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FRIENDS THE FAMILY YOU CHOOSE (NO MATTER WHAT): AN
INVESTIGATION OF FICTIVE KIN RELATIONSHIPS AMONG YOUNG ADULTS

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Friends the Family You Choose (No Matter What): An Investigation of Fictive Kin Relationships among Young Adults

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Current research on fictive kin primarily focuses on the assignment of the fictive kin relationship, and does not focus on how acceptance of an individual as fictive kin is communicatively constructed. This research offers a look into how young adults communicate acceptance in their fictive kin relationships. Four focus groups and seven semi-structured interviews were conducted with young adults regarding their interactions that co-constructed meaning in their fictive kin relationships and how acceptance as fictive kin was communicatively constructed. A grounded theory constant comparison method is used to analyze the focus groups and interviews. The data were used to develop themes and extend the current research on fictive kin. The findings of this study illustrates how individuals are accepted into fictive kin relationships as expressed in term of events that co-construct meaning such as activities with fictive kin, the themes of stories about and rituals with fictive kin, and messages of acceptance. Additionally, this study finds that fictive kin relationships among young adults are structured in two ways, with their family of origin or separate from the family of origin. Suggestions are made for future research focusing on longitudinal studies of fictive kin among single adults as well as the structure of fictive kin relationships.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter One: Rationale	1
Chapter Two: Review of Literature	4
Friendship	4
Family	6
Kinship	9
Symbolic Interaction	13
Meaning for Human Behavior	13
Self-Concept	15
Relationship between the Individual and the Self	16
Stories and Rituals	17
Chapter Three: Methods	20
Participant	20
Focus Group Sequence	21
Data Analysis and Coding	24
Reliability and Validity	26
Chapter Four: Results	29
Social Activities	29
Limitlessness	29
Time	32
Family Events	34
Holidays	34
Vacations	36
Home Time	37
Food	40
Themes	42
Shared Experiences	43
Trying Times	43
Life Experiences	47
Major Life Moments	50
“No Matter What” Messages	52
Communicated Acceptance	57
Unconditional Statements	58
Intimacy	58
Acts of Acceptance	60
Communication	61
Support	63
Messages of Connection	65
Fictive Kin Family	68
Part of the Family of Origin	68
Separate from the Family of Origin	70

Chapter Five: Discussion	72
Social Activities that Co-Construct Meaning	72
Story Themes that Communicated Meaning in the Fictive Kin Relationship	75
Communicated Acceptance	77
Fictive Kin as Family among Young Adults	79
Limitations and Further Directions	82
References	86
Appendix A: Information and Consent Form	92
Appendix B: Demographic Survey	94
Appendix C: Focus Group Schedule	95
Appendix D: Individual Interview Information and Consent Form	98
Appendix E: Individual Interview Schedule	100
Appendix F: Table One: Initial Codes	101
Appendix G: Table Two: Refined Codes	103

CHAPTER ONE: RATIONALE

“To friends; the family you choose” is the toast that one participant recounted saying with her friends during their Thursday night dinners. Researchers have studied young adult friendships (e.g., Rawlins, 1992) and fictive kin relationships (e.g., Karner, 1998); however, no research studies the chosen family among young adults. As young adults move further away from their family of origin to attend school, pursue a career or a relationship, friends begin to play a greater part in their lives (Carter & McGoldrick, 1999). As friends become a larger part of young adults’ lives, do the friendships cross the line into family type relationships, and if so, how is that communicated to the friend?

Young adulthood is a unique time when friendship becomes a pivotal part of life (Rawlins, 1992). It is a part of life when many people move away from family to pursue a college education, a career, or a relationship. Rawlins (1992) suggests “young adulthood, generally encompassing the late teen years to the early thirties, comprises a pivotal stage for exploring the roles that friendships will play in adult life” (p. 103). Young adults enter a stage of life when family of origin may no longer be a daily feature of life but they have yet to create a family of procreation. During this time of transition, friends become central to life. Friends who function as family members may be called “fictive kin.” For the purpose of this study, fictive kin is defined as they individuals that function as family although they are technically not related.

Mac Rae (1992) described fictive kin as “adopted members who take on obligations, instrumental and affectional ties similar to those of conventional kin” (p. 228). Gubrium and Buckholdt (1982) explain that fictive kin can be seen as a substitute for family. In other words, the creation of quasi-family relationships with individuals

from close friendships comprises fictive kin. Fictive kin relationships have been studied among the elderly (e.g., Karner, 1998; Mac Rae, 1992), prison inmates (e.g., Gaillombardo, 1966), and individuals who are gay and lesbian (Allen & Demo, 1995). However, the phenomenon has never been studied among young adults as a general population. Theoretical implications in this study include illumination of young adult's co-constructions of meaning as fictive kin through symbolic interaction, and their use of stories and the rituals to form and create a sense of acceptance as fictive kin.

Fictive kin relationships have become a feature of contemporary media, as they are even present in many mediated presentations of relationships. Popular television shows such as *Friends*, *Grey's Anatomy* and *Seinfeld* demonstrate the reliance on and the value of fictive kin ties. That is, the interactions of the characters portray a relationship similar to that of a family, in that friends take the same obligations and emotional ties of family. These media simulated relationships reflect and create our culture. Understanding such relationships may prove beneficial for the understanding of our culture; specifically the culture of young adults. The potential impact of this research is a deeper understanding of young adult friendships as well as a clearer understanding of how fictive kin relationships are communicatively constructed; specifically how acceptance as fictive kin is communicated to individuals.

In this study, fictive kin will be examined using the theoretical lens of symbolic interaction. Among the core assumptions of symbolic interaction is that meanings are centered in the interaction between the people (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). That is, relationships are created, perpetuated and maintained in the "doing" of the relationship. The "doing" of a relationship is often expressed in stories and rituals. Stories and rituals

are a prime mechanism for understanding how people organize and construct meaning in their relationships (Vangelisti, Crumley, & Baker, 1999). Fictive kin in young adult relationships; specifically how those relationships are communicatively constructed, will be investigated along with how an individual identifies that he or she has been accepted as a member of a family. Stories and rituals will be the primary method for investigating fictive kin relationships. Therefore, a brief investigation of existing literature in these areas is necessary.

The following section will provide a review of literature on friendship in young adulthood, family, and fictive kin relationships. It will go on to explain the theories of symbolic interaction, and stories and rituals, which guide the current study. Because fictive kin relationships are formed from closer friendships, it is imperative to begin by exploring friendships.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Friendships vary greatly for person to person at different stages of life (Dickens & Perlman, 1981). Bagwell, Bender, Andreassi, Kinoshita, Montarello and Muller (2005) suggest that during adolescence, friendship plays a more dominant role as the adolescent relationships shift from family to friends. Carter and McGoldrick (1999) posit that young adulthood is a delicate time where young adults are balancing leaving home and staying connected with their family of origin. They argue that during this time young adults may have left the home, but have not yet married.

While family relations may still be important, Bagwell et al. (2005) posit that during young adulthood the primary source of interaction is with peers. Rawlins (1992) proposes that young adulthood is a critical time when the role of friendship in adult life is balanced with the constraints of “the demands of work, love relationships, and/or family” (p. 103). He continued that during this life stage friends have an important impact on one’s self-concept, career options, community involvement, recreation activities, and mate selection.

Friendship

A singular definition encompassing the gamut of variables involved in friendships is difficult to pinpoint (Hays, 1988). Friendships are a unique relationship type due to their nature and structure, yet Hays (1988) does offer a broad definition of friendship as “voluntary interdependence between two persons over time, that is intended to facilitate the social-emotional goals of the participants, and may involve varying types and degrees of companionship, intimacy, affection, and mutual assistance” (p. 395). Three aspects of

friendship can be delineated in this definition: (1) voluntary nature, (2) interdependency, and (3) social-emotional goals.

Friendships, unlike family relationships, are voluntary in nature (Hartup, 1975; Hays, 1988; Patterson, Bettini, & Nussbaum, 1993). Distinct from family relationships, where relational ties are formed based on blood or marriage, in friendship one seeks and forms relationships for the sole purpose of that relationship (Hays, 1988; Patterson, Bettini, & Nussbaum, 1993). The voluntary nature of friendship is illustrated by examining the relationship interaction. “Two people are friends to the degree that the plans, activities and decisions of one are contingent upon the other in the absence of constraints toward interaction that are external to the relationship itself” (Wright, 1974, p. 93). In other words, friendship requires the exercise of personal agency on the part of both parties to choose to participate in interactions that establish the friendship.

Mutual obligation is the second qualifier in the definition of friendship. Mutual obligation means that friends help each other (Hays, 1988). So friends interact with each other for the purpose of the reciprocated reward. Hays (1988) posits that when individuals are asked to describe the meaning of friendship, they said that friends are a source of support. Furthermore, they would state that the friends were people they could call for help.

A social-emotional bond is the final part of Hays’ definition. A social-emotional bond is that “friends are able to relinquish role behavior in each other’s presence” (Patterson, Bettini & Nusbaum, 1993). Additionally, social-emotional bond refers to the satisfaction that is derived by the friends through the interaction itself (Hays, 1988). That

is, the relational satisfaction comes in the formation, the feelings of belonging, and the emotional support derived from the friendship.

In addition to the voluntary nature, mutual obligation, and social-emotional bond, Rawlins (1992) adds that friends view themselves as equals. Equality is particularly visible in young adult friendships because they are experiencing similar life changes and relying on friends rather than family to help navigate those changes (Rawlins, 1992). Hence, friends become vital during young adulthood providing a sense of belonging and social integration (Hays, 1988). Although friends are important and critical relationships during young adulthood, families are important as well.

Family

Family plays a role in each individual's life, yet this relationship is also not easily defined. Trost (1990) states that defining family is problematic due to multiple perceptions and experiences that an individual has with his or her family. In both qualitative and quantitative studies of family, she found that while individuals cannot come to a consensus on a specific definition, they base their definition of family on either their family of procreation or their family of orientation (Trost, 1990). Furthermore, she argues that potentially each individual in a family could define family differently. Thus, in some ways, family is defined by individual perceptions of family. It may be valid that each individual holds his or her own perception of family; however, it is imperative to delineate the overarching characteristics of family to provide a definition for the purpose of distinguishing it from other entities. Whitchurch and Webb (1995) posit that the definition of family varies in the communication field; however, a common consensus recognizes that families "have idiosyncratic characteristics that are not paralleled in

nonfamiliar interpersonal communication (e.g., ad hoc or standing small groups, friendship dyads)” (p. 239).

Traditionally, family has been defined according to consanguine, or blood ties, and/or marriage (Galvin & Brommel, 1982). That is, an individual has “little choice who belongs in the family” (Warren & Goldstein, 2000, p. 382-383). However, in recent years it has been argued that this definition does not fit the modern family. Schmeekle and Sprecher (2004) give a more encompassing definition of the “immediate family” as “parenting adult(s) and dependent children [which] allows for variation in types of parents; grandparents raising grandchildren, a remarried couple raising biological children and stepchildren, or a heterosexual nuclear family” (p. 349). While Schmeekle and Sprecher’s definition is more encompassing than previous definitions, it does not include all families (e.g., couples without children or those who have adopted children). For this study, family is defined by Galvin and Brommel’s definition stating that family is a “group of intimates who generate a sense of home and a group identity, complete with strong ties of loyalty and emotion, and experience a history and a future” (as cited in Verderber & Verderber, 2004, p. 349). Implied in this definition are three essential characteristics of the family: home, emotional connections, and continuity.

First, the physical location of home can, in part, define family. Families typically organize around the basic physical location of home. Family has been called both a “network of people who live together” (Laing, 1972, p. 3) and those “comprising a permanent household that persist over the decades” (Terkelsen, 1980). In these definitions, home becomes the aspect that binds the individuals in a family. Central is the idea that “home” is not so much a place where one lives; rather it is the nucleus around

which the family revolves. That is, home is where family frequently comes together to interact with each other and is considered by its members the gathering place of the family. Thus, home could be a geographic region (e.g., southeast Idaho), a particular address (e.g., 2145 Snowflake Lane), an internet webpage (e.g., Smith family webpage), or a combination of any of these. Hence, home is the place where family members know they can come to interact with other members.

Secondly, family can be defined, in part, by the emotional ties and loyalties among individuals. Leach and Braithwaite (1996) posit that “families represent one of the most important sources of informal support” (p. 201). Furthermore, they state that families help deal with stress, transitions and other problems as well as support in everyday interactions. Korchmaros and Kenny (2006) suggest that individuals help those they feel emotionally close to and who they feel a duty to help. Furthermore, they found that a majority of the time those individuals were family members.

Finally, families have continuity. Continuity implies that the family has a history and a future. Unlike friendships, where the future is continually negotiated, a family member’s future is an assumed reality due to the involuntary nature of family (Patterson, Bettini & Nussbaum, 1993; Warren & Goldstein, 2000). The involuntary nature of family is evident in the fact that no family relationship besides marriage is a choice (Carter & McGoldrick, 1999). An individual may choose to not continue a marriage; yet, they remain intertwined in the family web as the “ex-spouse” (Carter & McGoldrick, 1999). Additionally, family members may choose to act as though they do not belong to the family; however, this does not break the family tie (Carter & McGoldrick, 1999). In other words, an individual may choose not to participate in a family, but that does not untangle

him or her from being intertwined in the family web. Continuity of family can endure the challenge of distance. Carter and McGoldrick (1999) posit that despite the geographic distance of family members, individuals rely on the “emotional subsystems, reacting to past, present and anticipated future relationships within the larger three-generational family system” (p. 3). In essence, the family becomes a source of relationship stability for an individual because they are not continually negotiating the existence of that relationship.

Kinship

Friendship and family relations seem to be delineable into two distinct categories; however, life experience and scholarly attempts to define each suggest that these lines are not as distinguishable as they may have once seemed. How is it that a friend can resemble family members? If an individual feels closer to a friend than a family member, why can't they become family? A friend who fulfills the definition and function of a family member may become family in some sense.

Johnson (2000) argues that social changes have necessitated a shift from the nuclear family to that of kinship. Key to her argument is that families are no longer solely based in blood or marriage relationships. Instead chosen families are formed through affection and mutual interest. Thus, family includes members as varied as “cousins, cohabiting partners with adult children, godparents, ex-stepparents, ‘fictive kin’ (those perceived as extended family members, though they are not related by blood or law) and in-laws” (Schmeeckle & Sprecher, 2004, p. 350). Similarly, Floyd and Morman (2006) have called us to “widen the circle of family communication” (p. xv) to examine alternative views. Alternate views of the family have been studied, including

communication among extended family members like in-laws, (e.g. Sotirin & Ellingson, 2006; Yoshimura, 2006) grandparent-grandchild relationships (e.g. Soliz, Lin, Anderson & Harwood, 2006), fictive kin (e.g., Johnson, 2000), and gay and lesbian relationships (e.g. Allen & Demo, 1995; Weston, 1991). Much work in gay and lesbian literature labels fictive kin “chosen kin” (e.g. Johnson, 2000; Schmeekle & Sprecher, 2000).

While family communication studies are being widened to include different types of family relationships, the convergence of family and friends constitutes what is known as fictive kin. Karner (1998) argues that the move from friend to fictive kin is simply a deepening of a friendship to a point where the friend becomes family through their actions, responsibilities and duties. Additionally, Gubrium and Buckholdt (1982) suggest that family is based on the idea of kinship and kinship is not limited to family status, but rather it is an assigned state. “It is recognized that ‘family’ is a way to describe any social relationship that has, or is claimed to have, special characteristics” (Gubrium & Buckholdt, 1982, p. 880). They note that these characteristics are the taken-for-granted actions of individuals such as concern. Furthermore, they argue that at times the fictive kin exhibit more genuine characteristics than the family and are often referred to as the “real” family. For example, an elderly person’s family may just be going through the motions of being concerned, while their fictive kin are truly and genuinely concerned for the individual.

Karner (1998) suggests that the “special characteristics” are defined in “those who care like family and do what family does” (p. 71). Hence, the assignment of family members is more than just mere words. Gubrium and Buckholdt (1982) explain it is through “ongoing concrete activities” that such relationships are defined (p. 879). Part of

the concrete activities referred to by Gubrium and Buckholdt (1982) can be seen in Mac Rea's (1992) definition of fictive kin. "[Fictive kin] are 'adopted' family members who accept the affection, obligations, and duties of 'real' kin" (Mac Rea, 1992, p. 228). The activities with which one manifests affections, obligations and duties, in part, define the relationship.

Karner (1998) argues that fictive kin do not develop quickly; rather, it is a process of growing closer as friends. For example, among the elderly, the caregiver and the elderly individual grow closer as the caregiver fills the gap between the family and the elderly person's needs. Their work is often done in the absence of the family. It is in this absence that the phenomenon of fictive kin is likely to happen. Furthermore, Gubrium and Buckholdt (1982) maintain that it is through the words of everyday life that family is assigned and defined. That is, people assign family membership through their everyday conversations. As part of growing close in a relationship, everyday reference to the individuals as a family member established that relationship (Gubrium & Buckholdt, 1982). Duck (1995) suggests that the construction and formalization is done by labeling the perception of the relationship and consequently giving the relationship order. As suggested by Gubrium and Buckholdt (1982) the labeling is done in everyday conversations. Labeling a person as brother or sister or any other kin-type label creates the relationship and may do more.

Fictive kin are sometimes seen as a substitute for actual family members (Karner, 1998). Mac Rea (1992) suggests that the elderly often substitute others for missing family members by converting them to fictive kin. "Fictive kin become very real to the participant in terms of expectations, obligations and emotional support" (Karner, 1998, p.

78). It is the bond between the two individuals in reference to the expectations, obligations and emotional support that provides the catalyst for the friendships to deepen and to form a familial resemblance. This type of friendship serves a few social functions. Mac Rae (1992) suggests that fictive kin fulfill the needs of the individuals by meeting social needs and preventing social isolation.

Fictive kin often fill the gap of absent family by taking up the obligations, affections and duties of family members. Korchmaros and Kenny (2006) posit that close friends in their interactions with one another can become family-like when the patterns of behavior, emotional closeness, and obligations mimic that of a family member. Fictive kin have been studied in a wide variety of situations; such as in the black community (Liebow, 1967), among the elderly (Gubrium & Buckholdt, 1982, Karner, 1998; Kivett, 1985, Mac Rea, 1992), or in prison life (Gaillombardo, 1966) however young adults as a group have never been examined under this particular lens.

Previous work undertaken examining fictive kin and the elderly may be used to point to the importance of focusing on young adults, as young adults hold similar needs for fictive kin as do the elderly. Frequently, young adults live away from their family to pursue a college education, a career, or a relationship. And as with the elderly, they are often surrounded by their peers. However, unlike some of the elderly, young adults do not have professional care people for which natural fictive kin relationships form due to the nature of the care given. However, they do form close and deepening friendship to prevent social isolation and to meet needs. Furthermore, the focus of studies to date is placed on the assigning of family relations; however, no work has looked at how the receiving individual knows that they have been accepted as a family member. An

investigation of young adults' formation of fictive kin and how the individual knows he or she has been received as part of the family would add to the understanding of the phenomena of fictive kin.

Symbolic Interaction

The voluntary nature of fictive kin is such that it requires communication to establish the relations between the participants. Symbolic interaction theory is a prime way to understand such communication. The central concept of symbolic interaction is that

People are motivated to act based on the meaning they assign to people, things, and events. These meanings are created in the language that people use both in communication with others and in self-talk, or their own private thought. Language allows people to develop a sense of self and interact with others in the community (West & Turner, 2007, p. 95).

LaRossa and Reitzes (1993) have dissected the theory of symbolic interaction into three central themes. These three themes are: the importance of meaning for human behavior, the importance of self-concept, and the relationship between the individual and society (West & Turner, 2007).

Meaning for Human Behavior

The first main assumption of symbolic interaction theory is that individuals construct meaning through the communication process (West & Turner, 2007). Inherent in this assumption is that meaning is not intrinsic, but rather through the communication process meaning is co-constructed with others. Blumer (1969) concurs that (1) human beings act toward things based on the meaning they have for those things; (2) the

meaning for such things is derived from, or arises out, of social interaction; and (3) meanings are handled in and modified through interpretive processes used by the individual dealing with the things he or she has encountered. Thus, it is through the interaction with others that we co-create meanings and interpret those meanings.

Humans assign meaning to things, institutions, human beings, categories of human beings (e.g. friend, mother, and father), and activities (Blumer, 1969). Their assignment of meaning to symbols is a product of social interaction and an agreement to apply certain meanings to specific symbols. Thus, it is not the symbol per se that is important, rather it is the agreed upon meaning that holds value. The meanings for symbols arise out of social interaction. Blumer (1969) said

The meaning of a thing for a person grows out of the ways in which other persons act toward the person with regard to the thing. Their actions operate to define the thing for the person. Thus, symbolic interactionism sees meanings as social products, as creations that are formed in and through the defining activities of the people as they interact (p. 4-5).

Thus, key to understanding fictive kin is to define the activities in which they participate.

The interpretative process of an individual is central to managing and handling meanings. Meaning is not a person's application of meaning; rather, "the use of meanings by a person in his action involves an interpretative process" (Blumer, 1969, p. 5). Blumer delineates the interpretative process as a two-fold process. First, the individual identifies the things that have meaning. Once the individual has communicated to himself [or herself] that those things have meaning, the individual then proceeds to "select, check,

suspend, regroup and transform the meanings in light of the situation in which he [or she] is placed and the direction of his [or her] actions” (Blumer, 1969, p. 6).

Self-Concept

LaRossa and Reitzes (1993) posit that the second overall theme of symbolic interaction is the importance of self-concept, in other words, the relatively stable set of perceptions that people hold of themselves. Central to self-concept is the idea that the individual is an active self grounded in social interactions (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). Furthermore, LaRossa & Reitzes (1993) suggest that this theme puts forward two additional assumptions: individuals develop self-concept through interactions with others and self-concept provides an important motivation for behaviors.

The development of self-concept is key to understanding how fictive kin are accepted as part of the family. Individual development of self-concept in symbolic interaction is created through contact with others (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). It is the process of interaction with others, response to others feedback and internalization of the feedback through which the self-concept is developed (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). Interactions with others help the individual to understand who he or she is in relation to the others.

Similarly, the second assumption suggests that an individual’s behaviors are motivated through their self-concept. Mead (1934) argues that self-concept is the core by which behavior and conduct is guided. That is, the beliefs, values, feelings and assessments of self, as developed through the process of interaction, are the basis of our behaviors or actions (Mead, 1934). The construction of self, through the interacting with

others, creates a self that guides his or her interactions. In other words, it is the interactions that help develop the self and leads to acting as family.

Relationship between the Individual and the Society

The final theme centers on the relationship of individual freedoms and social constraints (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). Two underlying assumptions clarify this theme: (1) people and groups are influenced by culture, and (2) social processes, and social structure is worked out through social interaction.

The first assumption that people and groups are influenced by culture and social processes assumes that an individual is constrained by the social norms (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). In addition, culture influences the behaviors and attitudes valued in the self-concept (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). In this study of fictive kin, this assumption would suggest that we are constrained by the social norm which may focus on the “traditional view” of family, discounting fictive kin as “real” family members.

The second assumption that social structure is worked out through social interaction mediates the position taken in the previous assumptions. That is, while individuals are constrained by the social norms or structures, they have the ability to modify the social situation (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). It is through individual’s interactions that the structure is modified and the individuals are not completely constrained by it (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). Embedded in this assumption is the idea that individuals are capable of making choices. In light of fictive kin, an individual may be constrained by the social structure of family as it has been historically defined and structured, however, through his or her interactions with other individuals, those individuals may choose to modify the social structure of family to include friends as

fictive kin. As stated previously, meanings are formed through interaction, thus, the modifying of social structure would naturally be done through interaction. The following research question is posited.

RQ 1: What are the “social activities” that co-construct a symbolic meaning of friendship as fictive kin?

Stories and Rituals

Previous research indicates that stories and rituals become important interactions which individuals use to adapt social structures (Jorgenson & Bochner, 2004). Jorgenson and Bochner (2004) argue that stories and rituals are vital for the reason that they act as a symbolic resource for preserving the past, understanding the future, and negotiating the two in the present. Furthermore, they state that “stories and rituals are resources through which family members create shared realities of family life” (Jorgenson & Bochner, 2004, p. 518). Additionally, they suggest that stories and rituals are intertwined. That is, rituals, such as wedding receptions, birthday, and family dinners, are frequently the foundation of the family stories (Jorgeson & Bochner, 2004).

Stories function in many ways to create family. Vangelisti, Crumley, and Baker (1999) suggest that stories create the basis for which members may evaluate circumstances, individuals and relationships as well as the standards they have for them. Stories create identities for the members of the family, teach values and behavior, and create a family culture (Koenig Kellas & Trees, 2006, p. 51). Family stories can identify kinship ties, preserve and extend family identity, provide a navigational tool for developing family relations and provide an initiation/orientation for new members of a family (Fiese & Bickham, 2004).

Not only do stories create families, they also function to help create individual identity. McAdams (2004) argues that stories account for how individuals act upon their desires and beliefs over a lifetime and, thus, are used to organize time. She argues that during the young adult stage, an individual develops a life story that helps one “make sense of who one was, is and will be within the social, economic, and ideological world in which a person lives” (p. 239). Furthermore, she argues that these narratives are co-authored by the individual and the culture to help them make sense of the world around them and give their experiences meaning.

Stories have frequently been used to study the family (Jorgenson & Bochner, 2004; Koenig Kellas & Trees, 2006; Pratt & Fiese, 2004; Vangelisti, Crumley & Baker, 1999). Stories are a prime instrument for understanding how fictive kin are accepted into a family. The current study examines fictive kin through the themes present in stories about these relationships. Toward this end, the following research question is posited:

RQ 2: What are the themes reflected in stories people tell about their fictive kin relationship with friends?

Koenig Kellas (2005) purports that one of the primary purposes of stories and storytelling is to create and evaluate the self. Furthermore, she argues that “stories can work to organize our experiences into coherent packages that, when socially enacted, serve to negotiate and stabilize our individual and relational identity” (Koenig Kellas, 2005, p. 367). She continues that inclusive language (e.g., we-statements) as heard in stories, functions to create relational unity. In addition, explicit statements about the relational identity (e.g., we’re cheap), serve to create the self-concept (Koenig Kellas,

2005). Little has been written about the nature of acceptance into a fictive kin relationship on the receiving end. The following research question is proffered:

RQ 3: What kinds of communication lets an individual know that he or she has been accepted as a part of a family?

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Qualitative methodology focuses on the experience of the participants in their own words (Noller & Feeney, 2004). Jorgenson and Bochner (2004) suggest that qualitative methodology provides for a deeper-reaching contextualized understanding of lived relationships. “Qualitative research seeks to preserve and analyze the situated form, content and experience of social action, rather than subject it to mathematical or other formal transformations” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 173). The investigation of fictive kin relationships through stories provides for an opportunity to grasp the significance of a story or a ritual as part of understanding the relationship in terms of the specific symbols used, the relationships involved, the feelings and memories evoked. Family stories encourage us to “climb under the skin” of others, projecting ourselves into their lives (Jorgeson & Bochner, 2004). While qualitative research may not be generalized to a larger population, it can provide new understanding of a particular phenomenon (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

Lindlof and Taylor (2002) argue that interviewing is particularly fitting for “understanding the social actor’s experience and perspective” (p. 173). Participants in the interview process may be chosen due to a certain status or social category and the life experience or challenge they share (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Interviews allow for the participants’ stories to be told through the language of the person who has been there. In addition, interviews allow us to “elicit the language forms used by social actors in natural settings” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 174).

Focus groups are an extension of interviews in that they are essentially a group interview. The benefit of using focus groups is that “persons in focus groups are

stimulated by the experiences of other members of the group to articulate their own perspectives” (Lindlof, 1995). In short, this methodology uses group interaction to produce data and insights that are less accessible without the interaction of the group (Lindlof, 1995). Because fictive kin may be an unfamiliar and ambiguous term to many of the participants, focus groups provided a catalyst to spur recall and understanding of fictive kin interactions.

After some preliminary analysis, it was noticed that the focus groups provided only general information and were not functioning to create and spur discussion as previously hoped. It was not anticipated that the questions asked would solicit private and sensitive responses. That is, the participants were only giving general answers even after they were prompted for more in-depth information. The focus groups were discontinued; however the general themes from them were used to guide in-depth interviews. Follow up interviews were planned as member checks and to gain a deeper understanding of the fictive kin relationship. Due to the unexpected nature of the focus groups the interviews were used to gather primary data from the participants; however, they still functioned as member checks.

Participants

This study utilized four focus groups with four participants in each for a total of 16 participants. An additional seven individuals participated in semi-structured in-depth interviews. There were a total of 23 participants. Participants’ ages ranged from 22 to 31 and with an average age of 24. Upon Institutional Review Board approval, a snowball sample was started by contacting graduate students through e-mail at a medium sized northwest university. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) suggest that this method is effective for

studying social networks, subcultures or disperse groups who share certain characteristics or attributes. Prospective participants were qualified to participate in the focus group if they felt that they had individuals in their life who were not related to them that they considered family members. If individuals agreed to this statement, they were considered suitable a participant for the study. One individual in the study stated that he or she did not consider his or her friends family, however, the individual said that his or her friends acted as family. Because the friends functioned as family, which follows the definition of fictive kin previously mentioned, the participant was allowed to continue with the study.

Snowball sampling assumes the participants have a dual role; that of an interviewee and that of a guide to other potential participants. Many participants provided a second or third participant. Participants referred other participants. Hence, this study reflects several different social networks stretching across the country. Four focus group interviews were scheduled, and participants were asked to volunteer for the focus group that best suited their schedule. Each focus group was comprised of approximately four participants. Each participant had the opportunity to accept or decline participation in the focus group.

Focus Group Sequence

The focus groups met for approximately one and a half hours each and the in-depth interviews averaged 45 minutes each. Approximately 12 hours was spent in interaction with participants. At the beginning of each focus group, participants were asked to read and sign a consent form (Appendix A) assuring the participant that all information is confidential. The consent forms are kept in a locked cabinet only accessible to the researcher. Participants were then informed that the interviews would be

videotaped and that the video acted as the researcher's eyes and ears during the group discussion, allowing the researcher to fully concentrate on the conversation. The participants were informed that the videotape would be kept in a locked cabinet only accessible to the researcher.

Participants were asked to fill out a short demographic survey (Appendix B). A brief description of the project and instructions were given to the participant (Appendix C). It was explained that the researcher wanted to hear the participants' experiences through their own words. Furthermore, it was emphasized that there are no right or wrong answers. The participants were asked that no names be used and the researcher explained that no one outside the group would know exactly what each participant said. Then the participants were asked to agree to respect the right of privacy of the other participants by not discussing anything that anyone else said outside the focus group (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

The focus group was designed to be semi-structured and narrative. The researcher moderated the discussion. After introductions around the table, the researcher started with "one or two questions intended to tap into the experience under study" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 183). The discussion was lightly guided with a list of questions and follow-up questions (see Appendix C). After the group interview process, the participants were asked if they had other friends or acquaintances that had experiences with fictive kin relationships. The names, e-mail addresses, and phone numbers were collected.

Names gathered during the focus group were used to solicit additional participants. As with the focus group, perspective participants were asked if they had individuals in their life that were not related to them that they considered family

members. If individuals responded positively to this statement, they were qualified to participate in this study. All participants had the opportunity to accept or reject a personal interview. Once the participant had accepted the interview, a time and location to meet was determined. The interviewee was asked to complete a consent form (Appendix D) and asked if the interview could be tape-recorded. It was explained to the participant that the tape recorder acted as the researcher's ears so that the researcher could engage in conversation with the participant. The tapes were kept in a locked cabinet after the data collection. Notes were taken during the interview to capture the nonverbal messages and the "feel" of the interview. A few moments were spent at the beginning of the interview acquainting the participant with the study, answering any questions, and informing the interviewee that at any time he or she was able to stop the interview, change or delete an answer, not answer a question, or discontinue the interview. During the interview process, nonverbal cues were jotted down to provide context for the verbal text during the transcribing process. Follow up questions were designed and asked if clarification of the overall meaning of the interviewee's response was needed or if the participant misunderstood the question. Follow up questions were also asked if the researcher felt as though the participant was responding to the question by providing the answer the researcher wanted to hear rather than their own response.

Data Analysis and Coding

All focus group interactions and interviews were transcribed. During transcription each participant was given a pseudonym to ensure anonymity. The data were sorted, categorized, and organized. The researcher's written notes were transcribed along with

the interviews. The transcription was 110 single spaced pages. All words, laughter, tears, sighs and other key sounds were recorded to maintain the integrity of the information.

The grounded theory approach pioneered by Glaser and Strauss (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) was used to interpret the data. Grounded theory is widely used in the social science field, including communication research (e.g. Katriel, 1985). The first step to grounded theory or the constant-comparison method is “to code as many categories as possible for the data” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 218). These categories can have their origin in the literature reviewed from the project or “in the inductive spirit of qualitative study, much coding is devoted to generating categories from the researcher’s own lived experience in the scene” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002 p. 219). To reduce large numbers of codes, each incident was compared to others to decide to which codes it belongs (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). In addition, each code was clarified as they were revisited multiple times. The data was coded according to open coding. That is, initially there was an unrestricted coding of data (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). It is through open coding that categories are constructed, labeled and given characteristics (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Two focus groups and one interview were open coded and 155 codes were identified (see Appendix F). Focused coding was used to code the rest of the transcripts. Charmaz (2006) states that focused coding is using codes developed in the first few interviews to code the remaining data thereby speeding up the coding process. During focused coding, the constant comparison method is still used and additional codes may be added. Once this was completed all data had been chunked together based on coherent groups of meaning (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

The next step was the “integration and dimensionalization” stage. At this stage categories were reshaped to produce deeper meaning. During the integration of categories connections were established between the categories through a process called “axial coding” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Thus, themes and codes were collapsed into broader categories and labeled. At this point, four categories were established with 23 sub-themes (see Appendix G). Once categories were defined, one of the final steps was to “explore [a category’s] attributes or characteristics along continua or dimensions” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Key dimensions that span all categories were identified and four basic categories with twelve sub-themes were found in the data. After the data had been “explained,” the data was then interpreted.

The interpretation process translated the data from one referent to another and added life and depth to the data (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Interpretation began with an understanding of the history, situation, and context as seen by the participants to give descriptive properties to the categories. As the data was transcribed, coded and categorized the interpretation of it became clearer and patterns among the data sets were recognized. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) posit that the interpretation process “adds tremendous value to a study by using theories or symbolic relationships to understand data and categories in a new light” (p. 232).

Reliability and Validity

The interpretations of the data were tested to insure reliability and validity. LeCompte and Goetz (1982) assert that reliability can be seen in two lights; internal and external reliability. Internal reliability is that independent researchers would be able to replicate the coding of the data. LeCompte and Goertz (1982) suggest that the use of

mechanical recording data as well as including narrative in the results provide internal reliability. That is, the ability to view how raw data has been categorized into specific themes provides means for others to similarly code data. In this study, focus groups were video recorded and interviews were tape recorded which provided the researcher with the raw material. The raw data also provided insight into the nonverbal behaviors and the mechanical devices enhanced the internal reliability. Narratives were extracted from the raw material and used as examples. Excerpts from the participants were provided to the reader so that he or she could see the raw data and the interpretation of it.

External reliability refers to the ability of an independent researcher to replicate the research in the same or similar situations. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) argue that due to the nature of qualitative research, reliability is not much of a concern. The interpretive aspect of qualitative research and the fact that the results of the research typically are not generalized to a greater population suggests that reliability is not essential. Moreover, the social world this study is examining is always changing, thus the researcher's understanding of it is always changing in relation to the scene he or she is studying. Hence, a replication of results by an independent researcher is neither practical nor possible (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

Validity, however, plays a larger role in qualitative studies. Validity in this sense deals with the truthfulness of the observations. LeCompte and Goertz (1982) suggest that validity tests the accuracy to the extent that the results represent reality. That is, validity focuses on identifying if the researcher accurately reports the nature of the object being studied and its characteristics or behaviors (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Lindlof and Taylor (2002) suggest a method of testing validity is to employ member checks. In other words,

the findings from this study were taken back to seven participants to check the accuracy of the findings. The participants were asked to assess the results as true and accurate to their experience. The questions set forth by Lindlof and Taylor (2002) were utilized to test validity; (1) “Is there anything you particularly like about this? (2) What did I get wrong? (3) Did you recognize anyone? and (4) Have I been fair?” (p. 243). Participants felt as though it was true to their experiences.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

Social Activities

Research question one asked participants about social activities that co-constructed meaning in their fictive kin relationships. As was expected, qualitative inquiry by means of focus groups and interviews produced a number of social activities which individuals communicatively co-constructed fictive kin relationships. Among the numerous social activities four major themes were found: (1) limitlessness, (2) time, (3) family events, and (4) food. The four themes serve to communicate the activities that co-create the fictive kin relationship. Separating these social activities is by no means suggesting that they are mutually exclusive. On the contrary, many of the participants mentioned a combination of the activities as part of coming to an understanding about their relationship. Separating the activities serves to provide clarity to each. Multiple examples will be used to convey the information as it was explained by the participants.

Limitlessness

Although limitlessness is not a social activity in and of itself, it encompasses the idea that there isn't a particular thing that kin does together, rather it is the idea that they can do *everything* together. Limitlessness, while vague and all encompassing, was widely discussed among the participants in terms of repetition and reoccurrence. That is, it was frequently mentioned as the activity that the participants enjoyed doing with their friends. In other words, the possibilities of options were limitless. Limitlessness was often expressed by the participants using the term anything. That is, there are limitless possibilities to what they can do together; anything goes. Even after probing for more information about the activities the participants experienced with their fictive kin,

anything was still the response from the participants. Rob demonstrated this when he said,

Rob: Pretty much everything goes because those are the friends that have passed over to more of the family lines. It is not just good time buddies and that sort of thing. It is everything. Everything from weddings and funerals, to going to get some beers, to helping someone move, to you know taking vacations.

Interviewer: What do you enjoy doing together?

Rob: Pretty much anything. We don't need a whole lot to have a good time so yeah it could just be about anything...They are the guys you can call anytime to do anything.

Mike, too, demonstrated that anything envelops the broad range of activities he and his friend do together.

Mike: I am from a small town in Montana so it is not uncommon for us to have to entertain ourselves. We figured out that we can do about anything together and it would be fun.

Interviewer: Can you give me a specific example?

Mike: Just like rolling around on the carpet. You know anything and it would be fun.

Sarah said, "With my best friend what we usually do is everything from doing everything to doing nothing." Again, encompassed in the idea of limitlessness is that the fictive kin can do everything together.

Some participants mentioned that mundane tasks (e.g., hanging out or taking a nap) are part of the limitlessness of their activities. Rachel commented that there are some things that she and Katy enjoy doing together. She mentioned the organic nature by which these adventures come about. “With Katy we do something outdoorsy together like skiing or like being on the river but it really doesn’t seem like we have to have an agenda or go on this high action adventures. It is like let’s be lame and stay in the house and it seems to be a great time.”

Another mundane activity that the majority of the participants mentioned was hanging out. Hanging out is spending time together doing anything and everything. For example, Aubrey said, “[We like] just hanging out having dinner, having a glass of wine, or going shopping. Not anything too big but at the same time it is what we like to do. So we like to just hang out and talk or watch a movie.” Inherent in the idea of hanging out is that the participants are not limited to one particular activity, rather there are limitless options.

Chris mentioned several times throughout his interview that the friends he considered to be family spent a lot of time hanging out together. “I have a few people that I would consider like that because you know they are people that...we hung out with and did a lot of things with but pretty much like we share a lot together.” Later he stated, “You know, they are always like someone to talk to, to hang out with, to share experience with and you know friends to do things with.” Ellie described being completely comfortable with her friends to the point that anything is really acceptable. Ellie said:

We don’t necessarily do anything, but with all my other friends and acquaintances you are doing something. But when I am with my friends I

consider my family, I am just being me and I am completely oblivious to what is going and what we are doing at the moment because I am just comfortable. It doesn't really matter. I don't have to be doing this in order to enjoy being in your presence or having you around me. So it is just nice...it is nice not to have to worry about anything.

Participants don't rely on a particular activity to interact with their friends; rather they said that these friends are so close that doing anything, participating in the mundane tasks of life, or doing nothing is what they enjoy doing together.

Time

Closely related to having limitless activities with fictive kin, many participants pointed out that the time they spent together was more important than the activity. Participants mentioned that it was the time spent together that demonstrated to them that this was a fictive kin relationship. For example, Jordan said,

It kind of comes down to spending so much time with them...I have gotten especially close to people that have gone on to grad school with me because it has been a long period of time. You know, four years this spring so. But going into it I would have never thought I would have gotten to know people and felt so close to people. Really, in a sense the class and the studio up there kind of feels like a big family so to speak.

The longevity of the relationship was often mentioned as what made the friendship feel more like family. Liz mentioned that the quantity of time she has spent with her friends makes them feel like family. Liz said,

Nikki and I went to college together and it was just a transformation. Like she ended up cooking for me and kind of took care for me like an older sister would have and just gave me advice and everything but I don't know just the longevity of the friendship makes it feel like it is more than just a friendship.

Rob said, "I think the sheer quality of time comes into play....it is the spectrum, and it is for so damn long." Once more the time spent in the friendship played a large part in the development of the fictive kin relationship. Lyndi provided another example. She said in reference to her fictive kin, "She is the closest thing I have to a sister. Which is not true because I have a step sister." She laughs. "I have known her longer than my step sister." The key element in the friendship, as earlier mentioned by Lyndi, is the time she had known her friend.

Other participants spoke about the amount of time they spent with their fictive kin in terms of frequency. Katy said, "He would come over every single day after work and he lived in one place and I lived in another and that is like a half an hour away. He would always drive down after work and we would spend the evening together." Some participants mentioned that they are no longer in the same physical location as their friends, and thus their interaction are not as frequent as they used to be. However, some type of contact with their fictive kin whether it be daily, bi-daily, or weekly contact by phone or email was cited by the participants. Rachel said, "I email or talk to Katy about once a week." Liz stated, "One of them I probably talked to three or four times a week. We don't live by each other but we are on the phone a lot." Jose said, "We were with each other you know all the time. While I am up here, you know I talk to them like

everyday. I call them on the phone, talk to them over the internet with the little video stuff.” Frequent contact and the time spent together constitute activities that created and formed fictive kin relationships.

Family Events

Another activity that constructs meaning in the fictive kin relationship is in participating in family events. Family events are traditionally viewed as taking place with family of origin. Within the family event themes, three sub-themes were found. They were: (1) holidays, (2) vacation, and (3) home time. Participation in these sub-themes may take place with a fictive kin family or with fictive kin and his or her family of origin. Either way, the family setting seemed to be unique to these types of interactions.

Holidays. Many of the participants mentioned spending holidays together as an activity that created fictive kin relationships. Fictive kin were incorporated in the holiday in two ways. Some participants spent the holiday with their fictive kin family while other participants mentioned including fictive kin as part of their family of origin. In both situations, the interaction during the holiday is the key feature. For example Becca said,

At Christmas time, we will have a themed potluck with everybody (families of origin). And then on Christmas Eve my four best friends will always go for a drive around at midnight and go around and check out the lights and then come back and have hot chocolate and talk and whatever (fictive kin family).

Becca’s holiday included both family of origin and fictive kin traditions. Similarly, Katy said, “Before I moved up here, we would spend every New Year together. It was kind of this family tradition I had with my family [of origin] that he kind of became incorporated

into.” Liz said that part of their holiday traditions includes the day after thanksgiving tradition. She said,

Every year, the day after Thanksgiving, the three of us girls and our moms go shopping in Spokane. So it is like the day after thanksgiving with all the sales. It started with just the six of us and since people have gotten married like my friend Mickey, her brother got married so the sister-in-law now comes with us and her little daughter comes too. So it is like an extended family.

Liz continued, “We celebrate holidays together and things like that. It doesn’t seem to be anything huge to me anymore. I just expect them to be there at the holidays and [I know] we are going to see each other.”

While some participants mentioned a mixture of family and fictive kin events during holidays, other participants spent the holidays exclusively with their fictive kin. Hannah’s experience with family holidays is solely with her fictive kin. She said,

I knew that they were family that moment when it was like ‘I wanted to spent my thanksgiving with you’...When Thanksgiving comes around and I have the choice of where I am going to go, we have our thanksgiving traditions, so at this point after four or five years of doing that together. I go to my fictive kin holiday. We have shared experience and this is what we do. We have thanksgiving together.

Hannah has another group of friends who she spent New Years with. She said, “My other two friends, I haven’t talked to since New Years but one flew in from New England and one flew in from California so we can all have New Years

together, which is phenomenal.” Joshua noted that he, too, has spent time during the holidays with his fictive kin when he was unable to go home. He said, “I have spent both Thanksgiving and Christmas with Krystal and Joslynn and so you know it has been great that way.” Jose said, “Well for each of our birthdays we make it a big deal. I am not really one to make big deals about holidays or birthdays but birthdays are always a big deal for us.” Lyndi mentioned that “spending holidays with other friends” has made friends feel more like family. Holidays can function to strengthen the bond of fictive kin relations.

Vacations. In addition to holidays, vacationing is another family event that made fictive kin feel as though they were family. Family vacations happened with either the fictive kin family or with the fictive kin and family of origin. However, again it was having the experience with the family, in a family setting (e.g. the home), that created the bond.

Samantha said,

I knew I was part of the family because they invited me to go in family vacations and family trips or when they were going somewhere fun. I was invited to go along whether it was to their grandma’s cabin or their summer vacation to California. That was when I knew I was considered as part of the family.

Mike said, “Growing up we played sports together, we traveled with each others families, went on vacations together and just hung out all the time... We took summer trips together. Summer trips are a lot of fun and experiencing each other families a little better.”

Similar to family vacations are family reunions. Some participants either have their fictive kin participate in family reunions or they participate in the family reunion of their fictive kin. Stacy talks about the tradition of taking her friend to family reunions. In this situation, Lisa, Stacy's friend, is the fictive kin coming to the reunion. She said,

Lisa always comes to my family reunions. She always has since I don't know when. It is even to the point where my whole family, my grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins are like, is 'Lisa going to be here? Which boyfriend is she going to bring this year?' It is tradition for her to come with me to that each year.

Cassie also talked about participating in family reunions. Cassie, too, described being fictive kin to the family. That is, she is participating in another family's reunion. Cassie said, "They would have big family get-togethers and they would invite me over. So that is how I felt like I was family." Vacationing and family reunions with family are an activities that made friendships grow into fictive kin relationships.

Home Time. Spending time in the home of a fictive kin or a fictive kin's family of origin is another family event that made the participants feel as though they had moved to a fictive kin relationship. Again, the time spent can be either in the home of the fictive kin or the fictive kin's family of origin. For example, Liz stated,

They actually live on a farm. Whenever I spent the night over there I would have to chip in with all the chores that they would have to do. So then their dad who is like my second dad was treating me like, 'well you are staying here, you are part of the family, you are going to do some work also.'

Rob shares a similar experience about sharing family of origin with the fictive kin. He said, “Both of them are close enough to family that they would still show up to my folk’s house. They’re 1500 miles away and they show up there. So it has just gotten to that point.” He continued describing the reverse role, he being the fictive kin to his friend’s family. He said, “Being invited over to their parent’s house for dinner when you just run into each other, that sort of thing that makes you feel more like it is not just a friendship, it is something above and beyond.” John talks about the importance of time in the creation of fictive kin. He said, “It is one of those people you incorporate into your family by spending so much time around them. If they just end up at your house some random time during the week I mean it is just pretty normal.”

Matt explained that his fictive kin’s family of origin became fictive kin as he spent time with them in their home. He said, “His parents would always feed me. It seemed like his parents became like my second parents. They would always worry about me like my parents worry about me.” Katy said that she and her fictive kin Dallin would often have the following conversation: “‘Let’s hang out at my parent’s house, let’s have stuffed mushrooms and steak’ and we would just talk and talk for hours to the point that it is one o’clock and we are crashed out on the couch or the spare room.”

Two of the participants had the following exchange about being extremely comfortable in the house of their fictive kin.

Sarah: “I can just walk into my friend’s house, get something out of the fridge and just plop down on the couch without them even being there.”

Rachel: “Totally.”

Sarah: “Without even knocking or anything and they will be like down stairs.”

Rachel: “You just help yourself to all their crap.”

Sarah: “Yeah you just make yourself at home.”

Rachel: “Like I take a nap when he is over at my house. What a bad hostess. It’s not a thing. It is totally cool.”

Sarah: “When I come home from college they always fill their candy jar full of chocolate and they buy milk even though they don’t drink it. They are just waiting for me to come.”

Lyndi, too, explains her comfort level with having her friends in her home. “I have people in my life who have keys to my home and can come and go as they please.”

Another way that participants spent time in each other homes is by living together. That is, the act of having a home together functioned to create fictive kin type relationships. Chris demonstrated this when he said,

I lived in the basement of some of my friends in Utah. Well when we all lived in Utah together there was like three or four or five houses that I definitely stayed in for part of the winter. I stayed in one house and the other part of the winter I stayed in this other house. I guess that made us feel like family because we were all kind of together.

Jose said, “We lived at each others house, we lived at one guys apartment. We were with each other you know all the time.” Lyndi said, “Joy made me come live with her even though I had a new dog and gave me money to spend on Christmas presents.” She then spoke of another fictive kin, “During the three years that we lived together we became

best friends.” Hannah said, “We all lived together... We met in 2001 and we were all roommates in 2005.” Stacey said, “I am family with her family. I have been there for everything in her and her little brothers lives. And I mean we have keys to each others houses. We have lived with each others parents at different times...I think it was when she moved in with me during high school [that I knew she was part of the family].”

Family events such as holidays, vacations, family reunions and home time are social activities that the participant mentioned as constructing meaning in fictive kin relationship.

Food

Sharing food is the final social event that participants frequently cited as helping them feel as though they are part of a fictive kin relationship. Food, like the other mentioned activities, can either be exclusively part of the fictive kin relationship or incorporating the fictive kin into the family of origin or both. Fictive kin may participate in and create traditions or rituals based around food. For example, Rachel said,

We always set aside a night of the week when we watch *Lost* and eat dinner. So every week there is this thing that we do to kind of reconnect.

So one of us takes a turn bring the wine and the other person cooks and we trade off at houses. So we kind of reconnected with each other that way.

Mike referred to his friend’s family making him meals when he came over, “Yeah you come and you order your food and they are like alright.” Matt said, “His [fictive kin’s] parents would always feed me dinner.”

In addition, Hannah said, “Our circle of friends, would have dinner every Thursday night when we lived in West Virginia and our toast that we would start

everything would be ‘to friends, the family you chose.’” Pam explained dinner with her college roommate’s family. She said,

I remember going over to dinner at Abby’s house and her dad asked me these questions about how life was going for us; these really personal questions that my dad would never ask. You know, we would never talk about something like that. Then he asked me questions about what I thought about Abby or about how Abby was handling stuff and we would all talk about it as a family, you know as part of their family time.

Mike mentioned that he and his fictive kin have a food based tradition. He said, “Every time we come over to see each other we bring a case of Mountain Dew. It has been our tradition ever since grade school. We have always just done that. We stock each other’s fridges. Sometime there are three or four cases but it is just kind of our tradition.” John spoke about his friend that has recently joined the army. He said, “He used to come over every Thursday and eat dinner with us just by tradition I guess. My mom still cooks enough for him too.” Lyndi talked about her group of fictive kin friends. “For the last years, my friend Katie and I were roommates and would host the Thursday night dinner and poker game at our house and out of a group of friends everybody would choose a Thursday night to cook, but it was always held at our house.”

Liz stated, “Like she ended up cooking for me and kind of took care of me like an older sister.” Jacob explained that his colleagues in their graduate program often eat together. “Right now I see the school guys way more than anyone else and we are here working on stuff all the time, so we grab lunch, dinner sometimes, breakfast if we had been up all night.” Jordan said, “I have been over to their (fictive kin) houses for

barbeques.” Food was a solidifying factor in creating social relationship between friends. It was an avenue by which the participants mentioned that created fictive kin relationships.

The participants employed multiple social activities to co-construct meaning of fictive kin relationships. Again, the separation of the social activities into themes is not intended to imply that these social activities exist independently of each other. As seen through the examples, there are many different activities by which the participants felt that their relationships had been constructed to create fictive kinship. Any or all of these themes - limitlessness, time, family events and food - are the basic activities that facilitate the formation of fictive kin. Social activities are only one aspect in the creation of fictive kin. To see another aspect of the formation of these relationships it is necessary to analyze the different themes in the stories participants told about their fictive kin.

Themes

Research question two sought to distinguish the themes reflected in the stories participants told about their fictive kin. Themes refer to the underlying ideas embedded in the stories the participants tell about their fictive kin. Jorgenson and Bochner (2004) state that “stories and ritual are resources through which family members create shared realities of family life” (p. 518). There were two prevalent themes the stories the participants told: (1) shared experience and (2) “no matter what” messages. Shared experiences refer to traumatic, trying or tragic moments, life experiences, and major life moments that were highlighted in the participants’ stories about their friends. “No matter what” messages reflect the participants’ views that their fictive kin relationship would

endure through all experiences. They also refer to an inherent time frame incorporating past, present and future.

Again, these themes are not mutually exclusive; however, a differentiation has been made between them in order to clearly discuss each. Frequently, participants' stories reflected shared experience themes that would be followed by the theme of "no matter what" messages. The shared experience was used as the warrant for the "no matter what" messages theme. Once more the participants' stories reflected an interconnection of these themes to explain their fictive kin relationships but for the purpose of clarity they will be discussed separately.

Shared Experiences

First, shared experiences are events that the participants went through with their fictive kin. There are three identifiable categories in this theme: (1) trying times, (2) life experiences, and (3) major life moments. Again, these categories are not mutually exclusive but have been separated to facilitate a clearer discussion of each. These experiences were identified by the participants as bonding forces in their relationships.

Trying Times. Trying times consist of story told by the participant where they experienced something that they characterize as a trial, a trauma or a tragedy. Trials, traumas, and tragedies could occur between participants and their fictive kin or be an experience outside the fictive kin relationship. For example, Jose explained losing a friend and leaving a gang with his fictive kin. He stated,

There was a really traumatic night that happened and one of our buddies got shot and it's kind of like when you are a kid you think you are invincible or whatever and then all the sudden the kid next to me got shot.

It is like that could have been me just as easy. So it took us back a little bit. We were all like you know this is nuts. And that's when we kind of felt like we should, because my buddies will never show that they are scared or whatever, but there was a time when all of us without saying anything were like you know this is cool and all but like it is not what we want to be. You know I don't want to end up in the hospital over some stupid stuff. I want to go to college and get a good job and stuff like that. We really had a talk. We were just like this is stupid. I think that it was after that night that we really kind of, well I mean, like before that we were like best of friends, and then after that night it just brought us all closer together...I think it was like kind of a turning point that made us more into a family and more like looking out for each other.

Likewise, Ruth explained that her fictive kin was with her when her mom died. She said, "The weekend that my mom passed away, Tony came to the hospital and was there all day. He didn't require anything of me. He wasn't there to be entertained and I didn't feel like I had to entertain him. He was just there to support me and to do anything that I needed him to do. And that meant a lot for me."

Hannah shared a similar medical situation that affected her fictive kin family. She explained,

I have had an incredible week with this circle of friends. One of them was diagnosed with cancer this week and we all high tailed it from all over the country. We were able to be with him in Portland. And it was a sense of community and connections that I had never felt before. And there came a

time when we were all sitting around the living room and we all went into memory mode. It goes back to the four places we lived. The hilarious river adventures that have occurred or being dumped, but it is just like, again, that shared experience. I think that it really was driven home that they really are like family.

Rachel too described a time when her fictive kin went through a traumatic health experience and she had an opportunity to help her. She described the situation by saying, “I actually think how we got to be friends is that we were in our research methods class and one day she just kind of collapsed. She has a kind of arrhythmic heart. So my friend and I just helped her until the paramedics came. So I think we just connected through that.”

Becca, too, related a time when her fictive kin was experiencing a medical trauma that drew her closer to that friend.

When I was a freshman in college it was like the day before spring break and I got a call that said that she got in a really bad car accident and that she was on life support. I was supposed to go to Florida for spring break. I was like, ‘oh my gosh what do I do?’ I had already invested all this money in it and now it was like, there is no way. Her parents and mine said ‘there is nothing you can do. You can’t talk to her. You know she is not going to be able to talk to you for a while, if – we are not sure what is going to happen.’ So they talked me into going to Florida. So I went down there. I was there for a day and I was like ‘no way never mind.’ So I bought a ticket and flew all the way home to South Dakota and sat by her bed for a

whole week and just waited. I think that was because she was just like a little sister. I felt so devastated. So I could not be there for it. So I think that kind of made it...so she is definitely family.

Katy recalled being a source of support as her fictive kin went through a point of being ostracized by his community.

He came back from his LDS mission early. Things really didn't work out well there and he came back early. He kind of got ostracized by the community and myself not being active in that whole community was just like sort of like it really doesn't matter right. Come, we can pick up where we left off or whatever. We spent some real intense three or four months with each other.

The participants sometimes expressed trying times by describing a falling out or a fight with their fictive kin. Each participant explained that working through the falling out or fight was often what solidified their relationship. Rob spoke of a falling out with some of his friends. Because of this falling out, the friends that stayed together established a fictive kin type relationship. Rob said,

Generally you start out with friends and they are fair weather friends and you go through a lot together. You know, we had a few other friends, part of the group back in California, and there was a bit of a falling out that divided the group a little bit. It was really weird, kind of a soap opera nonsense type thing. I think that that was kind of a turning point for all of us. We have since actually gotten back in contact with all the other people

but it is not quite the same because they don't see it as the same and so it was kind of a bonding through necessity.

Stacy said,

We are just family. We've known each other since we were two. We went to preschool together. And even to the point that her and I had a falling out and didn't talk to each other for about a year and a half. It finally got to the point where it was like, 'I am a moron.' 'No I am the moron' and we made up like you do in families sometimes. That is a relationship that has been through everything possible and it is still there and like literally family to each others families.

In Stacy's situation, working through the conflict provided the proof that the relationship was more than just a friendship. Liz also mentioned conflict between her and her friends. "We don't necessarily fight. I have fought with those other two girls" She talked about it in the past tense and later stated, "Like I said before, they are stuck with me."

Life Experiences. Life experiences were another way that participants talked about shared experiences. Life experiences were any situation that the participant identified as a memorable or defining moment of their life that they shared with their fictive kin. For example, some participants cited graduate school as a life experience that has drawn them closer to their friends. Jordan explained the experience of graduate school as a time when he drew close to these friends. He said,

With people at school, it is kind of interesting we have gotten to know each other very well, spending time when we have free time which is kind of rare. I have been out to dinner. I have been on dates with either some of

the students and their wives or girlfriends. In the architecture program, it is primarily males. There are only a few ladies in the program so I have gotten to know them really well. I have actually gone on like camping trips with a few of them. I have been over to their house for barbeques. There are two or three people that I have gotten to know really well; my friend Alex and Mike. We go out and play what we like to call architecture ball.

Jacob, too, is an architecture student and explained his relationship with some of his colleagues. “Well yeah, anytime you go through hard times with people you kind of get a different kind bond. This is really been the worst four years of my life as far as stress and anxiety are concerned.” Rachel said, “I am most close to Bob. We met in grad school and just right of the bat he was just a-sexual and I was not attracted to him at all. He was not attracted to me at all. So immediately we were just friends but the dynamics in our department are always fluctuating, like who is mad at each other and who is getting along, but he is my constant.”

Ellie spoke about going through puberty as the life experience she shared with her fictive kin. She said,

My mom did not talk to me about puberty. It was just not talked about. Like this was just your own personal thing and you don't talk to anybody about it either. But Brandon being my first serious boyfriend or whatever...and then Manda and I knowing each other since we were tiny...you have no hips and like no boobs, nothing. We went through that together. We talked about it and like Brandon like we kind of talked about

and felt this hole; we just kind of went through puberty together. So like I never talked about it with my family, but I experienced it with them and even if it wasn't like this explicit thing where we say or do anything. It was like those experiences of going through it just bonded us I guess.

Sari also commented on a life experience that affected her friendships. She said, "I went through my mission with them. It was a very much a growing time and you learn to rely on each other. So some of my companions, I became very very close to. And that is a bond that if we were never to see each other again. It would never change."

Katy recalled experiencing the in-between times with her fictive kin. She recounted,

I remember we had both gone away to college and it was the end of our first semester of undergrad. He was down south in Southern Utah going to school and he called me up. I hadn't heard from him for months. I was kind of like well we were really close in high school and that was just what it was suppose to be. But he called me up with some problems and we were just talking and he sort of just let it all out. And he was like 'I missed you so much and I can't wait to see you soon' then like we just started to be in touch again.

While big life events were bonding moments for some participants, for others it was participating in everyday life. Rob explained that he and his friends camp together. He recounted their first camping trip.

With some of them camping trips are pretty big rituals. I took them for their first camping trip like five or six years ago. They had never been which made no sense to me. They had no idea what they were doing. They didn't even know how to start campfires or use their stoves they had just bought. And now they are the ones who always call me [to go camping].

Chris spoke about living and experiencing everyday life together as part of what moved the friendship beyond just friends. "I guess that made us feel like family because we were all kind of together. I was leeching floor space for a while." Lyndi too discussed the fact that her fictive kin help her through everyday life. She said, "We like to eat. And we like to hike and exercise and talk about our dogs and our families and get each other through daily life. We discuss the minutia."

Pam also explained that being a part of the simple dinner conversation made her feel a stronger connection with her fictive kin. "I remember going to dinner at Abby's house. Her dad asked me question about how life was going for us...and we would all talk about it as a family, you know as part of their family dinner time."

Major Life Events. Marriages, births, birthday, and coming outs are major life events that participants recounted experiencing with their fictive kin. For example, Liz said, "I was in Megan's wedding and I am going to be in Mickey's wedding. So I think that will be good and then when they have their kids, you know, I hope to be there to be one of the first people to know about the occasion." Rob shared a similar experience.

Last year July, July 1, one of my friends, one of the guys I went camping with, he got married and it was quite a big hubbub. Because he was the first of the real good friends to get married so it was a very, we behaved

ourselves somehow. But it was still, it was a big deal. We got to do the speeches and such and we were part of the wedding parties. We spent the entire day cracking jokes and reminiscing about even more stuff that we had done together. It was really really fun and it was everybody there. You can't ask for anything more than that. It was what a wedding should be.

Rachel said, "Katy is getting married and she started making wedding plans and stuff before we got to be really close. And she asking me to be in her wedding is a big thing. You know her sister and her fiancé's family is in it and so I knew that that was...you know, that is her biggest day."

Participating in the birth of a fictive kin's child was an additional major life experience that some participants mentioned. Aubrey shared the story of being at the birth of her fictive kin's child. "When I was in the labor room, because I had just recently come back and we hadn't seen each other in years. I was there with her mom and another close friend of hers and her boyfriend and I was there for her son's birth." Ellie also recounted experiencing the birth and adoption process of her fictive kin's children. "She had her first one right after high school. I named him. I am like in there with her and her mom comes in and is like 'I hope you know what you did now. I hope you know what you have gotten yourself into.' She is scared to death. She is 18 and she just had a kid." She continued with the story of her friend. "She just had her third baby two weeks ago now. And she gave her up for adoption. That day she called me and cried and cried. Like she knew it was a good thing and now she is trying to figure out how to have her two boys adopted."

Hannah talked about being there for her friend when he came out. She said, “One of my friends came out of the closet and I was sort of the beginning of that process with him. He entrusted me with that.” Shared experiences through trying times, life experiences and major life events are one of the central themes in the stories that the participants told about their fictive kin.

“No Matter What” Messages

As previously mentioned, “no matter what” messages were a theme in the stories the participants told about their fictive kin. Many participants used the word “no matter what” to describe an aspect of their relationships with their fictive kin or the fictive kin relationship itself. “No matter what” messages refer to the dependability or unchanging nature of the relationship as seen by the fictive kin. For example, Rachel said, “It is the people that no matter what you do, no matter how much you screw up, they are going to be there.”

Other participants expressed the same sense of reliability in their fictive kin relationships. Ellie stated,

They are the people that I feel closer to than my family and even though they are just friends there is no way I would terminate those relationships. You can but they are people that I could say anything to them and they could say anything to me and I know that no matter what I love them to death and they love me back. There is nothing that any of us can do to ruin that friendship ever.

Katy recounted a time when she was experiencing some life changes and her friend stuck with her. She said, “I think it is having those friends who let me develop into

the person I am becoming. It's the ones that are accepting no matter what. They don't put constraints on me that I should be or do or act a certain way." Becca recounted the reliability of her fictive kin. "I guess they just know me and understand me and would always be there for me no matter what. If something bad happens, they are the friends you know will always be there and have been there forever." Rob explained, "There are a certain number of friends, some of them you only want to see when you are having a good time, but real friends you want them there no matter what."

Other participants expressed "no matter what" messages using different terminology. Terms such as "always be there for me," and "never change" are a few alternative ways that participants referred to the reliability of their fictive kin relationships. Liz said,

I guess I got to choose them which is different than family which you don't get to choose. So I guess I chose them and they chose me and in some kind of weird twist it just works out. I know that at any time, situation, whatever, that they will be there for me and I would do the same for them. But it is not your family at the same time so I think maybe it means even more.

Sari explained that the fictive kin she developed when she was on a mission and others since then have a place with her forever. She said,

It is a bond that if we were never to see each other again, it is still there. It would never change. So in a way they are sisters to me. But even here, Bob and "the Sam", in a way, they are my family because they are my

family away from family. They are my brothers. So I guess, in some ways yeah, I do have some good friends that I know will never change.

Hannah described the consistency of her friends by saying, “There is this feeling that you have when you know, just as with your family, you can’t imagine them not being there.” Becca said, “they are the people you want to be there when you want them to or when you don’t want them to. They are always people you will laugh with and have fun with and you know will always be there for each other and experience life and grow together.”

Encompassed in the theme of “no matter what” messages is time. When participants spoke of the consistency or reliability of their fictive kin in term of “no matter what” messages there was an undertone of time. That is, frequently when participants recounted stories regarding their fictive kin, there was evidence of a past, present and anticipated future. These elements, past, present, and anticipated future, justified their claim of consistency in their relationships. For example, Stacy said,

We have been through so much together, good and bad times we can just laugh about. They are the type of person you can get together with and make a statement and just laugh. You have so many inside jokes. You have really been through some trials together too. Whether it is one person’s bad times or both of you together everything has been really...it has been tested. It has been though a lot of pressure and it has been tested. And for me, I know it will be life long. I have known her for twenty years. I think the biggest things are the trials you go through and come out on the other side better than before.

Rob, too, commented about the past with his friends. He said, “The one [friend] that I have had for over twenty years that, again, it is quantity, it is the spectrum and it is for so damn long. Because I was six when we met, so not too many memories before that you know.” Liz too cited the past.

I think that is was just over time how we’ve stayed very close through elementary school, middle school, high school, college and even now in our adult years. Other friends have come and gone but we have still stayed together and I don’t know when I realized that...but, I don’t know, just the longevity of the friendship makes it feel more than just friendship.

While some participants look to the past as the foundation of their fictive kin relationship, others anticipate the future. Samantha recalled how she sought out the advice of her fictive kin when she was struggling through graduate school. She then described the anticipated future. She said, “I was looking for her support and her advice. So I think that was when it was crystallized that this person is really important to me in my life and will continue to be so throughout my life.” Pam also talked about an anticipated future. She said, “Maybe this familiarity where you know that you are going to be in each others lives even if you like snap at them or tell them what to do or ask them to do chores or something.” Lyndi projected a future with her fictive kin by talking about being in the lives of her fictive kin’s children. She said, “Susan’s kids know me like I know my mother’s friends. I know I will be a part of her children’s lives and they probably don’t remember life without me.”

During a focus group, the conversation turned to the topic of a projected future with their fictive kin. The conversation is as follows.

Katy: I know things are really bumpy with the thing we are going through but I really really hope we can pull through it because we have been friends for so long. We are talking about going on seven or eight years. We have had times where we haven't talked a lot and there is that expectation where you don't have to talk a lot but I am hoping that we pull through it. And it is definitely going to take some work on renegotiating roles and things like that. But I think he knows so much about who I used to be that I would like him to learn who I am becoming.

Aubrey: Yeah those people grow with you no matter what.

Hannah: We speak in fantasy and I know some time that is like part of how in-groups and out-groups communicate but we totally talk about what it is going to be like when we go on river trips in our sixties and seventies and our grandkids are totally embarrassed by their naked old grandparents.

The themes of the participants' stories are centralized on the shared experiences they went through together as fictive kin and the "no matter what" messages. Shared experiences, whether it was traumas, trials, tragedies, life experiences or major life moments created situations that participants identified as turning points in the stories they told about their fictive kin. Similarly, the tested relationships led to the participants sharing stories with the "no matter what" messages. In addition, inherent in the theme of "no matter what" messages is a past, present, and anticipated future. Story themes show how the participants view their fictive kin. Now let's look at the ways the participants knew that they had been accepted as fictive kin.

Communicated Acceptance

The third and final research question inquires about the type of communication that allows the individuals to know that he or she has been accepted as fictive kin. In addition to the previous results, participants also indicated how being accepted as fictive kin was communicated to them. Communicated acceptance as fictive kin seem to be where all parts of the study comes together making it the pinnacle of the study. Although interviewing only one individual in the fictive kin relationship cannot answer the question of whether the friends were attempting to communicate a fictive kin type relationship, it can provide us with insight into how individuals perceive to have moved into a deeper friendship.

Communicated acceptance was partially answered with the first two research questions. That is, the participants felt that they were accepted as fictive kin through their social activities that they shared. In addition, acceptance was reflected in the themes of the stories the participants told regarding their fictive kin relations. As seen previously in the results, often the participants would recount a story and state that after the experience they felt like family. For example, Liz described her time in college with her friend and then said, "I don't know, just the longevity of the friendship makes it feel like it is more than just a friendship." Samantha said, "I knew I was part of the family because they invited me to go in family vacations and family trips or when they were going somewhere fun." Jose too cited a traumatic experience and then added, "I think it was like kind of a turning point that made us more into a family and more like looking out for each other." Hannah's shared an experience about a fictive kin that has recently been

diagnosed with cancer and how her other fictive kin rallied around him. She finished her story by saying “I think that it really was driven home that they really are like family.”

While acceptance was communicated as the participants shared stories and talked about activities they experienced with their fictive kin, there were additional ways that the participants felt as though they were accepted. Some participants voluntarily shared experiences that communicated to them that they had been accepted as fictive kin. Others mentioned aspects of the relationship that set this particular friendship apart from other friendship. Communicated acceptance is seen in two general ways: (1) unconditional statements, and (2) messages of connection.

Unconditional statements

Unconditional statements by the fictive kin are statements about or characteristics of the fictive kin relationships that communicate acceptance. The unconditional statements can be categorized in four parts: (1) intimacy, (2) acts of acceptance, (3) communication, and (4) support. These categories are not mutually exclusive, rather many of the participants would mention a combination of some or all as they spoke about the communicated acceptance.

Intimacy. The participants who expressed intimacy felt they had a close relationship which includes trust, exchanges of information about the person and emotional closeness. Some participants mentioned that they knew they were accepted as a fictive kin when they had an intimate relationship with their friends. That is, the person being accepted felt as though they were trusted or that they were well known by their fictive kin, vice versa or a combination of the both. For example, Sari said, “I think when they start allowing you into their most interpersonal emotionally and mentally [is when it

moved from friendship to fictive kin].” Jordan spoke of his architecture friends and said, “I’ve gotten to know them really well” and then talked about the activities that they do together. Later he commented as he thought back over graduate school, “I would have never thought that I would have gotten to know people and felt so close to people and really in a sense the class and the studio is kind of feels like a big family.” Liz spoke of her fictive kin have been close through time. “We’ve stayed very close through elementary school, middle school, high school, college and even in our adult years.” For Liz the closeness of the relationship enduring over time was what communicated acceptance.

When Rob was asked how he knew that the relationship had moved from friendship to family, he said, “It became more of a complete relationship.” He continued referring to his fictive kin, Marshall, “He said I am Ferris Bueller to his Cameron. It took a second and I said ‘what do you mean by that?’ He is very shy and reserved and quiet and doesn’t like taking the lead and everything like that. So I have always had to do that.” Implicit in this statement is an intimacy level in their relationship that allows them to fill in where the other leaves off. Lyndi talked about being accepted by participating in someone else’s life. She said, “It is the unconditional love and the acceptance into someone else’s life and family without reservation. Susan’s children kind of know me like I know my mothers friends.” Pam, too, talked about the intimacy she shares with their fictive kin. She said, “There are some groups of friends you only show this part to and some friends you only show another part to but she’s one of my friends that I try to show all parts of my life to.” Katy said, “It is like, I am not just talking to a friend, I am talking to someone who really really knows me to the core” Becca stated, “They just

know me and understand me... We know each other so well that we know what we don't like to do or what each of us doesn't like." Sarah talks about her friends knowing her so well. "You know when you sit down and tell them something and you realize that there is nothing you can't tell them because they already know everything."

Cassie mentioned that there was trust in her fictive kin relationship that made her feel she had been accepted as family.

They are well to do and so they give me the password to their house, give me keys, let me watch their kids. You know it is just like stuff you know 'are you sure you want me to be driving around in this?' and she is like 'yeah here you go.' And I am like thank you. And so I think that the trust factor is when I felt it.

Stacy expressed trust in another way. She said, "I think that other part of it is that I feel responsible to her or even sometimes for her and I think it's vice versa for her." Trust, knowing each other very well, and being a part of the fictive kin's life are the aspects that created the feelings of intimacy. Intimacy was one way that the unconditional statements were communicated to the participants and thus communicated acceptance.

Acts of Acceptance. Another method by which the unconditional statements were communicated is through acts of acceptance. Acts of acceptance are comprised of respect, not being judged, charity and having no requirements for the friendship. Acts of acceptance facilitated feelings of acceptance. For example, Ruth explained when her mom died her fictive kin Joshua was there. She said, "He didn't require anything from me. He wasn't there to be entertained. I didn't feel like I had to entertain him." Sari said that she knew she has been accepted because "They just accept me for who I am. I don't

have to be anyone different.” Later she mentioned, “When they accept you and really need you and rely on you and give you that gift of gifts and responsibility of being a part of their life.” Lyndi talked about being accepted in the life of her friends. She said, “It is unconditional love that not so much [lets your] guard drop but being able to completely relax without worrying of repercussion.”

Stacy expressed acceptance by stating that her fictive kin don’t judge her. She said, “You know even being able to go talk to them when it comes to taboo topics, you know things that you think you will get in trouble or people will think you are weird. You can tell them anything and they won’t judge you.” Ellie talked about being accepted by her fictive kin to the point she doesn’t have to entertain them. She said, “I don’t have to be doing things in order to enjoy being in their presence or having them around. So it is just nice, it is nice not to have to worry about anything.”

Rachel talked about how she is sometime a bit racy in her joking around but her fictive kin doesn’t judge her. She explained,

This is awful, but I think it is... in a not racist way at all but there are times when I can said some kind of jive and it is awful kind of Boratich and he knows it is not me being racist...it is just me. Sometimes, I have no turn off valve....Sometimes I said things that other people misinterpret. And anyway, other people misinterpret it but he knows that that’s not my heart.

Communication. The third aspect of unconditional statements is communication. Communication is the ability to give and take advice and have open dialog about any topic available. The ability to seek out fictive kin for advice as well as speak to them

about any topic demonstrated the unconditional communication of the fictive kin. That is, communication that does not hinge on the wants of the receiver but has the best interest of the receiver in mind. This type of unconditional statements function to help individuals know they are accepted as fictive kin.

Ruth explained,

I think it is a lot of what Sari said, not only treats you as a confidant, but also asks for your help, your opinion, for your advice. ‘What do you think?’ I mean when I am not sure what to do. I think that it is a great deal of trust and respect and honor that gets placed on you. I know that I personally don’t readily ask people you know, ‘what should I do here?’ unless I trust them unless you know I am really going to listen and I am interested in what they have to said.

Jordan said, “I can just freely go and talk to them and ask them for help or advice.” Later he continues, “I kind of look up to some of them as far as asking them for advice for my future career plans or asking them for advice on my projects.”

Liz too explained that giving and taking advice was one of the things that made her feel like family. She said, “They just give me advice on everything...I am the little sister that they get to pick on and get to advise as well...I would said they definitely come to me for advice as well.” Rob said the able to bounce ideas off of each other and having open communication demonstrated acceptance. He said,

We all kind of play sounding boards against each other. We are at the point where people are figuring things out with their live and a lot of

changes are going on with their lives. ‘I think I will do this, think I will do that’ and we kind of have an open line of communication.

When Jose and his friends went through a traumatic experience, he explained that they talked. He said, “It was after that night that we drove home in the car we didn’t talk. But it was kind of like the next day we talked.” Lyndi said that she knew that Mindy had accepted her as fictive kin when she frequently sought advice from her. She said, “When, oh my gosh (laughter) I don’t know specifically, maybe when Mindy came to me for regular council through her divorce.”

Katy stated, “I knew when barrier had been broken down where it was just me and him talking there. There were no fronts, no appearances you know nothing, just conversation.” A bit later she said, “He just got married last...almost a year ago and I was the only one who knew his family that close, but now his wife of course does. But he always made an effort to keep me in that loop and keep me updated on things that were going on.” Hannah mentioned she felt accepted by the information that was shared with her. “The information you get privy too, those big announcements [makes me feel accepted].” She then related the story about when her friend entrusted her with his secret that he was gay. Ellie too explained that it is the ability to be entrusted with anything and everything. She said “You can say anything you want. With Steve he tells me things honestly all the time.”

Support. The last part of unconditional statements is support. Expressing support, physical, emotional, or fulfilling the fictive kin’s needs, established the unconditional statements that communicated acceptance to the fictive kin. Chris explained how he

supported his fictive kin Maria and fulfilled her needs in a time of family crisis. He recounts,

She called me up one day to ask me about some things about her family. She asked if there was anyway I could help her out and her family too. I don't know it had to do with her grandparents. So I tried to use my knowledge and connections with my family to help her out. So that is probably how I knew.

Chris knew he had been accepted as a fictive kin when Maria sought out his support in her time of need. Jacob spoke about receiving support from his fellow classmates. He recalled, "Some of the people here get competitive and don't help out each other, but there are a bunch of us who just want to get through and we share ideas, materials, once or twice, clothes." Jose stated,

There was one time where I questioned if I actually called them and said I needed help would they be there for me. There was one time where I did and I was just like 'dude can you get over here' and they came over and it was obviously after that but it was really one of those points early on that I was just like these kids are really you know they are there for me. So that was kind of what it was.

Lyndi said, "Well just the ability to count on them whether it is for emotional reasons, for financial reason, for loyalty, or for teamwork." Hannah proclaimed, "Just support. When things are not going that good you can give them a call and be like 'dude...here it is. Things suck.' And they are also the first people I want to call when things are joyous.

They will celebrate with me.” Mike stated, “If we ever need anything, we’ll be there for each other.”

Stacy recounted a time in life when her friend was pregnant, living in Vegas and in a bad relationship. Stacey then said, “I think just physically their actions show it. Especially when you are at your worst, how they treat you, how they act or what they do for you, physically and emotionally even more so physically and just the action they take when you are at rock bottom kind of show it.” Cassie explained a time when she physically supported her fictive kin after the loss of her mother. She said, “I helped her clean her house and I helped her move. I think I am just kind of support and I know it goes both ways.”

Intimacy, acts of acceptance, communication and support are all types of unconditional statements that communicate acceptance as fictive kin. Again, these four features provided the fictive kin with a feeling that they are part of their friend’s life “no matter what.” Similarly, messages of connection were used to communicate acceptance as fictive kin.

Messages of Connection

Many of the participants describe knowing that they had been accepted as fictive kin by the messages of connection expressed by their fictive kin or the bond they felt in their relationship. Messages of connection are anything that described feelings of connectedness. For example, Jordan said,

You have a project for architecture school and a lot of times it is your own concept that you are trying to develop. So it is something kind of close to you and you end up having to share that. You end up having to pin up

your work in front of your class and share with them, you know your ideas and sometimes it is a personal thing. But sometimes, I think that when I am sharing that with others, that is what has helped me to bond.

Jacob, also an architecture student, said, “Anytime you go through hard times with people you kind of get a different kind of bond.” Jacob then described his experience as an architecture student and the experiences he has had with his fictive kin.

Liz, too, described messages of connection as a way that acceptance as fictive kin was communicated. Liz said, “We were inseparable growing up and once again it is that feeling. You just know how they feel about you.” Lyndi said, “When Suzie tells people publicly that I changed her life. I mean that always kind of gives me that feeling of closeness I guess.” Hannah described knowing she was accepted through messages of connection. “There is this feeling that you have when you know, just as you do with your family, you can’t imagine them not being there. And when you have that, there are people in your life that you are like ‘uh I like them around.’ If they weren’t around it would suck.” Rob said that he knew he had become a family member with his fictive kin because he felt it. He said, “You know other friends there had been certain little moments of your life that you are accepted: getting a bizarre gift for no reason, being invited over to their parent’s house for dinner when you just run into each other. The sort of things that make you feel more like, it is not just friendship; it is something above and beyond.” Later in the interview he talked about a falling out with some of his friends. He said that the ones he stayed close to became fictive kin. “So it was kind of a bonding through necessity.”

Additionally, Jose spoke of a traumatic experience that formed a bond between him and his friends. He said, “All that stuff that happened just brought us so closer to together. Whether it was, I mean, drug related or violence related or you know whatever happened then you know years later or a year later just connected us so well that we, it a bond that just can’t be broken.” Ellie described her experience growing up and experiencing life with her fictive kin. She said, “It was just like those experiences of going though it just bonded us I guess.”

Further participants explained messages of connection by saying that they felt connected to their fictive kin. Mike spoke of the experiences he had with his fictive kin. “I mean there were the hard times and there were the really good times and we lived through both and I think that makes the connection even more personable.” Rachel explained, “I can give him crap just like any other sibling relationship and he gives me crap all the time too. But I just feel that there is that connection that he is just someone that gets me and I don’t have to explain myself too. It is just like a very comfortable relationship.”

Messages of connection were expressed by the participants in multiple ways. Whether it was the bond that was established, an emotional tie, feeling they had, or a feeling of connection, the feeling communicated acceptance as a fictive kin to the participants. Communicated acceptance was demonstrated though unconditional statements, messages of connection, the social activities that co-construct meaning, and the stories told about and rituals with fictive kin. In essence, as the fictive kin exhibited family type behaviors, specifically family like communication, they felt accepted.

Fictive Kin Family

Although the study did not set out to investigate the types of fictive kin relationships among young adults, the participants' information showed a clear distinction in the types of fictive kin. Fictive kin relationships were, at times, distinguished by the participant in terms of the time frame and/or the relationship with the family of origin. Two types of fictive kin relationships became apparent in the information the participants shared: (1) fictive kin as part of the family of origin, and (2) fictive kin separate from the family of origin.

Part of the Family of Origin

Many participants described spending time with the family of origin to the degree that the family of origin considered them fictive kin as well. For example, Liz stated, "I have two friends who I've known since I was five or six years old. Their entire family, I feel, are family to me. Our families grew up doing everything together." She continued by sharing stories of the times they vacationed together, spent holidays together, and stayed the night at their homes. She said, "Whenever I spent the night over there I would have to chip in with all the chores that they would have to do. So then their dad who is like my second dad was treating me like, 'well you are staying here, you are part of the family, you are going to do some work also.'"

John said, "I have a friend that actually our families have known each other for a long long time. We started hanging out as freshman in high school and he is just...it is one of those people who gets incorporated into your family." Matt explained a similar situation.

I moved to Big Timber when I was in 6th grade and we started hanging out since then. He is a year ahead of me in school and I would go over to his house and hang out after football practice or basketball practice. And his parents would always feed me dinner. And it seemed like his parents were like my second parents. They would worry about me like my parents worry about me.

Stacy's fictive kin is part of her family of origin and Stacy is part of her fictive kin's family of origin. Stacy explained,

I have two friends that I would personally consider family. One of them is more like a sister to me than the other one. Just talking about her, she is family with my family. I am family with her family. I have been there for everything in her and her little brothers lives. I mean we have keys to each others houses. We have lived with each others parents at different times. Her grammy and pappy are my grammy and pappy.

Ellie, too, had a similar experience. "We have been friends since sixth grade. And since she had a horrible relationship with her mom she started calling my mom, 'mom'. And my mom calls her... whenever I talk to my mom, my mom is like 'how is my second daughter?'"

Fictive kin were also delineated by the time the friendship was formed. That is, many participants would say things such as "my friends from high school" or "I've known them since sixth grade." Sarah said, "I have Rachel. She is my very best friend and we were best friends though high school... And then I have Hannah and she was my childhood best friend and we are jut like sisters." Aubrey commented, "I met Ryan my

senior year of high school.” Katy stated, “He and I have been friends since we met in high school our junior year” Lyndi proclaims, “I have a friend, my BFF, that I have had since we were eight years old. And she is definitely family.” Jacob said, “There are three guys from high school that I’ve been friends with ever since. For sure, those guys [feel like family].”

Separate From the Family of Origin

Some participants distinguished childhood fictive kin from those formed later in life. For example, Becca said,

I guess there is kind of two categories of it. One is which a group of us who formed our own family and we all kind of have different roles and stuff. And we all kind of understand each other and no matter how long it has been it is always the same when we come back. Then there is also the other part where I have a few friends that are part of my primary family. I guess that just know me and understand me and would always be there for me no matter what.

Hannah described a similar delineation of fictive kin. She said,

I have I would say two different sets; one is high school buddies that I met when I was 15. It was 15 years ago now. And we go for a long time without talking but when we get together it is like not time pasted. They’ve seen me through a lot of things. We just have that shared experience. I have another circle of friends. We have been friends for seven years and we all started a risky job together as white water raft guides. So it was very high stress but also very high play. And since 2001

we have just sort of worked seasons together. We have moved across the country three times together.

Other participants mentioned that they met their fictive kin during their college experiences. Jordan said,

In the architecture program, it is kind of unique that we have a studio up there. I do feel like I have really gotten to know people really well. I don't know if I consider them, I don't know the same as family but I know that the people that I am really the closest to at this time are really the people up there.

Jacob, another architecture student said, "You know I now consider probably four or five guys from this program as fictive kin." Pam mentioned, "I have one best friend from college. We met right before school started and we had a lot of things in common over."

The participants established an interesting dichotomy as they spoke about their fictive kin. For some, fictive kin were those who they had known since childhood and were part of their family of origin. Others explained that their fictive kin relationships were established later in life and were separate from family of origin.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Social Activities that Co-construct Meaning

Fictive kin relations among young adults are created, and perceived in a wide variety of ways. As aforementioned, researchers have found fictive kin relationships are based the interactions that individuals have with each other (Gubrium & Buckholdt, 1982; Korchmaros & Kenny, 2006). Interactions create fictive kin relationships through symbolic interaction. That is, as partners interact with each other they create a relationship that moves beyond friendship. Blumer (1969) suggests that meanings are constructed through interactions with others, interpreted through self-concept, and influence by society. The categories of the social activities mentioned by the participants were: limitlessness, time spent together, family events, and food. Two of the three principles suggested by Blumer, interaction with others and influence by society, are seen in the social activities the participants mentioned. Furthermore, self-concept was constructed as the participants discussed how acceptance as fictive kin was communicated and will be discussed later. Meaning constructed through interaction and influenced by society coupled with symbolic interaction co-construct meaning for the participants.

First, Blumer (1969) stated that meaning grows out of how people act towards each other. That is, the treatment of a person, thing or idea creates the meaning of it between the partners. In the current study, meaning forming through interaction is frequently seen in the social activities in which the participants engaged in with their fictive kin. For example, the limitless activities consist of doing mundane tasks, having adventures or “rolling around on the carpet” as Mike put it. Likewise, just spending time

together also involved doing all activities from the formal occasion of a wedding to the mundane of taking a nap. The kinship's ability to feel comfortable enough to do anything imitates family life. Siblings in a family participate in all types of activities as they live together ranging from formal family gathering to cleaning the house or a lazy Saturday afternoons. Fictive kin participating in these types of activities are creating the meaning of "family" by acting as family acts. That is, performing a family-like relationship creates one.

More concretely, participants mentioned that they participate in family events such as holidays and family reunions. Traditionally, vacations and specifically family reunions are experienced as a family. As fictive kin are asked to participate in traditional family activities, they develop a family-like relationship. Sharing food, including family dinner was also mentioned as a social activity for which participants were involved. Some participants mentioned ritual dinner time experiences such as meeting on a certain day a week for dinner. For many young adults, dinners have traditionally been eaten with family members. As young adults venture out on their own, eating dinner with fictive kin can be an activity that mimics family life. Again, these family based activities created and communicated the meaning of the relationship. The relationship was given meaning as the individuals participated in traditional family activities.

Second, symbolic interaction suggests that individuals are constrained by social norms however; individuals have the agency to modify the social situation (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). Participants modified social norms as they interacted with their fictive kin. For example, participants mentioned having traditional activities such as thanksgiving celebrations or dinner dates. Traditionally, family dinner, holidays,

vacations, and mundane activities are activities participated in as blood family. But the participants have adapted the traditional structure of the family to include fictive kin as family members and thus participation with fictive kin singly or with the family of origin is not extraordinary to them although it may be different from the social norm. Moreover, common courtesies such as entertaining guests or knocking on the door are forgone due to the nature of the relationship. Some participants mentioned that with their fictive kin they tend to be less formal to the point that social norms are ignored. For example, Rachel said, “He doesn’t comment on my pajamas that look like crap. He was poaching my internet, so he was over and I was taking a nap while he is over so it is like just so comfortable.” Similarly, many participants mentioned that they were comfortable enough with their fictive kin that they would help themselves to food in the fridge and walked into the house without knocking. Lyndi sums it up well when she said, “[I have people] in my life who have keys to my home and can come and go as they please without asking and it is not annoying.” Modification of traditional norms to create a family-like relationship functioned to establish meaning in the relationship. As fictive kin are treated like family, they move from friends to family.

Meaning growing out of interaction and the ability to modify the social norms all functioned to create the meaning in the fictive kin relationships. Simply stated, the fictive kin relationship developed as the partners treated each other as family and accepted those that meaning. Gubrium and Buckholdt (1982) state that fictive kin are created through “ongoing concrete activities” and “doing what family does.” Clearly through symbolic interaction concrete on going family type activities created family relationships.

Story Themes that Communicate Meaning in Fictive Kin Relationship

Participants often spoke about their fictive kin by telling stories about experiences they have had together. Past research stated that stories and rituals are a way in which shared realities of family life is created (Jorgenson & Bochner, 2004). In the current study, the stories and rituals centered on two general themes, shared experiences and “no matter what” messages. First, people told stories about shared experiences they have had with their fictive kin. Shared experience reflected trying times, life experiences and major life moments. Stories expressed how participants went through part of life, trials, trauma, life experiences, or major life events, with their fictive kin. Frequently accompanying the stories, participants mentioned that their fictive kin “was there for me” or “we went through it together.” Participants also shared stories about participating in major life events such as weddings, funerals, and births. Again, as mentioned above, doing things typically reserved for family, such as being the support during trials or participating in the birth of a fictive kin’s child, helped solidify the fictive kin relationship.

Often these stories incorporated experiences in which there was a shared emotional experience. For example, Jose shared a traumatic experience with his fictive kin in which one of them got shot. He said, “And that’s when we kind of felt like we should, because my buddies will never show that they like they are scared or whatever, but there was a time when all of us without saying anything were like you know this is cool and all but like it is not what we want to be.” Shared experiences often meant shared emotions too.

The second theme, “no matter what” messages, expressed a security in the relationships which the fictive kin were engaged in. Participants frequently used the

words “no matter what” or “they will be there for me” to finish the stories they told about their fictive kin. The stories justified the reason for the participant to claim that their fictive kin relationship would endure no matter what. “No matter what” messages functioned in a couple of ways to describe the fictive kin relationship. Some participants used “no matter what” messages to declare of the stability of the relationship. That is, friendship is perceived to be life-long. Others used “no matter what” messages to affirm the dependability of the relationship. Dependability was seen when participants’ would proclaim that their friend would be there for support or advice in any situation.

While there are a few ways to understand the “no matter what” messages, the underlying idea is an anticipated future. Anticipated future suggests that the relationship will always exist. The inherent perpetuation of a relationship is a feature of family relationships. Past research stated that a family member’s future is an assumed reality due to the involuntary nature of family (Patterson, Bettini, Nussbaum, 1993; Warren & Goldstein, 2000). As seen reflected in the themes of the stories told by the participant, there is the same assumed reality of the future in the stories told. Although there are no family bonds to guarantee the continuation of relationship, the participants declared that the relationship would endure time. In their perception the future of their relationship is as stable as family relationships, enduring forever. McAdams (2004) suggests that young adults use stories to make sense of who they are in social, economic and ideological world which they live. As young adults are in a transitional period between their family of origin and their family of procreation, fictive kin function to fulfill the structure of family when there is less contact with the family of origin.

Communicated Acceptance

Now that there is some insight to how fictive kin relationships are being formed among young adults, it is important to take a look at how acceptance as a fictive kin member is being communicated. Communication of acceptance incorporated the social activities, stories told, unconditional statements and feeling connected. Although each category was separately discussed, they worked together to communicate acceptance. It is the combination of these categories that produced a feeling of acceptance in the participants' experience. That is, often the participants would share stories about moving through a trial with their fictive kin, they would then comment on how their fictive kin was there for support and advice and finish by stating that there was a bond created in the relationship. For example, Rob said,

I think that maybe it was more that it became more of a complete relationship. You know you start out with generally you start out with friends and they are fair weather friend and you go through a lot. You know we had a few other friends, part of the group back in California and there was a bit of a falling out that divided the group a little bit. It was really weird. Kind of a soap opera nonsense type thing and I think that was kind of a turning point for all of us. So it was kind of bonding through necessity and at the same time it was being there for everything. It just is all encompassing.

The theory of symbolic interaction stated that, interacting with others, responding to their feedback and internalizing the feedback develops the self-concept (LaRossa and Reitzes 1993). The self-concept is the relatively stable set of perceptions that an

individual holds about themselves (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). That is, an individual's perception of who he or she is formed as the cycle of self-concept, interaction, feedback and internalization, was enacted. In this study, the cycle of developing the self-concept was evident as the participants shared their experiences with fictive kin. Samantha's experience exemplified the development of the self-concept as part of the family. She said, "I knew I was part of the family because they invited me to go on family vacation and family trips or when they are going somewhere fun... That was when I knew I was considered as part of the family." So she participated in the interaction, received feedback and internalized it and came to the conclusion she was fictive kin.

According to past research, fictive kin become family through interactions. Korchmaros and Kenny (2006) stated that close friends in their interactions with one another can become family-like when patterns of behaviors, emotional closeness and obligations mimic that of a family member. While the participants in this study exhibited these same patterns of mimicking family life, this study also shows that fictive kin communicate acceptance as they develop family like patterns of behavior, emotional closeness and obligations with each other. That is, as they mimic family life, acceptance is also communicated. For instance, participants mention going through life experiences with their fictive kin and their fictive kin experiencing that time with them. The stories often ended by the participants mentioning that their fictive kin would always be there for them no matter what. Stacy, for example, said,

We've been through so much together good and bad time... Whether it is one person's bad time or both of you together, everything has been really...it has been tested. It has been through a lot of pressure and it has

been tested. And for me I know it will be *life-long*. For me it is that close...So I think that is the biggest thing, the trials you go through and come out on than other side better than before.

Participants did not mention direct communication of acceptance into the relationship. That is, none of the participants reported that their fictive kin directly and asked them to be family or confirmed that they had been accepted as family members. A few did mention expression of affection. For example, Samantha said, "I think some of the emotions you feel with them are put into words so maybe how they verbalize their affection or you and their concern." But again none of the participant mentioned that they were directly asked to be family members.

This study shows that acceptance as fictive kin was communicated as fictive kin mimicked family-type relationships in their interactions, emotional closeness and obligations towards one another. As the participants interact, the cycle of self-concept as illustrated through symbolic interaction is enacted, and a perception of the self is created. As that self was created participants felt as though they had been accepted as fictive kin. The perception of the self is part of the meaning that is shaped through interaction. As typical family behaviors were enacted, the friendship deepened and moved to a fictive kin relationship. Acceptance was communicated as fictive kin were treated like family.

Fictive Kin as Family of Origin among Young Adults

In addition to the creation and communicated acceptance of the fictive kin relationships, many participants discussed how their fictive kin extend beyond the dyad to their family of origin. The family of origin as part of the fictive kin relationship is not discussed in the literature concerning fictive kin relationships among the elderly, prison

inmates, gay and lesbian individuals or the black community. While the results of this study cannot show the reason of the unique feature of fictive kin with the family of origin, participants frequently mentioned the family of origin.

While no research mentioned fictive kin relationships as being connected to the family of origin, the participants provided some justification for this type of relationship. Connection to the family of origin fulfilled family characteristics for the fictive kin. First, many participants mentioned that they had been fictive kin for multiple years. That is, the participants would mention that they have been friends since they were eight or in sixth grade. For many of them, this is the majority of their life. Rob sums it up well when he said, “The one I’ve had for over twenty years, that again quantity, it’s the spectrum and it is *for so damn long*. Because I was six when we met, so not many memories before that you know.” The longevity of the relationship made it feel like fictive kin was part of the family of origin. Further, in a family, siblings aren’t the same age. That is, it is not uncommon to have a sister who didn’t participate in the first eight years of her brother’s life because she wasn’t born. Similarly, fictive kin may not have known each other since birth however this doesn’t discount their family type relationship.

Second, some participants mentioned that their fictive kin parents were second parents. During childhood, adolescence and even young adulthood for some, parents play a central role in fulfilling needs (Markiewicz, Lawford, Doyle, & Haggart, 2006). That is, parents provide of the basic physical, emotional, and social needs of their child. Naturally, a child’s friend become recipients of those basic needs as the friend eats dinner, visits the house and associates with their child. These interactions establish a

fictive kin relationship with not only the child but potentially the parents. In a few cases participants mentioned fictive kin relationships with the siblings of their fictive kin.

Some participants mentioned that they felt like they were part of the fictive kin family of origin; however, not all participants mentioned being a part of the family of origin. Fictive kin relationships being extended to the family of origin may be unique to young adulthood due to the transition time that is typical during this stage. Carter and McGoldrick (1999) posit that young adulthood is a delicate time where young adults are balancing leaving home and staying connected with their family of origin. Balancing leaving home and staying connected with the family of origin maybe explain the fictive kin extended beyond the dyad.

Rawlins (1992) states that young adult friendships are unique “since these friendships were developed while dealing with fundamental decisions and life issues for the first time, the partners persist as important conversational recreators of and symbolic links with such unrepeatable moments.” Further he posits that adolescence friendships become the standard by which “real friendship” is measured for the rest of individual’s interpersonal endeavors and these standards don’t change throughout life. Participants mentioned an aspect that communicated kinship was the tried and tested nature of the friendship. Hence, fictive kin relationships from childhood or adolescence may continue into young adulthood due to the shared experiences. Consequently, the relationship with the family of origin is perpetuated as well. Clearly, further research in needed to explore role of the family of origin as fictive kin relative relationships.

Limitations and Further Directions

While this study was very successful in illuminating fictive kin relationships among young adults, there are several limitations that should be noted. With limitations also come directions that future research can take the current ideas to expand them further and gather more specific information regarding fictive kin specifically among young adults. The current study was an exploration of communicated acceptance in fictive kin relationships among young adults. Now it is time to address the problems that arose during this study.

The snowball sampling method, while it may be effective for some studies, did not function well for this particular study. When the participants were asked to refer another friend, which is the typical pattern for the snowball sampling, they often would refer their fictive kin. This sample method provided plenty of participants to speak with however, their stories were very similar or they shared the same types of experiences. The snowball sampling method only functioned for one referral because the participant would refer their fictive kin who, again, had similar experiences.

Further, the participants in this study were all self-selected. That is, they choose to participate in the study based on the description of the study. The study asked for participants who had close friends that they considered family. There were no participants that did not have a fictive kin relationship. It is important to note that a few participants directly said that they felt there was a distinction between family and friends and they do not call their friends by labels traditionally given to family members such as brother or sister. However, those participants also said that they treated their friends like family. They mentioned that there are a few that were closer than other friends. Further,

these participants described their friendships and it fit the criteria set forth earlier in this study of family. Family is characterized by a location (Laing, 1972), emotional ties (Leach & Braithwaite, 1996), and continuity (Patterson, Bettini & Nussbaum, 1993). Although all participants in this study had fictive kin relationships, an investigation of the degree of fictive kin relationships is essential. The design of the current study did not provide an avenue to investigate cases among young adults who do not have fictive kin relationships

This study used interviewing to collect data. Interviewing has its disadvantages. During the interview process, the interviewers' nonverbal responses may influence the participants' answers to reflect the socially desirable response. Additionally, after an interview, the interviewer must make sense of the data and determine if it is representative of the group or unique to the participant (Noller & Feeney, 2004). That is, what is considered an outlier in statistical research is more difficult to determine due to the type of data collected. There is no systematic way to determine if an individual participant's experience is unique to that person or an untapped population in the group. However, the interview process is based in the premise that "interview talks is the participants' rhetorical construction of their experience" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 173). Baumeister and Newman (1994) argue that in contrast to quantitative methods which focuses on abstractions and generalities, qualitative methods such as narratives shapes human experiences in terms or context, action and intentions. Quantitative research investigating communicated acceptance in young adult fictive kin would prove useful to see the extent to which the results of this study can be generalized.

This study does not examine the reciprocity of the fictive kin relationship. Many participants referred their fictive kin as participants in the study; however, no data was analyzed pairing the participants with their fictive kin. That is, the study only looks at the perceptions of one of the participants, not the pair. While individuals may perceive fictive kin relationships independent from the other individual, the reciprocity of the relationship is important. In a traditional family, a sister is a sister from the perception of all members of the family. That is, the mother, the brother, and the sister herself, see the sister as the sister. By not examining both sides of the relationship, it is difficult to know if the perception of the individual coincides with reality. Further research should study the relational partners to see if the perception of fictive kin is similar for both partners.

Fictive kin relationships in this study were investigated in the present time. This study was simply a snapshot of the participants' fictive kin relationships at the moment. The study did not investigate past fictive kin relationships nor did it look at the longevity of the relationship. Due to the transitory nature of young adults, (e.g. the move often due to new jobs and new opportunities for education) it would be imperative to study the longevity of these relationships. That is, is the perception of fictive kin among young adult simply a reality while they are in the same locations or do these relationships persevere over time and distance? A related study could investigate the longevity of these relationships and may also look at the use of multi-media channels to maintain these relationships.

Further research regarding the types of fictive kin relationships would prove to be enlightening. As discovered in this study, fictive kin among young adults maybe a part of the family of origin or separate from the family of origin. Further research investigating

how fictive kin relationships are formed at each stage of life would be insightful. Studies need to be conducted looking at fictive kin relationships during childhood, adolescence, young adulthood and adulthood. A comparison of the fictive kin relationship during these stages of life would provide a deeper understanding of fictive kin relationships.

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Appendix A

Information and Consent Form

Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before you agree to be in this study. This study is being conducted by Kimberly Clinger as part of her thesis project under the direction of Dr. Christina Yoshimura at the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Montana.

Procedure: You were selected to as a possible participant in this research because you have experience with close friendships. If you agree to be in this study, you will be interviewed and asked several questions which will be videotaped and then transcribed in to text form.

Interviews will take place on the University of Montana campus and other locations selected by participants. After this study is complete, only the general findings of this study will be presented. All personal information that may identify you, including your name, the date of the interaction, and the names of other participants mentioned will be omitted from the general findings. In other words, those that read the final report will not be able to identify specific participants with the information reported in the findings of this study. *Your personal information will remain confidential and secure.*

Potential Benefits: You will receive no direct compensation, either financial or otherwise for participating in this study. However, in the long run this study may help further the field in understanding the communication behaviors of fictive kin and help you reflect on the importance of friends in your life.

Potential Risks: There are two potential risks for those who participation in this study. First, this study will require a time commitment of approximately 60-90 minutes. Second, in the process of these interviews you may experience some mild discomfort in talking about talking about your experiences. If you experience any discomfort, please contact the Curry Health Center Counseling and Psychological Services at (406) 243-4711.

Compensation for injury: Although we do not foresee any risk associated with this study, the following liability statement is required in all University of Montana consent forms.

“In the event that you are injured as a result of this research you should individually seek appropriate medical treatment. If the injury is caused by the negligence of the University or any of its employees, you may be entitled to reimbursement or compensation pursuant to the Comprehensive State Insurance Plan established by the Department of Administration under the authority of M. C. A., Title 2 Chapter 9. In the event of a claim for such injury, further information may be obtained from the University’s Claims representative or University Legal Counsel.” (Reviewed by University Legal Counsel. July 6, 1993).

Voluntary Participation and Rights: Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and will have no impact on your rights as a student or the conditions of your studies. You have the right to stop the interview at any time and withdraw from the study completely. You have the right to skip over any question for any reason (or for no reason) and answer only the questions you feel comfortable answering. You have the right to strike any previous responses from the record at any time during the interview or after the interview is complete. Your participation has neither a positive or negative impact on your relationship with the University of Montana.

Confidentiality: This study will protect confidentiality. Each focus group will be videotaped and auto taped recorded. However, both videotapes and audiotapes will only be used in order to ensure the accuracy of the information and will be transcribed in text form. The videotapes, audiotapes and transcriptions will be stored under lock and key at a safe location. Original names will be omitted from the transcriptions and your confidentiality will be protected. Only I will have access to the videotapes, audiotapes, transcriptions, and interview notes. Once I am finished with the information, I will destroy the audiotapes.

All data collected as part of this project are the property of the researcher. Participants of this study will only have access to the general findings of this study. They will not have access to video or audiotapes of interviews, transcribed interviews, and/or hand notes taken during the interview.

Questions: If you have any questions about the research now or during the study please contact Kim Clinger at kimberly.clinger@umontana.edu or by calling (406) 396-3936. Or contact Dr. Christina Yoshimura at christina.yoshimura@umontana.edu or by calling (406) 243-4244. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Chair of the IRB through the University of Montana Research Office at (406) 243-6670.

Statement of Consent: I have read the above information, and have been informed of the risks and benefits involved, and all questions have been answered to my satisfaction. Furthermore, I have been assured that any future questions I may have will also be answered by a member of the research team. As such, I voluntarily consent to participate in this study.

Signature _____
Date _____

Signature of Investigator _____
Date _____

Appendix B

Demographic Survey

I'd like you to answer some question about yourself.

1. What is your age, in years? _____
2. What is your gender? (circle one) Male Female
3. How would you describe your ethnic background? (check all that apply)
_____ Black/African American _____ Hispanic
_____ Asian/Pacific Islander _____ Caucasian
_____ Native American _____ Other (please describe):
4. After the completion of the focus group I may have a question or want more information about your responses. Not all participants will be contacted. If you are willing to participate in a follow-up interview please include your contact information below.

Appendix C

Focus Group Schedule

I. Moderator Introduction

Hello! My name is Kim Clinger, and I am working on my Master Thesis Project. You were all invited here today because it is important that we hear from young adults like you. However, don't worry that anyone outside of our group will know exactly what you said. No names will be used when your comments are used in my research project. Also, I ask you to respect the privacy of others group members by not discussing anything that anyone else said. So we all agree that our conversation will be confidential? [I will make eye contact with each participant to be sure that they agree.]

Before we get officially started we need to complete some paper work. The first is the consent form. This form gives me your permission to use your information for my study. It also sets out some guideline for how the interview process will happen. The second piece of paper is a quick survey. You are not obligated to fill out every question on the survey. Again, this survey is for my benefit in placing context around your comments. It is to provide me with a deeper understanding. Please feel free to skip the questions that you do not feel comfortable answering.

Okay, it looks like almost everyone is finished, so let's get started. Let's imagine that you have an appointment and need to know what time it is so you won't be late. You don't have a watch so you ask someone, "What time is it?" There is a right answer. All you have to do is check the clock. However, what we are discussing here is your experiences, feelings, and perception and so there can be as many different opinions as there are people in this room. Every one of those opinions is right. We aren't here to convince each other that our particular opinion or experience is right, rather we are here to discuss and hear what each and everyone has to say.

Sometimes you will find that many people in the room have your opinion, and other times, you will be the only one with that opinion. It is important for us to learn about all the opinions, because even if you are the only one in the room who hold that opinion, there may be hundreds or thousands of other people in our community who feel the same. Most importantly, every opinion counts, so please feel free to share your thoughts.

If you look up, those two cameras will be recording our conversation. I am recording our conversation so I can remember what is being shared. The video recorder has one downfall. It is difficult to hear multiple voiced. So I am asking you to speak one at a time. I will keep this tape in a locked cabinet only accessible to me. So please express yourself freely. Again what happens in this room will only be know by those present.

If you need to leave the discussion for any reason, please feel free to step out. But please hurry back. Please sit back, relax and enjoy the next few minutes of discussion.

II. Participant Introductions.

To get started, let spent a few minutes getting to know each other. I would like to find out your favorite Missoula activity. [I will use this as a discussion training exercise. It should help to warm up the participants and exemplify the type of discussion I will be looking for.

III. The Questions.

Thank you! Now that we know each other a bit lets get started.

First off we will focus on those people you consider to be close friends. So at this time I would like you to think of a person or people that you consider close friends. We will discuss these close friends for the first half of the focus group, and then we will shift gears. We will than focus on you as the fictive kin relationship. We will spend the remainder of the time discussing who considers you as a family type relationship. So let get started.

1. How do you define family?
2. How do you define friends?
3. Are there any people who are not related to you that you think of as members of your family?
 - a. What type of contact do you have with them?
 - b. About how often do you usually see the individual?
 - c. How close is the relationship?
4. What types of interactions do you have with these friends?
 - a. What do you enjoy doing together?
 - b. Do you have traditions or things you typically do together?
5. What memories/experiences you do have with these friends that make you feel like they are family?

Now let's switch gears. You have spent the last few minutes discussing your close friendships, now let's talk about how you are part of close friendships. So we will be focusing how you feel as one of the close friends.

6. How did you know that you "became" a family member to an individual?
 - a. What made you think you were a part of the family?
 - b. How did you know you had moved from friend to family?
 - c. What memories/experience do you have that make you feel like you are family?
7. What else would you like to tell me about these relationships that I might have forgotten to ask?

IV. Conclusion

1. Thank them for their time
2. Explain again how it has been valuable.
3. Ask if I can contact them again for further information/clarification.
 - a. When reviewing the tapes, I might need clarification or more information about those things that were mentioned. Would it be alright to contact you for a personal interview? If so, please put your contact information on the back of your demographic sheet.
4. Ask one last question: Is there anyone else you know that has family-like friends that I might contact to participate in a similar focus group?
 - a. Please write down the persons contact information on this slip of paper.
 - b. Your friend will have the same opportunity to accept or reject the interview.
 - c. I would like to hear more experiences like those which you have shared with me.
5. Ask what question they have for me.
 - a. Thank them once more.

Appendix D

Individual Interview Information and Consent Form

Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before you agree to be in this study. This study is being conducted by Kimberly Clinger as part of her thesis project under the direction of Dr. Christina Yoshimura at the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Montana.

Procedure: You were selected to as a possible participant in this research because you have experience with close friendships. If you agree to be in this study, you will be interviewed and asked several questions which will be auto taped and then transcribed in to text form.

Interviews will take place on the University of Montana campus and other locations selected by participants. After this study is complete, only the general findings of this study will be presented. All personal information that may identify you, including your name, the date of the interaction, and the names of other participants mentioned will be omitted from the general findings. In other words, those that read the final report will not be able to identify specific participants with the information reported in the findings of this study. *Your personal information will remain confidential and secure.*

Potential Benefits: You will receive no direct compensation, either financial or otherwise for participating in this study. However, in the long run this study may help further the field in understanding the communication behaviors of fictive kin and help you reflect on the importance of friends in your life.

Potential Risks: There are two potential risks for those who participation in this study. First, this study will require a time commitment of approximately 20-45 minutes. Second, in the process of these interviews you may experience some mild discomfort in talking about talking about your experiences. If you experience any discomfort, please contact the Curry Health Center Counseling and Psychological Services at (406) 243-4711.

Compensation for injury: Although we do not foresee any risk associated with this study, the following liability statement is required in all University of Montana consent forms.

“In the event that you are injured as a result of this research you should individually seek appropriate medical treatment. If the injury is caused by the negligence of the University or any of its employees, you may be entitled to reimbursement or compensation pursuant to the Comprehensive State Insurance Plan established by the Department of Administration under the authority of M. C. A., Title 2 Chapter 9. In the event of a claim for such injury, further information may be obtained from the University’s Claims representative or University Legal Counsel.” (Reviewed by University Legal Counsel. July 6, 1993).

Voluntary Participation and Rights: Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and will have no impact on your rights as a student or the conditions of your studies. You have the right to stop the interview at any time and withdraw from the study completely. You have the right to skip over any question for any reason (or for no reason) and answer only the questions you feel comfortable answering. You have the right to strike any previous responses from the record at any time during the interview or after the interview is complete. Your participation has neither a positive or negative impact on your relationship with the University of Montana.

Confidentiality: This study will protect confidentiality. Each interview will be taped recorded. However, audiotapes will only be used in order to ensure the accuracy of the information and will be transcribed in text form. The audiotapes and transcriptions will be stored under lock and key at a safe location. Original names will be omitted from the transcriptions and your confidentiality will be protected. Only I will have access to the audiotapes, transcriptions, and interview notes. Once I am finished with the information, I will destroy the audiotapes.

All data collected as part of this project are the property of the researcher. Participants of this study will only have access to the general findings of this study. They will not have access to audiotapes of interviews, transcribed interviews, and/or hand notes taken during the interview.

Questions: If you have any questions about the research now or during the study please contact Kim Clinger at kimberly.clinger@umontana.edu or by calling (406) 396-3936. Or contact Dr. Christina Yoshimura at christina.yoshimura@umontana.edu or by calling (406) 243-4244. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Chair of the IRB through the University of Montana Research Office at (406) 243-6670.

Statement of Consent: I have read the above information, and have been informed of the risks and benefits involved, and all questions have been answered to my satisfaction. Furthermore, I have been assured that any future questions I may have will also be answered by a member of the research team. As such, I voluntarily consent to participate in this study.

Signature _____
Date _____

Signature of Investigator _____
Date _____

Appendix E

Individual Interview Schedule

Opening

1. Reiterate the purpose of the study.
 - a. Explain that I have contacted them for further understandings of their fictive kin relationships.
2. Explain confidential
3. Ask if may record.

Interview Guide

1. Would you tell me more about your story about your close friend?
2. Tell me more about your experience with being accepted as a family type relationship.
3. Can you tell me more about your relationship with your close friend?

Closing

6. Thank them for their time
7. Explain again how it has been valuable
8. Ask one last question: What else do you think it's important for me to know?
9. Ask what question they have for me.

Appendix F

Table 1: Initial Codes

()	She is my strength & I am her strength	Know like	Know what they like
I Way	Biological fam had 1 way to do things	Know you	Know you
ABT	Always be there for you (even if not)	Lake	Outside recreation
ACQ	Acquaintance Relationship	Laugh	Friends laugh together
ACT	Accepts me for me	Learn	Learn from friends
Ad parents	Adopted parents	Like fam	People that are close like family
Adopted	When participant use the word adopted	Like pepl	People you like
ALLOW	Allows you to know them	LIVE	Live together
ANY	Do any together	LONG	Longevity always be there
B →	Blood ties and beyond	LOVE	Love
Be there	Always be there for you	LSN	Listen
Been	Been there for me	Me Δ	I change from family to friend
Better	Relationship better after fight	MOVE	Move closer as know each other
Better Rls	Better relationship then with family	MOVIE	Movie/entertainment
Bio = Bio	Biological family is the only family	Multi level	Know rls/different levels
Bio	Biological Family	N Ent	Don't have to entertain friend
BN	Bond	N Term	Not terminate the relationship
Bring in	Bring them to table/allow in your circle	NΔ	The rls never changed
BRO	Called friend brother	NBio	Not Biological Family
BT	Experience bad times	NCOM	Not a common thing
Can't	Can't always go to family for things	NEED	They need you
CARE	Care about each other	NEW	We like do new stuff together
CD	Call Daily	NMW	No matter what
CHAR	Charity	No jud	Doesn't judge
Child	Childhood friends	No Req	Have no requirements from friends
Cling	People you cling to	Nocomm	Didn't communicate with family
Close	Emotionally Close	NOfam	No family support
Comm. In	We share common interests	NSD	No set definition
Compare	Compare to biological family	Nstip	No stipulations on relationship
CON	Confidant	NTh	Willing to do new things together
CR	Comic Relief	Open	I am more open
Create	Create family to fulfill roles	Opin Adv	Give/Take opinion and advice
CW	Call Weekly	Others	Support other than family
DFB fam	Friends are different from blood family	Own	Friends made after high school
DEG	Degree of friendships	P < F	His parent treat me better than him
Dep fam	Dependant like family	P of F	Part of family
Depends	Depends on whats going on	Pare	Parents
Depw	Depends on who I am with	Party	Party/reunion
Dif lrn/Gw	You learn and grow from them	Phelp	Physical help
Dif -N	Different from normal friends	Phy-act	Physical actions to show love
DIFF	Different from each other	Pla	Go to places together (travel)
DO	Do anything for me	PNR	Point of no return
Drive	Drive together with each other	PoL	Part of life
Ehelp	Emotional help	Prepare	Prepares you for the future
Enjoy	Doing things w/ family they enjoy	Priv	Privileges (cars, house passwords)
Ex life	Experience life together	REC	Recreation
Exclus	Exclusive bonds	Recip	Reciprocated
Exp = con	Experience makes the connection	RES	Respect and Honor
F +1	Friends plus one...friends	Resp	Responsibility

F4F	Family away from family	RLY	Rely on them
FALL	Friends had a falling out	Say any	You can say anything to them
Fam = His	Family History	Seek sim	Seek out those that are similar
Fam → Fr	Family = Friends Treat them the same	SIS	Called friend sister
Fam str	Family Structure	SN	Social Network
Fa w/Fam	Friend is family with my family	Special	Felt special/did something special
FAM	They are like family	Sports	Play sports together
Fam=fam	Know and experience family	Start	Start where you left off
Fight	Fighting with friends	SUP	Support
FOOD	Food is part of the relationship	T = B	Things are better together
For →	Forgive and move forward	T w/fam	Time spent at family home
FR	Family Reunion	TAKE	Take the advice
Friend old	Friends that are older then you	Talk only	Confide in person
Fulfill	Fulfill needs	Talktaboo	Talk about taboo topics
FUN	Friends have fun together	Talk	Types of activities is talking
Get Past	Get past Conflict	Tease	Tease friends
GW	Grow together	TF	True Friends
HANG	Hang out with	Trama	Trauma in life
HIST	Been through everything together	Travel w/ f	Travel with friend and family
Holiday	Holiday	Trial	Trails
HP	Help	TST	Trust
In com	Have things in common	TWT	Time without talking
In/fam	See & experience family “inner circle”	UNI	Unique experiences
IND	Independent	UT	Use Titles
Inside joke	Inside jokes	VACA	Vacation together
Involve	Involve myself in their life	VACA-F	Vacation with family
Key	Key to each others house	WORK	Work Relationship
Kinds	Different types of friends	WT	Went through things together
KMM	Knows me more / I know them more		

Appendix G

Table 2: Refined Codes

<p><i>Category: Social Activities</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anything <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hanging out Mundane activities Nothing Travel Family Events <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Holidays Family reunions Family vacations Spent time in family home Recreation Communicate <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Call <ul style="list-style-type: none"> In-person E-mail Time Together <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Live together Work together Key to house In-group <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tease Inside Joke Food <p><i>Category: Themes of Stories Told</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Time <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Past Present Anticipated Future No Mater What Do anything for me Went through it together <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Trials Life experiences Trauma Major life moments Work through an experience <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Forgive and move on Grow together Point of no return No change in relationship Relationship better after fight <p><i>Category: Types of Fictive Kin</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recent fictive kin Childhood fictive kin Degree in friendship Degree in family relationship Different from typical friends 	<p><i>Category: How You Know</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Names <ul style="list-style-type: none"> True Friends Adopted Parents Brother Sister Parent They are like my Family Family away from Family No Name Unconditional relationship Intimacy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Knows each other Allow to know you Multilevel relationship Emotional close Trust Part of life Responsibility for them “Allow in you circle” Acceptance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Care Charity Doesn’t judge me No requirements Don’t have to entertain Respect Communication <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Give and take advice Talk about taboo topics Listens Can say anything Confidant Support <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Physical Emotional Fulfill needs/are needed Reciprocated <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Things are better together Family Relations with Family of Origin <ul style="list-style-type: none"> See family inner circle Part of family Know and experience family Family structure Experience makes the connection <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bond Having special privileges They did something special Shared experience Learn from them Verbal Expressions
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