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“Love Needs to Be Exchanged”: A Diary Study of Interaction and Enactment of the Family Kinkeeper Role

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“Love Needs to Be Exchanged”: A Diary Study of Interaction and Enactment of the Family Kinkeeper Role

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Abstract

Family kinkeepers enact an important role centered on interaction and maintaining family relationships. The researchers studied kinkeeping communication in light of mediated communication, topics engaged, and kinkeepers' assessments. Thirty-four self-identified kinkeepers kept an interaction diary over 2 weeks. Their 275 reports represented 1,487 interactions using largely mediated communication channels (text, telephone, e-mail, social media), centered on everyday activities, rituals, and health and safety. Despite potential complications of the role, kinkeepers reported high agreement and openness with family members, little conflict, and overall satisfaction with their interactions. Implications of these findings, new directions for researchers, and the important mediated role of family kinkeeping are discussed.

Keywords: family communication, family relationship maintenance, interaction diary, kinkeeper

Contemporary families have access to a wide variety of means to stay connected and maintain family relationships. In many families, a kinkeeper takes on the role of helping family members keep in touch with one another, providing or coordinating

family support, and serving as an informational gatekeeper (Gallagher & Gerstel, 1993; Rosenthal, 1985). Kinkeepers can play a central role in family relationship maintenance via various activities, such as planning family rituals or family reunions (di Leonardo, 1987; Gerstel & Gallagher, 1993; Leach & Braithwaite, 1996; Rosenthal, 1985), coordinating family caregiving (Brown & DeRycke, 2010; Troll, 1994), or serving as a repository of family medical information (Giordimaina, Sheldon, Kiedrowski, & Jayaratne, 2015).

By and large, researchers sought to understand how many families have kinkeepers and who takes responsibility for this role. What has not changed over the last 30 years is that kinkeepers are mostly middle-age women (e.g., Gallagher & Gerstel, 1993; Leach & Braithwaite, 1996; Rosenthal, 1985), with some evidence for a modest increase in men enacting the kinkeeping role at present (e.g., Brown & DeRycke, 2010). In the mid-1990s, two members of our current research team studied the specific communication behaviors of kinkeepers, detailing frequency of kinkeeper communication, communication channels used, and functions of the role (Leach & Braithwaite, 1996). Of course, this research occurred before the widespread use of mobile communication technologies and social media. Our goal in the present study was to provide a contemporary understanding of family kinkeeper communication and we contributed a new portrait of kinkeeping activities that accounted for mediated communication, topics engaged, and kinkeepers' overall assessment of the quality of their interactions with family members.

Communication of Family Kinkeepers

While earlier scholars highlighted the existence of the kinkeeping role and its general functions, Leach and Braithwaite (1996) were the first to track the interaction of kinkeepers via diaries and interviews with a group of kinkeepers. Kinkeepers who had been identified by members of their family participated in a diary and interview study (Zimmerman & Wieder, 1982). They kept an interaction diary for 2 weeks, answering a set of questions each time they initiated contact with family members, providing details about the amount of contact, communication channels engaged at the time, and outcomes of kinkeeping for the family. While earlier kinkeeping studies provide a foundation, several questions persisted that we address in the present study. First, while we are aware that the kinkeeper role has the potential of positive outcomes for families (di Leonardo, 1987; Gallagher & Gerstel, 1993; Gerstel & Gallagher, 1993; Leach & Braithwaite, 1996; Rosenthal, 1985), we still know little about how kinkeeper communication helps create and maintain family relationships. Questions remain about what constitutes the everyday interactions of kinkeepers—for example, what topics are included in these interactions and who initiates these interactions? These questions form our first goal in this study.

The kinkeeper role is important to understand, as family relationships are created in interaction, socially constructed as members cocreate, and enact family identity and bonds (Baxter, 2014; Braithwaite, Foster, & Bergen, in press). As Baxter (2014)

highlighted, “Families are the result of what we *do*—the product of our everyday communicative accomplishments” (p. 13). Families coconstruct and maintain their relationships and identity via established roles and expectations (e.g., Floyd, Mikkelson, & Judd, 2006), cultural identity (e.g., Carbaugh, 1996), celebrations and traditions (e.g., Wolin & Bennett, 1984), and everyday interaction (e.g., Goldsmith & Baxter, 1996).

Family relationships are maintained in interaction, in ways that are intentional and goal-directed, as well as ways that are the byproduct of routine communication (Stafford, Dainton, & Haas, 2000). When families co-reside in a single household or locality, maintaining the family relationship may be aided by proximity. But when some family members do not co-reside, when there are multiple households and extended family, and especially when there are greater geographic distances or other reasons not to interact face-to-face, the motivations and means of family interaction and maintenance are more effortful (Stafford, 2005). Scholars have done an excellent job identifying behaviors and functions of relational maintenance, focusing largely on dyadic relationships, such as dating, marital, and parent-child. However, little has been done about how relationship maintenance is accomplished in family systems, across different households and family members. Family kinkeepers play one vital role in maintaining family relationships.

Second, in terms of communication channels engaged, the proliferation of communication technologies available to families and kinkeepers since the earlier studies warrant examination. For example, e-mail, smartphones, text messaging, social media, blogs, webcams, digital photography, and video chat are all readily available to many, but certainly not all, families (Rudi, Dworkin, Walker, & Doty, 2015). These different technologies provide families with multiple ways for collaborating, exchanging information, and spending time together. All of these technologies have the potential to assist with relational maintenance (Stafford, 2005) and help create feelings of family strength and closeness, although they have the potential for harm as well (Grant, 2009; Tee, Brush, & Inkpen, 2009; Webb, 2015). In addition, family members must develop expertise on various technologies and consider carefully which should be employed with and by different family members, especially children (Rudi et al., 2015). According to the 2012 Nielsen Social Media Report, the most widely used technology is the computer, followed by smartphones and tablets; Facebook and Twitter are the most used platforms. While there is evidence, at least for dyads, of a relationship between stronger ties and using more media to interact (Ledbetter, 2015), Webb (2015) pointed out that there are more misconceptions than firm knowledge when it comes to family communication and technology use. Relevant to our work, previous kinkeeping studies were all undertaken largely before the advent or widespread adoption of digital and social media. Few of these technologies were available widely when earlier studies were carried out; not many family members had smartphones, e-mail, or internet access. Thus, exploring the communication channels engaged by kinkeepers and their families, as well as who initiated these messages, forms the second goal for our study.

Third, while scholars have documented potential for positive benefits of kinkeeping, there has been little discussion of some of the potential drawbacks for kinkeepers. Kinkeepers often act as gatekeepers, giving them the potential for benefiting families, as they are well informed and can help get information and support to and from family members (Rosenthal, 1985). However, challenges of kinkeeping and gatekeeping are also chronicled in the family literature, as gatekeepers can reduce participation and direct communication of certain family members (e.g., Allen & Hawkins, 1999). Similarly, there are instances when the linchpin nature of the kinkeeping role may see kinkeepers put into the middle of family members' problems and conflicts and become caught in the middle of triangulated structures, which has typically resulted in negative ramifications for all concerned (Dallos & Vetere, 2012; Leach & Braithwaite, 1996; Wang & Crane, 2001). Thus, understanding strengths and challenges of the kinkeeping role for kinkeepers themselves is the third goal for our study. To address how contemporary kinkeepers function in family relationship maintenance and to better understand contemporary communication channels engaged (especially mediated channels), who initiates kinkeeping, content of these messages, and ramifications of the kinkeeping role, the *research question* guiding the present study is: How do family kinkeepers communicate, enact, and assess the kinkeeping role?

Method

In order to understand the interaction of family kinkeepers, we situated the study in the interpretive paradigm with the goal of understanding "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). The researchers collected data via interaction diaries kept by participants (Bolger, Davis, & Rafaeli, 2003; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Diaries are an approach to gathering data in a way that simulates field observation and enables researchers to explore participants' activities when they are not able to make firsthand observations themselves (Zimmerman & Wieder, 1982); in this way diaries serve as an "external memory" for participants (Altrichter & Holly, 2005, p. 24). Diaries have been successfully used by social scientists for many years (see Bolger et al., 2003; Reis & Gable, 2000) and by family communication researchers—for example, in stepfamilies (Braithwaite, McBride, & Schrodt, 2003) and in the social networks of young adults (Baxter, Dun, & Sahlstein, 2001). A diary methodology allows scholars to build a more complete picture of interaction not available via self-report surveys or interviews and gain a more complete understanding of everyday interaction.

Participants

We chose to explore the interactions of family members who self-identified as a family kinkeeper, which we defined as a "family member who takes on the role of helping

their families stay in touch with one another.” We placed a call for participants who met the following criteria: (a) be at least 19 years old (a requirement of the local IRB), (b) self-identify as a family kinkeeper, and (c) have enacted the kinkeeper role for their family for at least 1 year. Participants were asked to keep a record of all kin-keeping activities for at least 8 days in a two-week period.

Thirty-four participants, 31 females (91.18%) and 3 males (8.82%) completed a set of demographic questions and kept an interaction diary. The kinkeepers ranged in age from 23 to 77 years old ($M = 54.59$, $SD = 3.54$ years). Thirty of the kinkeepers identified as Caucasian. The kinkeepers’ education level ranged from high school (3%), some college to an associate’s degree (11.8%), bachelor’s degree (29.4%), master’s to professional degree (32.3%), and doctoral degree (23.5%). Most of the kinkeepers were married (73.5%). When we asked when they began their kinkeeping role, 31 indicated their age when they started, ranging from 14 to 64 years old ($M = 29.16$ years old, $SD = 11.78$).

The kinkeepers reported they reached out to differing numbers of family members ranging from 3 to 412 members, ($N = 1147$, $M = 34.76$, $SD = 75.24$). In their daily interaction reports, kinkeepers initiated contact with a total of 652 family members throughout the data collection period: 337 female relatives (51.6%), 195 male relatives (30%). They did not identify the sex of the family member in 120 (18.4%) of the cases.

Procedures

Once participants volunteered for the study, we sent them a “daily kinkeeper report form” to complete once a day for at least 8 days in a two-week period. This was a two page document the researchers adapted from earlier studies, adding in communication technologies and social media. Participants were asked to focus on communication with family members in their role as a kinkeeper and report on those interactions. The research team developed and pilot tested a draft of the daily kinkeeper report form with several volunteers. This was an important step as questions that seem common-sense to researchers may not be clear to participants (Bolger et al., 2003).

One of the biggest challenges volunteers encountered was how to count what constituted as an interaction. This was much simpler for Leach and Braithwaite (1996) when kinkeepers were recording the number of letters sent, phone calls made, and face-to-face interactions, versus how to count a series of text or e-mail messages. Volunteers found it challenging to keep track of interactions that were comprised of a series of messages on the same topic, which occurred most often in the form of back-and-forth text messages. After much discussion, the research team operationalized the definition of an interaction as a “conversation” on a single topic, instructing participants to consider a conversation that might contain multiple messages on a single topic as one interaction. For example, if a kinkeeper exchanged a series of text messages on or about an upcoming family reunion, this would count as one interaction. We refined and finalized the daily kinkeeper report form before starting our data collection.

The final daily kinkeeper report form included five sections. First, participants indicated the number of times per day they initiated communication or responded when other family members initiated via different channels, what we labeled as “communication methods” (social media, text, e-mail, telephone, face-to-face, U.S. Postal Service [USPS], video chat, or other). For each channel, we asked the kinkeepers to indicate the number of different topics engaged. Second, we asked the kinkeepers to list who in the family they were trying to reach by role (e.g., mother, sister, grandfather), and which family members tried to reach them. Third, we asked the kinkeepers to indicate topics about which they communicated as a kinkeeper that day. Fourth, we asked the kinkeepers to “choose one message or exchange you reported on today that you believe was the most important to your role as a kinkeeper.” We asked them to report on the method (communication channel used) and why that was chosen, who initiated this interaction, the topic, the outcome of this communication, and why this was the most important topic on this given day. Fifth, we asked the kinkeepers to think about the most important message they reported on and to answer five Likert-style questions about (a) effectiveness of the communication method/channel, (b) how openly they communicated about the topic, (c) agreement among family member(s), (d) conflict in this interaction, and (e) overall satisfaction with this message or exchange.

Kinkeepers completed their forms electronically or via paper during one of two different periods, depending on their availability. The second author received and archived all data. We continued with the data collection until we perceived we reached theoretical saturation in terms of unique cases that were appearing in these data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 263).

Analysis of Data

Data consisted of 275 completed daily kinkeeper report forms from the 34 kinkeepers. The total number of forms submitted per kinkeeper ranged from 3 to 12, with a mean of 8 forms returned ($M = 8.09$, $SD = .71$) over the period of days data were collected. We do not have a way of knowing how typical the amount or type of communication over these days was for this group of kinkeepers; for example, whether taking part in the study encouraged more (or less) messages initiated. We did keep the data collection period away from major U.S. holidays in an attempt to reduce a higher incidence of interaction than normal. Per our instructions, if there were no kinkeeper interactions that day, participants did not complete a form.

We analyzed 1,487 interactions and (a) the number of kinkeeping interactions participants initiated and responded to, (b) the communication channels used (social media, text, e-mail, telephone, face-to-face, U.S. Postal Service (USPS), video chat or other), (c) the number of different topics, and (d) the family roles of those contacted or who initiated contact with the kinkeepers (see Table 1). Second, we analyzed the specific topics covered and their frequencies, in an inductive thematic analysis (Baxter & Babbie, 2004; Braun & Clarke, 2006), separately and then by coming to consensus in

Table 1. Interactions Initiated by Kinkeepers and Family via Different Communication Channels

Communication Channel	Kinkeeping interactions* KK initiated	Kinkeeping interactions* other initiated
Text	238 (26.53%)	155 (26.27%)
Telephone	200 (22.30%)	117 (19.83%)
E-mail	153 (17.06%)	99 (16.78%)
Social Media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat)	167 (18.62%)	109 (18.47%)
Face-to-Face	71 (7.92%)	60 (10.17%)
U.S. Postal Service (snail mail)	21 (2.34%)	9 (1.53%)
Video Chat (FaceTime, Skype)	25 (2.79%)	18 (3.05%)
Other	22 (2.45%)	23 (3.90%)
Total	897	590

*Interaction operationalized as a conversation on a single topic.

Table 2. Topics Addressed in Kinkeeping Messages

Category	Examples of Topics	Frequency% of Total
1) Everyday Activities	Reminders; Checking in/updating; Talking about sports/weather/ current events/politics; Sharing jokes/photos/videos	276 (40.35%)
2) Rituals	Birthday/wedding/graduation; Organizing family trips/events; Memorial services	162 (23.68 %)
3) Health & Safety	Physical/emotional well-being; Surgeries; Issues related to death; Travel/weather safety	156 (22.81%)
4) Education	Parent/teacher conferences; Upcoming educational plans; Helping with homework; School sports	31 (4.53%)
5) Finances & Legal	Buying insurance; Settling estates; Lending money; Getting attorney; Marital problems	27 (3.95%)
6) Work	Selling real estate; Getting credit card reader; Family-owned business	25 (3.65%)
7) Other	Letter received from grandfather's former orphanage; Online purchases	7 (1.02%)
Total		684

discussion. We arranged these data into seven topics, along with frequencies of these topics (see Table 2). Third, we analyzed the messages identified by the kinkeepers as the most important message that day by (a) channel (type and frequency), (b) who initiated this topic, and (c) what topic(s) were discussed. As with the earlier data, we undertook an inductive thematic analysis of these data and the frequencies of these

Table 3. Kinkeeper Evaluation of the Most Important Interaction

<i>How effective was this method of communication?</i>						
7*	0	7	5	23	40	177
2.7%	0%	2.7%	1.9%	8.8%	15.4%	68.4%
Very Ineffective						Very Effective
<i>How openly did you communicate with your family member(s)?</i>						
2	2	3	6	21	48	180
0.7%	0.7%	1.1%	2.3%	8%	18.3%	68.7%
Very Closed						Very Open
<i>How much did you and your family member(s) agree?</i>						
1	3	3	12	16	52	171
0.4%	1.2%	1.2%	4.6%	6.2%	20%	66.3%
High Disagree						High Agree
<i>How much conflict was there?</i>						
3	3	4	7	9	25	199
1.2%	1.2%	1.6%	2.8%	3.6%	10%	79.6%
Lots of Conflict						Very Little Conflict
<i>How satisfied were you with this message or exchange?</i>						
2	5	3	12	15	45	178
0.7%	1.9%	1.2%	4.6%	5.7%	17.3%	68.4%
Very Unsatisfied						Very Satisfied

* Total number of kinkeepers to select that rating.

topics, resolving any differences in discussion. Fourth, we analyzed the responses to the five Likert-scale questions (see Table 3). As a last step, the whole research team met and engaged in an extended discussion of the results and suggested exemplars to highlight these data in the research report.

Results

To address the research question, how do family kinkeepers communicate, enact, and assess the kinkeeping role, we present results in three sections: (a) profile of kinkeeping interactions, (b) most important kinkeeping interaction of the day, and (c) kinkeeper assessment of the most important interactions.

Profile of Kinkeeping Interactions

The researchers' analysis of the 275 daily kinkeeper reports appear in Table 1, providing a summary of the communication channels used (social media, text, e-mail, telephone, face-to-face, USPS, video chat, or other) and reported by (a) interactions initiated by the kinkeepers, and (b) interactions initiated by other family members. Table 2 is a summary of our analysis of the different topics kinkeepers reported discussing. All of the results are detailed in the tables and we describe the most frequently reported results.

Initiation of Communication and Channel Used

As revealed from the daily kinkeeper reports, a total of 1,487 interactions were reported by the kinkeepers over the two-week period. Of the total interactions, 897 (60.32%) were initiated by the kinkeepers and 590 (39.68%) were initiated by family members.

First, we analyzed the *number of kinkeeping interactions per day initiated by the kinkeepers and the communication channels used*. Text messaging accounted for 238 (26.53%) of the total kinkeeping interactions. Telephone was the second most frequent channel, representing 200 (22.30%) of the total interactions. E-mail was the third most frequent channel representing 153 (17.06%) of the interactions. Social media was the fourth most frequent channel (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat) representing 167 (18.62%) of the interactions. In total, these four mediated channels accounted for 84.51% of all interactions as compared to in-person (face-to-face) interaction, accounting for 71 (7.92%) of the interactions.

Second, we analyzed the *number of kinkeeping interactions per day initiated by family members and the communication channels used*. When we compiled the data on the number of kinkeeping interactions per day initiated by the family members, text messaging again ranked as most frequent and accounted for 155 (26.27%) of the total kinkeeping interactions. Telephone again ranked second, representing 117 (19.83%) of the total interactions. In contrast to messages initiated by the kinkeepers, social media was the third most frequent channel, representing 109 (18.47%) of the interactions. E-mail was the fourth most frequent channel used by family members representing 99 (16.78%) of the interactions. In total, these four mediated channels represented 81.35% of all interactions as compared to in-person (face-to-face) interaction, which represented 60 (10.17%) of the interactions.

Topics Addressed

Table 2 is a summary of the topics discussed over the reporting period. The kinkeepers identified a total of 664 topics over the two-week period, which we analyzed, creating seven categories: (a) health and safety, (b) rituals, (c) everyday activities, (d) finances and legal, (e) education, (f) work, and (g) other. The three most frequent topics were everyday activities, rituals, and health and safety, accounting for 86.84% of the topics discussed. First, everyday activities accounted for 276 (40.35%) of the topics discussed. These included updates and reminders, planning dinner, talking about current events, or sharing photos or family history. For example, one kinkeeper described:

I sent out a photograph from a family gathering at our grandparents' home on a summer Sunday in the mid-50s. I have more than 50 cousins on my mother's side and most of us are rather close, considering the time and distances involved. I send out photos or notes from time to time to remind the cousins that they are remembered. (17: notation refers to participant number)

The kinkeepers also sent current news items about the family or of general interest, cartoons, or jokes. For example, one kinkeeper shared a humorous message with her mother that had been posted by a favorite television personality, remarking, "I know that my mom enjoys his show and his musings" (19). Another kinkeeper indicated she discussed "birthday, job choices, how children were doing" (33).

Second, rituals accounted for 162 (23.68%) of the topics discussed. This included organizing or discussing family events, such as birthdays, weddings, graduation celebrations, and memorial services. For example, one kinkeeper, a woman in her early 60s, described: "Daughter Nancy came over and we worked on items for the upcoming baby shower for other daughter, Anna. A friend came over and helped us with decisions for decorations" (25).

Third, health and safety accounted for 156 (22.81%) of the topics discussed, including physical and emotional well-being of family members, upcoming surgery of a family member, or death. This category also included messages regarding travel and related weather updates. For example, a participant recorded:

Two big things happened in the past 24 hours: an earthquake late last night in the city I live and a shooting threat at the place I work/go to school today. Because I know my parents constantly go onto social media and news outlets, I felt I had to inform them of these situations before they found about/freaked out about them. (7)

The remaining categories were divided among education, finances, work, and some messages coded as "other" that did not fit into the above categories.

In sum, considering the overall profile of kinkeeping interactions over the data collection period, kinkeepers reported that they initiated more of the messages than did family members. When they reported on the messages they initiated versus messages initiated by family members by communication channels used, with some slight differences, the preponderance of messages came via text, telephone, social media, and e-mail, followed by face-to-face interaction by a much smaller amount. For these kinkeepers, whether they were initiating or responding to family members when enacting their role, the majority of the interaction was mediated.

Most Important Kinkeeping Interaction of the Day

The second section of the daily kinkeeper report asked participants to choose the message or interaction from the day that they believed was the most important to their role as a kinkeeper. We analyzed four aspects of this most important communication: (a) message recipients, (b) communication channels, (c) topic, and (d) outcome of kinkeeping communication.

Message Recipients for Most Important Communication

In their explanations of *who they contacted in this most important message or interaction*, as a whole, kinkeepers listed 337 female family members, 195 male family members, and 120 other relatives for whom they did not indicate sex. In their explanations

of *who contacted them in this most important message or interaction*, as a whole, kinkeepers listed 207 female family members, 123 male relatives, and 61 other relatives for whom they did not indicate sex.

Communication Channels for Most Important Communication

When we asked about the communication channel used for the most important message, interestingly, the findings were different than the overall messages reported. For these most important messages, telephone was used most frequently, accounting for 93 (32.07%) of the messages, followed by text, accounting for 53 (18.28%) messages, e-mail, accounting for 50 (17.24%) messages, social media accounting for 44 (15.17%), and face-to-face communication accounted for 38 (13.10%) of the messages, with postal mail and video chat present, but not used frequently. When they indicated why they chose the communication channel they did, respondents cited choosing communication channels that were either (a) fastest, easiest, or convenient, or were (b) more personal. Speaking to the former, one respondent noted, "I chose to call her because she is new to texting on her iPhone and it frustrates her" (7), and another explained, "With my brother, Facebook or texting elicits the best or quickest response" (19). Those who reported using the telephone or face-to-face interaction cited reasons of practicality, coupled with perceptions of the more personal nature of telephone communication. For example, one kinkeeper noted why she uses the telephone: "I call my mother every day since my dad died over 3 years ago. It provides for conversation and connection for her in the evening, which are her most 'alone' times of the day" (32). Another kinkeeper stressed why she avoids electronic communication with her grandmother:

My grandmother rarely uses her cell phone (if she even decides to charge it!). She has an email but complains that it is an informal way to keep in touch with loved ones, so I have learned to not email her about important or family issues. (7)

Topic of Most Important Communication

In the analysis, we coded topics into the same categories that appeared in Table 2, but there were important differences in the incidence of these topics. First, health and safety was by far the most common topic for the most important interaction that day, accounting for 105 instances (33.44%). For example, one kinkeeper sent a message to multiple family members, "Reminding people to wear their CRC shirts on Wednesday for my husband's chemo appointment" (34). Rituals were the second most common topic at 29.94%, followed by everyday activities at 25.16%.

When we asked the kinkeepers to reflect on why this particular topic was the most important of the day, they detailed the need to keep family together and informed, and highlighted the need to affirm and support members of their family. Kinkeepers stressed their role as important to keep the family informed, especially as face-to-face contact was often difficult to accomplish. One kinkeeper explained:

Because it is typically hard to schedule a time for all three families to get together. Although we aimed to do it this last year, it did not happen last year because of scheduling difficulties. My son is a farmer who is tied to the farm by irrigation, my daughter, an elementary teacher, often teaches summer school, and it is difficult to find a time that suits all. (10)

Kinkeepers perceived that family members looked to them and expected their enactment of this role. For example, one kinkeeper described sending birthday cards to family members:

This is the “regular” obligation. At this point, the nieces and nephews would be so sad if I forgot a birthday greeting. They’ve been getting cards for up to 30 years, and I try very hard to make sure the birthday [social media] posting goes up on time (they do forgive me when I’m late). (27)

In addition to keeping the family in contact, kinkeepers expressed that enacting their role was important to provide support to family members. For example, one kinkeeper stressed, “All people need to be affirmed and celebrated. Love needs to be exchanged” (33), and another explained, “We all need to know that we are loved and needed” (21). Especially for kinkeepers who engaged in topics connected to health and safety, support came in the form of providing help; as this kinkeeper reflected, “Love means concern for family and doing what you can to help” (33).

Outcomes of Kinkeeping Communication

Overall, the kinkeepers expressed positivity over the outcome of the most important interactions and believed they had accomplished their goals for the interaction. In a practical sense, the kinkeepers completed a task they set out to do, as in this example of a kinkeeper who reported she “finalized the dates, the type of food, considered catering options, when I will come down to help prepare in advance, decorations and gift ideas” (29). Others reported that they accomplished their goal of providing emotional support, “Filled my mother’s evening since she was home alone for the first time following surgery” (32), or instrumental support, “We brought some comfort and were comforted to see that he was in fairly good shape” (33). Other kinkeepers reflected on the expansive nature of kinkeeping, describing how their actions facilitated additional support to a family member, as did kinkeepers who posted a message of congratulations to a family member on social media, “People acknowledged they ‘like’ this and many of them commented on the post to congratulate her” (25).

Kinkeeper Assessment

The last questions on the daily kinkeeper report asked for kinkeepers to evaluate their most important interactions via five Likert-style questions about (a) effectiveness of the communication method/channel, (b) open communication about the

topic, (c) agreement among family member(s), (d) conflict in these interactions, and (e) overall satisfaction with this message or exchange. We summarize these data in Table 3.

Taken as a whole, these data reflect that kinkeepers perceived their most important interactions quite positively overall. They reported their chosen communication channel (method) to be “very effective” 68.4% of the time. In this most important exchange, kinkeepers indicated a moderate to high degree of openness with their family members, reporting “high openness” 68.7% of the time, and without much conflict, reporting “very little conflict” 79.6% of the time. Kinkeepers rated a moderate to high degree of satisfaction with the message or exchange, reporting themselves to be “very satisfied” 68.4% of the time.

Discussion

In this study, we created a contemporary portrait of family kinkeeping interactions of a group of self-identified family kinkeepers, highlighting messages initiated, frequency of interaction, topics engaged, communication channels, and kinkeepers’ assessments of their interactions. We are more convinced than ever that the kinkeeper is an important role in family maintenance and this role is aided, but not replaced, by the use of social media. In fact, Kamal, Noor, and Baharin (2016) reported the results of a study of Malaysian kinkeepers using a particular mobile social media app, WhatsApp. The researchers documented the central role of one or more kinkeepers (still largely women) and found that, even with sophisticated technologies available to facilitate family interaction, the kinkeeper role is important to encourage wider participation and to keep interaction going. As most families do not maintain relationships in adult life via coresidence, both families of origin and extended family members rely on different forms of interactional ties, with mediated forms of communication increasingly important for relational maintenance (Dindia, 2003; Stafford, 2005; Webb, 2015).

For families that have kinkeepers, these people can serve an important lynchpin function for the family. We had wondered whether the demographics of the kinkeeper role would have shifted over the last 20 years, especially with the shift to electronic communication. We found that the profile of kinkeepers represented in Leach and Braithwaite’s (1996) study and our present study remained remarkably similar. In 1996, all of the kinkeepers who volunteered were middle-aged women and, in 2016, 91.18% of the kinkeepers were women, largely in the same stage of life. While there were 3 male kinkeepers represented in the present study, overall, we found that those who self-identify in the role and volunteer to be studied demonstrate surprisingly little variation over 20 years; at the same time many other gendered roles have altered. While Leach and Braithwaite were unable to compare kinkeeping interactions in terms of whether they were initiated by kinkeepers versus family members, in our study, we observed more interactions initiated by kinkeepers (60.32%) in their self-reports.

Not surprisingly, given the advances in digital communication technology and availability of personal communication technologies for many U.S. residents (at least those with the socioeconomic means and/or desire to use them), mediated communication dominated the communication of kinkeepers and family in the current data. This dovetails with national data; for example, Perrin (2015) reported that, in 2015, 65% of American adults use social networking sites, with 90% of young adults engaging in social media and a marked increase in technology use by those in middle age (77%) and by those 65 years old and older (35%). Hertlein and Blumer (2015) stressed that family relationships are maintained differently since the onset of wider availability of media technologies, providing opportunities for increased contact. Kinkeepers are one way families can facilitate this kind of contact.

Our results help demonstrate the ubiquitous nature of digital communication employed by kinkeepers and their families; overall 62% of the interactions involved text, e-mail, or social media like Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram. Text messaging represented 26% of all the interactions and, indeed, is likely minimized in our data, as we asked kinkeepers to treat a series of messages on a topic as one interaction. While this procedural choice made good sense for collecting these data, we know from examining the data from our pilot study that, had we counted text and other messages individually, the incidences of mediated channels would have been much higher. Hertlein and Blumer (2015) did caution that while the number of interactions can increase with common adoption of these technologies, there is a danger of more frequent contacts with a shorter duration that may negatively influence intimacy and this is something to which future kinkeeping researchers should attend.

While internet-based communication technologies have increased, Karraker (2015) pointed out that access to newer, and often more cost-effective, communication technologies is shaped by the economics of a given household, but also personal preferences of the users, and cautioned that newer technologies do not always replace older ones. In fact, in our present data, we saw continued high incidences of telephone use by both kinkeepers and their family members. However, what these results do not highlight is that more or most of the telephone use at present is likely via mobile phones, on which kinkeepers and family members also text (with text messaging representing 26% of all the interactions in the data). Taken together, text and telephone use represented 48.8% of the interactions initiated by the kinkeepers and 46% of the interactions initiated by family members. While we are not able to differentiate between mobile phones and landlines in our dataset, given national data on mobile phone use and the large incidence of text messaging in this study, our supposition is that most of these telephone interactions are via mobile phones. However, as we consider the use of telephones in kinkeeping, we do note the importance of telephone technology to kinkeepers and their family members.

Interestingly, face-to-face visits also remained quite similar between 1996 (20.5%) and 2016 (18.09%). While geographically dispersed families do use mediated forms of communication, scholars recognize that at least some face-to-face contact appears to be important for most families to maintain their relationships (Aylor, 2003; Stafford, 2005), which also appears to be the case in our data. All of these results together point

to the mediated nature of family kinkeeping interactions, and the use of face-to-face interaction as well. From our data, we were able to reflect on the role of kinkeepers in keeping families that are geographically dispersed informed about each other and who help maintain family relationships when visits are not possible or perhaps desirable.

Our data also help us provide a description of the topic areas of kinkeeping interactions. The results confirm the importance of everyday interactions in the maintenance of family relationships (e.g., Goldsmith & Baxter, 1996). We did analyze the topics by communication channel to better understand how these topics are communicated. We know that social media like Facebook, which is the social media site currently visited most in the United States, is being used by increasingly older users than when Facebook began on college campuses. Child and Petronio (2015) reported that “current users across age groups increasingly use Facebook to interact with their closest confidants, including family members” (p. 34), and they stress the importance of understanding challenges, such as managing privacy.

The second most common topic overall—and first among the most important topic of the day—was health and safety. This finding encourages us to stress the social support provision of family kinkeepers. Social support occurs in everyday interactions in personal relationships, not just during times of crisis (e.g., Koenig Kellas, Kranstuber Horstman, Willer, & Carr, 2015), and is a key to the quality of human life and family unity (Goldsmith, 2004). Scholars have noted that the substantial time and energy expended in maintaining relationships among extended family are often not shared equally among family members. Our results lead us to suggest that kinkeepers are an important source or facilitator of family social support (Gerstel & Gallagher, 1993; Leach & Braithwaite, 1996).

The third most common topic contained in kinkeeping messages was rituals and, as in the past, planning and enacting family rituals remains an important purview of family kinkeepers (di Leonardo, 1987; Gallagher & Gerstel, 1993; Gerstel & Gallagher, 1993; Leach & Braithwaite, 1996; Rosenthal, 1985). Ritual enactments are important to both family health and identity (Wolin & Bennett, 1984) and are a hallmark of resilient relationships (Buzzanell, 2010), and the value of kinkeepers’ role in family rituals should be appreciated. More than ever, social media use becomes a family ritual in and of itself, and family rituals are increasingly enacted via social media like Facebook. Bruess, Li, and Polingo (2015) reported that families that engaged in a Facebook ritual experienced positive benefits of increased connection and Facebook rituals encouraged more frequent communication, having more information about others’ lives, reminiscing, enjoyment, and social support. From our present data, kinkeepers reflected these same attributes, but we are not able to say how similarly or differently families with kinkeepers experience these benefits.

One unique contribution of our work was that we examined kinkeepers’ assessment of their role. At least when reflecting on their most important interaction of the day, kinkeepers reported little conflict, high agreement, high self-revelation (openness), and they reported they were very satisfied with this interaction. While we are gratified that kinkeepers find value and satisfaction in the role, as reflected in these present data that largely mirrors previous research (e.g., Leach & Braithwaite, 1996), we

recognize that empirical focus has been on the perspective of kinkeepers to the neglect of how family members perceive and evaluate this family communication and role. Certainly, we suggest that scholars take this focus in the very near future.

In addition, more empirical research needs to be done to understand the use of social media and kinkeeping. While kinkeepers reported high levels of openness and satisfaction and low conflict with their role in this present study, we are in the very early stages of understanding how family members use and perceive social media in family life and the rules for this communication (e.g., Bruess et al., 2015; Child & Petronio, 2011, 2015; Child, Petronio, Agyeman-Budu, & Westermann, 2011), especially when functioning in a gatekeeping role, as kinkeepers do. For example, we believe family scholars and practitioners need to better understand how kinkeepers and families regulate privacy rules across communication channels and how they manage boundary turbulence that occurs when there are privacy breaches (Petronio, 2002), especially via mediated channels (Child & Petronio, 2015). Scholars may desire data on the geographic dispersion of the kinkeepers and their family members and the generational nature of this communication, about which we did not ask in the present study. Our sense is that these and other demographic factors can best be accounted for in larger sample variable analytic research.

Finally, scholars need to better understand the role of kinkeeping in a wider variety of family relationships. While Leach and Braithwaite's (1996) study included a larger proportion of Latina kinkeepers than we did in the present study, we hope to come to a better understanding of the role of kinkeepers across a greater variety of family types, such as LGBTQ families, military families, or nonresidential parenting, within different cultural groups, such as immigrant families, within multiethnic families, and internationally.

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