Interaction with Kin, Social-Status, and Well-Being

Cross-Cultural Evidence from Males*

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ABSTRACT

Using data from London, England; Los Angeles, California; and Sydney, Australia, several hypotheses about the relationships between kinship interaction, social status, and subjective well-being are developed. It is found that social statuses are generally not correlated with interaction with kin. Interaction with immediate kin is positively correlated with overall well-being and marriage well-being, although it is more strongly correlated with the latter concept. Interaction with extended kin positively affects overall well-being, but not marriage well-being. There are few significant variations among cities.

The importance of Kin and relatives for modern urbanites has been well documented (Gordon and Noll, 1975; Mirande, 1970; Litwak and Szelenyi 1969; Litwak, 1960; Adams, 1968; Key, 1968; Babchuk, 1965). In urban communities, interaction with kin has been shown to vary by such factors as social-class (Gordon and Noll, 1975; Litwak, 1960; Adams, 1968); sex and age (Booth, 1972); ethnicity and religion (Gordon and Noll, 1975); and geographical distance from kin (Clark and Gordon, 1979). There have been studies of urban people and their kin in a variety of countries such as Cork City, Ireland (Clark and Gordon, 1979); London, England (Hubert, 1965); and Helsinki, Finland (Sweetser, 1968). However, few studies are cross-cultural and comparative in design. This paper compares the kinship of males from London, England, Los Angeles, California, and Sydney, Australia. These metropolitan areas were selected because they are very large (each has over 3 million population), and are in highly industrial, English-speaking countries. Thus, the patterns we will find should be similar across metropolitan areas.

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Kinship can involve relationships with immediate kin, who are related persons in the household of the person. Usually, immediate kin include spouse, if married, and children living at home. However, married people may have other relatives living in the household, such as parents and siblings. Parents and siblings are particularly likely to be immediate kin for unmarried people. Unmarried people may also have children as immediate kin, may live alone, or with unrelated persons (e.g. a same sex friend or a cohabitor, who are usually not considered kin).

Extended kin, by definition, live outside the household. They may include parents, children or siblings.

The relationships of males to kin have generally been assumed to be infrequent and unimportant because males are viewed as more instrumentally oriented than females. Studies have found that males are less concerned with marital companionship than females (Bradburn, 1969), and males identify fewer close kin than females (Booth, 1972). Males are also less active with kin (Lee, 1980; Bahr, 1976; Adams, 1968). However, the differences between male and female kinship patterns may be small and inconsistent (Powers and Bultena, 1976; Anspach and Rosenberg, 1976). Male relationships with kin may differ by social status, may vary by community, and may have psychological effects on them; thus our focus on this gender.

Immediate Kin

Several studies in the United States have found that marriage companionship is positively correlated with socioeconomic status (Spanier, 1976; Bradburn, 1969; Locke and Wallace, 1959). This may be true because higher status couples can better afford to engage in activities such as attending cultural events, joining voluntary associations together, and participating in hobbies. In addition, the number of friends may increase with socioeconomic status (Fischer, 1982; Booth, 1972). Since married people usually have friends as a couple (Babchuk, 1965), those of higher status may share more companionship specifically because they have more friends to be active with. Conceptualizations of companionship usually include interaction with friends as a major dimension (Bradburn, 1969). Finally, middle-class marriages may be more homogamous than their lower status counterparts. People of similar status are more likely to interact than are dissimilar status people (Homans, 1974).

Studies of the relationship between socioeconomic status and companionship outside of the United States are rare. Two studies from Australia seem to illustrate that companionship and socioeconomic status are positively correlated. In a study of Melbourne, Bell (1975) found that well-educated women shared more companionship than women with less education. In a 1973 study of Perth, Palisi (1976) found similar tendencies. Although both studies dealt with women, men probably do not greatly differ. Studies in the United States show similar trends for both sexes (Bradburn, 1969). Obviously the trends are