THE FORGOTTEN KIN

Although much is written about contemporary families, the focus is typically limited to marriage and parenting. In this path-breaking assessment of families, sociologist Robert M. Milardo demonstrates how aunts and uncles contribute to the daily lives of parents and their children. Aunts and uncles complement the work of parents, sometimes act as second parents, and sometimes form entirely unique brands of intimacy grounded in a lifetime of shared experiences. *The Forgotten Kin* explores how aunts and uncles support parents, buffer the relationships of parents and children, act as family historians, and develop lifelong friendships with parents and their children. This is the first comprehensive study of its kind, detailing the routine activities of aunts and uncles, the features of families that encourage closeness, how aunts and uncles go about mentoring nieces and nephews, and how adults are mentored by the very children for whom they are responsible. This book aims to change the public discourse on families and the involvement of the forgotten kin across generations and households.

Robert M. Milardo is Professor of Family Relations at the University of Maine. He has published extensively in the field of family studies in leading journals and books and is currently editor of the *Journal of Family Theory & Review* owned by the National Council on Family Relations, of which he was elected a Fellow in 2005. He is the former associate editor of the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* and the former editor of the *Journal of Marriage and Family*. Professor Milardo is active in the developing science of personal relationships and served as the first president of the International Association for Relationship Research. His interviews and commentaries on family issues have appeared in a wide array of venues, including *Psychology Today*, the *Guardian*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Post*, *USA Today*, and a variety of local and regional media.

The Forgotten Kin

AUNTS AND UNCLES

Robert M. Milardo
University of Maine

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,
São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo

Cambridge University Press
32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521516761

First published 2010

Printed in the United States of America

A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data

Milardo, Robert M.
The forgotten kin : aunts and uncles / Robert M. Milardo.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-521-51676-1 (hardback)
1. Aunts – Family relationships. 2. Uncles – Family relationships. 3. Nieces – Family relationships. 4. Nephews – Family relationships. I. Title.
HQ759.94.M55 2010
306.87–dc22 2009037298

ISBN 978-0-521-51676-1 Hardback

CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

PREFACE

> [My aunt and I] spent hours together at her country house, weeding, watering, planting. No question of mine was too repetitious or unworthy. "No," she smilingly answered once, "peat moss is not a person."
>
> Paula DiPerna, 1998

A STORY FOUND

I was raised in a typical Italian-American family. It was large and sociable. Family gatherings were frequent, offered occasions to visit and for children to play, and always centered on food and talk. Our home was near town, and within a short drive were the homes of my mother's six sisters and two brothers and my father's sister and three brothers. The sisters talked daily; the brothers played cards every week. Nearly all of my aunts and uncles, as well as my father, worked in what Eisenhower called the nation's "military industrial complex," although I'm not sure my family thought of it in this way, and they looked at me kind of oddly when I brought it up one Christmas. I don't think I was an especially difficult child, certainly not any more difficult than my brothers or cousins, but I did at the time think my parents were occasionally, and without justification or provocation, entirely unreasonable. At these times, I visited Aunt Bea with my list of complaints. Bea is my mother's youngest sister. She had five daughters, one son, and a husband who played the clarinet. Bea listened, acknowledged, and encouraged, and then she would convince me that my parents were wonderful people, kind and generous, and I returned home comforted. I imagine my parents were a bit relieved to have their youngest son out of the house for a day.

My earliest recollection of an uncle occurred one summer evening. I had only recently gotten a new Schwinn bicycle. It was red with blue and white trim. I was speeding around our home, failed to make a sharp turn, went

airborne, and landed in a heap in the midst of a hedgerow that separated the front lawn from the sidewalk. At the time, Uncle Tom happened to be walking over for a visit, reached into the hedge, lifted me up, and carried me around the house and into the kitchen, where first aid was administered, consisting of multiple bandages and Bactine. Recently I saw my Uncle Tom, who is now elderly but still has the same wiry smile. (Uncle Tom knows about the military industrial complex. I'm sure of it.) Tom has always asked how I was and how work was going. "Do you like teaching?" he queried, and I replied in the affirmative. "Good," he replied, "as long as you like it. That's what's important." I would be remiss in suggesting our conversations were short-lived, as often they were not. My uncles and aunts were each in their own way remarkable, intelligent, articulate people. But I would be equally remiss not to acknowledge that our conversations always began with an expression of interest and usually followed with a measure of support. This is not to say that they were not sometimes critical – they were – but the wellspring was always clear. I had a passel of second mothers and fathers who were encouraging, supportive, interested, playful, and always there. There were exceptions. There always are. Uncle so-and-so was nice enough when he was sober, but at times he had difficulty managing his intake of alcohol, and at such times became abusive. From my parents' perspectives, although I never had the opportunity to ask them directly, I suspect they would view their siblings as part occasional irritation, part fun, and in larger part supportive of themselves, their parenting, and their children. But most important for my parents, their siblings were central to the mix of ingredients that defined what it meant to be a family.

I did not intend to write a book about aunts and uncles or their nieces and nephews, at least not initially. I began with a simple interest in uncovering instances of men other than fathers in caregiving roles. My own uncles were positive influences in my life, and I simply wondered whether uncles were important in the lives of others. This was in the late fall of 2001. The University of Maine, my academic home for more than two decades, offered a one-year leave from teaching, advising, and other routine duties to initiate a new program of research. Jan Pryor, my friend and colleague, to whom I will be forever grateful, encouraged me to accept a visiting research appointment at Victoria University in Wellington, New Zealand. The appointment in a psychology department brimming with talent included a stipend, an apartment with cleaning service, and an office situated in a city with more cafés per capita than any other city in the world, including San Francisco. I packed immediately.

Sometimes interest and opportunity collide, and in this case, it was a remarkably smooth entry into a new research venture. I began with a handful of questions and arranged interviews with a small group of uncles and nephews in New Zealand. What do the relationships of uncles and nephews look like? Are uncles important to nephews, especially supportive, but possibly, occasionally critical? How do uncles understand their responsibilities to their nephews, or their siblings, the parents of nephews? Do they routinely complement the work of parents or occasionally act as surrogate parents, especially in cases in which one parent is absent? In my own experience, uncles were important adult role models. Most I emulated, and others suggested lifestyle choices to avoid, like alcoholism. In my conversations with nephews, I asked how they regarded their uncles and what qualities they especially admired, as well as those they did not admire. The stories these uncles and nephews told were rich descriptions of their relationships and their families, richer than I had ever imagined.

I continued the project on returning to Maine and interviewed yet another group of uncles and nephews. As the project grew, it became clear that I couldn't stop with uncles and nephews. I thought of my own aunts, and their wonderfully warm, quirky, inquisitive selves. Some were full-time homemakers, like my own mother; some combined childrearing and careers; some were single and childless. They all voted, which is to say they shared a common feminist sensibility. On Easter Sundays during the formative years of my childhood, we gathered together as was the family's tradition. My uncles wore suits, gaudy silk ties, and shiny wingtips. The aunts wore skirted suits, stylish hats, and matching gloves. From this I learned the importance of the ensemble, and the ensemble of this family included aunts as well as uncles.

In the subsequent year, I began interviewing aunts and nieces about their relationships. In all I interviewed 104 aunts, uncles, nieces, and nephews and accumulated more than 80 hours of recorded interviews, and many hundreds of pages of text wherein those interviews were transcribed. This book is the story of the participants, their relationships, and their families.

As social science projects go, 104 participants is a relatively small number of people and certainly unrepresentative of any known group. Qualitative research, which is often based on in-depth interviews, excels at representing a few people well, in their own words and rooted in their own experience, and suggests the range of possibilities that may further characterize larger groups. Nonetheless, I selected participants with an eye toward maximizing the diversity of the families and relationships they represented. I wanted

to discover varieties of family relationships – and especially the forms of relationships among aunts and nieces, and uncles and nephews – that are potentially widespread.

The sample comprises largely nominate white families and includes a number of Franco-Americans, the largest minority group in Maine, and smaller numbers of Native Americans, Asians, Pacific Islanders, and Hispanics, as well as gays and lesbians. It does not include Black Americans, nor does it represent an array of other groups central to the mix of North American families – or New Zealanders for that matter. Overall the aunts, uncles, nieces, and nephews described a range of relationships, some close and some relatively distant, and they did so with remarkable consistency and nuance.

Although aunts, uncles, nieces, and nephews occasionally reported disagreements and conflict, none described a relationship that was highly conflictual or abusive. Nonetheless, uncles, relative to other family members, are a common perpetrator of the sexual abuse of nieces and, more rarely, nephews.[1] In the effort to understand the contributions of uncles, as well as other family members, I do not wish to overlook the very destructive ways in which men sometimes prey on children. Nevertheless, in the mix of relationships described here, there is little question of a decidedly generative culture of aunting and uncling.

The book is written for a broad audience, including researchers, specialists in family policy, family counselors, college teachers and their undergraduates, and graduate students who are in some way interested in moving beyond the nuclear family unit and expanding the realm of family to include the study of multiple households and issues of kinship and friendship, where the culture of aunting and uncling practically resides.

Curiously, family scholarship is surprisingly lacking in this regard. The study of families is largely restricted to relationships among parents, parents and children, and siblings, typically in childhood and adolescence with relatively little directed at relationships among adult siblings.[2] Studies of kinfolk are limited to the contributions of grandparents.[3] But aunts and uncles are of a different generation, uniquely influential, and largely forgotten. In a review of 10 leading introductory family textbooks, I found no reference to aunts, uncles, nieces, or nephews. This is the first book to address the relationships of aunts and uncles in depth.

[1] Chiroro, Viki, Frodi, Muromo, & Tsigah, 2006; Margolin, 1994; Russell, 1986.
[2] Robertson, 1995; Walker, Allen, & Connidis, 2005.
[3] C. L. Johnson, 2000.

By omitting aunts and uncles from our inquiries of families, we inadvertently simplify how families actually operate across households, and we omit an important area of some people's individual lives – one that influences their personal development and their understanding of themselves, as well as the remarkable ways they can influence their siblings and their siblings' children. To fully understand families – when they are distressed and when they are resilient – we need to know about how they are actually lived and experienced. The view of two parents raising young children independently is largely mythic.[4] For many, families are not self-contained private enterprises, tidy households largely closed off from community; given the realities of merging childrearing with dual-worker families, or single-parent families, private enterprise is hardly an option.[5] Rather, families are organized across multiple households. A sister learns of her niece's academic accomplishments not directly from her niece but from her older sister, who happened to call their brother, father to the niece. A simple detail about a niece travels across several households, each maintained by a sibling, before finally arriving at the doorstep of an aunt, and in many instances such chains of communication often include grandmothers. And as many parents know, nieces and nephews can be important conduits of information about adolescent children. A mother, and aunt, learns from a niece that her son has a new romantic partner, for instance. Nieces and nephews are influenced by their aunts and uncles, and, just as important, they influence their aunts and uncles. Like parenting, the effects of aunting and uncling are bidirectional. The organization of families across households describes a configuration of highly interdependent family units inclusive of adults and children. Articulating the relationships of aunts and uncles changes the way we understand families.

I hope this book will be of interest to aunts and uncles, nieces and nephews, who may find experiences and voices similar to their own. The participants often commented on how being a part of the study altered their views of themselves and family members, or otherwise sharpened their understandings of the importance of a particular aunt, niece, uncle, or nephew. Many participants were quick to point out the unusualness of my queries. Aunt Sylvia explained, "There aren't too many people like you who come around asking 50 questions [about aunting]." As participants told their stories, perhaps they came to understand their families, their siblings and parents, and their uncles and aunts more deeply. Perhaps readers will as well. Unquestionably, and if nothing else, this book demonstrates how

[4] Smith, 1993.

[5] Hansen, 2005.

aunts and uncles are important in the lives of children – how aunts and uncles are important to parents and how aunts and uncles are, just as importantly, influenced by the children for whom they are responsible. Whether a researcher or family professional, teacher or student, aunt or uncle, niece or nephew, or simply an interested party, I hope you will find the stories participants shared with me as intriguing and enlightening as I did.

A READER'S GUIDE TO THE FORGOTTEN KIN

The book is organized into nine chapters that can be read sequentially or not, depending on the reader's interests. Chapter 1 frames this inquiry within the field of family studies. At the outset, families are viewed broadly as configurations of multiple interdependent households and relationships. The chapter details what we know from the limited available literature on aunts and uncles, as well as summarizing literatures that indirectly inform our explorations, including research on adult siblings, grandparents, and, more generally, kinship, and on the typical patterns of gendered differences that consistently appear in the realm of relationships with kin. This material is paired with a dynamic view of families as socially constructed enterprises, an understanding of intergenerational solidarity, and a focus on the concept of generativity, which proves to be central to an understanding of the relationships of aunts and uncles with nieces and nephews, as well as their parents. The chapter questions the common belief that contemporary families are isolated nuclear units and suggests that, for some families, ties to kin are generative, active, and influential.

Chapter 2 describes how the study was conducted, the questions that were asked, and the methods used to distill essential findings. It provides detailed descriptions of the participants in terms of their ages and family backgrounds. This material is useful for placing the current study within a context and suggesting where and for whom the findings may be generalized. The chapter also includes a lexicon or quick guide to the participants by name (actually pseudonym) and key characteristics such as age and marital status. Throughout the book, readers may find the quick guides to the *dramatis personae* useful in understanding their essential life circumstances.

Chapter 3 explores basic features of the relationships of aunts and nieces, uncles and nephews, describing how often they visit, what they do together, and how access to new mediums such as cell phones and e-mail influence their relationships. The chapter details how families negotiate geographic distances that separate them and continue their relationships, how they

stay informed of one another's circumstances, and how sometimes they establish distinctly close ties. We detail the array of social and personal factors that influence the closeness of aunts and uncles with nieces and nephews, including the all-important relationships between adult siblings, or the parents of nieces and nephews, as well as personal features of aunts and uncles, such as childlessness, or highly regarded qualities such as "being fun" or holding strong family values. Each of these realms of family experience illuminate when aunts and uncles are apt to develop influential relationships with their nieces and nephews.

Aunts and uncles described their roles in a variety of ways, often seeing themselves as adjuncts to parents, as third parties with unique perspectives, or, in some cases, as surrogate parents. Chapter 4 explores each of these roles. The chapter first considers how aunts and uncles view the importance of their relationships in general terms, how such relationships change over time, and how aunts and uncles supplement parents, act as objective third parties, or act as surrogate parents, often when biological parents are unavailable or entirely absent. Parental separation and divorce is an important factor that can influence relations among extended family members; aunts and uncles can function effectively in helping children come to understand their parents' marital struggles.

Chapters 5 through 7 explore the relationships of aunts and uncles in greater detail by addressing the question of how such relationships are generative. Generativity, or a concern for future generations as it is typically defined, can be thought of in terms of four essential components of generative families, communities, and cultures. These essential components include mentors, meaning keepers or family historians, intergenerational buffers, and fellow travelers or friends. *Mentors* are the practical guides, individuals who model action, teach skills, provide guidance or support, and generally facilitate the advancement of others. Direct mentoring of nieces and nephews, a cornerstone of generative action, occurred in nearly all areas of personal and relational life. Chapter 5 describes how aunts and uncles actively mentor their younger charges, how they express support, and how they are occasionally critical. In some areas, aunts and uncles differed in the focus of their mentoring. For instance, aunts and nieces were more likely to discuss relationships with romantic partners and issues regarding sexual activity, and they did so in greater depth than uncles and nephews. The chapter also discusses how aunts and uncles mentor parents by simply providing a listening ear or, at other times, providing direct support for parents who are dealing with sensitive issues regarding their children; chief among these issues was the sexual activity of adolescents. Finally the chapter

explores the issue of *reverse mentoring* – occasions when nieces and nephews mentored their aunts and uncles, for instance, by offering advice in dealing with other family members. Although generativity is usually viewed as "a concern for future generations," in fact generative actions are frequently lived and expressed among all generations.

Chapter 6 explores *intergenerational buffering* as a form of family work. Aunts and uncles act as buffers by mediating the occasional disputes between family members, acting as partisan supporters or critics, sharing knowledge about family members without qualification, and otherwise enacting their third-party perspectives as nieces and nephews seek to better understand their parents or other family members. Aunts and uncles participate in family work by fostering a sense of family togetherness. Building a sense of family togetherness occurs directly as aunts and uncles encourage nieces and nephews to be appreciative of their family members or through the organization of family visits or reunions; it occurs more indirectly as aunts and uncles share stories about family members, particularly the parents of nieces and nephews, and in doing so realize the family's unique history.

In Chapter 7, we explore how family relationships occasionally take on the character of a close friendship. Some aunts and nieces, uncles and nephews, report exceptionally close relationships in which they share similar interests and simply enjoy one another's company. Like a good friendship, their relationships are often marked by reciprocity, mutual support, advice giving, and occasional criticism. They are people who have known each other for long periods of time (sometimes since the birth of a niece or nephew), shared nearly all major life transitions, and readily expressed the expectation that their relationships would continue well into the future. Their friendships are unique and irreplaceable because of their shared biographies founded in family ties. For some aunts and uncles, the friendships that develop with nieces and nephews are redemptive in that they alter the course of a life. For instance, a recovering alcoholic uncle finds new meaning in his life as a result of a developing relationship with his nephew. In helping her niece, an aunt finds that she comes to understand her own life in new ways.

Chapter 8 centers on the social reproduction of aunting and uncling as we examine how aunts and uncles understand their roles, whether they talk about aunting and uncling and with whom and to what effect, and how their personal experience of their own aunts and uncles informs their current relationships with nieces and nephews. Overall we find considerable continuity across generations in the expression of aunting and uncling.

The concluding chapter summarizes what this book has to offer in how we go about thinking about families, especially the contributions of aunts and uncles. Given the limited research on families as social configurations of multiple households, it is not so surprising that many of the key findings were previously unanticipated and unreported. We do not know how often the relationships of aunts and uncles with nieces and nephews are realized, but we do now know that when they are active, they are fundamental in building strong, resilient, healthy families.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are multitudes of people I should thank because they, knowingly or not, influenced the production of this book. Katherine, a well-regarded qualitative researcher and feminist scholar, is among the unknowingly influential. I mentioned to her in November 2001 that I was thinking about interviewing uncles. The sum total of her response was an enthusiastic "Great!" and I thought that an interesting comment both in its brevity, clarity, and fit. I hope it was also a prophetic comment.

My aunts and uncles had no idea I would eventually write about them, however obliquely, although they have been present throughout this production. In some regards, they provided the initial impetus for the project, and some of my initial ideas about the focus of interview questions were based on my experiences with them. You will see mention of them along the way; they provide the pseudonyms for many of the aunts and uncles I interviewed, as did my cousins for the nieces and nephews.

John Coltrane inspired much of the writing over a period of three years and plays again today, mostly *A Love Supreme,* first released when I was ambling the halls of high school in search of a beat in 1965. And as much as I am inspired by *Bringing It All Back Home*, Dylan's fifth studio album released in the same year, I am not able to write to it as it is more of a sing-along kind of mix, with the likes of "Subterranean Homesick Blues." I can't sing along to Coltrane, which explains in part why jazz is a perfect accompaniment to silent thought and active keyboards. While we are on the subject of Subterranean, I should mention my parents, who never objected to either hard pop, free jazz, or shock folk, and for this, as well as many things, including introducing me to their siblings, I thank them. My nieces Nicole and Angela and my nephew Seb are spectacular people and provided my first experiences in the sheer fun of uncling, with the occasions brought

about by my brothers Nicholas and Sebastian and their partners, Virginia and Peg.

Rosemary Blieszner, Heather Helms, Michael Johnson, and Stephen Marks have been supportive of this project throughout. They are the very best of colleagues, brilliant scholars, thoughtful in all regards, and appreciative of the importance of understanding and advocating for people and their relationships.

This project began in earnest in Wellington, New Zealand, at Victoria University, where I was a resident visiting scholar in the School of Psychology. Jan Pryor, my wonderful colleague and friend, hosted the visit. Jan now serves both as the director of the Roy McKenzie Centre for the Study of Families housed at Victoria University and as Commissioner of Families for the government of New Zealand.

Janice Bacon is the administrative assistant in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at my home institution, the University of Maine, and was instrumental in solving the dilemma of the week, usually accompanied by a smile, if not an outright chortle. Ruth-Ellen Cohen is a journalist who managed to pen several articles on the project over the years, one of which appeared on the front page of the *Bangor Daily News*, which I thought spectacular. These articles helped gain volunteers for the project. My thanks to the many talented undergraduate and graduate students who helped with the project in a variety of ways, including Sarah Beaudette, Sarah Bourget, Jennifer Downs, Laurie Farkas, Meghan Hannington, Nika Landry, Meredith McIntire, Rebecca Riccio, Amy Skelton, Katie Vigue, and Terry Watson.

My partner, Renate Klein, inspires, quips, and generally comments on this American life, and for this I irregularly thank her. Perhaps I should do so more often.

To the aunts, uncles, nieces, and nephews who allowed me to pry, I thank you for the inspiration and all that you do.