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Relational Landscapes

Oddly enough, aunting and uncling have little clear representation in the public discourse about families. The relationships of aunts and uncles with nieces and nephews are rarely discussed or examined in any comprehensive way. Yet relationships among siblings are among the more resilient, long lasting, and intimate of family ties, and with the introduction of children, the roles of aunt and uncle are added to the mix of bonds linking siblings and their partners or spouses.

Even the terms *aunting* and *uncing* are relatively new; they appeared only recently in the popular and academic literatures on families, and then amid some controversy. Among the early appearances of the terms was an article I wrote and submitted for review to a leading academic journal. The article was published in due time, but not without some spirited exchanges.¹ One of the reviewers questioned the terms aunting and uncling and lamented over their inclusion in the family lexicon, perhaps thinking they were unnecessary, unusual, or simply dreadful. The story illustrates the invisibility of the family work of aunts and uncles because specific terms to describe what they do are not in common usage. We have heretofore no common terms by which to describe our expectations of aunts and uncles or their typical activities and to differentiate them from the expectations and activities of other family members such as parents or grandparents. Terms such as aunting and uncling have a clear linguistic parallel with the term *parenting*, a word in common usage, but the former still sound foreign to some ears, as they did to the journal reviewer. The gap in our common language is suggestive of how the family positions of aunts and uncles are rarely discussed or acknowledged in any formal way. The family work of aunts and uncles, nieces and nephews is neatly hidden from public view and

¹ Milardo, 2005.

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Robert M. Milardo

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acknowledgment, although as we shall see, aunts and uncles routinely discuss, among themselves and their intimates, their relationships with nieces, nephews, and other family members, and their contributions to family work are varied, consequential, and apparently commonplace.

The invisibility of aunts, uncles, nieces, and nephews, as well as relationships among adult siblings more generally,² in the field of family studies contrasts sharply with the lived experience of actors who know quite clearly the importance of each to the other. Family members rather commonly talk among themselves, visit, phone, e-mail, circulate family photos in person or via Web sites, and celebrate holidays, birthdays, and anniversaries. In their contacts, they share news and gossip, and all of this occurs across households of grandparents, parents, adult siblings (some of whom are single), and close friends, including coworkers. To be sure, not all families are in frequent communication, but then not all exist as isolated households. One need only recall travel patterns on major North American holidays to confirm this.

In one curious instance, the everyday and academic discourse on families fuses implicit acknowledgment of what aunts and uncles typically do and how these positions are commonly understood. The Aunties and Uncles Co-operative Family Project Ltd. is a program developed to service disadvantaged children in Sydney, Australia.³ The program matches adult volunteers with children typically from single-parent families headed by women. The adult volunteers agree to spend one weekend per month with their assigned child and are expected to help build the child's self-esteem and confidence. Volunteers become mentors to parents as well. The program staff refers to volunteers as aunties and uncles and the children who are served by the program as nieces and nephews. At least some of the volunteers come to think of the families they are assigned to as extensions of their own families. That is, they regard themselves as aunts or uncles and the children as nieces or nephews. As one adult volunteer remarked, "We have become family and would continue to be, even if [the program] ceased to exist." At least some of the families served agree: "With all we receive from the auntie, we feel she and her family is like a family to us."⁴

The Aunties and Uncles Program is unusual in several respects. First, by labeling the volunteers as aunties and uncles, the organizers are implicitly identifying a meaning or definition of these family positions – aunts and uncles mentor children and children's parents. In doing so, the organizers

² For reviews of the adult sibling literature see Mauthner, 2002; Mikkelsen, 2006.

³ Wilkes, Beale, & Cole, 2006.

⁴ Wilkes et al., 2006, p. 299.

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recognize what family scholars have often overlooked – the integral role aunts and uncles can play in family life. Second, the organizers assume a common meaning to aunting and uncling that parents and children will recognize and in this way implicitly define a common culture of aunting and uncling. Third, the program facilitates the social construction of kinship, what we might call *chosen* or *fictive kin*.⁵ Volunteers may come to view themselves as chosen kin, or as uncles and aunts connected by virtue of their responsibilities to parents and children rather than ties of blood or marriage; serviced families may come to regard their assigned providers as being like kin. In this way, chosen kin are created through a deliberate intervention program that implicitly recognizes a definition of what it means to be an aunt or uncle and applies such labels to participants. In ordinary family life, the positions of aunt and uncle may be rooted in relational ties of blood or marriage, or they may be rooted in ties of friendship, shared expectations, and values. Just as we sometimes regard a close friend as *like a brother or sister*, we may come to regard such a friend as a chosen uncle or aunt. Fourth, in the same way that not all aunts and uncles are actively involved with their nieces and nephews, not all volunteers and serviced families come to view themselves as being like kin. Simply applying the label of auntie or uncle to a volunteer does not ensure a mentoring relationship will develop or that participants will come to actually think of each other as kin. This circumstance suggests that we refrain from *essentializing* aunting or uncling, or viewing the enactment of these social positions as entirely consistent and invariable. As we shall see throughout this book, there is great variety in the depth of relationships that develop among aunts, uncles, parents, and their children. Aunts and uncles can develop lifelong friendships with their nieces and nephews, just as they can fail to develop even the most superficial of relationships.

In the pages that follow, I review a select few literatures that help inform our interest in aunts and uncles. Research on kinship is sparse but most certainly helps provide essential background, and we can usefully draw on understandings developed by sociologists – and, to a lesser extent, evolutionary psychologists and anthropologists. I follow this initial literature review by introducing two core theoretical perspectives: the concept of intergenerational solidarity and ideas about generativity taken from developmental psychology. Each of these perspectives is cast within feminist concerns about the social construction of families, and each helps frame the study of aunts and uncles, suggesting initial research questions while

⁵ Carrington, 1999; Muraco, 2006; Spencer & Pahl, 2006.

enriching our developing understanding of the importance of aunts and uncles and the organization of family systems.

Family scholars and practitioners are rather late in coming to understand aunts and uncles and the varied ways they influence their siblings, the children of their siblings, and themselves. There are, of course, exceptions and some fine initial studies of aunts and uncles, nieces and nephews, as well as developing literatures on relationships among adult siblings, grandparents, and grandchildren. I consider these literatures as they informed the development of this project and the questions asked in *The Forgotten Kin*. First I consider the more general area of kinship.

UNDERSTANDING KINSHIP

The field of family studies has advanced substantially in the past several decades in terms of the major areas of inquiry, ways of thinking about those areas, and ways of gathering and analyzing data.⁶ Yet in some regards, the field is underdeveloped, and one instance of this underdevelopment is the literature on families and their involvement within networks of kin or other close associates.⁷ In a comprehensive review of the kinship literature, social anthropologist Coleen Johnson⁸ noted the near absence of a literature on relationships between family and kinship members, with the exception of the literatures on grandparenting and caregiving for the elderly. Johnson's evaluation is supported by a recent study of the mainstream scholarship on families.

Family scholars Karen Fingerman and Elizabeth Hay, in an analysis of research published on relationships, found that the vast majority of literature focuses on spouses, heterosexual romantic partners, parents, and children.⁹ The remaining forms of family relationships compose less than 10% of the published research, including relationships with grandparents, grandchildren, in-laws, stepparents and stepchildren, siblings, cousins, and other forms of personal associates such as family friends, neighbors, coworkers, and service providers. To be sure, relationships among primary partners (e.g., spouses) and parents and children are among the most important of personal relationships; family professionals and laypersons alike continually rate these two domains highly,¹⁰ and they are clearly consequential. It makes sense that intimate relationships among adult partners (e.g., spouses

⁶ Milardo, 2000.
⁷ Milardo & Helms-Erikson, 2000.
⁸ Johnson, 2000.
⁹ Fingerman & Hay, 2002.
¹⁰ Fingerman & Hay, 2002.

or unmarried couples living together) and relationships among parents and children should command our attention. However, relationships with grandparents are important for children, parents, and the grandparents.

Similarly, when volunteers are asked to rate the importance of relationships with collateral kin – aunts, uncles, nieces, and nephews – they rate these relationships as relatively important. For instance, Fingerman and Hay asked respondents in their study to rate the importance of a wide variety of kin and nonkin on a 10-point scale. Spouses, children, and parents are rated typically very high in importance with average ratings of 8 or higher, siblings about 7.5, and collateral kin somewhat less in importance, with average scores in the range of 5 to 7.¹¹ Yet these scholars find that research on siblings represented less than 5% of available research, with most of that focused on children, approximately 1.5% focused on grandparents, and less than 0.1% on collateral kin.¹² The imbalance of what people consider important in their lives and what social scientists tend to study is clear. This study is designed to correct that imbalance, however modestly.

The significance of a wider tracing of kin is apparent when we question beliefs about a sense of obligation due individual family members. What, for example, are the rules governing relationships with kin, and collateral kin in particular? In times of family crisis, do adults generally feel compelled to provide relatives with comfort or financial support; for that matter, on occasions of family celebrations such as anniversaries or birthdays, do adults feel compelled to provide relatives with gifts or to visit? Felt obligations to kin can be strong or weak, consistent across a variety of relationships, or relationship-specific and stronger for some relationships than others. Felt obligations can be consistent across people (e.g., nearly all people agree about a sense of obligation to particular types of kin) or relatively inconsistent, in which case individuals are free to act in ways they feel appropriate. Family sociologists Alice and Peter Rossi explored these questions in a now-classic study of families across three generations.¹³ They asked a large and representative sample of people living in the greater Boston area to estimate the degree of obligation they felt to provide comfort, money, gifts, or visitation to a variety of kin. The obligation to provide support was rated for

¹¹ Fingerman & Hay, 2002.
¹² These figures are best interpreted as estimates because although the number of articles Fingerman and Hay (2002) surveyed was large (n = 1,000), the number of journals was limited to 6, all of which were published in North America, and without the inclusion of gerontological journals where studies of extended kin may appear more regularly, although certainly not frequently.
¹³ Rossi & Rossi, 1990.

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a variety of kinfolk on the usual multipoint scale, ranging from 0 (*no sense of obligation*) to 10 (*a very strong sense of obligation*). From this manner of questioning, we can judge variations in felt obligation to various kin relations, and from this infer a normative structure and perhaps glean some idea of the importance of kin. Parents' sense of obligation to children can be compared with that of grandparents, aunts, and uncles; conversely we can compare a sense of obligation by adult children to care for their siblings, parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles. Of course, understanding normative beliefs about obligations to kin does not guarantee a relationship will ensue. Much like close friendship, for instance, relationships among siblings are in part the result of personal discretion, values, and opportunity and, in this way, the consequence of social or relational constructions.¹⁴

In general, respondents feel obligated to provide support for kin. Mean obligation ratings fall in the range of 6 to 7, indicating fairly high levels of felt obligation.¹⁵ Average ratings to provide a kin relation with financial aid, comfort, a gift, or visit were all in this range; the forms of aid are highly interrelated. Kin that evoke a strong obligation to visit are also the kin who evoke an obligation to exchange a present or provide financial aid in a crisis. This does not mean all kin are rated in similar ways. Parents evoke a greater sense of obligation than cousins. We can use this information to examine how aunts and uncles compare with other kin.

As we might expect, people generally feel a strong sense of obligation to parents and to children. Parents and children are rated 8 or higher for most items.¹⁶ In times of crisis, we regard providing comfort or financial aid to parents and children a distinct obligation; in times of celebration, most regard providing gifts or visiting an obligation. Following parents and children are a core of kin members including siblings, grandparents, and grandchildren, who are relatively high in levels of felt obligation.

Several intriguing patterns arise from these descriptive comparisons of felt obligation toward nieces, nephews, aunts, and uncles. Siblings evoke a stronger level of obligation to act in supportive ways than the children of siblings (i.e., nieces and nephews). Participants are more inclined to provide support to their siblings than they are to the children of their siblings. This suggests that close ties among siblings may not entirely translate to close ties between siblings and their nieces and nephews.

Close friends can evoke significant obligations to provide support that in several instances exceed those to nieces, nephews, aunts, uncles, and

¹⁴ Hansen, 2005.¹⁵ Rossi & Rossi, 1990, table 4.7, p. 173.¹⁶ Rossi & Rossi, 1990, table 4.7, p. 173.

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cousins. This finding is yet another indicator that close friends and close kin evoke similar expectations. There is one exception in that nieces and nephews, as well as aunts and uncles, evoke a stronger gift-giving norm than friends. Individuals are apparently more inclined to acknowledge an aunt or nephew's birthday, or other cause for celebration, by exchanging gifts. Perhaps exchanging gifts serves to solidify a family connection, however symbolically, without requiring a level of intimacy consistent with providing comfort or of geographic proximity consistent with permitting visiting.¹⁷

Along with a general expectation to provide aid to nieces and nephews, there is also a parallel expectation to provide uncles and aunts with aid when needed, including financial aid. This suggests that over time, the relationships of aunts and uncles with nieces and nephews are balanced, or at least not entirely one-sided. In contrast, others have suggested that exchanges of support, including affection, are stronger downward (e.g., from parent to child or uncle to nephew) than upward (e.g., from nephew to uncle).¹⁸ We feel more obligation toward our children, grandchildren, nieces, and nephews than they perhaps feel toward us. The varied findings regarding the reciprocal nature of relationships among collateral kin, or grandparents and grandchildren, may well depend on the ages of the participants. Whereas younger nieces and nephews may be less inclined and less able to provide support for aunts and uncles, older nieces and nephews may be more inclined and able to do so.¹⁹ At any one point in the life span, relationships among kin may appear asymmetrical, whereas over the long term, they are more apt to be balanced.

In addition, kin relationships vary in terms of the flexibility of the norms ascribed to them. For instance, we expect parents to support their children with few exceptions. Within the Rossi and Rossi's multigenerational study, this is reflected in a relatively high mean score on each of the measures of felt obligation (a rating of 8 or higher), as well as a relatively low range of scores within the parent group (less than half a point). Obligations to parents and children are high and uniform.

Some of the highest ranges of scores appear among the two groups of most interest: (a) aunts and uncles and (b) nieces and nephews. Apparently, on average people feel a considerable sense of obligation to provide for their collateral kin, but there is significant variation, with some reporting a much greater sense of obligation and others a much lower sense of obligation. This finding suggests that there is substantial individual discretion in providing

¹⁷ Rossi & Rossi, 1990.

¹⁸ Bengtson, 2001; Bianchi, 2006.

¹⁹ Schnieder & Cottrell, 1975.

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support for nieces and nephews or aunts and uncles, and more so than we find among other kin relations, with the possible exception of relations among stepkin.²⁰

Relationships with kin vary systematically in other ways, and especially in regard to gender differences. As we might expect, gender plays an important part in understanding relationships among kin, and women generally report more knowledge of kin, a greater sense of obligation to kin, and more direct involvement. At all ages, women report larger networks of kin, and they are able to name larger numbers of kin than men.²¹ Men and women seem to know similar numbers of close kin (i.e., grandparents, parents, grandchildren, and children), but on average women know a broader array of more distant kin, including aunts, uncles, nieces, and nephews, as well as more of the potentially vast array of cousins (e.g., grandparents' cousins, parents' first cousins, personal first cousins, first cousins' children, grandchildren, and so on), and in-laws. In one inquiry, the average number of kinfolk known by women was 183, whereas for men the average was 135.²² These figures are interesting because they illustrate the typical gender difference, but also temper any conclusions we make. Men on average are not completely isolated from kin. They may know fewer kin than women on average, but they still know many, and there are some men who are apt to be actively involved with kin. The issue is important because when men are more involved with kin, they tend to report higher levels of marital satisfaction, as do their wives. Involvement with kin is in some way connected to the particulars of marital quality.²³

Comparatively, in most cases, women report a greater sense of felt obligation toward kin than men and a greater sense of obligation to provide for their nieces and nephews, as well as their elderly aunts and uncles.²⁴ This sense of obligation is paired with a greater knowledge of kin and more activity. Sisters, for instance, can name more kin than brothers.²⁵ Women visit with kin more often, especially with other female kin,²⁶ and they are more likely to include aunts and uncles in their networks of intimates and near intimates.²⁷ These simple facts illustrate the greater salience of kin in the daily lives of women.

²⁰ Sarkisian, 2006.²¹ Schnieder & Cottrell, 1975.²² Schnieder & Cottrell, 1975.²³ Burger & Milardo, 1995; Helms, Crouter, & McHale, 2003; Perry-Jenkins & Salamon, 2002.²⁴ Rossi & Rossi, 1990, table 4.14, p. 193.²⁵ Salmon, 1999; Salmon & Daly, 1996.²⁶ Gerstel & Gallagher, 1996; Rainie, Fox, Harrigan, Lenhart, & Spooner, 2000; Schnieder & Cottrell, 1975.²⁷ Wellman & Wortley, 1989.

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Women in their roles as mothers, daughters, wives, and sisters serve to connect family members. They are central in encouraging men to develop closer relationships with their own kin, encouraging relationships among children and grandparents, and encouraging relationships between their siblings (aunts and uncles) and their children. Women are in many regards *kin keepers*,²⁸ key figures in the development and routine maintenance of family relationships within and across households. The significance of women as kin keepers is suggested in the reflections of men and women regarding who is considered important when growing up. Grandmothers and aunts are likely to be cited as more important to respondents than grandfathers and uncles, and maternal grandmothers and aunts are the closest of all.²⁹ This attention to kin keeping suggests mothers and sisters, relative to fathers and brothers, are more central in encouraging relationships among aunts and uncles with nieces and nephews.

Of course, kinship is not the sole domain of family sociologists; anthropologists have long recognized the variable importance of kinship in framing the social, economic, political, and religious organization of family groups and the communities in which they live.³⁰ They have extended considerable effort in understanding complex issues of lineage and descent (i.e., who is considered kin and with what significance), postmarital residence patterns (e.g., where couples are expected to reside in relation to one partner's or the other's kin), and the organization of family households (e.g., who lives with whom).

Largely absent from this impressive accounting of the world's array of conventions regarding kinship and their significance for the organization of societies is an accounting of aunting and uncling in the daily life of families as well as a recognition that kinship bonds are inherently both personal and relational in nature in three important regards. Aunts are aunts only because of the presence of their nieces and nephews, and conversely. Second, people almost universally fudge who is considered kin and who is not.³¹ At times, and perhaps routinely, close friends who are unrelated by blood or marriage come to be viewed as aunts, uncles, nieces, or nephews.³² Conventions may provide some guidelines, but essentially relationships are socially constructed and based on a degree of personal discretion. We develop close relationships with people we like and who like us, and aunts, uncles,

²⁸ Leach & Braithwaite, 1996; Rosenthal, 1985.

²⁹ Dubas, 2001; Monserud, 2008; Schnieder & Cottrell, 1975, p. 197; Silverstein & Marengo, 2001.

³⁰ Parkin & Stone, 2004.

³¹ Faubion, 2001.

³² Carrington, 1999; Muraco, 2006; Oswald, 2002; Spencer & Pahl, 2006.

nieces, and nephews are no exception. This also means that some kin, including aunts and uncles, may not be acknowledged or readily identified as such. Third, relationships among aunts, uncles, nieces, and nephews develop (or fail to develop) in a family context involving multiple relationships and households. Parents, grandparent, other siblings, and their partners can all influence the relationships that develop. To be sure, family members are notoriously opinionated, their relationships both potentially supportive and potentially problematic.³³

More recently, evolutionary psychologists have begun examining kinship issues in attempts to better understand the biological basis for kinship selection. In essence, by helping those to whom one is sure of being related, we advance the replication of our own genetic identity.³⁴ From an evolutionary perspective, this means that individuals should invest more in the offspring of daughters and sisters because they can be more assured of being related. Among primates and humans, for instance, there is a strong preference for associating with maternally related kin.³⁵ In a series of studies, all of which are based on college students, living distance is unrelated to the frequency of visiting grandparents, aunts, and uncles. Although students and their parents generally live closer to paternal relatives, including grandparents and the siblings of fathers, they have more contact with maternal relatives, including both visiting and phoning, a finding that is generally consistent across a variety of research. Maternal grandmothers, for instance, experience more contact with their grandchildren relative to their paternal counterparts,³⁶ and grandchildren report being closer to maternal than paternal grandparents.³⁷

Although the evolutionary perspective is one of the more controversial theories of human behavior,³⁸ this research is suggestive of the importance of collateral kin and the greater importance women place on relationships with kin. We can hypothesize that aunts and uncles are more likely to develop relationships with the offspring of sisters regardless of how near or far they live, that aunts should develop closer relationships with nieces and nephews than uncles, and that female kinfolk (mothers, grandmothers, and sisters) are more likely to encourage relationships among aunts, uncles, and children. Perhaps evolutionary factors such as natural selection and a preference for investing in the offspring of daughters and sisters have some influence, although I wonder if social constructions such as gender and

³³ Fingerman, Hay, & Birditt, 2004.
³⁴ Harvey & Wenzel, 2006; Kenrick & Trost, 1997.
³⁵ Stone, 2000.
³⁶ Cox, 2003.
³⁷ Dubas, 2001; Monserud, 2008.
³⁸ Harvey & Wenzel, 2006.