

Racial-Ethnic Differences in Nuclear and Extended Family Relations in the United States

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Short abstract

Building on the intergenerational solidarity paradigm, previous research identified distinct types of adult parent-child relationships. This study emphasizes the importance of extended family alongside nuclear kin as well as racial-ethnic differences, aiming to develop a comprehensive typology of family relationships across various kin types. Using recent KINMATRIX data we examined relationships with the respondent's father, mother, siblings, half-siblings, grandparents, cousins, aunts, and uncles, distinguishing between gender and maternal and paternal lineage. A bias-adjusted three-step latent class analysis was applied to 74,603 relationships for 4,635 anchors living in the U.S., including measures of functional, affectual, structural, and associational solidarity, as well as conflict. Five relationship patterns emerged, differing significantly by kin type and race-ethnicity. 'Ambivalent' relations were the least common, mostly found in nuclear kin, while 'tight-knit' relations were most prevalent among parents. 'Detached' and 'Intimate but distant' ties were more common among extended kin. Although 'close' relationships were less likely to be found in cousins, the absolute number of 'close' cousins was similar to that of 'close' siblings, underscoring the importance of the demographic availability of kin. Hispanics and Blacks were more likely to have 'Close' and less likely to have 'Detached' relations, however, with important variation by kin type.

Introduction

Building on the intergenerational solidarity paradigm (Bengtson & Roberts, 1991; Silverstein, 2021), numerous empirical studies identified distinct types of adult parent-child relations across a variety of countries and regions, including the United States, Europe, and Asia (e.g., Guo et al., 2012; Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997; Silverstein et al., 2010; Van Gaalen & Dykstra, 2006). Such typological analyses provide important insights, because they “capture the nuances and complexities of intergenerational relationships and present combinations of relationship qualities or support patterns that differentiate families” (Fingerman et al., 2020, p. 395).

A much smaller body of research generated similar typologies for relationships between adult siblings (Budginaitė-Mačkinė & Juozeliūnienė, 2023; Stewart et al., 2001), grandparents and adult grandchildren (Barrett & Gunderson, 2021; Hwang et al., 2022), as well as other extended kin, such as cousins, aunts, and uncles (Hessel, 2023; Vogt, 2020). Whereas these latter relationships have often been described as “forgotten kin” (Milardo, 2010) and a “neglected topic” (Furstenberg, 2020) in family research, interest in kin relations “beyond the nuclear family” has recently been growing again, taking advantage of methodological advances and an increasing availability of microdata on kin ties beyond the household (e.g., Kolk et al., 2023; Leopold et al., 2023; also see Alburez-Gutierrez et al., 2022).

Obtaining a comprehensive typology of family relations comprising multiple nuclear and extended ties seems important for a number of reasons: To begin with, while corroborating the well-known primacy of nuclear kin, Leopold et al. (2023) showed that “extended kin are central to younger adults’ lives, accounting for half of the family members they are emotionally close to, in regular contact with, and deem important” (also see Vogt, 2020). Importantly, it has long been “shown that the extended kin network is a more salient structure for black families than it is for white families” (Hays & Mindel, 1973: 51; also see Dilworth-Anderson, 1993).

Previous research suggests enduring racial/ethnic differences in both nuclear and extended family relationships: Silverstein & Bengtson (1997: 446), for example, found that “[r]ace and ethnicity variables are associated with types of maternal relationships. Both blacks and Hispanics are less likely than non-Hispanic whites to have obligatory relationships with their mothers, and blacks are less likely than whites to have detached relationships [...] affirming the cohesive strength traditionally ascribed to black and Hispanic families.” These results have been supported by studies investigating family members’ geographic proximity (Reyes et al., 2020; Spring et al., 2023) or the exchange of support (Berry, 2006; Taylor et al., 2022). Sarkisian & Gerstel (2004) underline the importance of acknowledging the existence of different racial patterns of kin support involvement, showing that blacks are more involved in

practical support, whereas whites report greater involvement in financial and emotional kin support. Moreover, gender turned out to be crucial for understanding racial differences in kin support: Next to reports of a particularly pronounced “matrifocal tilt of intergenerational relations in [black and Hispanic] families” (Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997: 446), Sarkisian & Gerstel (2004), for example, found black and white men to be very much alike, whereas there were significant differences between black and white women (also see Sarkisian et al., 2007).

Finally, most previous work has focused on individual dyadic relationships or aggregate family patterns, thereby masking considerable variation in relationship qualities among dyads within families (Suitor et al., 2018).

Data and Methods

Our analyses rely on data from recent KINMATRIX data from 2022-24, including relationship information on 74,603 dyads pertaining to 4,635 respondents living in the U.S. We account for ties to the respondent’s father, mother, siblings, half-siblings, grandparents, cousins, aunts, and uncles, distinguishing between gender and maternal and paternal lineage.

We apply bias-adjusted three-step latent class analysis to, first, identify typical patterns of relationship solidarity, second, assign relationships to the most likely family cluster while taking into account classification uncertainty, and, third, investigate the association of relationship pattern with kin type, race/ethnicity, gender, as well as their joint interaction.

We included six measures of relationship solidarity, namely frequency of *conflict* (including conflict, tension, or disagreement; 1. “None at all” to 4. “A great deal”; dichotomized to “Having no conflict at all”), frequency of *contact* (adding up all visits, letters, phone calls, etc.; 1. “Daily or several times per week” to 6. “Never”; dichotomized to “Having contact at least once per month”), *emotional closeness* (1. “Not at all close” to 5. “Very close”; dichotomized to “Feeling at least pretty close”), and whether the respective relative has ever given or loaned a larger amount of *money* (yes/no) and given good *advice* for an important decision to the respondent (yes/no) or *comforted* them when they were sad (yes/no). Additionally, we included a measure for whether or not a respondent could really count on their relative if they needed help reflecting the potential for support provision. To reduce the complexity of the model, we combined advice, comfort, and counting on into one *emotional support* variable, indicating if either kind of support had ever been given or could be given in the future (yes/no). Geographic *proximity* was measured as travel time distance with the usual mode of transportation on five-point-scale (1. “1 Hour or longer” to “Lives in the same building”; dichotomized to “Living within one hour or less”). These indicators represent four out of six relationship solidarity dimensions, namely structural, affectual, functional, and

associational solidarity (Bengtson & Roberts (1991)) and additionally conflict to also measure ambivalence.

To account for racial/ethnic differences, we combined the measures for the respondent's race (White, Asian, Black, Others) with an indicator for Hispanic background (yes/no), distinguishing Non-Hispanic Asian (6%), Non-Hispanic White (52%), Non-Hispanic Black (9%), Non-Hispanic Other (3%), Hispanic (14%), and Missing (because Hispanic background was not available, 16%). We additionally account for gender of the respondent (male 35%, female 61%) as well as the relative's gender (except for cousins and halfsiblings), as well as matrilineal vs. patrilineal lineage. The analyses also control for age.

Preliminary Results

Based on statistical model fit as well as interpretability of the results, we identified five typical relationship solidarity patterns that differed in their combinations of the ratings for our six relationship measures. '*Intimate but distant*' relationships were characterized by a large geographic distance between the respondents and their kin, combined with high emotional closeness and support (10%). Relationships we labelled '*detached*' scored low on all included relationship indicators, thus reflecting the absence of any active tie to that relative (60%). '*Close*' relationships stood out in their close geographic proximity, frequent contact, as well as high emotional closeness, while support was not commonly exchanged (9%). Relationships scoring high on frequent contact, exchange of support, as well as conflict frequency were labelled '*ambivalent*' (4%). Lastly, '*tight-knit*' relationships were characterized by close and strong ties on all relationship dimensions, except conflict (16%).

Intimate but distant relationships were more common among extended kin, particularly grandparents (Figure 1). Among parents, particularly mothers, we observed the highest shares of *tight-knit* relationship patterns, followed by sisters, brothers, and maternal grandmothers. *Detached* relationships were most common and more likely to be found in kin most distant in terms of relatedness from the focal individuals (cousins, aunts, and uncles) but also not completely unlikely in siblings or fathers. *Close* relationships can be found in any type of kin but most likely among siblings, grandparents, and halfsiblings. Considering these relationships were characterized by a strong affective bond, much contact, and low functional solidarity, it seems reasonable that these relationships are less common for parents (more functional solidarity) and aunts, uncles, and cousins (less contact). *Ambivalent* relationships were the least common relationship pattern across all kin types and least likely in cousins (in case of conflict, these relationships may be most easily cut out completely and become detached).

Based on the *relative* distribution of relationship patterns over kin and particularly the percentage of detached versus all other relationship patterns (and particularly tight-knit), a clear cut can be observed between ‘nuclear family’ members, including parents, (full and half) siblings (except paternal halfsiblings), as well as grandparents, and the ‘extended family’, including aunts, uncles, and cousins. However, considering the *total* number of each kin in a person’s family network, the average number of close cousins clearly outnumbers the average number of close grandparents a person has, for instance.

Racial-ethnic differences were most pronounced for ‘close’ relationships overall, with relatives in Hispanic and Non-Hispanic Black families showing a significantly higher likelihood of this type of solidarity compared to White families. This finding was exactly opposite for ‘detached’ relationships. Importantly, we also found visible differences in solidarity patterns by race-ethnicity in specific kin types. For instance, Asian mothers’ relationships had a significantly smaller likelihood to be ‘intimate but distant’ than mothers from any other racial-ethnic group. Hispanic uncles, aunts, and cousins were less likely to be of the ‘detached’ pattern whereas the relationships with fathers in Black families was least likely to be ‘tight-knit’.

Our findings underscore the importance to consider extended kin alongside nuclear family to fully understand the universe of relationships available to individuals. Moreover, the nexus between kin type, race-ethnicity, and gender seems particularly important in understanding inequality in family solidarity.

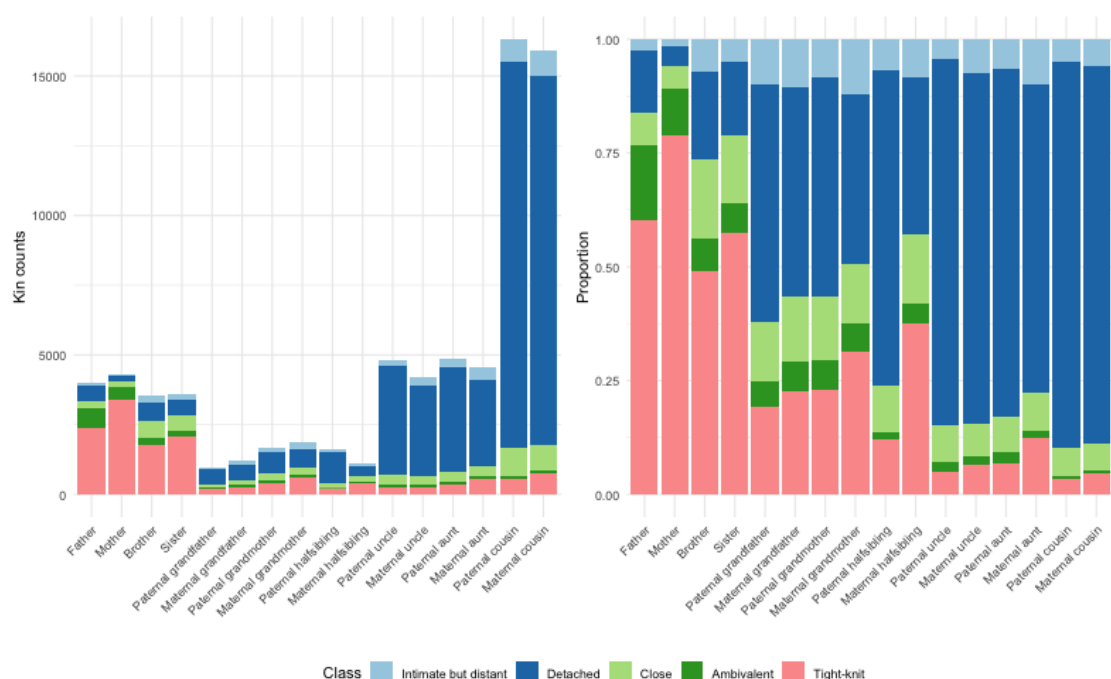


Figure 1 Distribution of Relationship Patterns by Kin (left panel: absolute; right panel: relative)