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# Communication Structures of Supplemental Voluntary Kin Relationships

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## Abstract

Although scholars have constructed typologies of voluntary (fictive) kin, few have considered challenges and opportunities of interaction and relationships between biolegal and voluntary kin. This study focused on one type of voluntary kin, supplemental voluntary kin, relationships that often arise because of differing values, underperformed roles, or physical distance from the biolegal family, and wherein relationships are maintained with biolegal and voluntary kin. We examined how these family systems are constructed via interactions in relational triads of “linchpin” persons between biolegal family and voluntary kin. From in-depth interviews with 36 supplemental voluntary kin, we examined themes in the linchpins’ discourse surrounding the interaction, rituals, and ideal relationship between biolegal family and voluntary kin. We constructed a typology of four relational triads representing these relationships: intertwined, limited, separate, and hostile. We describe the structure and communication within each type, and implications for helping families with these triangulated voluntary kin relationships.

**Keywords:** Family communication, fictive kin, triangulation, voluntary kin

Kinship is the root from which human societies grow, most commonly from biological connection or established via law. Many contemporary family scholars view “family” as socially constructed (McConvell, Keen, & Hendery, 2013; Parkin & Stone, 2004), and postmodern understandings of family recognize the fluid, complex, and varied understandings of family (Gamson, 2015). But family forms that deviate from the so-called traditional (i.e., nuclear) family structure are often viewed as inferior (Floyd, Mikkelsen, & Judd, 2006).

Family communication scholars focus on family as constituted in the social relations and actions of family

members, “constructed and sustained through communicative practices” (Baxter, 2014a, p. 13). Adopting this perspective moves one beyond viewing communication as the transmission of ideas, as it asserts that individual and family identity are co-created and emerge out of interaction (Baxter, 2014a). Galvin (2006) coined the phrase “discourse-dependent families” to emphasize challenges faced by postmodern family structures such as adoptive, single parent, step, and same-sex or non-gender-conforming lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer families that are discursively constructed. Discourse-dependent families face the ongoing task of

legitimation and are reliant on interaction to negotiate and navigate their relationships without cultural models to guide their development, communication, and enactment (Baxter, 2014b; Galvin & Braithwaite, 2014). Our goal in the present study was to shed light on the experience of one type of discourse-dependent family, those with voluntary kin (VK), to explore how they interact and navigate the relationship with their biological family (BLF) of origin.

## Argument

### *Voluntary Families as Discourse Dependent*

Unlike the postmodern family structures mentioned already, which are established through biology, law, or a combination of both, our interest in the present study concerned family relationships that do not have biological bases but rather are born of ties of affection and commitment. These relationships have various labels, such as “fictive kin” (e.g., Muraco, 2006), “chosen kin” (e.g., Weston, 1991), and “ritual kin” (e.g., Ebaugh & Curry, 2000). Nelson (2014) examined more than 600 scholarly articles referencing fictive kinship and found that a common feature across these family types was that they functioned as family in ways distinct from close friendships. In the present study, we adopted the label “voluntary kin” to describe “those persons perceived to be family, but who are not related by blood or law” (Braithwaite et al., 2010, p. 390). Using the VK label is intended to avoid both the deficit model associated with being fictive kin and labels that have appeared to describe particular relational types, such as “chosen kin” for same-sex and non-gender-conforming families (Nelson, 2014). Braithwaite and DiVerniero (2014) argued that voluntary families epitomize discourse-dependent families, because without either biological or legal precedent, they have the largest legitimation burden, both internally and externally, and face challenges of understanding and acceptance.

Scholars have chronicled different fictive or VK structures at different life stages or within different ethnic or cultural groups (e.g., Ebaugh & Curry, 2000; Lee, 2013; Nelson, 2014), as well as challenges with deficit views of this family type (e.g., Allen, Blieszner, & Roberto, 2011). In the present study, however, we focused on how these discourse-dependent families are enacted and legitimized within preexisting familial networks. Our

interest centered on the interaction of adults with what Braithwaite et al. (2010) labeled “supplemental VK”—that is, those who maintain a relationship with their BLF and add VK to their lives. These relationships tend to arise when deficits are perceived in the BLF due to differing values, missing or underperformed roles from members of the BLF, or physical distance, with the VK helping to address emotional needs unmet by the BLF (Braithwaite et al., 2010).

Although scholars have examined the value that supplemental kin relationships add to one’s life, there are also challenges associated with balancing BLF and VK relationships (Braithwaite & DiVerniero, 2014). In fact, Nelson (2013) critiqued the positivity bias in the literature, stressing that scholars “rarely describe how fictive kin relationships might also create the kinds of complications (of disappointment from unfulfilled responsibility, unwanted interference, and outright conflict) that routinely emerge in kin relations” (p. 262). Moreover, Galvin (2006) described both internal and external challenges that discourse-dependent families face. For VK relationships, internal challenges include a lack of shared expectations for what VK relationships should entail. For example, an individual may come to expect the same types of instrumental or emotional support in the voluntary VK relationship that he or she expects in an involuntary BLF relationship, given that the VK is regarded as family. This can put undue pressure on the VK relationship, especially when such expectations have been assumed rather than discussed (Allen et al., 2011).

External challenges for supplemental kin who maintain both BLF and VK relationships include roadblocks to explaining and legitimizing the VK relationship with one’s BLF and navigating the simultaneous relationship with BLF and VK (Braithwaite & DiVerniero, 2014), which formed the impetus for the present study. Thus, we sought to understand how persons who maintain relationships with both VK and BLF report that they interact and socially construct these relationships, navigate boundaries and access to information, and allocate time and other limited resources. The results helped us create practical applications for persons who maintain both BLF and VK relationships and to guide professionals with whom they confer.

### *Triangulation and Voluntary Kin*

Given that our interest was focused on those who maintain kin relations with both VK and BLF,

triangulation seemed conceptually fruitful to help understand how these relationships function with the addition of a third person who is not related by blood or law but is regarded as family. *Triangulation*, a theoretically and practically powerful concept in the study of family relationships (Bowen, 1978), means turning to or bringing in a third party to a dyadic relationship to cope with tension in the dyad, such as between the dyadic structure of a marital couple with the addition of a child (Broderick, 1993) or the addition of a stepparent into a parent–child dyad (Baxter, Braithwaite & Bryant, 2006), which can create loyalty binds for each person. Family systems theorists Minuchin (1974) and Bowen (1978) argued for a focus on the structures and patterns of interaction among family members, across different family types, with which families co-create expectations and rules central to family functioning (Yoshimura & Galvin, in press). All families face boundary issues at one point or another; common ones include ambiguity concerning who is considered a family member and who has access to family activities or information. Managing family boundaries becomes increasingly complex when those boundaries are either overly rigid or too ambiguous (White & Klein, 2014). To date, most research on triadic family structures has been focused on BLFs, such as between parent dyads and a child (e.g., Wang & Crane, 2001), which have the advantage of culturally sanctioned boundaries and expectations to guide their development and enactment. Understanding the manifestation of triangulation within VK relationships helps elucidate the discursive nature of forming and enacting discourse-dependent relationships (Baxter, 2014b; Galvin & Braithwaite, 2014).

Lindahl (2003) argued that triangulation may be enacted in a variety of ways but “always involves a pair of family members incorporating or rejecting a third family member” (p. 1660). For example, researchers have documented triangulation experiences when children feel caught between divorced parents or between a parent and stepparent (e.g., Baxter et al., 2006), when spouses feel caught between a spouse and an in-law (Morr Serewicz, 2008), and when adolescents feel caught between parents during parental conflict (Buehler & Welsh, 2009). Although triangulation typically has a detrimental impact on relationships (Lindahl, 2003; Wang & Crane, 2001), some scholars have suggested that there can be mixed or even beneficial aspects to triangulation (e.g., Rootes,

Jankowski, & Sandage, 2010). Other scholars have asserted that the triangle is not inherently negative or positive, but rather that the processes of triangulation can work in ways that enhance or harm relationships (Dallos & Vetere, 2012).

In the present study, we focused on the experiences of persons who simultaneously maintained both VK and BLF relationships. Although much of the research on triangulation is rooted in the notion that coalitions are essentially exclusionary to one member of the triad, Milstein and Baldwin (1997) argued that this understanding limits the possibility that coalitions might function in ways that positively connect the members of the triad. We sought to explore how persons with VK interact and negotiate these discourse-dependent structures while maintaining their BLF relationships. Thus, the research question guiding our work was the following: What are the communication structures that characterize relationships of voluntary kin and bio-legal families?

## Method

The research team situated the study in the interpretive paradigm to “understand how individuals, relational partners, families, and others in close relationships perceive, understand, experience, enact, and negotiate their relational worlds” (Braithwaite, Moore, & Abetz, 2014, pp. 491–492). Interpretive researchers embrace the subjectivity of human experience and seek to understand perspectives and language choices from the point of view of actors themselves (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Communication scholars working in this paradigm are committed to understanding the social construction of meanings of human interaction, within particular structures and social contexts, from the perspective of actors (Tracy, 2013).

Data were drawn from in-depth research interviews with persons who self-identified as having VK, which we defined as “those people who you think about and treat as family, yet are not related to you by blood or legal ties.” Interviewers were doctoral students not on the research team who were trained in qualitative methods. Participants were told they would be discussing both VK and their immediate bio-legal family, defined as “your closest living family members; those with whom you have blood or legal ties.”

### *Participants*

Inclusion criteria required that participants were at least 25 years old, to ensure they were past the emerging adult stage (Arnett, 2000), as our focus was on relationships that had opportunity to develop past stage-based kin before the age of 25 (e.g., college or young adult roommates), and could identify at least one current VK relationship they were maintaining that had lasted a minimum of 2 years. Data analyses focused on in-depth interviews with 36 supplemental kin relationships that had been coded from a larger data set of 52 interviews. For example, we did not analyze interviews with those who had no relationship with their BLF. The sample comprised 25 females (69.4%) and 11 males (30.6%) ranging from 25 to 83 years of age ( $M=42.0$ ). The VK identified by participants ranged from 4 to 92 years of age ( $M=43.8$ ), and relationship length ranged from 4 to 34 years ( $M=19.4$ ). Thirty-one of the voluntary relationships (98.8%) were with one person, and one participant described multiple members of another family as VK. Twenty-four participants (66.7%) indicated that their VK was the same sex as themselves. With regard to ethnicity, 31 participants (86.1%) self-identified as Caucasian; one each as Asian, Black, and biracial; and two did not identify an ethnicity. In all cases where ethnicity was identified, the ethnicity of the participant and their VK was the same.

### *Procedures*

We developed a series of questions to answer the research question that encouraged participants to talk in an unstructured way as much as possible to reflect on how their family systems were discursively constructed, to identify the communicative structures revealed in informants' talk. All participants identified these as VK relationships, and we took them at their word; the results shed light on different structures of supplemental VK relationships revealed in the discourse. Participants were asked to describe the nature of their relationship with their VK and BLF, focusing on their interactions and expectations of both. Interviewers encouraged each VK to provide a detailed description of the relationship and interaction between him- or herself and the BLF, including their face-to-face meetings, activities undertaken, tone of

interactions, and information revealed and concealed. Participants were also asked to describe how similar or different communication was with their VK and BLF, how much the VK and BLF knew about one another, how comfortable they perceived BLF members were with the participant's VK relationship, and how they would describe an ideal relationship between their VK and BLF. The interviews ranged in length from 45 to 75 minutes.

### *Data Analysis*

The research team analyzed the data in five stages and met multiple times to discuss, test, and refine the analysis at each stage (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Miles et al., 2014). First, 36 transcribed interviews focused on VK relationships were identified as supplemental from the larger data set. Second, while focusing on the discursive construction of these relationships, the first and second author analyzed 25% of these data for primary themes in response to the research question; they found that there were different ways in which the supplemental VK relationships were enacted. This process entailed clustering data around crosscutting themes that characterized different structures of supplemental VK relationships; for example, some who encouraged a relationship between their BLF and VK and others who kept them more separate. These authors came together in multiple conferences to discuss the emergent themes. In particular, the central role of the participant as the linchpin in triangulated communicative structures between him- or herself, the BLF, and the VK were observed in the data and inductively organized into four socially constructed structures of VK and BLF systems: intertwined, limited, separate, and hostile. Third, the entire team discussed, refined, and reached agreement that this typology represented the types of triangulated structures identified in these data (Braun & Clark, 2006). From these discursive constructions, the authors developed visual representations of the four triangulated kin structures (see Figure 1), modeled on pictorial representations developed by Baxter et al. (2006). Fourth, the second, third, and fourth authors read all 36 interview transcripts to arrange the data into the four structures of supplemental VK relationships and to identify which themes or characteristics distinguished the communicative

structures of each supplemental kin type. Agreement was reached that three characteristics distinguished the four structures of supplemental VK relationships: nature of the contact, rituals, and ideal relationship. Fifth, the whole team met to test and refine the typology and characteristics, a process of validity checking that Lincoln and Guba (1985) labeled “investigator triangulation.” The research team determined that the categories and analyses accounted for what we saw in these data. Finally, before writing the research report, any information that could identify participants was altered.

## Results

In these results, we highlight the role of the participant as the linchpin between the BLF and VK, also functioning as a “triangulator” who may attempt to bring the other parties into a relationship or keep them apart. Four structures of supplemental VK relationships are discussed: (a) intertwined, (b) limited, (c) separate, and (d) hostile (see Figure 1). In our analysis of these four structures of supplemental VK relationships, three crosscutting themes characterized these systems: the nature of the contact between BLF and VK, rituals engaged between BLF and VK, and the ideal relationship between the two family systems from the linchpin’s perspective. We discuss each family structure in order of those represented most to least in these data.

*Intertwined: “They are very much a part of each other’s life”*

The intertwined family type consisted of a relational history and multiple, often complex, webs of relationships between the VK and BLF. In Figure 1, for the intertwined triad, the darker line represents communication that is direct and positively valenced among the linchpin, VK, and BLF, mediated by the linchpin.

*Nature of the Contact.* The contact between intertwined families ranged on a continuum from seeing one another once or twice a year around rituals and special events to regular weekly interactions. Many linchpins described frequent interactions between their VK and BLF via face-to-face visits, social media, or telephone communication. Although the amount and nature of

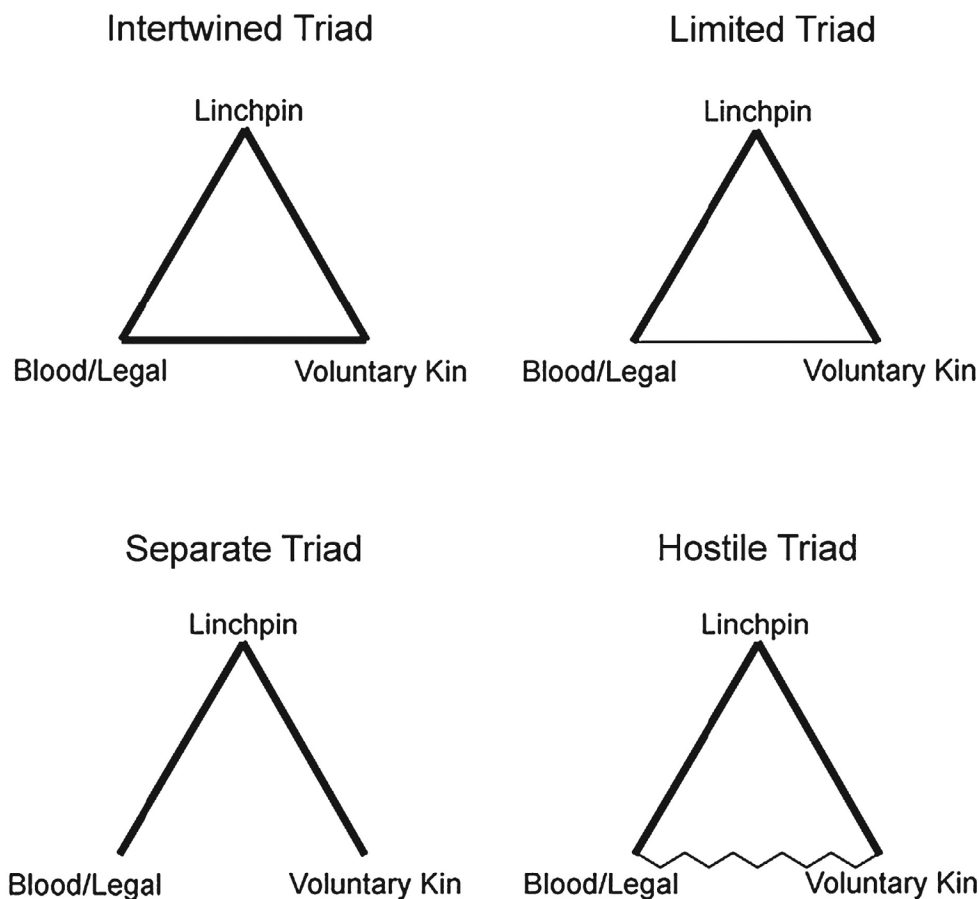
contact varied, linchpins had a clear sense that a positive relationship existed between their BLF and VK, and that they (the linchpin) mediated that relationship. Linchpins variably described the relationship between their BLF and VK as falling somewhere on a continuum from friendship to family-like. Many linchpins believed that their VK and at least one member of their BLF would consider each other to be family, as well. Describing the relationship between her mother and VK, Bailey said, “We joke around and say that [my VK] is [my mother’s] second daughter, and I tell [my VK] that my mom is her second mom,” and Bailey later added that her mother calls her VK “her second daughter.” When the interviewer followed up and asked what her ideal relationship would be between her VK and her mother, Bailey said:

I really hope it will continue to be like as it is now, honestly. I think we have such a great relationship. I mean, [my VK] invited my mom to her wedding specifically, and ... when I said to her that I wasn’t sure if my mom would be able to go, [my VK] got really upset.

The nature of the intertwined relationship shared some similarities to the extended family type identified by Braithwaite et al. (2010), wherein BLF and VK knit themselves together to form one cohesive system, with all members considering one another to be family. In contrast, in our analysis of the experiences of intertwined supplemental kin, the relationship between the BLF and VK varied and was mediated by the linchpin with varied levels of closeness to one or more members of the BLF. The distinctive factor was that the intertwined supplemental relationship rested on the linchpin; in our data, the linchpin reported that no relational history between the two families predated the VK relationship, and the relationship between the two families grew and was maintained by the linchpin. Lisa described how the connection and interaction between her two families developed over the years:

I’m sort of the go-between as far as the information flow [but my children and VK] certainly feel close to one another based on ... the kindness and care [my VK] has given to us over the years.

Lisa’s experience typified the integrated structure in which closeness was fostered through her relationship with both VK and her BLF over the years. For



**Figure 1.** Structures of Relationships Between Biolegal Family and Voluntary Kin. Darker line=communication that is direct and positively valenced. Lighter line=circumscribed, limited interaction. Jagged line=negatively valenced communication. Absence of a line=no direct communication.

intertwined relationships that were more limited in scope, the VK-BLF ties remained cordial and positive. Close VK-BLF relationships often established enduring ties during major life events, such as when linchpins married or had (grand)children; these events tended to result in the VK being increasingly knit into the social fabric of the BLF. Sarah believed that, for her husband and daughters, being with her VK “was like being with me.”

Similarly, the linchpin was often knit into the VK’s family. For example, several linchpins described close relationships between their spouses and their VK’s family. Sarah, for example, illustrated this well when she described her husband’s tie to her VK:

Oh, my husband adores her. In fact, when she was going through a rough time in her marriage, he was like her fill-in, like the three of us ran around all the time. It was like, you know, he would take her son if she and I were going out, he would watch

her son, and our children. We’ve always been very close.

Some linchpins reported little difference in openness with intertwined VK and BLF members, although most reserved certain topics for one group or the other. For example, perhaps illustrating the friendship root of the VK relationship, some indicated greater openness with their VK, indicating that they would discuss sexual relationships or marital problems with their VK but not with their BLF.

*Rituals.* Of the four supplemental family types, only the intertwined structure included regular engagement in family rituals, repetitive communication events that pay homage to something important in the family and that reflect the social relationships of those taking part (Rothenbuhler, 1998; Wolin & Bennett, 1984). Ritual enactments, such as weekly meals, birthday celebrations, and holidays, brought some intertwined VK and BLF

together at regular and predictable intervals; many of these rituals had been shared between the VK and BLF for a number of years, especially when the two lived in close physical proximity to each other. Several linchpins mentioned that members of their VK and BLF remember and acknowledge one another's birthdays by sending birthday cards, for example. Some of the linchpins described shared family vacations with VK and BLF, as did Karen: "They are very much a part of each other's life; [for example,] we check each other's schedules [and] vacation together when we can."

Older linchpins often reflected on many years, sometimes decades, of shared rituals between their VK and BLF. Similarly, some relatively younger linchpins described childhood friends becoming VK and continuing joint rituals started in childhood. In both cases, shared rituals seemed to both help create and reflect the closeness of VK and the BLF, as Bailey illustrated when talking about her VK:

She always used to come up around Christmas, or around my birthday since it is usually in Spring Break, and I would go over there for the next year. So, basically, my mom, me, and [my VK] would spend some sort of holidays together once a year... [T]hey don't call each other and chat or anything. . . . [M]y mom sends [my VK] birthday cards, Christmas cards, and stuff. Her mom sends me stuff too on birthdays and Christmas and stuff like that.

Other linchpins spoke of connections between the VK and BLF through shared, regular family events, such as weekly dinners and other regular interactions that facilitated the relationship.

*Ideal Relationship.* Linchpins were asked to describe the ideal relationship and interaction between their VK and BLF, and their responses consistently emphasized the importance of a positive relationship between the two. Those with intertwined systems invariably indicated that they were satisfied with the current relationship between their VK and BLF and did not desire to change the way they interacted; whether the BLF and VK regarded each other as family or not, linchpins appreciated the relationship that existed between them. As Sophia shared: "I think it's important that they know each other and know each other's concerns and issues. I wouldn't feel comfortable if they didn't have any relationship with each other."

The intertwined relationship between BLF and VK reflected in the discourse of the linchpins were perceived as an added benefit to both VK and BLF. They demonstrated little of the internal and external threat and legitimation burden that discourse-dependent families often face.

*Limited: "They're like casual acquaintances"*

The limited family type was characterized by knowledge of, but little direct contact between, VK and BLF. In Figure 1, the darker line for the limited triad represents communication that is direct and positively valenced between the linchpin, the BLF, and the VK, and the lighter line represents circumscribed, limited interaction between the linchpin's BLF and VK.

*Nature of the Contact.* Unlike the intertwined type, linchpins did not believe that their BLF and VK considered each other as close or as family. Occasional or infrequent contact between BLF and VK occurred, but only in the presence of the linchpin. In most cases, linchpins described the interactions as neutral but not negative. For example, Jane's description of the contact between her VK and BLF typified the limited family type:

It would pretty much be through me. I wouldn't really call it a relationship. . . . I think they would be acquaintances ... [T]hey know of each other, and they have had some conversations with each other, and I think they can find some good things to say about each other. And that's pretty much it. Every once in a while someone would ask, "So how's so-and-so doing?"

Janel described her linchpin role between the two families and emphasized that the brief interactions between them were always cordial. The limited interaction between BLF and VK in limited family types was often characterized as casual and not intimate. As Ken described, "I'm the common link there. They [BLF] don't have interaction with [my VK] when I'm not around."

Unlike the intertwined structure in which linchpins reported fewer differences in their openness with BLF and VK, linchpins in this limited structure described greater differences between what they revealed to BLF and VK, commonly reporting greater openness, and often closeness, with VK. Mara reflected on the differences:



I am much more honest and relaxed when I am talking to [my VK] than my family. . . . Some deep things, or personal things, like secrets and stuff, I talk about them with [my VK] because ... if I tell my parents about some of those things, I don't think they will be happy about me.

*Rituals.* Unlike the intertwined structure, rituals did not connect VK and BLF in the limited family type. The two may have interacted occasionally when they were co-present, but there were no expectations for interaction or involvement in family rituals that distinguished the relationship or bonded the BLF and VK. Most often, the presence of both BLF and VK at family rituals, such as at the linchpin's birthday celebration, was more by chance than planned, and their interaction was not an anticipated aspect of the experience, as was the case with the intertwined structure. As Tanner explained, "When we were in college, my parents would see him because we lived together, but now it would only be at my parents.' ... [I]t is usually just the holidays. But if I am home, if I am around, he may come around if time allows."

*Ideal Relationship.* Linchpins described the limited family type in largely neutral or positive ways and did not desire to change the nature of the contact between their BLF and VK. They expressed a desire for their BLF and VK to like one another, or at least avoid tension, but they did not try to foster deeper connections between them. In some cases, this facilitated their desire to remain distant from their BLF. Janel said that her VK had met her BLF on several occasions, but she emphasized that she did not desire to cultivate a relationship between them:

I am a little bit estranged from my immediate family. Everybody acts like that's not the case, but I don't feel close to them. So I think one of my ways of keeping them away from my circle is not to let them know a lot about [my VK].

Although they did not show an interest in facilitating a BLF-VK relationship, linchpins with a limited structure did appreciate that there did not seem to be tension between them. Alex elaborated:

It's important to me that they get along. . . . I would feel bad, and it would cause conflict in my life if they thought he was a bad guy or he thought they were bad people. It would cause conflict, but in

terms of whether the relationship grows or not, if they become more comfortable, I'm not too concerned about it. I think it's fine if they're like casual acquaintances, casual friends, whatever the case may be, but I'm not trying to make sure they spend more time together.

For most linchpins, the limited relationship functioned well given that there was not competition or tension between the BLF and VK.

*Separate: "They pretty much stay internal"*

The separate family type was characterized by no direct communication and no relationship between VK and BLF. Linchpins described making no attempt to facilitate contact or a relationship between them, perhaps in many cases because linchpins in this type often did not live near their BLF. In Figure 1, for the separate triad, the darker line represents communication that is direct and positively valenced between the linchpin and the BLF and with their VK, but no direct communication between the BLF and VK.

*Nature of the Contact.* In some instances, the BLF and VK had never met or had met casually only once or twice, typically when one BLF member had visited the linchpin. Most of these VK relationships began after linchpins had moved away from home for college or career, which suggests that geographic distance between BLF and VK may have played a role in shaping these family types. Although some families had never met, we noted that all linchpins in the separate category explained that their BLF and VK had knowledge of each other and that the BLF knew of the linchpin's close relationship with the VK. This was the case for Gerry, who shared this: "My voluntary family knows that I have brothers and sisters because I've talked about them, [and] my immediate family has heard me mention the voluntary family over the years. . . . They're really well aware of each other." When asked if her birth mother and her VK, who she calls her "other mother," have a relationship, Becky explained, "No, I don't think that they have a relationship per se. I think what they have in common is me, and loving me and being proud of me."

However, while the families in the separate structure were aware of one another, the fact that the linchpin regarded the VK as "family" was rarely revealed to the BLF. Becky added that when talking to strangers,

she would refer to the mother of her VK as “my other mother,” but when talking to her own mother, out of a sense of loyalty, she would refer to her VK and other mother only by first names.

Many linchpins indicated that their values or interests were better aligned with those of their VK than their BLF, and by extension implied that the values or interests of their VK and BLF did not align well. Gerry expanded on the commonalities that helped him connect with his VK:

I became kin with the other family because I connected with them on things that were more interesting. They reflected my interests and my life. I think that’s kind of common that people will gravitate toward others that they see going in the same direction. And they were achieving academically and that’s what I wanted to do. My regular family, we don’t share as much mutual interests so when we talk it’s more superficial, “How’s the job, how are the kids,” things like that. So a little more depth [exists in my interactions] with the voluntary family because of common interest and a little less depth [exists in my interactions] with the immediate family because of lack of shared interest.

This linchpin, like some others, described strong mutual interests and deep communication with his VK that did not exist with his BLF.

*Ideal Relationship.* Most of the linchpins expressed satisfaction with or, at minimum, ambivalence concerning the absence of a relationship between their BLF and VK. Although geographic distance separated most of these families, those without this hindrance indicated that their BLF had not made an effort to become acquainted with their VK. Craig described his BLF in this way:

My immediate family doesn’t leave themselves open to that sort of thing. It’s not that they’re closed people, but they pretty much stay pretty internal. They have some friends and stuff, but they’re not going out trying to find new people and new relationships to have, so that would probably be why.

Craig stressed that he not was upset that his two families did not interact and emphasized that he did not perceive a problem with the status quo. At the same time, he expressed some confusion regarding the lack of interest his BLF had shown toward his VK, saying, “Why wouldn’t it be better to be friends with more

people? To have more people to share experiences with?” Other linchpins expressed satisfaction with the separation between their BLF and VK. Gerry, for example, remarked that she would ideally want the relationship to be “just the way it is now,” then continued: “I don’t need anything to change . . . [T]he relationships are natural.” Overall, linchpins with separate structures described them as functional and indicated that VK often offset deficits in their BLF relationships.

*Hostile: “He knows she doesn’t like him”*

The hostile family type, which was characterized by discomfort, jealousy, and competitiveness between the VK and at least one member of the BLF, was least common among our linchpins. In Figure 1, for the hostile triad, the darker line represents communication that is direct and positively valenced between the linchpin and BLF, and between the linchpin and VK; the jagged line represents negatively valenced communication between the BLF and VK.

*Nature of the Contact.* Although a hostile relationship has the potential to take on different configurations, in this particular data set, all of the linchpins with hostile relationships were female, and the hostile relationship existed only between their male spouse and their female VK. In other words, the hostile relationship did not exist between all members of the BLF. Rather, linchpins who described hostile communication between their spouse simultaneously reported what we would have categorized as a limited or intertwined relationship between the rest of their BLF and VK, if not for this problematic dyadic relationship between a spouse and the VK. For example, Beth described her situation as follows:

My husband and [VK] have just never really gotten along and I have never understood if it is some kind of jealousy or what it is exactly, but . . . she has never really liked him. . . . On my wedding day she came into my dressing room, she was matron of honor, and said, “Just say the word and I will take you away from this. You don’t have to go through with this. I don’t think this is right for you.” So that was pretty clear. . . . I think [my husband] respects my friendship with her, but he also, not from anything I have said, . . . feels that she doesn’t like him. So he hasn’t really tried to make a relationship with her.

Beth chose not to tell her husband about her VK's wedding-day comment, and she has chosen to navigate her VK's dislike of her spouse through the value she places on the VK relationship. Other linchpins echoed this sentiment and avoided discussing their VK's hostile attitude toward their husbands. Carrie, for example, detailed the areas she avoids talking about with her VK:

She doesn't like my husband, so we rarely talk about him. Sometimes we will, and she will put her two cents in about him, and vice versa, but usually we try to stay away from that and talk about other things. Now my husband before him, she knew all about him but this one...I don't want things to be worse with her, or for him.

Tensions between husbands and VK sometimes interfered more directly with the VK relationship. For example, Sasha said, "There for a while, my [now] ex-husband did not like my [VK], so he wouldn't let me go over there and talk to her."

*Rituals.* Because of the tension in the relationship, no rituals existed between VK and the linchpins' husband. Although linchpins shared that their VK did interact with other members of their BLF, the discomfort between their husband and VK discouraged them from developing rituals together or including each other in their own family rituals.

*Ideal Relationship.* When reflecting on the desired relationship between their BLF and VK, these linchpins reflected that they wanted their spouse and VK to get along and develop a relationship. As Beth explained, "I would like my husband to get along better with her. . . I would like for them to feel more comfortable with each other." Other linchpins echoed this desire. Sasha shared, "In my happy world, she would adore my husband and he'd like her because she liked him and we'd live down the block from each other. That would be probably both of our happy worlds."

In the end, we have very limited data on the hostile structure, as there were few cases, and all were dyadic rather than systemic. It will be important to understand and explore further how hostile VK-BLF communication structures develop and how relational parties might best navigate these difficulties.

## Discussion and Implications

Questions of who is in the family raise issues of privilege, responsibilities, and challenges (Lee, 2013). In the present study, we have expanded the extant literature on VK to better understand discursive construction and enactment of four triangulated supplemental kin structures for persons maintaining relationships with both BLF and VK. These structures included BLF and VK relationships that can variably be characterized as intertwined, limited, separate, and hostile; these structures were differentiated largely by the nature of the interaction between the BLF and VK. These structures reveal a nuanced understanding of supplemental VK, the systems in which they are embedded, and some of the challenges they face. Different family structures and roles are worked out in interaction as members discursively define, legitimize, and enact these relationships (Baxter, 2014a) and cope with internal and external challenges that exist in a given supplemental VK structure.

In their original description of the supplemental type, Braithwaite et al. (2010) concluded that most supplemental kin arose from a perceived deficit in the BLF, often because of the lack of shared values or physical proximity. In the present study, we found that deficit characterized the relationship with BLF for some, but not many, of the linchpins. For example, intertwined family systems did not form from deficit, and these families fostered interaction, shared rituals, and a relationship of varying levels of closeness with the VK through the linchpin. Importantly, this supports the idea that the process of triangulation can work in ways that enhance relationships. Indeed, for those with an intertwined structure, the VK relationship appeared to be a wholly positive experience for linchpins and their BLF, similar to what Pahl and Spencer (2010) referred to as fusion, wherein biological and nonkin boundaries are blurred. Our sense is that intertwined triadic structures have the potential to function as "family plus" to enhance life for the linchpin and VK and, from what we see in these present data, potentially the BLF and VK as well. For example, the VK may smooth the way for linchpin and BLF interactions and the linchpin may become a positive presence in the lives of some of the BL families as well, especially in intertwining VK structures.

In the intertwined family structure, participation in and creation of shared rituals enhanced the experience of these families. Participation in celebrations, such

as birthdays and holidays, can reflect family identification and embeddedness in larger relational systems and help scholars understand how families construct their social world (Baxter 2014b; Rothenbuhler, 1998; Wolin & Bennett, 1984). Overall, the intertwined supplemental kin type helps us understand that although triangulated structures have the potential for difficulty, they can be positive for linchpins, their BLF, and VK. Linchpins in the intertwined structure were able to socially construct an unproblematic triadic structure similar to what some others who find themselves “in the middle” have created. For example, some children in postdivorce families have found themselves to be in the desirable place of “centered” between their parents rather than caught in the middle (Braithwaite, Toller, Daas, Durham, & Jones, 2008); in this structure, children report they are able to sustain a positive relationship with both parents. The present findings reflect the potential for integrated triangulated structures to be enacted in such a way as to avoid the linchpin feeling caught in the middle. In this way, they serve as kinship models that build and reflect relational strengths (Rootes et al., 2010).

Although supplemental kin with intertwined or limited relationships between their BLF and VK were satisfied with those relationships, those with separate and hostile structures described challenges. The voluntary nature of VK relationships may play a role in how punitive these latter two structures may be. Those with a separate structure may have little opportunity or desire to integrate their BLF and VK families, and BLF and VK themselves may be satisfied with weak ties; in any case, the opportunity to choose to remain distant can be viewed as an advantage of these triangulated structures. In contrast, for example, weak ties may not be an option for those in involuntary and potentially undesirable family relationships, as is sometimes the case with in-law relationships, given cultural expectations in conjunction with close physical proximity, financial independence, or the presence of grandchildren (Morr Serewicz, 2008).

In the separate triad, linchpins reported little or no contact between the BLF and VK due to geographic separation, disinterest, threat, or their own lack of desire to intertwine these persons in their lives. This type seems to match more closely the supplemental kin type forming from deficit that Braithwaite et al. (2010) articulated; our data did reveal that some VK

relationships form because of unmet needs in the BLF. In the separate structure, linchpins retained control of information, and most indicated they did not let BLF members know that they considered the VK to be family. Retaining control of the information and privacy boundaries may allow the linchpin to maintain a relationship and receive social support from both BLF and VK as needed and, at the same time, avoid hostilities that could arise in this triangulated structure in the case of increased contact or shared information (Petronio, 2002). In addition, we learned that having the VK as a source of social support and serving as a confidant may also enable persons to maintain a more distant relationship with their BLF when they do not share interests or values. In this way, the presence of the VK relationship may help protect and even facilitate more fragile relationships between linchpins and their BLF.

In the present study, we saw few cases of hostile relationships, and all of them were between a female VK and husband. Certainly for the linchpin, the hostile triad presented a set of challenges to address, as they found themselves in the unenviable position of being caught in the middle of this triangle and experiencing difficulties associated with loyalty conflicts between their spouse and VK. Loyalty conflicts such as these are found in other contexts; for example, they are well documented in stepfamily relationships (e.g., Schrodt & Ledbetter, 2012) and for adolescents whose parents are in conflict (e.g., Fosco & Grych, 2010). In addition, Petronio (2002) wrote about the important role of the confidant but warned of the strain this role can put on the confidant and the relational system in which he or she is embedded. For linchpins in the present study, loyalty conflicts associated with the triangulated structure resulted in being pulled between their husband and VK, with negative implications similar to the experiences of those caught between their spouse and their parent who is functioning as an in-law (Morr Serewicz, 2008). Although there was a gendered element to the hostile structure in our data—all the examples were between a female VK and a male spouse—this was a small sample of cases. Thus, it is not our intention to extrapolate or make claims about gender and the hostile family type, and we caution readers against doing so from these data as well. We encourage researchers and practitioners to develop an empirical understanding of how

and why hostile structures form and which messages and actions might encourage intertwined, or at minimum, limited or separate relationships in their place.

Results of the present study lead us to argue for a more nuanced understanding of the negotiation of supplemental kin, focusing on the discursive construction and enactment of ties with VK and BLF. Nonetheless, our findings should be understood in the context of the study's limitations. First, our participants were not diverse with regard to ethnicity or sexual orientation, and exploring these relationships across ethnic minority and sexually marginalized groups should be a focus of future research endeavors. For example, fictive or non-conventional kin have long been common in African American and other cultural groups (Nelson, 2014), and persons marginalized on the basis of sexual orientation are at an increased risk of being distant from their BLF (Muraco, 2006). Consequently, such groups may experience triangulated kin structures differently than do White, middle-class individuals (Johnson, 2000; Nelson, 2014).

Second, these interview data enabled the research team to gain an in-depth understanding of triangulated kin structures from the perspective of the linchpin. We believe researchers can employ the typology of supplemental kin as a starting point to better understand the role of interaction in constituting and legitimating VK in triangulated sets of relationships, and perhaps in other types of triangulated structures as well. Future studies should gather data from the perspective of VK and BLF members. We also see value in future research approaches that focus on the development of these family relationships over time; for example, a study on relational turning points in the development of VK. This work may reveal keys to creating positive intertwined relationships, or functional limited or separate relationships, or provide insights that would help linchpins and their families avoid hostile relationships.

### *Applications*

Findings of the present study have shed light on our understanding of supplemental VK and reveal four different triangulated relationship structures of linchpins, VK, and BLF. From these findings, we suggest applications for those who form VK relationships and for professionals who may work with them. Family therapists

understand the importance of moving beyond dyadic analyses in families and to triadic structures, which are common in families (Beaton, Doherty & Wegner, 2013). We know that VK relationships have the potential to provide important relational benefits throughout the life span (Nelson, 2013; Pahl & Spencer, 2010). First, for those who are building VK relationships or struggling with how to navigate the intersection of BLF and VK relationships, our findings lead us to suggest that there are multiple healthy models for supplemental kin relationships, on a continuum from tightly interwoven to more distant. Making the four structures available pictorially (as in Figure 1) may help persons understand their range of choices and consider the structures they would like to embrace or avoid. Linchpins should be intentional about the amount and type of contact and relationship they desire between their BLF and VK because they may be able to influence the type of triangulated kin structure that develops. Ultimately, linchpins desiring a relationship between their BLF and VK will want to consider how best to knit their social webs together according to how much and what kind of contact, openness, and ritualizing seem most desirable and fitting in their particular context. As more is learned in future studies about the perspective of the BLF and VK, further refinements can be made for developing individuals' desired structure.

Second, we know from the present study that not all supplemental relationships become intertwined, and we believe that it is important to realize that there are other healthy models for supplemental VK that can meet the needs of the linchpin and others while maintaining a desired boundary between BLF and VK. This leads us to advise that linchpins, and perhaps their BLF and VK, not expect that their BLF and VK necessarily need to be interconnected. Although some of the linchpins desired more closeness between their BLF and VK, most with limited and separate structures expressed satisfaction with those circumstances, as well.

It is important to note that the limited and separate structures, in particular, are likely to present boundary management challenges for linchpins. Galvin (2006) described the internal and external boundary management tasks that discourse-dependent families face, and these are relevant in the case of VK. Although linchpins regard VK as family and clearly value these relationships, consideration needs to be given to how much to reveal to the BLF about the role VK play in their lives.

For example, in the present study, linchpins in the separate structure engaged in code switching by avoiding family labels around their BLF, such as referring to VK as their “best friend” rather than a “sister” or other family labels. Linchpins need to anticipate how they believe their BLF will react to the presence of VK in their lives. Bevcar and Bevcar (1999) suggested that families struggling with triangulated structures might need a therapist to work with different family members to manage potential negative implications of these structures. This might be particularly true for those who experience the hostile type of supplemental VK relationship. In addition, as they navigate boundary management between the BLF and VK, linchpins must also consider and, in some cases, control access between VK and BLF on social media (see Child & Petronio, 2011). For example, linchpins wishing to maintain separation between BLF and VK need to be mindful of privacy settings and what they reveal and post on social media sites. Similarly, linchpins need to navigate their degree of openness about the VK relationship when hostilities exist between their BLF and VK.

Last, keeping greater degrees of distance between VK and BLF may provide linchpins the benefit of maintaining both relationships in a parallel fashion that avoids the complexities that may arise when managing triangulated structures. However, maintaining a greater distance between the BLF and VK may present challenges in some contexts. For example, in separate or hostile relationships, when the linchpin becomes ill or needs additional support, the lack of a relationship between the BLF and VK may prevent them from cooperating in ways that might be helpful to the linchpin. This seems especially important to consider for people who are unmarried and for those in later life, when different types of VK relationships can exist and provide social support and care (Allen et al., 2011).

Despite any challenges that accompany navigating supplemental VK relationships, it is clear that these are important, long-standing relationships that warrant examination and understanding. The intertwined structure provides an opportunity to understand positive and functional relationships within this triangulated structure. Moreover, aside from those with the hostile structure, supplemental kin can function quite well with agreement from the various parties. Thus, our findings should encourage family researchers and practitioners interested in family support across the life

span to consider the place of VK relationships within the larger family system. Family systems are characterized by boundaries that regulate the amount of contact with others. These boundaries shift and vary from rigid to open, and one of their purposes is to manage hierarchy within the system (Minuchin, 1974). Caseworkers and caregivers may find it helpful to consider the ways hierarchy is constructed and maintained when working with these triangulated family structures and to help linchpins, VK, and BLF negotiate the most functional relationships possible.

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