

ABSTRACT

Communication in the Aunt/Adult Niece Dyad

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The modern family system is truly being widened by research into the field of extended family. Within this expansion, the role of aunt has emerged as an important, yet understudied relationship. Extant research on aunting has been limited to the perspective of strictly the nieces and nephews involved, creating a one-sided representation of the aunt relationship. The current study examines the perspectives of both the aunt and niece, shedding light on the more mutually dependent nature of the relationship. Both aunt and niece make decisions that influence the relationship and together, these mutual choices help shape this unique family dyad. The aunting relationship has the potential to escape the constraints of both the parent and friend roles to develop a unique form of its own.

Communication in the Aunt/Adult Niece Dyad

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To my family

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Our understanding of the family system is being expanded by research focusing on more historically under-studied familial relationships. In comparison to family research related to marriage or parenting, communication scholars have not devoted much attention to the myriad of other family relationships that influence, inspire, and inform the total family dynamic (Floyd & Morman, 2006). Moving away from the singular focus on the nuclear unit, the family of today has grown to encompass many relationships including not only genetic, but also legal and even fictive family bonds (Floyd & Morman, 2006). Within this expanded understanding of the contemporary family network, the role of aunt has emerged as an important, yet under-studied extended family relationship, a unique female role characterized as everything from a surrogate mother to a big sister, serving nephews and nieces as teachers, mentors, and caregivers (Flora & Segrin, 2005). As a result, many aunts are often perceived as the “other woman” within the family circle; yet “aunting” has been understudied in regards to perceptions of actual relational authority and responsibility due to its non-parental nature and “extended family” association (Sotirin & Ellingson, 2006a).

Recent research has shown the unique communication patterns and relational dynamic surrounding the mother/adult daughter relationship, as these women move in and out of potentially the same maternal role (Miller-Day, 2004). Less is known about the similar female-female familial relationship between aunts and nieces. This is especially significant considering that both women (i.e., mother and aunt) hold different

positions in the family structure and are often connected through genetics. Potentially, this lends itself to the idea of two different women serving in a similar maternal role, thus making the aunt/adult niece relationship an important dyad to examine. As Trader and Bennett state, “Aunts are critical cultural resources whose contributions to childrearing, family support, self-development, relational knowledge, and kinship are both invaluable and overlooked,” (Sotirin & Ellingson, 2006a, p. 81).

The purpose of the current study is to undertake an investigation of the communication, interaction, and perceptions of the aunt/adult niece relationship. After a brief review of the extant literature in this area, the study’s methodology and findings will be presented followed by a discussion of their implications to the field of family communication.

The Aunting Relationship

The extant research on aunting within the family is limited at best; however, family scholars are beginning to shed some light on a few significant facts about the role of the aunt in today’s contemporary family. First, aunting is inherently associated with the traditional care-giving roles of women in the family. Whether played by a family member or by a friend in a fictive aunt role, the function of aunt is sex specific to females; yet that seems to be the only straight-forward fact when it comes to aunting! Second, research indicates that the definition of “aunting” is incredibly varied (Sotirin & Ellingson, 2006a). Aunts can be perceived as aloof and distant, occasionally moving in and out of the family system. Even more so, they have been characterized in popular culture as peers and confidantes. As Trader and Bennett aptly titled their 1998 tribute of aunting relationships, aunts are “older, cooler, wiser friends.” Additionally, aunts might

be conceived of as “second mothers” with not only consistent involvement in the lives of their nieces and nephews, but also with parental authority and responsibilities (Sotirin & Ellingson, 2006a).

Third, aunting typically is framed as a choice, i.e., aunting styles are dependant on the *choice* of the aunt and how they choose to enact the role of aunt within the structure of the family, particularly with the niece and/or nephew relationship (Sotirin & Ellingson, 2006a). No one socially acceptable or standardized way of enacting the role of the aunt within the family exists; thus while such variability provides for a wide range of choice for the woman in the aunting role, it also simultaneously might threaten the performance of other more structured or constrained family roles performed by other women within the family circle-for example, mother or sister. Finally, we know that, like mothers and grandmothers, aunts are potential family kin-keepers (Sotirin & Ellingson, 2006a). Females in the family network are especially important as they typically are the ones who hold the family together throughout its history (Hagestad, 1986). Research shows that in addition to grandmothers and mothers, aunts have the potential to kin-keep, too. (Rosenthal, 1985), because as yet another female in the family framework, they too remember birthdays, anniversaries, organize family events, and maintain other significant events within the family network (Dill, 1998). After all, within their own nuclear families, aunts are typically also mothers, sisters, and grandmothers as well.

In the area of family communication, scholars Patricia Sotirin and Laura Ellingson are best known for their work on the role of the aunt within the family. In 2004, they conducted an initial study focused on aunting in which they simply asked a set

of nephews and nieces to describe their relationship with their aunt. Additionally, they asked this group to describe communication with one or more of their aunts.

The study reported several conclusions. First, the authors noted patterns in the manner in which nieces or nephews wrote about their aunts, i.e., their use of metaphors, proliferation of adjectives, a focus on the self, and identification through family connections. A quality of “unreflectiveness” was also noted in students, i.e., nieces and nephews simply did not deeply reflect on their aunting relationships within the study, even though they reported the relationship to be highly valued. As Sotirin and Ellingson (2006a) described, “Aunts who were particularly nurturing or fun were highly valued, but their roles did not seem to bear much scrutiny or reflection,” (p. 90). Second, Sotirin and Ellingson interpreted the use of relational dialectics (Montgomery & Baxter, 1998) as expressed in the student’s descriptions of their aunting relationships. For example, the participants expressed the Autonomy/Connection dialectic in that some felt a divide in their relationships and others felt a strong familial closeness. The Openness/Privacy dialectic was conveyed as the participants defined their aunt as either someone to avoid or as a confidante and friend. The participants expressed the dialectic of Novelty/Predictability in that some aunts were seen infrequently and spontaneously, while others were seen regularly at family events. Finally, the participants expressed the dialectic of Stability/Change as they cited age-related changes in their relationships yet stability within a familial relationship like aunting (Sotirin & Ellingson, 2004).

Furthermore, when asked to describe their aunt, participants in the study relied on metaphors and similes to portray the nature of relationship, e.g., “my aunt is like a mother,” “like a grandmother,” “like a sister.” The respondents in the study frequently

answered the question with a maternal metaphor, expressing a definite maternal element within the aunting role (Sotirin & Ellingson, 2004). This maternal kin-script is seen often in the lives of nieces and nephews as the aunt becomes a type of surrogate mother for some. As one student in their study reported, “My aunt to me is my mom, big sister, and best friend all in one. It’s great!”

This idea of the “other mother” emerged once again in a 2006 study by Sotirin and Ellingson who reported that nieces and nephews, when asked to describe their relationship with their aunt, identified their aunt as a second mother. In many instances, this included the literal raising of the nephew or niece and/or providing a temporary home in times of need or trouble. Many participants concluded that aunts are like mothers, but without the responsibility of discipline (Sotirin & Ellingson, 2006b). Mothers are frequently stereotyped as overly sensitive, overly involved, and usually blamed for children’s developmental problems (Flora & Segrin, 2005); yet, the “other mother” role of the aunt seemed to lack this element of responsibility or accountability (Sotirin & Ellingson, 2006b). Because the aunting relationship is so often associated with mothering by nieces and nephews, there is a definite need to explore the maternal perceptions of the aunts as they relate to their niece and discover the differences between mothering and aunting.

As previously noted, perhaps the most similar set of female relationships comparable to the aunt/adult niece dyad is the mother/adult daughter relationship. Research has contended that a mother/daughter relationship can surpass other relationships because of the many years spent interacting with each other (Jones & Nissenson, 1997). In 2004, Michelle Miller-Day examined the unique communication

patterns of these intertwined female relationships within the family structure. Miller-Day examined levels of closeness between these women (e.g., connected or enmeshed); she also identified the dialectics of Openness/Closedness and Stability/Change particularly within the mother/daughter relationship. The study also noted the importance of turning points of closeness such as marriage, birth, and role-reversal as each member played the role of mother at various points within the life-course of this unique relationship (Miller-Day, 2004). As women participating in the same family, the aunt/adult niece dyad also potentially has that same intertwined structure and generational span.

Miller-Day reported that transitioning into an adult mother/daughter relationship seemed to be a defining moment for women, providing an opportunity for women to develop independence and an “egalitarian woman-to-woman bond” (2004). Carla Fischer (2004) also examined the multi-generational lifespan of the mother-daughter bond as they experience major turning points together such as marriage and aging. This unique female-female bond also has the potential to develop within the aunt/adult niece relationship, as the niece reaches adulthood and begins to interact in the dyad in an egalitarian way. Just as mothers and daughters have expectations for each other for emotional and physical support (Miller-Day, 2004), aunts and nieces may also rely on each other in similar ways. There are many similarities between these two pairs of women but most importantly is the inherently female-female aspect of the relationships which spans generations. And while much examination has been given to the first relationship such as patterns of communication, closeness, and change, the aunt/niece dyad also has the potential to be as influential as the connection between mothers and daughters.

While the body of extant research into the aunting role provides a sense of insight into the role and relationship, many questions remain unanswered, specifically related to the aunt's perceptions of the aunting role. Previous research has examined and evaluated the perceptions of nieces and nephews on aunting; aunts have yet to be assessed on their ideas of the role and its responsibilities. For example, Milardo (2005) examined the similar relationship of uncles and nephews. He investigated "generativity" or "a concern for future generations" in the uncle/nephew relationship. Milardo reported that uncles act as mentors, intergenerational buffers, family historians, and provide insight into behavior of family members. Twenty-one uncles and thirty-one nephews were interviewed for this study, providing comparative feedback and multiple perspectives of "uncling." Similarly, a study investigating both nieces and aunts might also provide insights into the relationship but from both participants. In order to formulate a more complete assessment of the aunting relationship, it is necessary to investigate not only the perceptions from the adult niece but the aunt as well. As research has shown, it is primarily the choice of the aunt that dictates the terms of their "aunting." Therefore, gaining insight into the aunt's perspective is a critical factor, heretofore overlooked in the limited research on aunting. Clearly, much remains to be learned about the historically understudied role of the aunt within the family. This line of thought and reasoning generates three research questions:

RQ1: How do aunts perceive their relationship with their nieces?

RQ2: How do nieces perceive their relationship with their aunts?

RQ3: How is communication constituted within the aunt/adult niece relationship?

CHAPTER TWO

Methods

Participants

This study examined the roles of aunt and adult niece through the primary use of written descriptions. A packet specific to each role (i.e., aunt and niece) was administered. A convenience sample of college women eighteen years or older was recruited to participate in the study (n=23). These women were given three survey instruments and asked to find an existing, in-tact daughter/mother/aunt triad in which the mother and aunt were related either biologically, through adoption, or re-marriage (i.e., step-sisters). Furthermore, the daughter and mother in the triad must have been related either biologically, through adoption, or re-marriage (i.e., step-mother/step-daughter). If the women recruited for the current study did not fit the parameters of study, or did not wish to participate, participants were given the option to recruit another daughter/mother/aunt triad that met the criteria as detailed above. While the original data collection includes information on mothers as well as aunts and nieces, this study focuses specifically on the written responses of aunts and adult nieces.

Procedure

After meeting criteria and consenting to participate in the study, aunts and nieces were asked to complete a pencil and paper survey. As part of the questionnaire, participants were asked the following questions (specific to their role) focusing on their perception of the roles of the other woman in the dyad (i.e., daughters reported on both

their mothers and aunts; mothers reported on both their daughters and sisters; aunts reported on both their sisters and their nieces):

1. Please describe your relationship with your aunt/niece.
2. Please describe communicating with your aunt/niece.

They were provided with a blank sheet of paper in order to write their responses.

The participants also answered survey questions measuring closeness, affection, relationship satisfaction, relationship involvement, and gender role orientation; this data will be reported in a future study. The questionnaires took approximately thirty minutes to complete and were returned through the mail in self-addressed, postage-paid envelopes.

CHAPTER THREE

Results

Three major themes were found in the narrative responses of both the nieces and the aunts. These themes include family networking, distance/proximity, and family networking. Three additional themes of regret/hope, family metaphors, and role expectation were found in the aunts' responses and were unique to that perspective. By examining these themes, a better understanding of "aunting" from both the aunt and niece perspectives was gained.

Furthermore, several respondents in this study reported using e-mail as a primary form of communication and as the main way they stay in touch with other family members. The majority of the respondents cited e-mail in describing how they communicate-frequently or infrequently. However in some cases, the respondents cited it in a negative sense stating, "We only communicate by e-mail," while others wrote that they e-mail "all the time." Some considered e-mail a poor substitute for face-to-face communication while others considered it a legitimate form of communication. The proliferation of responses of the participants was also impressive. The majority of the participants filled the entire page allotted for the narrative and others even continued on to another page. They truly engaged the opportunity to describe their relationships and included very intimate details of their family connections.

Family Networking

Participants noted that many of their aunt/niece relationships were dependant on family networking. While they did not directly keep up with their aunt or niece, they were able to do so indirectly through another family member and have some sense of their life and activities. One niece wrote, "She [aunt] talks with my mom a lot so I know about her life through my mom." One aunt wrote that although her niece did not volunteer information about her own life, she was able to stay informed through her mother. In several instances a close relationship with a cousin kept the aunts and nieces connected. Nieces reported that spending time with cousins helped develop a relationship with their aunt. Stated one niece, "I have more of a relationship [with] my aunt [through] my cousins, who are young teenagers. In the past year, the dynamics changed only because I visit more and take the girls around." Many aunts were pleased with the developing relationships of their niece and their children and saw their niece as a good role model, even if they did not have their own relationship with their niece. One aunt reported, "I am pleased to say that my niece and my two daughters keep in touch via telephone and e-mail. She is someone that my daughters admire and look up to." Aunts also noted that having a niece close in age to their own children helped to perpetuate the relationship. One aunt reflected, "I am close to my niece perhaps mostly because she is so close in age to my youngest son. They have an almost brother/sister relationship throughout the years. I keep up with her activities through my son and my sister." Clearly, the aunt/niece relationship can potentially depend on many other family members not only to simply keep information flowing, but also to help perpetuate a relationship.

Relationship Quality

Participants described their relationship quality in three main ways. First, some considered their relationships to be mutually supportive and completely open, as they both benefited from conversation and time spent together. As one niece wrote, “We value each other’s opinions (we have a lot of personality traits in common) and she has asked me to talk to her daughters (my cousins) about different things.” Similarly, one aunt wrote that her niece encourages her and is a good role model as well. The nieces and aunts wrote that they would do “anything for each other.” One niece summed it up by saying, “There is an unspoken bond between us.” Second, some aunts and nieces found themselves in what they described as a “typical” aunt/niece relationship “with age appropriate restrictions.” In describing their relationships they did not find themselves to be especially close or especially distant. One aunt wrote, “Overall, we are closer than some, not as close as others, but we enjoy what time we do have together.” Furthermore, these relationships did not result in intimate disclosure. As one niece wrote of her aunt, “I’m not completely open with her, I do pick and choose what I want to tell mainly because sometimes I feel a little bit judged by her.” Another niece wrote, “Our communication is very superficial –we talk about events and stuff we’re doing but never about feelings.” However, several nieces mentioned that although they don’t tell their aunts “everything” they tell them more than they tell their mothers. Finally, other aunts and nieces described their relationship as not close at all. As one aunt wrote, “My relationship with my aunt is not very strong. We are very different people who do not have much in common.” One aunt stated that she and her niece “do not have much of a relationship at all.”

Distance/Proximity

Distance played a prevalent role in virtually all the relationship descriptions and was perceived as the greatest potential stumbling block. Many aunts and nieces noted that they lived far from each other resulting in a lack of closeness in the relationship. “My aunt and I were closer when we lived in the same state,” one niece recalled. One aunt wrote, “The fact that we live so far from each other makes it more difficult to spend time together. Another reflected, “I really don’t have much of a relationship with [niece]. We have very seldom lived in the same city.” In these cases, distance was blamed for the lack of relationship. Interestingly, the definition of what was considered a great distance also fluctuated. “Far” could mean two hours away or across the county. One niece wrote, “She has always lived on the opposite side of the country from us so I never got to know her very well,” while another wrote, “My aunt lives about 2 ½ hours away and we used to live farther than that from her so I am not as close as I’d like to be.” In contrast, other nieces and aunts noted that although they lived “far away” (again the definitions fluctuated) they had a “good,” even “great,” relationship in spite of this. Distance again was perceived as the greatest possible stumbling block in the relationship but they had overcome this obstacle. Most were very proud of this fact. “She lives in New York, but we see each other about twice a year and talk several other times a year,” wrote one niece. Another reflected, “Even though we live far apart, whenever we see each other we pick right back up and it feels like no time has gone by since our last talk.”

This challenge of distance also affects the face-to-face contact that the aunt and niece share. Many aunts and nieces stated that their contact and communication revolved around a holiday, birthday, or family event. A few cited an occasional e-mail or phone

call in addition to the infrequent visits but the majority of communication was in person. “Our communication is rare unless it is in person,” wrote one niece. As one aunt wrote, “We seldom talk on the phone but visit in person.” For some this proved to be a positive environment which strengthened communication, even though infrequent, and gave the aunts and nieces an opportunity to catch up. One niece reflected, “When we are all together, we communicate much better.” Another wrote, “I see my aunt during the holidays if our families get together. She lives in Colorado so I don’t see her that much. I love my aunt very much and love spending time with her when I do get to see her.” In contrast for others, these face-to-face visits did little to strengthen the relationship. The limited nature of holidays and birthday did not allow for intimate communication. As one niece stated, “We only see each other a couple times a year, at family holiday parties...I’ve never spent any time alone or even in a small group with her.” Similarly, another niece wrote, “We only talk when we are in the same room or if it’s someone’s birthday.” In reference to her niece one aunt reflected, “I see her on holidays. We do not have much communication only holidays, birthdays, graduations.” Face-to-face contact seemed to allow for either a positive reconnection, however brief, or for a perpetuation of a poor cycle revolving around infrequent visits. Whether resigned to the distance or eager to overcome it, the respondents frequently cited separation of time and space as a factor when describing the quality of their relationships.

In addition to the previously mentioned themes found in responses from both aunts and nieces, three themes emerged that were unique to the responses from only the aunts.

Family Metaphors

In Sotirin and Ellingson's 2004 results, the nieces and nephews frequently referred to their aunts using maternal metaphors. Hoping to specifically differentiate between mothering and aunts, the participants in the current study were asked to discuss both their aunts and their mothers independently from each other. As a result, the nieces in this study rarely used maternal metaphors as descriptors. However, familial metaphors and similes were used frequently by the aunts to describe their nieces e.g. "my niece is like her mother," "like a daughter," "just like me." One aunt stated, "She is probably the closest thing to a daughter I will have." Additionally another aunt stated that she and her niece were so similar that they were almost like sisters. These metaphors also gave insight into their relationship, whether they perceived it as parental, friendly, or sisterly in nature. As one aunt wrote, "She is so much like her mother that I have become a caretaker with her rather than a friend." This use of metaphor reflects how interchangeable and flexible female-female roles have become in the modern extended family. To her aunt, a niece can be a friend, a daughter, and a sister, all in one.

Regret/Hope

The theme of regret was noted in some aunt responses which was not at all prevalent in the responses of the nieces. This regret was seen in regards to lack of communication or the infrequency of contact. Many aunts wished they had a better relationship with their nieces and hoped for better communication in the future. Other aunts were not happy with their relationship but were more resigned to the current state. For example, one aunt wrote, "I know we would have been closer and good friends if we could have had the opportunity." Another stated, "I just regret I couldn't be a more

‘constant’ in her growing up years.” However, many aunts also expressed hope for the future and a desire to improve the relationship. One hopeful aunt wrote, “I do not talk to her as much as I would like to, but I believe that will change when she settles into her own adult life after college.” Another stated, “I still feel like there is time to get closer to her. And I am looking forward to when that occurs.” The majority of regretful aunts hoped for a change in the future with their nieces.

Role Expectation

The aunts’ statements also reflected a sense of role expectation not seen in the nieces’ comments. Based on the aunts’ responses, there are certain duties that these women believed a “good aunt” is expected to perform. The aunts seemed to equate being a good aunt and having a good relationship with certain activities. Gift giving and being present at important events were frequently cited as aunts described their relationships. In illustrating her relationship with her niece, one aunt described it as, “very positive, [I] try to attend or send cards for big events, vacation with her and attended special events out of town.” Another wrote, “I have mailed Easter baskets, Halloween treats, Christmas gifts and tea sets to [her]. I flew to Texas when [she] was in Homecoming her senior year.” Even in describing her perceived failure in the role, one aunt wrote, “I, on the other hand, am always late with cards and other non-face-to-face recognition.” Interestingly, these expectations seemed to be self-imposed, as very few nieces mentioned specific expectations for themselves as nieces or for their aunts in the responses.

CHAPTER FOUR

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the ways aunts and adult nieces describe their relationship and communication with each other, and in doing so to discover how these women essentially framed their unique roles. The current study extends on this line of research because it includes perceptions from both aunts and nieces. The results of the current study lead to interesting implications concerning this varied dyad.

First, a high degree of ambiguity exists within these two roles. In their 2006 research, Sotirin and Ellingson noted that the definition of “aunt” is incredibly varied. Some aunts were characterized as distant and aloof while others were viewed as peers and confidants (2006a). The data from this study supports these findings as the participants’ definitions of “aunting” also varied from person to person. Yet, in addition, the current research suggests that not only is the role of “aunt” varied, fluid, and open but that the role of “niece” is just as ambiguous and diverse. Nieces were characterized as beloved daughters and friends, while others described their niece as distant and hesitant to disclose. Yet neither characteristic is necessarily “right” or “wrong.” Both roles lack a clear-cut set of social norms, practices, and expectations, making the role of niece just as ambiguous and as open to interpretation as the role of aunt.

Second, the aunt/adult niece relationship is dictated by the choices of both the aunt and the niece. As previously stated, Sotirin and Ellingson’s findings reported that the aunting style was dependent on the choice of the aunt and how she chose to enact her

relationship with her niece or nephew (2006a). Moreover, the current data suggests that the niece is just as accountable for her own choice in their relationship. Will she be close, attentive and quick to confide? Or will she be distant, aloof, and hesitant to disclose? The niece must make this choice just as the aunt must decide how to engage her role. Together, these choices create the overall quality of the relationship and affect the communication style, closeness, interaction, satisfaction, and a host of other relational variables.

Third, physical time and space play a significant role in the aunt/niece relationship. Whether separated by thousands of miles or only a few hours, aunts and nieces frequently brought up the element of distance; citing it as the potential stumbling block determining and/or influencing this unique family role. Proximity and face-to-face contact was also referenced repeatedly. Infrequency of contact led to either an eagerness to share, anticipation of future interactions, or, in many cases, a hesitancy to disclose.

Similar to a long-distance romantic relationship, the aunt and niece separated by time and space are greatly affected. In her 2004 study examining long-distance relationships, Sahlstein examined the mutual influence of togetherness and separation in these relationships. As Sahlstein noted, "Relationships are not only constructed in the face-to-face interactions between partners, but are also 'stretched' across time and space between face-to-face interactions," (2004, p. 691). Through her research, Sahlstein identified several ways that "being together enables being apart." Categories include: rejuvenation, reminder of the relationship, construction of memories, segmentation (emphasizing that time spent together should be about the relationship) and anticipation. Sahlstein also noted that being "apart enables being together" through fostering quality

time, showing appreciation, and being open to each other. Similarly many of the participants in the current study who stated that they lived far from their aunt or niece cited these aspects in their relationships. They were excited to “make the most” of the time they had together and stated that they communicated the best in those times set aside for the relationship, such as family birthdays and holidays. In these instances, the challenge of distance was overcome and even enhanced the relationship.

Sahlstein also identified ways that “being together constrains being apart.” The most frequently cited categories included feeling let down after the anticipation of being together, face-to-face standards (e.g., the rest of the time in the relationship does not measure up to the times spent together), and segmentation (e.g., times spent apart feel completely separate from time together). Sahlstein also noted that being apart also has the potential to constrain being together through pressure for quality time, communicative strain, and the feeling of being in different worlds. Many of the women in the current study, who rarely interacted with their aunt or niece, noted negatively that they *only* saw each other at family events and spoke on rare occasions and that their lives were completely separate except for those instances. Through her research, Sahlstein discovered that being apart has “pros” as well as “cons” and that togetherness is not necessarily a desired relational state (2004). The same can be said for the aunts and nieces who navigated their relationship through both time and space. In some cases distance really can make the heart grow fonder; in others, it severely limits most issues of relational growth and development.

Fourth, in previous studies, Sotirin and Ellingson have identified the salient metaphor of the aunt as the “other mother” (2006a, 2006b). The nieces in these studies

were quick to compare their aunt to their mother when asked to describe their relationship with their aunt. However, this proved ambiguous as little was known about their relationship with their mother. In an effort to gain a clearer definition of the aunting relationship independent of other relationships, the current study clearly and intentionally separated and examined the two roles of mother and aunt in the methodology. As a result, the metaphor of "other mother" was not frequently seen. When undifferentiated, these two roles have an opportunity to blend together; but when separated and intentionally assessed separately, the role of mother stays exclusive to the actual mother, allowing the aunt to then become her own unique participant in the life of her niece (e.g. friend, confidante, etc.) rather than "another mother."

Finally, as a result of the current study it is clear that the aunt/niece relationship has significance. Whether expressed in positive terms in cases of strong interpersonal closeness or in a negative way with regret for the past and hope for the future, the aunting relationship proved important to the participants. The general proliferation of response also points to this. The participants had an opinion on their relationships, whether good or bad, showing its consequential nature. The aunt/niece relationship mattered to these women and they took great detail, and in some case a great amount of time, in expressing and describing it in a highly personal and revealing manner.

Conclusion

Aunting is a mutually dependent, reciprocal relationship. Although the style of aunting may be dependant on the aunt's choice, that choice is *heavily* influenced by the choices of the niece and vice versa. This is unlike mothering or fathering which has set roles, social expectations, and perceptions of what it means to be a good mother or father

independent of the actions of their child. The aunting relationship is flexible, ready to be molded by both the aunt and niece. Aunts are able to shape and influence their nieces and maintain interpersonal relationships with them (or not) without much negative social response. However, the responsibility for this choice should not be placed solely on the aunt. The niece also makes her choice. How will they respond to each other? How will they deal with distance, other family members, and expectations? What will they choose? Together, these mutual decisions help shape the relationship. The aunting relationship has the potential to extend the bounds of parent and friend to become its own unique relationship; however, it is up to both the aunt and niece to make the choices necessary to fully engage this significant relationship.

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