

What is Family?

A Genealogical Definition

Mary Clement Douglass looks at the definition of family, genealogy style!

USING THE LENS OF kinship theory in genealogical studies fosters a deeper understanding of the social dynamics of families not in evidence by studying the families separately. It also breaks down barriers to further research.

Definitions

Among the people we call “family” are usually three types of relationships — biological, legal and fictive. Biological are those people to whom we are related by blood, our genetic kin. Our legal families are those people who we marry or adopt. My favorite sister-in-law is family because we married brothers. Our fictive relationships are social. Fictive kin refers to those whose kinship ties are not biologically or legally based but who, for a variety of reasons, are treated and named as kin. We may call members of our church family, “brother” and “sister”. Often our fictive or social relationships are more important to us than the other two.

Some Examples

In genealogical research, we use legal records to trace family — probate case files, census records, land records, birth, marriage and death certificates. Genealogists are now using DNA analysis to determine genetic kin. The following are examples from my recent personal research in the use of kinship theory to break through brick walls in genealogical research. When my family moved from



Oklahoma to Kansas for employment, one of my older colleagues adopted my husband and me as her children. We were very young, newly married, and she thought

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we needed “lookin’ after.” When our sons were born, they in turn adopted this woman as their “local” grandmother, since their

biological grandparents lived in another state. “Gam Hurst” baked cookies for them, taught them to garden, went to their ballgames and school activities, and did the usual grandmotherly activities. This bond was so strong, she left them an inheritance in her will. She was, in effect, their grandmother with all the rights and privileges of that relationship. This relationship with “fictive kin” was stronger than the relationships they had with their biological grandparents whom they saw infrequently. I have taken great care in our family history to note that “Gam Hurst” was not a biological or legal grandmother, but a grandmother of the heart. Knowing that “Uncle Jimmie” is fictive kin, and not biological or legal, can save a

genealogist from going off in the wrong direction in searching for ancestors.

Importance of Studying Kinship Theory

Now why is this story important to improving your genealogical research? It is a lesson in “kinship theory”. Usually we focus our attention and research efforts on discovering our direct-line ancestors. I know I did as a novice genealogist. At first, I was very successful, but soon I began running into “brickwalls”, dead ends and lots of frustration. Rather than deal with the issue, I would start another line of research. I had two

parents, four grandparents and eight great-grandparents who also needed research.

After more than 30 years of research, all that is left are dead ends! Now I have to deal with them if my research is to continue. That need brought me into contact with a woman who had another way of looking at family, Carolyn Earle Billingsley, Ph.D. Ms. Billingsley wrote a book, *Communities of Kinship*, on kinship groups in the antebellum American South. I had known of her work as a genealogist for many years, but I knew nothing about her work as a southern historian. As most of my family was from the American South, I read what she had to say about searching for ancestors using this larger concept of kinship.

She argued that the extended family group, the kinship group, was the most influential factor in the lives of antebellum Southerners. Because the South did not have a lot of institutional infrastructure, people used the family as their local bank for loans and mortgages. Families hired tutors for their children and their kin's children. Family nurtured and financially supported orphaned children and aged parents. Family married within the extended family, worshipped together, worked collectively, witnessed each other's legal documents, supported the same political party, joined the same fraternal lodges and migrated together.

Now how does this new knowledge affect my research? I was able to eliminate my dead ends. I looked for witnesses to deeds, signers of mortgages, neighbors on the census for 20 families on either side of my ancestor. I began to research the religious affiliation of my ancestors to find other members of local congregations. I looked for evidence of membership in fraternal lodges in their obituaries and on their tombstones. I noticed who pallbearers were. I platted neighborhoods using deeds and census records. As I widened my search parameters to these non-linear, non-"family" people, I discovered



new family members — the cousins, the in-laws of the in-laws and the "fictive" kin. As a result, what had been research dead ends now revealed answers to old questions and suggested new avenues of research.

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Break-throughs in Old Research

In reading through the voluminous Southern Claims Commission Disallowed file for one of my ancestors, I found the third marriage for a great-great-grandmother who had disappeared after the 1850 census. She was listed with her third husband, in an affidavit concerning her son-in-law's property loss after the American Civil War. Once I knew her newest name, her information was relatively easy to find. I would not have discovered this without going back and looking at her larger kinship group. I found information concerning an ancestor's second marriage and divorce, from which I descend, by reading the divorce proceedings from her third divorce. I learned the name of one of my husband's

ancestors by reading about his son-in-law's court proceedings.

Conclusion

Had I not expanded my vision of family, I would still be frustrated over my research dead ends. Researching all those other people mentioned in the documents I already possessed was not a waste of time. It was vital to my research! By using kinship theory in our genealogical studies, we gain a deeper understanding of the social dynamics of these families not in evidence by studying the families separately. So get out those troublesome ancestors and look at their larger kinship group. May all your "brickwalls" tumble!

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