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Exploring Young Adults' Perspectives on Communication with Aunts

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Exploring Young Adults' Perspectives on Communication with Aunts

Abstract

Women are typically studied by family communication researchers as daughters, sisters, mothers, or grandmothers. Yet many, if not most, women in these roles also are aunts. In this study, we offer a preliminary exploration of the meaning of aunts as familial figures. Seventy nieces' and nephews' written accounts of their aunts were collected. Thematic analysis of participants' accounts of communication with aunts revealed nine themes, which were divided into two categories: the role of the aunt—teacher, role model, confidante, savvy peer, and second mother—and the practices of aunting—gifts/treats, maintaining family connections, encouragement, and nonengagement. Our analysis illuminates important aspects of family schema (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002) and kinkeeping (Stack & Burton, 1998) regarding aunts.

Despite the tremendous proliferation in family forms, the popular image associated with “the family” is still overwhelmingly that of the heterosexual nuclear family with a husband, wife, and children (Garey & Hensen, 1998). Many family communication researchers, particularly feminists, are committed to honoring a plurality of family forms and relationships, for both ideological reasons and pragmatic ones, since families that deviate from the idealized nuclear norm now actually outnumber the supposedly normative families (Coontz, 2000; Garey & Hansen, 1998). One important aspect of many families is extended kinship resources, yet that topic has been under-studied by family researchers (Johnson, 2000). Anecdotal evidence of the significance of kin exists, but contemporary studies demonstrate a decline in families’ involvement with, and scholarly interest in, kinship ties (Johnson, 2000). Aunts and their nieces/nephews are one type of kinship relationship about which little is understood. Aunts are not nuclear family members, but they also are not obscure, distant relations. They are, after all, usually a sibling from a parent’s immediate family of origin. Traeder and Bennett (1998) claim in their popular tribute, *Aunties: Our Older, Cooler, Wiser Friends*, that aunts are a crucial resource for maintaining and enriching family and community life, and anecdotal evidence of the importance of aunts in family relations abounds in family stories and everyday conversation.

Women are typically studied by family communication researchers as daughters, sisters, mothers, or grandmothers. Yet many, if not most, women in these roles also are aunts. In this study, we offer a preliminary exploration of the meaning of aunts as familial figures. We contend that the meanings of aunting have been ignored in favor of framing motherhood as the essential role of women (e.g., O’Reilly & Abbey, 2000; Peington, 2004; Rich, 1977). As feminist researchers, we seek not to idealize aunts or to essentialize them within a single, fixed identity. Instead, we recognize the complexities of the roles aunts may play in their nieces’ and nephews’

lives. However, we also posit that there are likely to be some commonalities among nieces' and nephews' experiences of relating to their aunts, and uncovering those patterns is our goal. We frame our thematic analysis of descriptions of aunts by first offering a theoretical perspective on family communication and reviewing literature on kinship and kinkeeping.

Theoretical Perspective

The traditional nuclear family model of family communication is “losing its ecological validity” due to the proliferation of family forms in contemporary society (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002, p. 71). Koerner and Fitzpatrick suggest that theories of family communication now focus on the family as constituted in communication:

rather than seeing the family as composed of individuals connected primarily through legal and biological ties, scholars increasingly define family as a group of intimates who generate a sense of home and group identity and who experience a shared history and a shared future. (p. 71)

Such transactional definitions are more useful because they expand the boundaries of the family, are more accommodating to a variety of family forms, and better reflect the tremendous variation in how families define themselves (Noller & Fitzpatrick, 1993). Jorgenson (1989) positions the family not as a defined context but “as a system of relations that comes about as individuals define those relations in their everyday communication with another” (p. 28). Boundaries between households in extended kin networks are porous and negotiable, rather than fixed or rule-bound (Wellman, 1998). Hence, extended families may be understood as constituted through their transactions (i.e., communication) as they negotiate the norms of their relationships with each other. Our intention in this study was to delineate the organized knowledge structures, or schemas, that nieces and nephews have for aunts, as developed within the family context and through communication within families and kin networks.

Koerner and Fitzpatrick (2002) propose a theory of family communication that identifies a hierarchy of relational schemas used by family members to interpret their communication with other family members. Relational schemas consist of declarative and procedural knowledge and interpersonal scripts, and such schemas include information and beliefs concerning: “intimacy, individually, affection, external factors, conversation orientation, and conformity orientation” (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002, p. 88). Individuals cognitively process interactions with other family members by drawing upon relationship-specific schemas first (e.g., a sister’s relationship to her younger brother). If a schema does not provide the information or insights necessary to interpret or address the family member’s behavior or to form an appropriate response, the person then draws upon family relationship schemas that describe the communication norms and patterns of the family unit. If family relationship schemas also prove insufficient, then an individual family member draws upon general social schemas regarding relationships for information. It follows then that when nieces and nephews communicate with aunts and with others about aunts, they both rely on and construct schemas for who aunts are and how they behave. These schemas develop through communication and, in turn, influence communication. Because it is ultimately the knowledge that is contained in family relationship schemas that influences family communication, it is imperative to gain a better understanding of the kinds of knowledge that constitute family relationship schemas (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002).

Previous researchers have suggested that like schemas, the concept of family scripts is helpful in exploring families’ understanding of kinship roles and relationships. Family scripts “are mental representations that guide the role performance of family members within and cross contexts” (Stack & Burton, 1998, p. 408). In extended kin relationships, “kinscripts” designate who is obligated or entitled within a particular network to perform types of kin-work tasks, when such tasks should be done (kin-time) and how the process of assigning kin-work should be

handled (kin-scription) (Stack & Burton, 1998). We posit that underlying their extended family's kinscripts, people have relationship schemas regarding the norms, patterns, and expectations of aunts, as well as relationship-specific schema for relationships with particular aunts. Moreover, there are also social level messages/schema in the dominant U.S. culture about what it means to be or have an aunt (Authors, 2004). Hence, perceived cultural norms will influence aunts', nieces', and nephews' general schema and expectations for family communication (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002).

Aunts and Kinship

Kinship and Kin-keeping

Aunts are part of the extended kinship network. Garey and Hansen (1998) define kinship as a "system of rights and responsibilities between particular categories of people... 'kinship' refers not only to biological or legal connections between people but also to particular positions in a network of relationships" (p. xviii). Aunts can be either "consanguineal" kin (related biologically) or "affinal" (related through marriage). Cultures vary in the rules or standards for determining who counts as kin, in the rights and responsibilities accorded to various types of kin, and in the degree to which kinship association is voluntary (Stack & Burton, 1998; Wellman, 1998). In some communities "fictive" kin are created by inducting people not biologically related into a network of kinship, such as calling one's mother's best friend "aunt" (Stack, 1974). Kinship networks may change over time (Garey & Hansen, 1998).

Researchers have demonstrated that women are the primary "kin keepers" in extended families (Cheal, 1988; di Leonardo, 1998; Dill, 1998; Johnson, 2000; Leach & Braithwaite, 1996; Rosenthal, 1985; Stack & Burton, 1998). This suggests the importance of aunts in establishing and maintaining relational bonds with nieces and nephews (Arliss, 1994) and implies that kinkeeping is likely part of relationship-type schemas for aunts. Kinkeeping has

been traditionally associated with feminine roles and remains largely the province of women, despite change in gender roles (Garey & Hansen, 1998). Feminist scholars rendered visible the unpaid domestic work of women—including kinkeeping work—and acknowledged its importance in overall functioning of a capitalist society that values only paid labor (di Leonardo, 1998). Moreover, feminist researchers have reclaimed women’s focus on kin networks as potential sources of personal satisfaction, empowerment, and, at times, vital material and emotional resources (di Leonardo, 1998; Gerstel & Gallagher, 1993). Juggled along side paid employment, housework, and child care, “kin work” involves “the collective labor expected of family centered networks across households and within them,” including child and dependent care, wage and nonwage labor (Stack & Burton, 1998, p. 408), and relationship-maintaining communication and tasks as “visits, letters, telephone calls, presents, and cards to kin; the organization of holiday gatherings; the creation and maintenance of quasi-kin relations. . .” (di Leonardo, 1998, p. 420).

Leach & Braithwaite (1996) found that kinkeeping communication has five primary outcomes: providing information, facilitating rituals, providing assistance, maintaining family relationships, and continuing a previous kinkeeper’s work. Participants reported that kinkeepers were most likely to be mothers, aunts, or grandmothers (Leach & Braithwaite, 1996). Of course, the mothers and grandmothers of the student are also likely to be aunts to other members of the kinship network. Thus many kinship studies discuss mothers, grandmothers, and sisters in relation to groups that include these women’s niece and nephews, but without labeling this as aunting. Rather, kin work is framed in terms of sisterhood or motherhood (e.g. di Leonardo, 1998). Moreover, kinship is not functionally separate from networks of friends, colleagues, neighbors, and acquaintances (Wellman, 1998). Many people maintain what they judge to be close and meaningful relationships over great distances via telephone, visits, and the Internet

(Wellman, 1998). Such connections may not emerge in measures of kinship contact used by researchers, however, generating limited views of how contemporary kinship is enacted (Johnson, 2000). Latent kin relationships may be “activated for specialized needs, family get-togethers, or during migrations” (Wellman, 1998, p. 234). In investigating nieces’ and nephews’ schemas for aunts, we can shed light on how contemporary kinkeeping relates to expectations for aunt roles.

The experience and meaning of an aunt’s role is implied more than specified in research. Research on communication among adult siblings and their spouses implicitly addresses communication with and by aunts when the focus is on women’s roles and sister relations (e.g., Cicirelli & Nussbaum, 1989). Given that sibling relationships among parents affect children’s perceptions of their relatives, aunts who are emotionally close to a child’s parents are likely to be perceived as more integral in the child’s experiences of family life. At the same time, Troll (1985; cited in Arliss, 1994) points out that conflicts among adult siblings obligate husbands and wives to distance themselves from their siblings and such “family feuds” negatively impact relationships within the extended family including aunts, nieces, and nephews. Further, adult sisters who may have gone separate ways often become closer as they begin to follow parallel paths in life (marriage, children), providing material and emotional support for each other and renewing familial bonds (Arliss, 1994). Cicirelli and Nussbaum (1989) suggest that the association of women with feminine nurturing and expressiveness leads family members to turn to their sisters for support and aid as adults. This observation implies both the likelihood that aunts will be closer to their nieces and nephews if aunts and mothers find themselves on parallel life paths and that aunts may provide emotional and material support not only for their sisters and other adult family members but for their nieces and nephews as well. Sisters may work to make their children close to each other as cousins¹ (di Leonardo, 1998).

Moreover, aunting schemas are likely to reflect other culturally significant female figures. The significance of “othermothers” (Collins, 2000) and “godmothers” in Black, Latino, and Native American child-rearing practices has been recognized and even celebrated and promoted as a model for white, mainstream American culture (see Clinton’s *It Takes a Village*, 1996). Godmothers also are particularly important in Catholic communities (e.g., Italian-Americans, see di Leonardo, 1984; Mexican-Americans, see Falicov, 1999; Falicov & Karrer, 1980), whose members choose a godparent for their child as a crucial aspect of religious and cultural practice (Sault, 2001). Of course, “othermothers” and “godmothers” may or may not overlap the aunt so despite the increased, often feminist-inspired, attention to such practices, there is not an explicit focus on aunts and aunting per se. So although we may know where aunts are and that they are important within extended family configurations, we do not know much about how they communicatively enact those locations.

One topic in family communication where aunts are explicitly identified are studies of extended family configurations. Studies of extended family roles and practices generally focus on the following three themes: the extended family as a historically, racially, or ethnically-identified familial form (the African American urban family, the traditional Latino family, or the immigrant Asian family; e.g., Stack, 1974); mapping extended family configurations (e.g., Galvin, Bylund, & Brommel, 2003) or family histories (e.g., Halsted, 1993); and the extended family as threatened by contemporary patterns of mobility, divorce, and nonfamilial commitments and identifications (Stone, 2000). These themes overshadow the particular communication characteristics and functions (as they constitute relationship-type schemas) of aunt-niece/nephew relationships.

Other types of kinship studies in which aunts appear are kinship foster care, kinship networks for immigrants, and family histories, all of which constitute kinkeeping and thus are

likely to be reflected in students' relationship schema for aunts. Studies of kinship foster care show that aunts are second only to grandmothers in numbers of kin who function voluntarily (although increasingly regulated and, in some states, compensated) as foster caregivers for children removed from their parents' custody (Davidson, 1997; Thorton, 1991). Research also explores the importance of kinship networks for new immigrants needing financial and social support. For instance, aunts were featured prominently in the accounts of Mexican migrant women as they relocated, found work, and established households (Bastida, 2001). Finally, aunts often figure prominently in family stories (Wilmot, 1995), perhaps because family culture and lore are preserved and promulgated primarily by women (Stone, 2000). Stone holds that family stories define the family, providing rules for its enactment, identities for its members, and a shared memory and view of family and the world. For example, women report learning "commonplace" wisdom about relating to men from older women family members, including aunts (Romberger, 1986).

Our goal in this project is to follow up on the allusions to the aunt in family communication studies by describing the contents of nieces' and nephews' family relational schemas for aunts. If families are constituted through communication rather than through biological and legal ties (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002), then exploring how aunts are constructed in nieces' and nephews' communication is a good starting point for understanding the meaning of aunts in families. Further, this inquiry may shed light on the issue of choice and voluntary association with extended kin of various types (not just aunts). "Because the American kinship networks are flexible in their expectations, personal preferences can play a key role" in how the meaning of kin ties is negotiated (Johnson, 2000, p. 626). The aunt-niece/nephew relationship thus becomes one example of kinship negotiation. To these ends, we posed our research question: "How do nieces and nephews describe communication with their aunts?"

Method

Research Participants

Our data consists of written responses from undergraduate students enrolled in communication courses in a private university on the West Coast, a public university in the Northern Midwest, and a public university in the Southeast from 2001 to 2003. The project began when the second author had 20 students write responses to the prompt, “Tell me about your aunt” as part of an in-class activity. Intrigued by these preliminary responses, we obtained human subject board approval to formally solicit student narratives for analysis. The informal responses were not included in our data set. However, we did read and discuss them, and hence they may have influenced our expectations when we analyzed the data.

Students in four courses were offered extra credit points to write a brief (typed) narrative in response to the statement, “Please describe communicating with one or more of your aunts.” Given the exploratory nature of this study, we consciously left the parameters of the response open to participants by phrasing the prompt very broadly. Posing specific questions about aunts would have had an agenda-setting effect on participants. In the absence of specific research about aunts to ground our choice of such questions, we determined that an open-ended question was consistent with the inductive nature of this inquiry. Participants were also asked to provide their age, sex, and ethnic or racial group. Responses were written outside of class at participants’ convenience over a one to two week span and returned to the course instructor.

In total, 70 responses were collected, ranging in length from slightly less than one-doubled-spaced page to four pages, with an average length of about two pages, for a total of 154 pages of data. Our sample consisted of students who ranged in age from 18-27, with the vast majority being traditional undergraduates between 20 and 22 years of age: the median age was 21, and the mean was 21.07 years, with two students not reporting their ages. Participants

reported their ethnicity as follows: 51 identified as European American or White, four as Latino/a, four as African American, seven as Asian American, and one each as: Kurdistan, biracial African American and White, Guyanese-East Indian, and Ecuadorian-Romanian. Our data was highly skewed in gender representation: 52 were female and 18 were male. The disparity in gender participation was largely due to the under-representation of males in the communication courses from which participants were drawn. Nonetheless, participation by women and men was roughly proportional to the number of each sex in the courses. Likewise, European Americans are over represented, and students of color make up 27% of our sample, such that our findings reflect predominantly European American perspectives. While we acknowledge the limitations of our sample, we also endeavored to draw examples for our analysis from as wide a range of participants as possible.

Data Analysis

We used Owen's (1984) criteria for inductively deriving themes in our qualitative data: repetition, recurrence, and forcefulness. Repetition exists when the precise word or phrase is present across the data; for example, the term "second mother" was invoked by numerous participants to describe aunts. Recurrence is present when different wording is used to express similar ideas. Examples from our data include "like another mother," "my other mother," and "really a lot like my relationship with my mom" by various participants to express the similarity in these types of relationships. The third criteria, forcefulness, includes nonverbal cues that stress or subordinate words or phrases. Since we had type-written data (as opposed to interview transcripts) we defined forcefulness as placing emphasis through the use of underlining, bolding, or italicizing text (e.g., "My aunt is *awesome*"), the use of one or more exclamation points (!) following a word or sentence, or the use of all-caps for a word or phrase (e.g., "She's GREAT").

Thematic analysis began with the two authors independently reading the narrative data. Using marginal notation and underlining of text, we each noted key words that repeated, recurrent ideas, and forceful words and phrases. We then independently went through the data again and inductively grouped repeated, recurrent, and forceful phrases and ideas into a set of preliminary themes. At that point, we discussed our lists, including examples of each theme, and continually refined our inductive categorization until we were confident that our themes were coherent, inclusive, and saturated in data (Fitch, 1994; Tompkins, 1994). Finally, because our sample was predominantly female, the first author separated the 18 male responses and reviewed them to determine whether all themes were present and whether other critical ideas emerged within this subset of the data. After careful consideration, we judged that the male responses did not vary collectively from the larger sample, and there were no significant differences that could be attributed to gender. Likewise, the first author separated out the 19 responses from students of color and viewed them collectively. Again, we found no consistent, collective difference. There was as much variation within these two underrepresented groups as there was between each of the groups and the predominant group of European American females.

Results

We derived nine content themes from the data, and then divided them into two groups: themes about aunting roles—teacher, role model, confidante, savvy peer, and second mother—and themes about aunting practices—gifts/treats, maintaining family connections, encouragement, and nonengagement. We content that these roles and practices collectively reflect the relationship-type schema that nieces and nephews have for aunts.

Content Themes: Aunting Roles

Teacher. Participants indicated that their aunts had taught them many skills. In our data, aunts taught their niece/nephew everything from how to ride a bike, knit, and cook special meals,

to running a successful business and the meaning of religion. Nieces/nephews depicted learning from an aunt as fun, particularly in comparison to school and to learning skills from parents. An Asian American woman wrote: “The reason why [my aunt] and I became more communicative was because she’d show me how to bake cakes and cookies. And I loved cooking, so this was a fun and good thing for us both.” Another example came from a European American woman’s memory of playing with her aunt when she was a small child: “She was a physical education teacher for an elementary school and was always teaching me how to play various games.”

At times, an aunt may be cited for teaching an appreciation or understanding of something rather than a specific skill or technique. This might be appreciation for a hobby such as watching professional sports. For example, a European American male student reported: “[My aunt] got me started being a fan of Duke basketball, which I still am today.” Or it may be understanding or appreciation for a serious topic, such as religious faith. As one European American woman student explained: “When I was confused about the Lord and my beliefs [my aunt] took the time to explain things to me, and why faith is important.” Other nieces/nephews described their aunts as preparing them for life in general, guiding them into becoming competent and caring adults. As one European American woman noted:

My aunt and my pseudo-aunt, along with her sisters have helped me with a million lessons along the way. They have taken me college-hunting, apartment searching, as well as trips across the country so I could learn and live and see what this big world was made of.

We understand teaching as conscious efforts by aunts to instill skills or attitudes in a niece/nephew. The next theme, role model, places more emphasis on niece/nephews’ agency.

Role model. Aunts function as role models to their nieces/nephews when they serve as examples of how to be in the world. Participants reported that they looked to their aunts as

models of proper behavior, religious devotion, wives, mothers, and successful career women.

Aunts may be role models, embodying appropriate or ideal actions, roles, and identities for their nieces and nephews. One European American woman wrote:

She has been one of my greatest role models. Her work has taken her to many exciting place, and she is now the CEO of a non-profit charity that offers services to families and children. She has accomplished so much in her life...and she has set a great example for women. She has succeeded in business without conforming to any of the gendered workplace stereotypes.

Clearly, this niece will benefit from her aunt's example when she begins her career.

Interestingly, the niece notes that the aunt in particular has demonstrated how to balance femininity with business sense and competence. She sees her aunt as having circumvented stereotypes that the niece considers limiting.

Aunts also provide role models for how to be aunts, of course. A European American woman explains how her aunt inspired her to be a good aunt:

My sister asked me to be [niece's] godmother. I have decided that I am going to be the best Aunt to that little girl. I hope that I can be as good an Aunt to her as [my aunt] was to me.

This niece considers one of her aunts to be very successful at being an aunt. Hence it is her standard for aunting that the niece wants to reach with her own newborn niece. The niece's sister's designation of her as a godmother adds a sense of formality and responsibility or obligation to the role, and the niece's immediate connection of her new role as godmother to the role played in her life by her favorite aunt demonstrates how one looks to past and present role models when beginning a new life role.

Several participants also noted that aunts can serve as negative role models, reinforcing to nieces/nephews what they do not want to be. One European American woman poignantly described why she did not want to be like one of her aunts:

There was just always something missing—like she lacked a spirit, or vitality, that I seek in others. My uncle is hilarious—we get along great—he is the funniest guy ever, but I think he kind of pushes her around. Not literally, but it is very clear who wears the pants in that relationship. I guess I always knew that, even when young, and I have always preferred strong, independent women.

Sadly, this niece perceives her aunt's submissiveness to a dominating husband as a barrier to her connection with her aunt. The niece does not indicate disapproval of her uncle's behavior, and instead frames her lack of closeness with her aunt as due to her aunt's choices and personality. While we found her placement of blame problematic, it is clear to us that the niece believes her aunt has nonetheless served a vital role in this young woman's life. That is, watching her aunt's difficult life has inspired the niece to think about what kind of woman she wants to be around, and indirectly, both the kind of woman she wants to be and the type of marriage/partnership she would want to have. Another participant, also a European American woman, explains how her aunt went from being a role model to being a model of what not to be:

My aunt was my idol. As a young girl...she represented everything I thought a woman should; beauty and femininity. In my eyes she was kind, happy... She was perfect. [After I grew up and discovered her tremendous irresponsibility] I truly have lost all respect for who she is. . . It seems as though, when we talk, that I am the grown-up, that I am the mature adult...It's like a mother-child relationship where I am the mother.

As an adult, this niece understood that behavior she found charming as a small child was irresponsible and reflected consistently poor judgment by her aunt. She now feels more mature and capable than her aunt, and the niece resents her aunt's childishness. Aunts were powerful figures—both positive and negative—to whom nieces and nephews looked as they envisioned their future plans as professionals as well as family and community members.

Confidante/Advisor. Many participants reported that the aunts with whom they were closest were those to whom they could talk easily, who listened carefully and sympathetically, and were trustworthy with secrets. These aunts indicated their willingness to listen. One European American man was confident of his aunt's willingness to listen: "I know that if I ever need advice or financial help or just wanted someone to talk to for fun, my aunt would be absolutely thrilled that I chose her to call." These aunts functioned as important confidantes and sources of good advice. The terms "nonjudgmental" and "open-minded" were repeated. The aunt functioned as a safe person to turn to when a mistake had been made or a tough decision needed to be faced, and advice was needed.

A key component of this theme is the idea that nieces/nephews discussed with their aunts topics that they felt they could not talk to their parents about. Nieces/nephews reported that their aunts were not as closely tied to them as their parents were, and that this differing relational dynamic enabled aunts to help the niece/nephew without the emotional upheaval and inability to be reasonable that the nieces/nephews expected of their parents. In this sense, the aunt's third party perspective as someone who knows both the parents and the niece/nephew well enabled them to become ideal confidantes. The aunt knew both the niece/nephew and the parent, and hence was in a good position to understand the nature of the problem, the personalities involved, and what steps would best address the problem. This "third party" perspective was articulated by a European American man who offered this analysis of why he could confide in his aunt:

I have one small theory on why I'm so close to my aunt. She wasn't immediate family, so when I was introduced to her when I was eleven or so, I literally had a choice on how I wanted to except [sic] her. My family introduced me and really from then on all I was responsible for was being cordial. Since I got to choose just how much I wanted to accept my aunt it sort of took the family part out of the equation. . . I feel like I was introduced to a stranger and eventually became good friends with them. . . I don't trust a lot of people, and I don't really have that many close friends. I have even less family that I can talk to. . . I mention this because what I share with my aunt is really special.

Likewise, another European American man explained that with his aunt, "Its [sic] almost like talking to a long distance friend, your [sic] not afraid to really tell them anything because they are not present in your life, yet you still feel comfortable with them when they are around." An African American male offered a similar description of his relationship with his aunt:

My mom's other sister is the youngest and has a bond with me as a close friend. . . we hold a connection like no other, but I can confide secrets with her than I cannot do with my closest aunts.

Sometimes the problem at hand actually involved one or more of the parents. For example one European American woman wrote: "I often talk to [my aunt] about problems that I have with my parents. She listens and offers a different perspective." Similarly, "When there is a huge family fight between my mother and I, would call [my aunt]," explained one Asian American man. Other times, the issues were not related to the parent, but they involve sensitive topics. One European American woman explained: "if I need someone to talk to about taboo issues that my mom would slip into cardiac arrest over, I call [my aunt]." Confidante aunts can also be trusted to have integrity. A Latina described her aunt this way:

I can trust her with my problems-that she'll be empathetic, loving, kind, non-judgmental, and usually positive about whatever I'm dealing with..... not only will she be wonderful at providing wisdom...but she'll also call it like she sees it, whether she thinks I'll like hearing it or not. She's honest.

For this niece, honesty is as important as attentive listening and kindness. The aunt's willingness to express an opinion whether or not she believed her niece would be receptive to it was taken by the niece as a sign of her aunt's love and respect for her. While not all aunts fulfilled the role of confidante and advisor, aunts considered by nieces/nephews to be "favorite" "the best" or "the aunt I am closest to" shared this role.

Savvy peer. This theme involves references to an aunt who is closer in age to the respondent than other relatives. This youngest aunt is often the "coolest." That is, the aunt who is closest in age to her nieces/nephews is most often the one who was described as being able to identify with the niece/nephew, being the most fun, giving the best gifts, and being the most able to understand the experiences of the niece/nephew. Age was very often mentioned as the primary reason why the aunt shared many common interests. Two European American men described the nature of their conversations with their young aunts:

[My aunt] is quite a bit younger than my mother is and it seems like our conversations are more about the "cooler" stuff in my life. Like girls, or the clothes I'm wearing, or how many homeruns I've hit this year. Let's just say she understands the vernacular of kids in their early twenties.

[My aunt] can talk to me more about girlfriends, jobs, and my social life than my mother. . . my aunt experienced the same things I did in college so she can relate. . . My mom is

the oldest in the family, and [my aunt] is about ten years younger, so I think her age has something to do with me talking to her about certain things.

For these nephews, their aunts actually speak a language or vernacular that their mothers are unable or unwilling to speak. The men perceive that both the terms used and the topics raised are understandable to the aunt because of her biological age. For a Guyanese/East Indian niece, her favorite aunt is very much like herself:

The reason why I think my aunt is the coolest, is because she is not old fashion at all, she is out going, loves shopping, likes to be in style with the young girls and she fits in well. I also like that she has a lot of energy to keep up with me, we would often go out on Friday and Saturday night every week, and we don't get home until 5am.

This woman and her favorite (and youngest) aunt shared common interests and activities. She valued her aunt's youthful energy to stay out all night twice in a weekend, something that this niece enjoyed and cannot share with her older aunts. Similarly, a Kurdistan man described his peer-like friendship with one of his aunts: "My youngest aunt (mother's sister) was my best friends [sic]. I liked her very much."

The ability to share common terms and activities brings nieces/nephews closer to younger aunts. Of course, commonalties in interests and experiences would also bring nieces and nephews together with aunts regardless of age, but participants' descriptions strongly associated the age similarity between aunt and niece/nephew with a common perspective and interests. An Asian American woman contrasted some aunts who "are very old and very traditional and so they do not understand some of the things I do" to one of her mother's sisters who

is the youngest of all the aunts. She's [sic] dresses very fashionably and loves to party.

Now that I am 21, she takes me out with her to bars and clubs to hang out. . . I refer to her as my cool aunt who loves to have fun.

Such aunts are seen as more like slightly older peers than like parents, and that perception appears to be critical to niece/nephews' views of their aunts. Aunts who were kind and nurturing but who did not understand youth culture fit into the next theme, second mother.

Second mother. Participants described their nurturing aunts with terms such as "second mother" and "like another mother to me," and described themselves as like the aunt's child-- "I'm her other daughter." A Kurdistan male stated that he often stayed at his aunts' homes where his aunts "were parents to me." An African-American male said of one aunt, "I believe she looks at me as another son of her own," and of another aunt, "We spent so much time together that she developed a 'mother's sense' (the sense that a mom just knows) and helped me through those tough times." Sometimes the second mother title was very literal, in the sense that the aunt had been instrumental in raising the niece/nephew. For example, one European American woman related that her mother had been sent to a home for unwed mothers and was expected to give up her baby. A week before giving birth, her mother went to her sister's home to stay with her. She says of her mother's sisters and of an honorary aunt:

My mom's sisters are my closest aunts. They had a hand in raising me. They were my second mothers and my best friends.... For the first six months of my life, my aunt, and a pseudo-aunt took care of me along with my mother.

Other aunts provided childcare for young nieces/nephews. A European American woman described her aunt's role:

[My aunt] is someone who cared for me when I was little when my mother would work, and I needed a sitter. She is a very nice, caring person, who treated me as if

I was one of her own children at times.

Another European American woman recalled that her aunt regularly provided childcare: “[my aunt] is my Godmother, and in a lot of ways, my mother. She took very good care of me when I was a little girl and my mom was at work.” An Asian American male explained, “My mother was busy taking care of her career as a pediatrician, so [my aunt] frequently looked after us.”

For other nieces/nephews, aunts provided a temporary home in times of trouble during their teen years. A Latina described her aunt’s kindness in taking her in for awhile:

I lived with [my aunt] and her two children (my cousins) for a short period in high school when I wasn’t getting along with my parents.... This was an important time in our relationship because we both agree that a whole lot of bonding went on during that period.

This aunt allowed breathing room for her niece and the niece’s parents until their differences could be resolved. For those months, she served as a mother to her niece. An Asian American niece has lived with her aunt throughout high school and college: “she acts on behalf of my mother who lives overseas; she is my guardian. . . . Basically, I treat her like another mother, yet [somewhat] differently from my own mother.” As a college student, one European American male reported that he turned to his aunt for comfort while away from home:

I am closest to her because she was there for me when I first went away to college. I was homesick and she would pick me up and I would stay weekends at her house. . . . *Every* time I go to her house she makes a gourmet meal, something I really enjoy... Whenever I go over to her house that room is “my room,” and I love it, I feel like I have a home away from home.

In some ways, the second mother has an easier role than the mothers. As one European American woman so succinctly put it: “To me an aunt is like a mom, only they don’t have to

enforce the rules. They just give you guidance and direction but never have to punish you, so they always stay on your good side.” Like the confidante, the second mother has the benefit of the third party perspective. From her position outside the parent-child relationship, she is able to nurture without having to be responsible for many parents’ duties, particularly discipline.

Aunting Practices

Gifts/Treats. Nieces/nephews reported that gifts offered tangible evidence of the quality of their relationships with aunts. Participants considered the receiving of holiday and birthday gifts that were appropriate to their age level and reflected their interests to be signs of a caring aunt. Spontaneous gift giving and/or taking them for special meals, trips, entertainment, movies, visits to the park, or other activities that parents did not often provide were especially valued by nieces/nephews. One European American woman wrote: “[my aunt] has always made an effort to honor my birthday and other holidays with gifts, homemade cards, and homemade cookies.” Sometimes the treat involves the preparation of special foods. A Latina enthusiastically stated: “Every time I go to visit, she cooks for me--anything I want. She spoils me rotten!” An Asian American male shared this memory of special outings with his aunt:

My greatest memory of [my aunt] was when I was still a little boy was when we went to [a local] park. It was this huge park where they rented out bicycles, which we could ride. . . . We would all bike around the park and then go to the museum. . . . My sister and I would usually sleep over and she would cook breakfast for us the next day. Then we would dread coming home to our house the next day.

Other aunts were reported to allow indulgences that parents presumably did not. One European American female described her favorite aunt:

[my aunt] often took us out to the movies or out to dinner....and shopping for toys.

We went to Lake Tahoe every summer together. She would cook for us every

night and let us eat junk food on the beach.

Allowing such tame but “naughty” behavior as eating junk food was seen as a sign of affection and indulgence. Other aunts were prized because they indicated their understanding of a child’s point of view, as in the following example from a European American man: “I remember going to a family Christmas party and she was so cool, she was the only relative that got my brother and I completely separate gifts.” As a little boy, having his own gift was very meaningful, and yet most relatives gave him one that he shared with his brother. The aunt who provided separate gifts was “cool” because she understood her nephews’ perspective on sharing. Conversely, receiving no gifts or gifts that clearly reflected a lack of understanding of the niece or nephew’s personality (e.g., a Barbie doll given to a 16 year old) were seen as signs of an aunt not caring enough to find out what the child wants or likes (Sunwolf, forthcoming).

Maintaining Family Connections. Aunts were key hubs in the networks of extended family kin. We were intrigued by the fact that virtually all participants—with no prompting from the researchers—volunteered in their narratives explanations of how their aunts were related to them through their mother’s or father’s family. For example, one European American man explained that he would discuss “my mother’s sister . . . [my aunt] is the second oldest child in a family of seven. [My aunt] has two female children my cousins [names].” A Latina explained that, “[my aunt] is my mother’s youngest sister. My mother came from a family of ten, with five sisters, two brothers, and herself.” Another European American man explained that he would discuss “[my aunt], who married my dad’s little brother.” It was evident that locating the aunt within the constellation of relationships is critical to understanding the relationship to the aunt. That is, as a non nuclear family member, the aunt had to be accounted for. This is in contrast to participants’ mentioning of their parents or siblings, who needed no such kinship contextualization before they could be referred to in the narrative.

Family relationships also facilitated interaction with aunts through family gatherings. Nieces/nephews described family celebrations (such as Christmas, birthdays, and Thanksgiving) as a primary time for seeing aunts, particularly those who did not live nearby. The sharing of family rituals influenced the relationships of some nieces/nephews to their aunts. A Latina participant explained: “Tia [Spanish for “aunt”] is the aunt that I know the best. Our family spent numerous holidays with her family.” For other participants, family gatherings were the only occasions in which they interacted with their aunts. One European American woman wrote: “The only time I ever really see [my aunts] is during the winter holidays, and then only for short periods of time.” A Latina explained of her mother’s sister that

[my aunt] became the only sibling to live with her parents. While all the other siblings moved on, getting married and starting a family, [my aunt] stayed behind to take care of my grandparents. For this, I get to see her most because it’s inevitable that when I go [to] visit my grandparents, [my aunt] is there.

An Asian American woman explained how a family gathering provided her an opportunity to engage in a pleasing conversation with an aunt she had not seen in a long time:

I went to a family gathering for my grandma’s birthday. This was the first one I had gone to in a few years and it was certainly weird seeing all my relatives again. I got to talk to my aunt again and amazingly, we had a great conversation.

Aunts were often strongly associated with family gatherings, whether as primary organizers of such events or simply as participants. One Asian American woman who grew up in Hawaii explained that in Hawaii women in the community, such as neighbors and parents’ friends are addressed as “aunty.” She describes her one aunt who has been her neighbor “since the day I was brought home from the hospital” as instrumental to organizing neighborhood gatherings:

[my aunt] maintains very close relationships with all the kids in the cul-de-sac and is known as the “Party Coordinator.” Ever since I can remember, Aunty has planned the neighborhood parties for Christmas, Easter, and summer. . . So, if someone asked me how many people were in my family, I would not be able to give them an exact number because my family extends beyond my Mom and Dad, it consists of other special people . . . and aunts like my Aunty [name].

Parties and other gatherings often were traditions that were repeated annually. A European American man shared his aunt’s tradition:

The best part of [my aunt] is that every Halloween she always has a big party. She is a nurse and she would have [mannequins] and dress them up like scary looking doctors. I would go over to her house and have a great time with my little cousins.

An African American woman told of attending her great grandmother’s 90th birthday in a distant state.

I asked [my aunt] if I could stay with her, because that’s where I assumed my uncle and grandmother would [stay]. When I got there. . . I realized that my grandmother and uncle were staying with my great grandparents, and I had just invited myself to [my aunt’s] home. . . She just laughed and said it was ok because I’m young and I’m family . . .

Thus, family connections are facilitated by aunts whose presence, cooperation, and (often) hospitality fosters interaction and ritual celebrations among extended kin.

Encouragement. Participants described the aunts they liked as those who were very encouraging to them in school, sports, work, and other activities. Aunts’ verbal encouragement appeared to significantly influence nieces/nephews’ self-esteem. Aunts were an important source of positive self-image. Sometimes this encouragement is a sense of being loved and cherished.

A Latina participant described her affectionate aunt: “My aunt is also demonstrative with her

love for me. Not only does she make herself available when I need her but she lets me know how much she cares with her tender hugs and kisses.” An African American nephew characterized aunts as increasing his sense of self-worth: “I think that is the great things about aunts: they make you feel good about yourself.” A European American woman reported how much her aunt increased her confidence in herself. She explained: “[my aunt] made me feel like queen of the world. I remember when she gave birth to my cousin Katie. I was only eight and she let me hold her.” By trusting in her niece to behave competently (holding the baby properly), this aunt demonstrated her faith in her niece at a very young age and made her feel special.

At the same time that they make nieces/nephews feel good about themselves, aunts provide encouragement to do and be more. An African American male student explained that:

My aunts love to “push” all of their nephews and nieces towards success by any means necessary. . . . They are also big advocates of higher education. They have pushed my whole life and constantly opened my awareness...

This participant attributed his educational success in part to his aunts’ “pushing” him to succeed, and he valued their role in making him more aware of his own potential. Likewise, an African American woman explained that

when no one [in] the family thought I should leave home and got [sic] to college, she supported the ideas of me living and recommended it as well. She [talked] with the rest of [my] family and gave them her thoughts on the situation.

Another African American niece also was grateful for her aunts’ encouragement of hard work and perseverance.

Both of my aunts stress education. . . They encourage me to be heard strong and assertive because black women are at the end of the social totem pole. . . They want me to work hard and not depend on anyone else to obtain my success. [my aunts] have instilled in

me that this success will not come easily and I must endure a struggle to appreciate it.

This gives me confidence in myself to continue this difficult academic [path].

Nonengagement. Perhaps one of the most intriguing findings of our study was the straightforward, unapologetic, and seemingly casual way in which nieces/nephews expressed the acceptability of a lack of closeness with one or more aunts. While examples of nonengagement recurred throughout the data, participants rarely stated that they perceived the lack of closeness as sad or a loss. Most just did not think it was an important issue, nor was it one to which they gave a great deal of concern. We propose that this is an important difference between aunting and mothering—in the dominant U.S. culture, reporting that one is not close to one’s mother generally would seem to require some explanation, and perhaps be accompanied by an expression of regret, sadness, or anger. No such feelings are needed for lack of closeness to an aunt. For example, a European American woman stated: “I’m not as close to [my aunts] as I am with my friends or cousins. They just kind of exist as relatives; as my grandparents or my second cousins do.” A Latina described her communication with an aunt as fairly impersonal:

We tend to discuss more general; “safe” topics rather than anything deeply personal.

This I probably because I don’t feel all that close to her and I don’t particularly want her advice, as her life is not really a role model for mine.

An Asian American woman reported that she does not enjoy interacting with her aunts, but does not characterize her relationship with them as “bad.”

I am not particularly close to any of my aunts, and do not look forward to talking to them.

When I do, it is mostly for practical reasons or to be sociable. . . . I am not really interested in talking with them. This is not because I have a bad relationship with them, but that tends to be how [it is].

The lack of closeness is just the way it is, something to be accepted and not worried over. The matter-of-fact attitude towards lack of closeness with some aunts was explained as due to lack of proximity that precluded frequent interaction. The relevance of geographic distance pervaded the written accounts. A European American man's explanation is representative:

[my aunt] lives in [city], right out of [city], so unfortunately as I was growing up I did not get many opportunities to see her, as I have been born and raised in [another state]. So as a result of this distance, my relationship with Aunt [name] is not a very close one.

Living close to an aunt did not necessarily entail greater emotional attachment. However, more frequent interactions with their aunts did seem to relate to students' perceptions of them as meaningful figures in their lives. While geographic distance recurred, no other consistent or cohesive reason was given for not being close to an aunt. Nieces and nephews listed personality traits they disliked, unfortunately events, and family patterns that lead to or perpetuated nonengagement, but such justifications were diverse, and we found no pattern among them.

Discussion

The themes reported here illustrate the roles (teacher, role model, confidante, savvy peer, and second mother) and practices (gifts/treats, family gatherings, encouragement, and nonengagement) of aunts as perceived by their nieces and nephews. Participants described how communication (including lack of communication) with aunts is integral to their development of self and in other ways have significantly impacted their relationships and their lives. While the relationship-specific schemas (the first level of cognitive processing in Koerner and Fitzpatrick's theory, 2002) necessarily varied among the nieces and nephews and their relationships with each of their aunts, central characteristics of a relationship-type schema for aunts (the second level of Koerner & Fitzpatrick's model) emerged. Taken together, the themes in our data point to four core aspects of a relational schema for aunts.

First, participants defined the aunt within the kin network but outside of the nuclear family unit. The biological, marital, and/or fictive (chosen) relationships that create both connection and “third party” perspectives for aunts and their nieces and nephews are part of what made aunts powerful aspects of their lives. That is, whether an aunt was wonderful, weird, dull, absent, or unpleasant, her position as nonparent and nonsibling is an integral part of her identity *as an aunt*. Occupying a niche outside the nuclear family as a third party enables the aunt to avoid the deep identification, responsibility, and vulnerability of the parent-child bond that (ideally) leads both to closeness and to children’s need to rebel to establish their own identity. Perceived vulnerability is a critical factor in individual’s decisions over what information to disclose to others (Petronio 2002, 2004; Petronio & Kovach, 1997). Thus, it follows that nieces and nephews are likely to feel less vulnerable with aunts than with their parents.

Aunts usually are free from the burden of imposing everyday rules and regulations, and nieces and nephews need not separate themselves from their aunt in order to establish their independence. Hence, aunts may make ideal confidants for nieces and nephews who do not wish to discuss sensitive issues with their parents, and fun and indulgent time spent with aunts does not threaten a child’s sense of having a stable and secure home. Likewise, lack of attention from an aunt generally is unlikely to wound a child, certainly not to the degree that rejection by a parent likely would, and a niece or nephew’s choice to not engage with a particular aunt was generally not problematic or worrisome for them. Thus to be structurally apart from the nuclear family was to enjoy a greater degree of flexibility in determining the relationship-specific schema for each aunt-niece/nephew relationship. There clearly exist multiple ways of successfully enacting roles and practices that fit within the boundaries of the aunt schemas. Unlike motherhood, the successful performance of which generally is narrowly circumscribed within the boundaries of a full-time nurturer of children (e.g., Rich, 1977; Trebilcot, 1984), the

aunt can be successful as an aunt in a multiplicity of ways. Enacting the role of nurturer (second mother) is acceptable for aunts, but so are visiting just once a year, mailing cards or gifts without regular personal visits, briefly interacting at family gatherings, or engaging in a fun, peer relationship.

Second, the benefits of the relationship are almost entirely unidirectional, focusing on the aunt as fulfilling the needs and desires of the niece or nephew, with no implicit or explicit reciprocity. Nieces and nephews told of learning skills from their aunts but not teaching their aunts, confiding in their aunts but not of being confidantes for them, receiving gifts and encouragement from aunts, but not of giving to them, etc. From college-age nieces' and nephews' perspective, the role of aunt is that of a giver rather than a receiver of care and support. This phenomenon is likely related to the age difference between nieces and nephews who participated in this study and their aunts; reciprocity may increase over time as nieces and nephews leave college, assume adult responsibilities (e.g., full-time work), and grow older.

Third, the aunt relationship type schema included the passing on of a wide range of knowledge from the aunt to the niece or nephew. This knowledge included specific skills (e.g., teaching a particular game, cooking techniques), religious beliefs, family lore and traditions, and broader knowledge of the world. Knowledge was transmitted through direct instruction and interpersonal conversations, but also more diffusely through role modeling, such as when nieces or nephews sought to emulate their aunts' career paths.

Fourth, when the previous two conditions were met (i.e., aunts focused on the niece/nephews' needs and desires, knowledge was passed on) the communication involved in the aunt-niece/nephew relationship fostered (and in turn was fostered by) a sense of closeness and connection to the aunt. The word "close" was invoked again and again to describe nieces and nephews' feelings toward their aunts. Many participants emphasized that a close and valued

relationship was maintained despite geographical distance, busy schedules, changing life stages, and other obstacles. Aunts with whom the niece or nephew was not engaged (whether by conscious choice or due to circumstances) were labeled “not close” relationships and accepted as such. The nonengagement of (some) aunts in (some of) their nieces’ and nephews’ lives should not be dismissed as a failure or an unacknowledged kinship tie. Limited, infrequent, or even no contact between aunts, nieces, and nephews is not necessarily negative or a violation of the aunt schema. Nieces and nephews stated their lack of involvement matter-of-factly, expressing no distress or self-consciousness about revealing the lack of a close tie with a given aunt.

We posit that these four aspects constitute an exploratory relationship-type schema that may be useful in understanding how nieces and nephews engage in cognitive processing regarding interactions with (and about) their aunts (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002). While there is variation among our participants, there were also several prominent themes that suggest that contemporary U.S. culture reflects some shared commonalities in the understandings of and enactment of aunting.

Limitations

This study was limited in several ways. Our participants included only a convenience sample of undergraduate students. Families whose members are enrolled in college may have different expectations for aunts than those whose members have not attended college, particularly poor and immigrant communities. Also, the age range of participants reflects one life stage—young adulthood. In some ways, this is an ideal group to study, for whom childhood was recent enough to be easily recalled and for whom going to college made shifts in familial relationships and roles more immediate and evident. However, future research should explore niece/nephew perspectives on aunts across the lifespan. Our findings also reflect predominantly European Americans and females. Clearly, more research is required to locate potential gender

and ethnic/racial group understandings of aunts. Finally, the study focused on communication with aunts solely from the perspective of their nieces and nephews. Of course, aunts' perspectives must be incorporated into our understanding of aunting roles, responsibilities, and relationships in order to construct a more complex rendering of these relationships. Ideally, matched pairs of aunts and nieces or nephews could shed light on how the perceptions of aunts reflect and/or vary from those of their nieces/nephews.

Implications and Conclusion

Several implications of our findings are relevant to research on communication within family and kinship relationships. First, aunts embody a great deal of flexibility in their enactment of acceptable roles and practices, and we acknowledge and celebrate flexibility within this gendered construct. Despite changing social gender roles, women's roles in the home and family too often are still circumscribed within narrow parameters of appropriate (feminine) behavior (e.g., Coontz, 2000; Wood, 2005). Aunts, nieces, and nephews are making choices of how to communicate and behave together, and we suggest that the great range of behavior reported here reflects openness to privileging the needs and desires of each niece/nephew and aunt dyad over those of a perceived social standard. While most of the communication and behavior reported here is hardly radical or unusual, the ability for nieces and aunts to choose a variety of ways of interacting with a variety of aunts reflects a truly transactional definition of a family relationship constituted in interaction rather than dictated by legal or biological ties (Noller & Fitzpatrick, 1993). Such a model of flexibility could be instructive or even inspirational to those adapting to new family forms, such as blended families (e.g., Braithwaite, Olson, Golish, Soukup, & Turman, 2001).

Our study also contributes to studies of extended families and non nuclear kinship. Kinkeeping work reported here reflects previous studies' findings that kinkeeping remains

predominantly women's work (e.g., di Leonardo, 1998; Dill, 1998). It also suggests that while the recent trend away from studying extended kin may reflect declining interest in maintaining kinship relationships, that may also not be the case. Johnson (2000) proposed that studies that find declining instances of kinkeeping may suffer from methodological flaws that focus on sustained interaction and thus fail to take into consideration contemporary means of maintaining close ties over large geographical distances and within increased nuclear family mobility. Our findings support that methodological critique, as our participants clearly recognized and valued their aunts' kinkeeping work (e.g., providing child care) and participation in kinship rituals, gatherings, and long distance communication (e.g., phone calls and e-mail).

Our third implication concerns the lack of reported reciprocity of nieces and nephews toward meeting their aunts' needs or desires. We believe that the almost complete lack of reciprocity reported is a function of the age of our participants. As college students, they appear to have not yet assumed the role expectations of adults, and remain self-focused, as is characteristic of children. Preliminary data analysis of interviews with aunts, nieces, and nephews indicates that at least some adult nieces and nephews feel an obligation and/or take pleasure in materially and emotionally giving to their aunts (Authors, 2004). Some research has shown cultural differences in this areas of kinship; in African American families, nieces and nephews were considered by their elderly aunts and uncles to be important family members and reported receiving assistance from them, while elderly Whites reported no expectations of assistance from their siblings' children (Johnson & Barer, 1995). Clearly, more research is needed on how aunt-niece/nephew relationships change over time.

Finally, we note that none of the participants mentioned popular culture images of aunts in their descriptions. Given Koerner and Fitzpatrick's (2002) position that cultural messages about relationships influence the formation and maintenance of family relationship schemas, we

had anticipated that nieces and nephews might compare their aunts to popular figures, perhaps claiming that an aunt was cruel like *Harry Potter*'s Aunt Petunia or very kind and maternal, like *Andy Griffith*'s Aunt Bee. Such was not the case, indicating that at least in this exploratory study (with no prompting) nieces and nephews made no conscious associations between their own experiences with aunts and those in the popular media. Future research should seek to determine what, if any, relationships may exist between relationship-type schemas for aunts and cultural messages about what it means to have or be an aunt.

Our findings support the value of inquiry into aunts, family relationship schemas, and kinkeeping. While the practices and functions of family communication and kinship may be changing, extended family such as aunts remain vital aspects of many people's lives. As Gerstel and Gallagher (1993) suggest, "contemporary extended family does not simply persist. Someone expends a great deal of time and energy to maintain it" (p. 598). That many aunts, nieces, and nephews are expending time and energy with each other is significant to our scholarly understanding of contemporary extended family networks and certainly warrants further study.

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- i. The research cited here is specific to adult sisters; more research is needed to understand the relationships between adult brothers and their siblings.