectations for these convenience relationships versus their blood or legal family, and often it was difficult to tell the difference between voluntary kin and good friends, as in this example:

> I think that it is important to at one point in your life have some person you consider chosen kin. Yes, you need some really good friends, but I think you need one friend that you are really close with that you share everything with. (IV # 65)

It is important to note that convenience voluntary kin could turn into another type of voluntary kin relationship over time and when the situation or context that circumscribed the convenience relationship had been transcended in some way. For example, one participant, a doctoral student, described a voluntary kin relationship with his three fraternity brothers that had endured and grown beyond their college days, which we categorized as supplemental.

These convenience voluntary kin relationships were instrumental, contingent relationships limited to a context or certain life stage. While the participants described these relationships as family, it was at times challenging to see appreciable differences between convenience voluntary kin and friends. As with three of the four voluntary kin types, convenience voluntary kin were legitimated based on a deficit in the blood or legal family. However, the type of deficiency was markedly different from those used to legitimate other voluntary kin types. In the case of convenience kin, the blood or legal family may have been emotionally fulfilling, but were absent temporally or spatially. In the first case, voluntary kin relationships formed when the blood and legal family was absent geographically, as was the experience for many of the college student participants. Second, voluntary kin relationships were formed when the blood and legal family was absent from the experience of the participant at a certainly period of time, for example, in a voluntary kin relationship formed in a 12-step or recovery support group. Third, voluntary

kin relationships formed in places blood and legal family was not present, for example, work associates who formed a "second family" in the workplace. In the convenience kin type, absence was usually a temporal one, linked to a stage of life, or a spatial one, linked to a place that blood and legal family did not frequent.

Voluntary kin as extended family

The fourth and final voluntary kin construction involved a relationship that integrated both voluntary kin and blood and legal families. These extended family units had permeable and overlapping boundaries, families that were enmeshed, which was not the case in the other voluntary kin types. The voluntary kin and blood and legal family members considered each other part of the same family. As represented in the discourse of the participants, the two families typically lived close by, spent considerable time together, and developed long-term relationships that persisted even in cases when proximity ceased. One young woman described her extended family with Ann and her family. She elaborated:

> Our parents were really close, so they tried to have the kids around the same time. Ann's my sister's age because I graduated in '03 from high school, my sister from '02, so they're like a year grade-wise. And I mean my earliest memories are when her mom would . . . babysit me and I would always, I mean I always just assumed Ann was my sister. I mean I don't remember how the relationship developed, but she's been in my life as long as I can remember. Like her brother, I'm close with too, my mom is his godmother, so we're all kind of like intertwined. (IV #29)

Another woman described her blood family's relationship with Darlene:

> I don't call her Aunt Darlene but she's a friend of the family. She's always been involved like my mom is her son's godmother like we've just she's always just been her family has always been fond of our family and stuff . . . . If my mom wasn't there she was always there. We actually lived in the city together and we moved about half hour to the same neighborhood. Only ten minutes away again. We weren't neighbors but – they moved first then we moved. (IV #15)

The extended family voluntary kin type was the only family type that was not based on a deficit within the blood or legal family. These were enmeshed families that brought strength and community to both families. These voluntary kin relationships were described as interwoven with the blood or legal family, and it was difficult for our participants to even describe this kind of relationship in the absence of invoking the blood or legal family.

Discussion

From a social constructionist perspective, "family" is discourse dependent (Galvin, 2006); in talking about "family," we are always in the communicative business of constructing what a family means and legitimating it as a social entity. Families

that somehow depart from the normative standards of what constitutes a "real" family bear a special discursive burden to present themselves as understandable and legitimate. Because voluntary kin relationships are not based on the traditional criteria of association by blood or law, members of those fictive relationships experience them as potentially problematic, requiring discursive work to render them sensical and legitimate to others. The talk of our 110 informants legitimated four main types of voluntary kin relationships: (i) voluntary kin as substitute family, (ii) voluntary kin as supplemental family, (iii) voluntary kin as convenience family, and (iv) voluntary kin as extended family. These four types of voluntary kin were legitimated and rendered sensical by discursively invoking the family of blood and law. They were discursively constructed as sensical or "real" through analogy; that is, voluntary kin members were characterized as filling family-like roles (e.g., parent, sibling) or performing family-like functions (emotional fulfillment, acceptance, a sense of common identity, temporal and spatial presence in one's everyday life).They were legitimated in large measure because of attributed deficits in the blood or legal family: deficits of absence (physical death, geographic dispersion, or temporary nonpresence); deficits of role (a missing family role or an underperformed role); or deficits of emotion fulfillment (from felt estrangement, non-acceptance; lack of commonality). Only one type of voluntary kin relationship was legitimated affirmatively – the category of voluntary kin as extended family. This type gained its legitimacy by reframing the boundary of the traditional family of blood and law to emphasize its expansiveness and permeability. The major contribution of this study is its attention to the discursive work enacted by participants as they construct their voluntary kin as sensical and legitimate; although "fictive" by some benchmarks of "family," they were nonetheless constructed as "real" by our participants in their talk.

Many of the functions attributed to our participants' voluntary kin relationships have been identified in prior research cited in the introduction to this study. However, that body of work, for the most part, adopts a researcher perspective in which the voluntary kin concept is a nonproblematic one and the research agenda is that of objectively identifying the functions enacted by voluntary kin networks. By contrast, our scholarly task was to problematize the voluntary kin concept, asking how members of those relationships make discursive sense of them. The two approaches, while distinct, are nonetheless complementary. Together, they underscore the importance that voluntary kin relationships play in people's day-to-day lives.

Ironically, the discursive work enacted by our participants may further instantiate the primacy of blood and law as the benchmark against which family-ness is understood (Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991; Weston, 1991). Although our participants constructed their voluntary kin relationships as significant to their lives, the key discursive resource deployed to accomplish this task was a discourse of the traditional family. The traditional family of blood and law was the discursive prism through which our participants made sense of their voluntary kin relationships,

reminding speaker and listener of the centrality of that discourse. Given that deficits in the traditional family were the basis of legitimation for most of the voluntary relationships described by our participants, it is perhaps important to note that voluntary kin were not legitimated on their own terms. That is, based on our participant talk, would people have voluntary kin relationships if their families of blood and law were fully functional and complete? Our participants opened a slight discursive door by which to answer this question in the affirmative – the voluntary kin as extended family. However, even this type gained its legitimacy only by being framed within the permeable boundary of the traditional family. Interestingly, the extended family type was presented least often by our participants.

The development of a typology of voluntary kin types potentially helps researchers in understanding the different forms voluntary kin relationships take, rather than thinking about them in a unitary way. This interpretive project was not focused on an examination of differences, but certainly directions for future research include an examination of whether these types can be replicated with different populations. For example, it would be interesting to note whether this typology would emerge in native talk with populations already studied in the voluntary kin literature, including African Americans, older adults, immigrants, working-class families, and youth. Should these types emerge, their relative frequencies might vary by population group. Researchers could also productively examine possible gender differences in the prevalence of these voluntary kin types. The examination of such differences, while beyond the scope of the current project, holds value for future research.

In addition, future researchers could productively attend to various outcomes and processes associated with these voluntary kin types. It would be valuable to determine, for example, whether these types vary with respect to such indicators as relational satisfaction, commitment, and longevity. Researchers need to examine the communication processes by which various kinds of voluntary kin relationships are enacted. For example, since these relationships are, in most instances, part of a social network with the families of blood and law, researchers need to examine the ways in which individuals negotiate boundaries between one kind of family and another. How parties negotiate information access, as well as how they distribute time and other symbolic resources, merits systematic research attention. We are currently collecting data focused on the interaction and boundary work between the voluntary and blood and legal family members.

We note that while the voluntary kin are clearly important to our participants, most of these relationships are in addition to, rather than in replacement of, blood and legal families. We were somewhat surprised that we did not find more estranged families in our data. Perhaps persons with estranged families did not volunteer to come and talk about their experiences, or perhaps most people retain at least some contact with their blood and legal kin, even in situations where blood and legal families are not close. Certainly this raises an empirical question that researchers should continue to examine.

One other question raised in our data is how informants categorize committed GLBT partner relationships. Because GLBT persons cannot legally marry in most states, their relationships with their life partners are families of choice (Weston, 1991). This issue was highlighted as we were seeking participants. Several GLBT persons who participated in the interviews included their partners as voluntary kin and completed the interview about their partner. On the other hand, others chose not to name their partner as voluntary kin. For example, one gay man was emphatic in stressing that his partner *was his family* and he indicated that he would be happy to complete the interview by describing his 25-year relationship with a female he regarded as voluntary kin. In the present study, we took the participants at their word and included as voluntary kin the person they chose to identify, whether it was their partner or another person(s) in their life. Stacey (1999, p. 389) highlighted the many forms of GLBT families and their "patchwork of blood and intentional relations . . . into creative, extended kin bonds." Certainly the parameters of voluntary kin and family for GLBT persons are important boundaries for scholars to continue to examine.

One question that arose in our analysis is the difference between friendship and voluntary family. This question was most prevalent in our analysis of the convenience kin, for example, college fraternity brothers. In the present study we took the participants at their word when they self-identified as having voluntary kin after we defined the concept for them. Scholars do need to address this distinction. As a first step, in a subsequent study we are asking participants to reflect on the differences between voluntary kin and friendship, report address terms they use for voluntary and blood/legal families, and talk about the roles enacted by voluntary family. In addition, we are paying attention to ways in which voluntary kin relationships may shift over time, for example from convenience to supplemental as in the example of the fraternity brothers persisting after college and becoming supplemental kin. Longitudinal work or a focus on relational turning points (e.g., Baxter, Braithwaite & Nicholson, 1999; Surra, 1987) would be helpful to track these relationships over time.

We approached this initial study from the perspective of one person, but future researchers could usefully examine the functioning of voluntary kin relationships from the perspectives of all voluntary kin members, as well as from the perspectives of members of the blood or legal family of origin. Clearly, additional research aimed at understanding voluntary kin relationships is warranted.

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