

5

The “Other” Women in Family Life

Aunt/Niece/Nephew Communication

Patricia J. Sotirin and Laura L. Ellingson

Aunts are familiar characters in personal and popular family dramas. They may be beloved or reviled, intimately close or aloof and distant, central in family networks or rarely seen outliers, related by blood or legal ties, or unrelated except by friendship. These rich variations coupled with the gendered identity of the aunt role makes the aunt/niece/nephew relationship, or the aunting relationship as we refer to it, a rich and fascinating focus for scholarly study. Yet there has been little systematic analysis of the meanings or communicative practices that make up the aunting relationship. In this chapter, we encourage research into the aunting relationship for several reasons.

First, knowing more about aunting relationships promises to enrich our understanding of the alternative forms that familial and kinship bonds might take. As Traeder and Bennett point out in their popular tribute *Aunties: Our Older, Cooler, Wiser Friends* (1998), aunts are critical cultural resources whose contributions to childrearing, family support, self-development, relational knowledge, and kinship are both invaluable and overlooked. Second, studying aunting relationships contributes to more expansive and explicitly communicative understandings of self-with-other, family

82 Extended Family Relationships

life, and community relations. Indeed, given the diverse ways in which aunting relationships are realized, the study of aunting takes up the call to understand families less as biologically, legally, or even affectively circumscribed units and more as communicatively defined and negotiated relationships, responsive to emotional, temporal, and cultural contexts (Jorgenson, 1989). Third, taking the aunt/niece/nephew relationship as a focus unsettles the dominance of parental figures in research on family and childhood communication. This may be especially important given the postmodern conditions shaping contemporary family life in which alternative family forms and nonparental relations of authority and responsibility have become, if not more prevalent, then more visible (Kirby, Golden, Medved, Jorgenson, & Buzzanell, 2003).

Finally, given that aunts are paradigmatically female, a focus on the aunting relationship also attends to processes of gendering and gendered identities and draws attention to the pernicious sexism that continues to color conceptions of familial roles and kinship relations. Taken together, these reasons warrant turning scholarly attention to the aunting relationship. In this chapter, we explore the nature of aunting and report on original research into the communication patterns of aunt/niece/nephew relationships.

The Title of “Aunt”

Seemingly, the title of aunt marks a straightforward familial or kinship relationship: an aunt is the sister of a parent or the woman married to a parent’s sibling. Yet, limiting the definition of aunt to a location within a biologically or legally circumscribed network fails to acknowledge the ways this title designates cultural and affective relationships that expand the bonds of kinship beyond genealogical relations. The title “aunt” is also a cultural label that transcends the biological and legal definitions of family or kinship: my grandmother’s sisters, an elderly female friend, a female mentor, a neighborhood woman, a female church member—all may be known as “aunt.” In addition, bestowing the title “aunt” on a chosen person inducts that person into one’s kinship network as an honorary member (Stack, 1974).

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 the degree to which kinship association is voluntary (Wellman, 1998). For example, the auntie in many Asian American or Hawaiian communities may be a title of respect for an elderly female regardless of kinship ties. In gay communities, referring to someone as “auntie” may indicate an intimate

relationship, a mentoring relationship, or announce a familial bond among biologically unrelated men. An aunting relationship in contemporary mainstream U.S. culture affords considerable latitude for personal choice as to the rules, rights, responsibilities, and intensity of the bonds between an aunt and niece or nephew. Such latitude casts the aunt in a distinct yet ambiguous role whose only stable feature is a feminine gendered identity.

Aunting in Family Communication Research

There are no communication studies of the aunt relationship per se. Nonetheless, research in family communication suggests several potentially rich lines of inquiry into the importance of aunting relationships in family networks and the prevalence and content of communication in those relationships.

The Aunting Relationship in Family Networks

One line of research that invites research into the importance and prevalence of aunting relationships is the research on “kinkeepers” or those family members who take on the major roles for maintaining family support networks (cf. Gerstel & Gallagher, 1993). Women are the primary kinkeepers in extended families. It is women who remember birthdays, conduct holiday gatherings, and maintain communication across time and distances among relatives and friends (Dill, 1998). We find an indication that aunts may act as kinkeepers in Rosenthal’s (1985) study of the kinkeeper role. She found that 52% of families reported having someone in the role of kinkeeper, and of those, 72% identified this person as a woman sibling, suggesting that these kinkeepers may be aunts as well, especially if the respondent was a parent. While the percentages in Rosenthal’s study are not high, they do indicate that aunts may play a family kinkeeping role, a possibility that bears further investigation more directly focused on aunts. Similarly, in a study drawing on college students, Leach and Braithwaite (1996) found that among their respondents who indicated the presence of a family kinkeeper, 84% identified that person as a woman. Of these, 51% identified the woman as their mother, but the next largest percentage (9.8%) named an aunt. Again, this is not a large percentage, but the findings do offer direct evidence of the aunt’s role as family kinkeeper. Given that one person’s mother may be another’s aunt, these findings, along with Rosenthal’s study, invite further research into the aunt’s role as a kinkeeper in extended family networks.

84 Extended Family Relationships

Two other types of kinship studies in which aunts appear are studies of kinship foster care and kinship networks among new immigrants. Studies of kinship foster care show that aunts are second only to grandmothers in numbers of kin who function voluntarily (although in increasingly regulated and, in some states, compensated roles) as foster caregivers caring for children in their extended family who have been removed from the parents' custody (Davidson, 1997). Another line of research that has identified aunt-ing as an important caregiving relationship explores the importance of kinship networks for immigrants needing financial and social support in their new communities. For example, aunts feature prominently in the narratives of Mexican migrant women who depend on their relationships as and among aunts, or *tías*, to manage childcare and domestic responsibilities as well as locate job and housing opportunities (Bastida, 2001). Ethnographies of new immigrant families attest to the importance of aunt-ing relationships in maintaining transnational family connections among Korean immigrant families in New York (Min, 1998) and in the routines of daily family life among the Hmong in Wisconsin (Koltyk, 1998). While aunt-ing relationships are not the focus of these studies, the presence of the aunt in extended kinship networks is of taken-for-granted significance in the experiences of new immigrant families.

Prevalence of Communication in the Aunt-ing Relationship

The prevalence of communication in the aunt/niece/nephew relationship varies widely. While some aunts and nieces or nephews may communicate frequently, it is not unusual for little or no regular contact to exist between an aunt and a niece or nephew. Amount of contact may be affected by the ages of the aunts and their nieces or nephews. When children are small, contact may be mediated by a parent. As children age, their contact with both family-related and honorary aunts may change. In addition to age, the amount and value of communication between an aunt and a niece or nephew varies culturally. For example, in Latino family cycles, the *tía* may be expected to interact frequently and in significant ways with a niece or nephew regardless of their ages (Sault, 2001). Hence, the prevalence of communication across aunt/niece/nephew relationships must be understood on a continuum from no communication to frequent and intense interaction.

Research on communication among adult siblings and their spouses implicitly taps communication with and by aunts when the focus is on women as sisters. Given that sibling relationships among parents affect children's perceptions of their relatives, aunts who are emotionally close to

a child's parents may be perceived as more integral in the child's experiences of family life (Wellman, 1998). At the same time, Troll (1985) points out that conflicts among adult siblings obligate husbands and wives to distance themselves from their siblings, and such "family feuds" negatively impact relationships with extended family members like aunts. Sachs (1999) found that such family feuds obstruct information sharing among close kin, even of critical health-related information about genetic risks like family propensities for cancer. One woman reported that her maternal aunt was adamantly opposed to sharing the news of their genetic risk for breast cancer with children in the extended family although her brother's wife, another aunt in this family network, wanted to share the news immediately. Given her maternal aunt's reaction, this woman chose not to continue passing the information to family members.

On the other hand, 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. While there is no scholarly research that directly supports this assumption, recent trade books on aunting strongly endorse the aunt's role in providing multiple forms of support to nieces and nephews (Sturgis, 2004).

Content of Communication in Aunting Relationships

Family communication research suggests a number of issues that characterize the content of family communication. Although none of these studies has explicitly addressed aunting relationships, we find several promising directions for research on aunting. For example, Koerner and Fitzpatrick (2002) advance a transactional theory of relational schemas for understanding how people conduct family relationships. Relational schemas contain both experience-specific knowledge and culturally prescribed ideals and scripts that are drawn on for engaging in family interactions. Koerner and Fitzpatrick argue that family relationship schema include beliefs about intimacy (trust, respect, love, and affection), individuality (including independence and equity), external factors (such as personal security or children's

86 Extended Family Relationships

rights), conversation orientation, and conformity orientation (pp. 84, 88). It seems reasonable to assume that these schema also apply to aunting relationships, especially given the ambiguity and variability of the aunting relationship.

The concept of family scripts usefully complements the theory of family relationship schema. Family scripts “are mental representations that guide the role performance of family members within and across contexts” (Stack & Burton, 1998, p. 408). Stack and Burton proposed that enactments of extended kin relationships like aunting are guided by “kinscripts,” which designate within a particular network who is obligated or entitled to perform types of tasks (kin-work), when such tasks should be done (kin-time), and how the process of assigning kin-work should be handled (kin-scription) (Stack & Burton, 1998).

Research on family narratives is also pertinent to communication in aunting relationships (Wilmot, 1995). Aunts often figure prominently in family stories and as family storytellers (Romberger, 1986). This may be 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 the family and the world.

Taken together, these lines of family communication research suggest directions for research on communication in aunting relationships. Our own research draws on this work in family communication to explore communication among aunts, nieces, and nephews. We contend that aunting communication is an important aspect of family and childhood experience; subject to considerable variation; guided by cultural, familial, and autobiographical rules and traditions; and beset by issues of intimacy, obligation, circumstance, and ambiguity.

Themes and Schemas of Aunting Relationships

We have conducted original research into the themes and schemas that characterize communication in aunting relationships within contemporary U.S. families. In one study (Ellingson & Sotirin, in press), we conducted a thematic analysis of written narratives about aunts collected from 70 students in three universities. The analysis identified themes about the role of the aunt—teacher, role model, confidante, savvy peer, and second mother—and themes about practices of aunting—maintaining family connections, encouragement, and nonengagement. These themes are similar to the activities that women kinkeepers engage in, but there is clearly an affective intensity and a sense of personal connection that is missing in reports of kinkeeping. While some

students reported that they had little contact with their aunts, most characterized their relationships with their aunts in highly positive and emotionally invested terms. We concluded that the aunting relationship has important personal significance beyond the role an aunt might play as a kinkeeper.

In another study, we explored cultural schemas on aunting by identifying aunt figures and aunting scripts in popular media portrayals (Sotirin & Ellingson, 2004). While media portrayals are admittedly fictional, we hold that these portrayals contribute to the cultural schemas people draw on to guide their aunting relationships. Hoover, Clark, and Alters (2004) have shown that families reflexively engage the images of kinship relationships in popular media, negotiating their own beliefs and behaviors in relation to these schemas. We found that while media portrayals often cast aunts as caregiving, they also show that aunts may deviate from conventions of maternity, domesticity, social propriety, or femininity without the social condemnation reserved for deviant mothers. Popular schemas of aunting relationships thus serve to legitimate deviations from the mother-child caregiving relationship and set up aunts as alternative female mentors and role models.

Based on our findings, we highlight two critical dimensions of aunting relationships: variability and choice. First, being an aunt is uniquely varied; there are many socially approved ways to enact aunting. Unlike motherhood, a role that is seemingly trapped in contradictory tensions too often experienced as oppressive and restrictive (Hays, 1996), the aunt has multiple options: she can breeze in for quick visits, live far away, be a nurturing “second mother,” or maintain only a distant relationship with nieces and nephews without necessarily being a “good” or a “bad” aunt. In addition, variability characterizes the aunting relationship over time as both aunts and their nieces and nephews experience life changes. The aunting relationship may change dramatically as nieces and nephews become adults.

Second, aunting relationships are defined by choice in that the choice of how to enact aunting is not only acceptable but expected—even required. One must choose how to enact aunt, niece, and nephew roles because there are no singular definitions. One implication is that aunting offers family scholars, educators, and counselors working against repressive gender roles a valuable resource with which to encourage relational patterns that embrace multiplicity and variability and that affirm choice.

Descriptions and Dialectics of Aunting Relationships

The study we report here was conducted as an initial inquiry into aunting relationships. In this study, we asked participants to write brief descriptions of their relationships with aunts. Our goal was to address the aunting

88 Extended Family Relationships

relationship directly to find out how people represent this relationship. Two questions guided our research:

RQ1: How do nieces and nephews describe their aunting relationships?

RQ2: How are the primary relational dialectics expressed in niece and nephew descriptions of their aunting relationships?

Method

Our data consist of responses written during 2001 to 2003 by undergraduate students enrolled in communication courses in a private university on the U.S. west coast, a public university in the northern midwest, and a public university in the southeast. The project began when Ellingson 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. 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 to 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 Kurdish, biracial African American and white, Guyanese-East Indian, and Ecuadorian-Romanian. Our data were skewed in gender representation: 52 were female and 18 were male. The disparity in gender participation was largely due to the underrepresentation 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 overrepresented 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 conducted an interpretive analysis of these data. As Leach and Braithwaite (1996) explained in their study on kinkeeping, "the goal of interpretive work is the identification of recurring patterns of behavior and meanings" (p. 207). To identify such patterns, Lindlof and Taylor (2002) advise adopting interpretive "tropes" or semiotic devices for deciphering the patterns or lived codes that invest experience with meaning. Following our research questions, we adopted two tropes: descriptive strategies and dialectic tensions. Using these tropes as a lens, we repeatedly read through our data to detect emergent patterns.

For the first question, "How do nieces and nephews describe their aunting relationships?" we focused on the descriptive strategies students used to organize their narratives. That is, we sought to uncover patterns in *how* stories about aunts are told by their nieces and nephews. For the second question, "How are the primary relational dialectics expressed in niece/nephew descriptions of their aunting relationships?" we focused on the dialectic tensions of aunting relationships, drawing on the dialectic theory of interpersonal relationships (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). In particular, we focused on those tensions that Wood (2000) argued are the primary dialectics in interpersonal (nuclear family or dating/marriage) relationships: autonomy/connection; openness/privacy; novelty/predictability; and stability/change. While we did not ask students directly about relational dialectics, we correctly assumed that their descriptions of their aunts would reflect common relational tensions.

How Do Nieces and Nephews Describe Their Aunting Relationships?

We noted several patterns in the manner in which nieces or nephews wrote about their aunts: use of metaphors, proliferation of adjectives, focus on self, unreflectiveness, and identification through family connections. Rather than being content themes, these patterns show us how students described their relationships with their aunts.

90 Extended Family Relationships

Metaphors and Similes. Students frequently relied on *metaphors* and *similes* that emphasized the similarities between their relationship with their aunts and another female relationship—my aunt is “like a mother,” “like a grandmother,” or “like a (girl)friend.” As one female student put it, “What I’m trying to say is that my aunt to me is my mom, big sister, and best friend all in one. It’s great.” Another said, “Auntie [name] is my Godmother, and in a lot of ways, my mother.” A third woman summed up, “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.”

Adjectives. We noted a *proliferation of adjectives* to describe the personal qualities of aunts, particularly those associated with feminine qualities such as “nice,” “sweet,” and infrequently, “mean.” One woman recalled, “My aunt was my idol. As a young girl . . . she represented everything I thought a woman should; [sic] beauty and femininity. In my eyes she was kind, happy . . . She was perfect.” The focus on feminine qualities accords with the fact that aunts are women but suggests as well an expectation of conventional femininity.

Self Focus. We were struck by the consistent *focus on self* in students’ responses—aunts were referred to as possessions (“my” aunt) and descriptions centered on what “my” aunt does for me. For example, a male student observed,

I think the characteristic that all my aunts have is that they all think highly of me . . . They all seem to have a genuine interest in me. I think that is the great thing about aunts: they make you feel good about yourself.

Another student confided, “I love talking to [my aunt] because every time we talk she just makes you feel that she is truly interested in what you are saying.” We found little mention of reciprocity, of giving back to the aunt or taking the aunt’s view of things. Perhaps this was an artifact of the question we asked, but it may be that “owning” one’s family and the members of it contributes to a sense of identity. Students seemed to characterize communication with their aunts in terms of themselves, their childhood experiences, and their sense of who they are and want to be.

Unreflectiveness. We also noticed a quality of *unreflectiveness* in students’ descriptions of their communication with their aunts. Aunts who were particularly nurturing or fun were highly valued, but their roles did not

seem to bear much scrutiny or reflection. For example, one woman student told us,

The reason why I think my aunt is the coolest, is because she is not old fashioned 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.

Students' responses reflected stereotypical assumptions about the role of women in the family and about family relations more generally. Relatedly, we noted a striking amount of repetition across our student responses. One implication of such repetition is that students may be drawing on a cultural schema to describe their own relationships just as Koerner and Fitzpatrick (2002) have suggested.

Family Connections. Finally, we found it intriguing that virtually all aunts—whether they were aunts by blood, marriage, or held honorary aunt status—were *identified through family connections*. In their responses, students introduced their aunts initially by designating which parent's brother, sister, or friend (in the case of honorary aunts) the aunt was, the aunt's place in a sibling birth order, her age relative to the niece or nephew's parents, to whom the aunt was married, and so on. Hence, to have an aunt is to have a relationship with someone else first—usually with parents. Thus, the aunt is the mother's sister, or the father's brother's wife, rather than simply an aunt. Even those few who described honorary aunts often prefaced their descriptions with the disclaimer, "She isn't really related to me but . . ." The pervasiveness of this manner of describing their aunts suggests the importance of situating the aunt within the extended family.

How Are the Primary Relational Dialectics Expressed in Niece and Nephew Descriptions of Their Aunting Relationships?

Autonomy/Connection. The dialectic of autonomy and connection appeared in students' descriptions of their differences from their aunts and their family connections with their aunts. For example, some respondents alluded to a divide between themselves and their aunts, whether generational or in terms of their perspectives. Others described complex webs of relations connecting them to their aunts, for example, shared family events

92 Extended Family Relationships

or their shared connections to a mother or grandmother or even to the aunt's children. For example, one woman reported,

Growing up, I spent a lot of time with two of my mother's sisters. [Aunt] had a son a year older than me, and [second aunt] had a son and a daughter close to my younger brother's age. We were all very good friends and often went on extended family outings together.

A male student recalled,

Aunt [name] has one daughter, [name], who is my cousin. I am extremely close to [name] because we see each other every summer and we are the same age . . . When I talk to Aunt [name] all she does is express her love for me.

Student responses indicated that the tensions of the autonomy/connection dialectic are often resolved incidentally due to geographical distances, time lapses between visits, generational differences, or even the way that parents' relationships with the aunt affect the aunt's relationship with her niece(s) or nephew(s). For example, a male student explained,

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

Yet even though the tension between autonomy and connection can be mediated by circumstances and family structure, students' descriptions showed variation in responding to this tension. For example, some students neutralized the tension between autonomy and connection with their aunts by expressing a sense that things were not in their control—geographical distances, for example, that put the emphasis on autonomy rather than connection. Another way of dealing with the dialectic was to prioritize autonomy and disconnectedness. For example, one student observed, "I have no aunts on my father's side and one aunt on my mother's side whom I've never met because my whole family hates her." In contrast, other students appeared to prioritize their connections with their aunts, seeking their aunts out and emphasizing relational closeness.

Openness/Privacy. The dialectic of openness/privacy was quite clearly evidenced in accounts of the aunt as a confidante and savvy peer and, in a contrasting way, as someone to be avoided. We asked students to focus on

their communication with their aunts, so it is not surprising that this dialectic tension is evident in our data. In many of the responses, students implied that they prioritized either openness—placing value on talking with or confiding in their aunt—or privacy—whether this was enacted as talking only about superficial and “boring” topics or avoiding the aunt altogether. A woman student told us,

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.

Another woman said, “Oh, and if I need someone to talk to about taboo issues that my mom would slip into cardiac arrest over, I call auntie [name].” But we also received comments like this one from a third woman student:

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

Keeping conversational topics “safe” as a strategy for maintaining privacy contrasts with other students’ emphasis on opening up conversations with their aunts to taboo issues. Overall, our analysis suggests that students and their aunts must negotiate the dialectic of openness/privacy.

Novelty/Predictability. This dialectic was less evident in our data, although students often unreflectively assumed that their aunt would enact certain relational roles. The repeated occurrence of such assumptions suggests that students expected and enacted a sense of predictability in their relationships with aunts. For example, students expected their aunts to be at family gatherings, especially during holidays. As one woman explained, “The only time I ever really see [my aunts] is during the winter holidays, and then only for short periods of time.” Another aspect of predictability was the expectation that aunts would indulge their nieces and nephews and remember them on birthdays and other important events. One woman recalled, “Aunt [name] has always made an effort to honor my birthday and other holidays with gifts, homemade cards, and homemade cookies.” Another woman emphasized the predictability of her aunt’s indulgences:

[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.

94 Extended Family Relationships

Novelty seemed to take a back seat to predictability in students' descriptions as even the surprise of treats and gifts was expected.

Stability/Change. While there is a certain kind of stability to a familial relationship like an aunt relationship, change was an inherent aspect of our data given that our student respondents were in a transition period in their own lives. Many of their responses addressed the passage from childhood to adulthood and the attendant shifts in their relationships with their aunts. For example, one woman observed,

It was only about a year ago that 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.

Many students commented on such age-related changes. Some noted that as children they had either not known or even disliked their aunt, but as they became adults, the aunting relationship had either become more comfortable and friendly or more remote and unimportant in their daily lives. For instance, one woman observed, "As I have gotten older, it seems our relationships have moved past doing activities and onto more meaningful conversations." Another woman emphasized the importance of change in her relationships with her aunts: "I am grown up now, and I realize that I have the power to change my relationship with my aunts. I do not have to wait for them to call or write me, I can contact them." Here the element of choice in an aunting relationship is experienced by the niece as empowering, a sign that her relationship with her aunts has changed from a child/adult relationship to an adult/adult relationship.

Finally, some students neutralized the stability/change dialectic by finding stability in the changing forms of their relationships with their aunts. Several students observed that their aunts had become more like friends. For example, one woman related that her aunts had taken care of her as a child,

However, as I got older, [my aunts] become more like my peers than a mother figure, which probably stems from the fact that they no longer have to keep discipline or worry about my safety.

The assurance of affection or at least of an ongoing connection appears to mediate the changing nature of the aunting relationship.

Mediating Primary Tensions

Our student data indicate that the primary dialectics of interpersonal relationships riddle the socioemotional experience of aunting and that students and their aunts enacted a variety of strategies for mediating these tensions. In addition, we found that aunting can be a mediating agency in managing dialectical tensions in other family relationships (parental, sibling, spouse, or significant other). Baxter (1993) identified four forms of response to dialectic tensions: prioritizing, neutralizing, transcending, and reframing. An aunting relationship may enact any of these in response to the challenges of dialectic tensions felt in other relationships. For example, Wood (2002) described how being an aunt has helped balance the dialectic of seriousness/playfulness in her marriage. In playing with her nieces and nephews, she and her husband recognized that they had prioritized the serious aspects of their lives together and they began to be more playful with each other, balancing this tension rather than resolving it in favor of seriousness.

Similarly, our students' narratives credited their relationships with their aunts for mediating the tensions in their family relationships in a number of ways. For example, the dialectic of connection/autonomy becomes more critical when children leave their families to go to college, and this tension can become particularly difficult for parents and college-aged children to negotiate. The students' descriptions of their aunts implicitly mediated this tension by emphasizing family connections both because students had to locate themselves in an extended family configuration when naming their aunts and in the affection or respect students expressed for their aunts. Our student narratives also described ways in which aunts helped them to reframe the tensions of their relationships with parents. Sometimes an aunt helped a niece or nephew take a different perspective by offering sage counsel or a sympathetic ear, as when a female student admitted, "I often talk to [my aunt] about problems that I have with my parents. She listens and offers a different perspective." In a few cases, an aunt literally provided a different place from which to view their problems with parents by offering their niece or nephew a refuge or second home, as in the case of a woman student who told us,

I lived with Aunt [name] 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.

In a variety of ways, some implicit and others quite dramatic, aunting relationships may enact strategies for mediating the relational tensions of family life.

Communicative Strengths and Challenges

The unique communicative strengths and challenges of the aunting relationship have not been extensively examined. But our research on aunting suggests that there are important strengths and serious issues that attend the communicative interactions of aunt/niece/nephew relationships.

One issue that is both a strength and a challenge is the flexibility and adaptability of the aunting relationship. After all, one does not have to be a blood relative to be designated an aunt, and there is tremendous variation on what makes a “good” aunt. While this means that there is considerable latitude available for negotiating rules and identities, it also means that there is considerable ambiguity. For example, kinscripts from which to pattern aunt/niece/nephew communication may be sketchy and rules of negotiation unclear. Hence, uncertainty as to how to do aunt/niece/nephew communication may be high. Further, given that this relationship may change over time as participants become older and family configurations and expectations change, the ambiguity and uncertainty characterizing aunting communication may be ongoing.

One kinscript that appears frequently in reference to aunts is the maternal kinscript, to wit, “my aunt is like my mother.” Aunts are often cast as maternal substitutes, taking the place of an absent mother or serving as mentors, caretakers, and teachers. Yet there remain significant differences between mothering and aunting even when the aunt is playing a maternal role. For example, having multiple aunts simultaneously is quite commonplace and unremarkable whereas having multiple mothers simultaneously is not. Further, the aunt relationship is often engaged more intermittently, serendipitously, and in response to immediate exigencies than the mother relationship. In this sense, the aunting relationship may offer more flexibility, responsiveness, and tolerance for difference than the mothering relationship. More research is needed to unravel the relations of care and connection that distinguish aunting from mothering.

Another communicative strength and challenge arises from the fact that the aunt relationship entails choice. The amount and intensity of contact and connection are often matters of choice—one may choose to be very close or to stay distant regardless of geographical separation. Unlike a mother relationship, few eyebrows will be raised in most cultures if an aunt

decides not to pursue a closer relationship with her nieces and nephews. Aunts enjoy the options of extended kin: unlike nuclear family relationships, there is more cultural tolerance for neglect, disregard, and distance as well as for care, connection, and contact. One other aspect of this issue is that when aunts and their nieces and nephews are not given a choice in whether or how to conduct their relationship, the lack of choice may conflict with expectations. For example, if an aunt is conscripted into a maternal or caretaking role, she may feel resentful because the option to stay distant and disconnected is gone. Hence, the element of choice in aunting relationships is both a strength and challenge.

Issues of family solidarity and loyalty may present both strengths and challenges as well. Sibling conflict and intergenerational loyalties can create in-group/out-group tensions and coalitions that affect the aunting relationship. For example, how one's parents relate to a particular aunt (are they friendly or antagonistic?) or one's relationship with an aunt's children (are they jealous of her attentions or open to a cousin's inclusion?) may influence whether or not and how strongly one might bond with this aunt. Taken together, these communicative strengths and challenges of the aunting relationship suggest that there are plenty of research opportunities for family communication scholars.

What Is Left to Learn About Aunting?

Given the paucity of research on aunting relationships, there is much to explore. For example, how does the voluntaristic nature of aunting affect communication processes and patterns? How do issues of role ambiguity and relational adaptability affect communication in aunting relationships? In what ways do other family relationships, for example, parents' sibling relationships or in-law relationships, affect communication in aunting relationships? What significance does the age of a niece or nephew have and how do life passages affect communication among aunts and their nieces and nephews? What are the relational outcomes of aunting?

Future research should address the aunt role itself. For example, how does the aunt role differ in different family types such as nuclear, blended, single-parent, or gay/lesbian? How do women learn to be aunts and how do nieces and nephews learn their relational roles in aunting relationships? Conceptually, we have argued that relational schemas seem to guide aunting relationships, but just what the content of such schemas may be awaits further research. How are honorary aunts designated and what are the communication patterns in such relationships? Finally, gender is clearly an

important dimension for further study. For example, how does the feminine/female character of the aunt shape communication expectations and practices, and are there gendered differences in the communication of aunts and nieces versus communication of aunts and nephews?

We urge future researchers to adopt a holistic approach to aunting, including aunts and their nieces and nephews in our studies rather than depending on only one member of the relationship to give us our understanding of aunting. In addition, future research must be sensitive to age-related issues and the changes in aunting relationships over time and circumstance. Processual models of this relationship might be useful as changes over time clearly affect the nature of the relational experience and the identities of the participants, separately and together.

Conclusion

The relationship between aunts and their nieces and nephews is a rich complex of affective experiences, kinship obligations, and cultural scripts that respond to the ever-changing configurations of family life and personal experience. While aunting may not incur the intense investments, responsibilities, and proximities of parent-child relationships, the aunt nonetheless is an undeniable emotional presence in kinship and family relationships and histories. The complexities and significances of this relationship offer exciting opportunities for family communication researchers.

Despite the personal significance of aunts in lived experience and the pervasiveness of aunts in family life, there has been little direct research on aunting and there may not be much more in the future unless family scholars are willing to reconsider two pernicious preoccupations: the nuclear family and the mother. First, there has been an overwhelming concentration on the nuclear family in conventional family communication research despite considerable statistical evidence that the nuclear family model lacks “ecological validity” in the face of a proliferation of family forms in contemporary U.S. society (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002). Second, mothers and mothering practices and relationships are often taken both as central to family life and essential to womanhood in popular and scholarly literatures despite historical evidence that such assumptions perpetuate institutionalized gender inequities and oppressions and disadvantage or even endanger women (Rich, 1977).

We contend that neither of these preoccupations warrants overlooking the lived significance of aunting and indeed, that they seriously inhibit an expansive understanding of family communication. As we have shown, the flexibility and variability of aunting relationships hold considerable

potential for addressing the exigencies of contemporary social life. But to take the lived significance of aunting seriously, we must embrace broader conceptions of familial care and connection that move us beyond the tensions and historical baggage of nuclear families and traditional mothering.

The study of aunting relationships counters the dominance in common-sense and in scholarly models of parent/child relationships as the essence of family communication. The variety of aunting relationships that are taken to be acceptable suggests that by studying aunting, we might articulate alternative models of familial care and connection. By naming the aunt as nonnuclear and using the aunt as a reference point for recognizing and reclaiming other nonnuclear relationships as valid forms, conceptions of family may be expanded. If, as Trenholm and Jensen (2000, p. 273) observe, we are undergoing a transformation in family values, roles, and characteristics and no clear model of the "modal family" has emerged, then the aunt and aunting may well be poised to contribute to these changes and emerge as a central feature of family life in the 21st century.

