

The Scholar-Practitioner

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National Conference for Engaged Scholarship on Hidden Student Populations

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Current Hidden College Student Populations

May include those who have foster care or justice-involved experiences, who are survivors of sexual violence, who are recovering drug or alcohol addicts, who face housing insecurity, or who are considered Third Culture Kids

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The Scholar-Practitioner is a monthly publication of invited research summaries that target the research-to-practice gap for U.S. scholar and practitioner advocates for college students with experiences in foster care and other hidden college student populations.

This publication reinforces the work of the **National Conference for Engaged Scholarship on Hidden Student Populations (NCHP)** by providing a space to share research applications for practice. NCHP was the first research conference dedicated to this multidisciplinary area of study. The NCHP 4th conference will be held in 2024.

Implications of Voluntary Kin for Higher Education Practices

Kearney, K., Will, L., & Bailey, L. (in revision). Revisioning "Family": Considering the implications of voluntary kin for higher education practices.

Background

Support networks have been important for students to navigate the higher education system. Sources for support, like *family*, became more critical due to the increase in enrollment and retention pressures after the impact of COVID-19. Unlike their peers, students with foster care experiences frequently join college with support networks and perspectives on *family* that diverge from those found in higher education policies, language, and practices (Kearney et al., 2019). The concept of *family* used in institutions can shape practices on campuses, just as it shapes approaches to research (Bailey, 2017a, 2017b).

Purpose

To reconsider the definitions of *family* used in higher education, it is crucial to explore more comprehensive concepts of *family* that are typical in human interactions. The purpose of this study was to explore definitions of *family* that echoed what scholars refer to as voluntary, fictive, or chosen kin.

Research questions

Research questions for this reconsideration of data included inquiry into how individuals of varied backgrounds framed and understood family and family roles, influences, and longevity.

Methodology

This study, based upon an epistemology of constructionism, used two data sets both qualitative. Data collection was through case study practices.

Data sources

Sources used for this data re-analysis included long interviews (one on one and group), extended observations, miscellaneous documents, photographic artifacts, and participant-produced drawings. We used the following two data sets in this study:

(1) College students with experience in foster care. The duration of data collection ranged from 6 months to 3 years. (2) Members of "families" with non-biological non-legal ties, to analyze the ways participants conceptualized and described "family." Data collection occurred over a year and 4 months.

Participants

Participants in data set 1 included eight self-identified, college students who were enrolled in college, and in good academic standing, at a sophomore level or above. All were in out-of-home placements at age 13 or older. This placement could include foster care or foster care conditions, whether group homes or institutional care.

In data set 2, participants were legal or biological members of two families with ties across four generations. We focused on five adults; four participants completed all requested data collection activities, and a fifth completed all but follow-up activities. Education ranged from some college to terminal degrees.

Findings

Three cross-case findings resulted.

1. Participants had voluntary kin and referred to them using varied socially dominant family terms. In

both data sets, participants used traditional family terms. Similarly, in both sets, there was a strong presence of individuals with no biolegal ties, whom participants described as *family*. In the case of students with foster care experiences, it appears that the fracture of the original family led participants to create voluntary kin relationships. But this was not unique to the first data set, as such ties also appeared in the second data set.

2. Participants reported multiple instances in which their voluntary kin wielded significant influence.

We found in both data sets that voluntary kin had strong influences on participants' decision-making or thought processes. Participants identified multiple instances showing such influence.

3. Participants seemed to be seeking authentic relationships (safe space, freedom to just be me, etc.) through their family members of choice. Participants created their *family* by choosing persons in lieu of or in addition to the biolegal family members. We identified this in both data sets.

Implications for Higher Education Practices

Higher education institutions should be careful about how using the term *family* because of its loaded meaning in society. Individuals with various backgrounds make use of family

terms to articulate in an understandable and common way their relational bonds and influences. College students with experience in foster care may use family terms to fit in with social norms. Although we identified family conflict and relational breakages in both data sets, the foster student group did not express that all would be well in their families of origin. Students with foster care experiences may struggle between stating their realities and fitting into the idea of an idealized concept of *family*. It is necessary to challenge the concept of *family* as it is mobilized in the American higher education system and give rise to new terms that are shaped by the students' experiences and choices.

References

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