



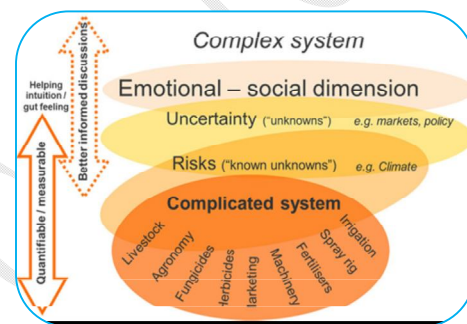
CONCEPTUALIZATION OF COMPLEXITIES OF DEFINING AN INDIGENOUS FAMILY: WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO WESTERN SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

Defining family is complex, particularly when considering cultural aspects, characteristics of Indigenous populations. This paper provides a theoretical review of conceptualizations of family particularly relevant for an Indigenous context, including a critical review of defining Indigenous families through non-Indigenous terms and possible alternate approaches in defining Indigenous families. In general, our review found that family may be conceptualized by blood, legal, or residence status, following a general systems theory approach. Such terms, however, may be limited in defining Indigenous families due to factors influencing family boundary ambiguity such as multiple caregivers, ambiguities in legal status, complex households, and different perceptions of defining families. Moreover, when understanding Indigenous families, cultural difference in identity, kinship, language, and mobility need to be considered in family definitions. In conclusion, it is necessary to recognize complexities of families, limitations of using one definition versus another, and the importance of applying a cultural lens when defining Indigenous families.



KEYWORDS: Indigenous culture, Indigenous family, Canadian Families, Family Boundary Ambiguity.

INTRODUCTION :

Family definitions in western society are generally based on blood ties, legal status, and residence, reflecting a general system theory approach, using static definitions for enumeration, regulations and policies allow for consistency, clarity, and ease of conceptualization. However, there are several factors that lead to family boundary ambiguity within these

definitions, such as disassociations in biological relationships, divorce within families, and complex households. Even though institutional definitions are often created to be unambiguous, misunderstandings of kin terminology in identifying the main caregiver, for instance, may lead to inaccurate reporting of family membership. Particularly among Indigenous groups, factors such as multiple

caregivers, different trends in marital status, complex households, and different perceptions of households, may increase family boundary ambiguity when defining Indigenous families through general terms. As Carlson and Meyer (2014), concluded, such intricacies become a concern when it complicated the availability of resources for families and children at the policy level. As an example, these

scholars argue that public policies based on traditional family definitions may not recognize complex family 24 structures, and as a result, such family types may be at a disadvantage to accessing economic resources.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of family is a fundamental way operationalizing social structure (Cox & Paley, 1997). Demographers, sociologists, policy planners, and decisions makers have varying perspectives on definitions of family based on what is identified as key components of a family, such as family functioning, child rearing, familial relationships, and the presence of intergenerational families (Emlen, 1995). This includes standardized definitions often employed for enumerations of the populations or its subgroups. Still, there is much debate in the concept of family. In western culture, the idea of family has been linked to legal institutions such as marriage (Levine, Sato, Hashimoto, & Verma, 1995). The 'nuclear family', commonly defined as a two-parent family with children living in one dwelling, has also been the traditional family form in western society, such as in Canada and the USA (Manning, Brown, & Stykes, 2014). On the other hand, in other cultures and nations, there are other family structure and types that are common and socially accepted. For example, polygamous marriages, controversial and illegal in Canada, are still practiced in other countries such as Malawi and South Africa (Andrews, 2009; Bailey, Baines, Amani, & Kaufman, 2005; Bartholonew, 1964; Limave, Bablola, Keneddy, & Kerrigan, 2013; Nyathikazi, 2013; Rehman, 2007). Thus it is possible that the traditional western interpretation of a "family" is not applicable to all cultures and nations. Ind; genous populations in North America are one such group where individual perceptions of family may differ compared to generally accepted concepts of family. Cultural differences between Lidigenous and Len Indigenous groups have been well established (Smith, 1999; I The term, "Indigenous" is a used in an paper in substitutions of "Aboriginal", "Indigenous" is viewed to be more inclusive of he various Indigenous populations in Canada and in other countries (inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, 2014). Waldram, Herring, & Young, 2006). If perceptions of family differ between Indigenous and no indigenous groups, the relevance of defining Indigenous families using non-Indigenous definitions is questioned.

While differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures may exist for specific Indigenous identity groups, 00000 in experiences may be related to the concept of family for Indigenous people worldwide. For example, historical differences, such as the impact of colonization and school segregation, health disparities and lower socio-economic statuses have been documented among Indigenous populations in Canada, as well as in the USA and Australia (Cooke, Mitrou, Lawrence, Guimond, & Beavon, 2007; Cunningham & Stanley, 2003; Ring & Brown, 2003). These experiences may impact one's perception of family. Furthermore, there may be similarities in family definitions between First Nations and Native Americans in Canada and USA in particular, as the Jay Treaty, signed in 1794, allows First Nations and Native American to travel across the Canadian-American border freely for employment, educational, retirement or immigration purposes (Embassy of the United States, 2014). Although the focus of the current paper is on Indigenous groups in Canada, the issue of defining family may also be applicable to Indigenous populations in other countries including the USA and Australia.

Complexities of Defining Family Through Residence, Blood Relationships and Legal Status

Defining family by residence, blood relationships or legal status may not always be clear. It is possible that differences between personal perceptions of family, complex family dynamics, and the terms outlined in family definitions, may increase the difficulty of defining family. Furthermore, while incorporating a rigid general systems theory approach to defining family may be useful for demographic purposes, researchers and families/individuals themselves may requires more ambiguous definitions or concepts. Such complexities may be explained through the theory of family boundary ambiguity, which is discussed in the following section.

Family Boundary Ambiguity

In contrast to the structural approach of defined boundaries according to general systems theory, introduced the concept of 'family boundary ambiguity'. Family boundary ambiguity is primarily used in family function research, however, as Carroll et al. (2007) concluded, such theory could be applied to a broader range of family research. In the present review, we apply the family boundary ambiguity concept to understanding complexities in defining 'family'.

Family boundary ambiguity refers to the inability to consistently report on who is considered to be a part of the family since this is not necessarily a static entity (Boss & Greenberg, 1984; Brown & Manning, 2009). Family boundary ambiguity may be influenced by either psychological or physical ambiguity (Pasley, 1994). A family member could be considered psychologically present but physically absent, such as a parent that lives in another region (for work purposes, as an example), or when a family member is physically present but psychologically absent (Boss, 1977). Other factors influencing boundary ambiguity include divorce, parental conflict, low parental involvement, separation from a family member, and illnesses/disabilities (Carroll, et al., 2007). Different perceptions of family membership may also occur due to remarriages and stepfamilies yielding reconstituted families (Carroll, et al., 2007; Stewart, 2005). Lin and colleagues (2004) found inconsistent reporting of child living arrangements between divorced couples, where both individuals of a divorced relationship believed that the child lived with him/her rather than their ex-partner. However, general systems theory approaches may lead to discrepancies in reporting, as perceptions of family may not coincide with demographic or census reports (Schwede 2004).

Complexities of defining family by residential status

Using the physical boundaries of a dwelling (or household unit) to identify 'family' fits with a general systems theory. Still, factors such as complex household arrangements add to family boundary ambiguity (Schwede, 2004). Complex households are defined as people (that are not directly related) living with each other in addition to (or other than) intact family members, including non-relatives and co-resident families (Schwede, 2004). Studies by Schwede (2003, 2004) found that complex households among certain cultural groups, such as Indigenous groups, contributed to issues in U.S. household members that were not legally or biologically related as part of the household. Such misclassification of household members may lead to inaccurate reporting of household data for demographers or population counts (Schwede 2004).

Complexities of defining family by blood relationships

Despite the relative clarity of defining a family based on biological relationships, consensus of which relationships to include in this definition remains difficult to achieve (Emlen, 1995). For example, the familial relationship between a parent and their biological child is clear; however, family boundary ambiguity may still exist between the parent and child when the child is unassociated with his/her biological parent or has non-biological caregivers, such as in the case of a foster family situation (Carroll, et al., 2007). Brown and Manning (2009) examined the consistency of family structure based on biological relations when it was reported by different individuals in a family (e.g., child, parent, and step-parent) and found that increasing complexity in familial relationships, as evidenced by foster families, separated, divorced and reconstituted 14 families, led to increased inconsistency between child and mother reports of familial relations based on blood relationships.

Complexities of Defining Family by Legal Status

Conceptualizations of family are often solidified through marriages but blurred by separation, divorce, remarriage, and death (Carroll, et al., 2007; Lin, et al., 2004; Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman, 1989; Walker & Messinger, 1979). Resenberg and Guttmann (2001) examined concepts of family among married and divorced families and found that although all children identified their mothers as part of the family, 30% of children with divorced parents did not identify their father as part of the family, while 43% of divorced mothers still identified their ex-husbands as part of the family (Resenberg &

Guttman, 2001). Remarriages and stepfamilies further influence the complexity in defining a family. Due to changes in family formation, individuals in a family tend to have varying perspectives of family based on their personal interactions with one another and their own perspective of what defines family (Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman, 1989; Resenberg & Guttman, 2001; Walker & Messinger, 1979). For example, family boundary ambiguity was found to be higher among cohabiting stepfamilies than two parent, single-parent, and married step-families (Brown & Manning, 2009). Family boundary ambiguity may be especially heightened in the case where stepfamily members do not reside in the same residence or on a full time basis (Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman, 1989; Stewart, 2005).

Family boundary ambiguity may arise among foster relationships, as inclusion of foster children in a family is often more ambiguous than adopted children. National agencies directly serving the public (e.g. Service Canada, Ontario Human Rights Commission) generally recognize both foster and adopted members as part of the family. Other institutions have multiple definitions of family, some of which include and others which exclude foster children as part of the family. For example, foster children are not considered part of the census family (Statistics Canada, 2011), although the definition of an economic family considers foster children as "other relatives", and thus foster children are included (Statistics Canada, 2011). It is recognized that such differences are a result of different specific objectives within the institutional body; nonetheless, variance in family definitions within and across institutions show that there may be ambiguity in recognizing foster children as part of a family.

Issues Arising from Defining Indigenous Families by Residential Status, Blood, Legal Concepts

Although the general systems theory approach, which includes residential, biological, and legal concepts to define families, may serve specific purposes, in part for demographers and program planners, attempts to define and fit Indigenous families into general family types may limit our understanding of Indigenous families. Our review of the grey literature identified a limited number of definitions specific to Indigenous families. For example, the Royal Commission of Indigenous People (RCAP) defined an Indigenous family in Canada as the biological unit of parents and children living at the same dwelling, which may expand to include the extended family, e.g., grandparents, relatives (aunts and uncles), and cousins (RCAP, 1996). This definition points to the recognition of residential, blood, and legal ties, and begins to address the social aspect of families for Indigenous people, however, it may not capture the ambiguous nature of some of these relationships for Indigenous people in Canada. The following section discusses some of the complexities of defining Indigenous families through residence blood ties, and legal status.

Complexities in Defining Family by Residence among Indigenous Groups Due to Complex Households and Different Perceptions of a Household

Family boundary ambiguity may occur in defining family by residential status among Indigenous families. Morphy (2007) argues that a household approach in defining family boundaries is not applicable for Indigenous families due to complex family structures and kinships within a household unit. Statistical agencies in western society discuss "household" with the assumption that households generally include a nuclear family. However, nuclear family types are only one example of many family structures within Indigenous groups (Morphy, 2006). For example, multigenerational and non-biological households (i.e., complex households), which are more common among the Indigenous population than non-Indigenous population (CHMC, 2008; Turner, et al, 2013), may increase the complexity of defining a family by residence. According to Statistics Canada, in 2006, Indigenous children were two times more likely to live in a multiple-family household than non-Indigenous children (O'Donnell, 2008; Statistics Canada, 2008). With greater diversity in household structure among Indigenous groups, there may be greater complexity in defining and conceptualizing an Indigenous family by household unit.

Different perceptions of households among Indigenous groups may also lead to complexity in defining a family by residence. As found in the literature, the term "household" may be perceived differently by Indigenous and non-Indigenous people due to different lifestyles, social activities, and

use of household space (CMHC, 2004). For instance, the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CHMC) (2004) found that within an Inuit community, multiple families and extended family members generally congregated in one housing unit for the majority of domestic activities including preparation of food, traditional activities, and socialization. As a result, it is possible that these individuals could be conceptualized as part of one household. Gerber (1994) argued that respondents are more likely to classify household memberships with social affiliations rather than physical residence. Thus, in contrast to the idea that each household is a family unit, a household among Indigenous groups may not represent one family but rather multiple families. Consideration of alternative definitions of Indigenous households accounting for the relationships between families and households may be warranted.

Complexities in Blood Relationships Due to Multiple Caregivers among Indigenous Families

Understanding familial relationships through blood ties is clear, however, the existence of multiple and different caregivers to a child may increase the ambiguity of family membership within the Indigenous population. With multiple caregivers, a child may associate several adults with a parental role rather than identifying a biological parent (Brokenleg, 2000). This ambiguity of roles demonstrates how identifying a family through biological ties, such as those between a parent and child, may not be applicable within certain cultures.

Greater family boundary ambiguity among Indigenous families may also occur in the case of skip generation families. According to national statistics, skip generation families, where children do not live with their parents but with their grandparent (s), although rate, is higher 18 among First Nations, Metis, and Inuit populations than the general Canadian population (Milan & Bohnert, 2012; O'Donnell, 2008). In these types of families, grandparents are typically the primary caregivers to their grand children (Milan & Hamm, 2003). However, additional ambiguity may occur if the biological parent of the child is still present in his or her life, as the child may associate a parental role with both his/her biological parent(s) and grandparent(s) (Landry-Meyer & Newman, 2004).

Complexities in defining family by legal status among Indigenous groups

With respect to legal status definitions of family, differences in marital trends and adoption practices between Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups may also contribute to greater family boundary ambiguity. Based on 2006 national statistics, on-reserve First Nations women (46.6%), off-reserve First Nations women (47.6%), Metis women (50.7%), and Inuit women (51.2%) were less likely to be legally married than non-Indigenous women (57.8%) (Quinless, 2012). On the other hand, Indigenous women were more likely to be in common-law relationship and in a lone parent family than were non-Indigenous women (Quinless, 2012). Even though commonlaw couples are recognized as a type of family at the institutional level, defining family by marriage is more straightforward than cohabitation (Brown & Manning, 2009). Studies have found that, as compared to married couples who partake in an institutional process, family boundary ambiguity increases among cohabiting couples (Brown & Manning, 2009; Nock, 1995).

A family may also be formed through adoption, which is commonly recognized in definitions of family. However, family boundary ambiguity may occur with customary adoptions', a common form of adoption among Inuit people in Canada. Customary adoption is similar to statutory adoption but without the administrative and institutional requirements (Baldassi, 2006). Among Inuit populations, customary adoption is commonly practiced, where other people, typically but not necessarily a relative of the biological parent, take on the parenting responsibilities of the child (Fletcher, 1996). With a lack of administrative and legal processes, however, family boundary ambiguity may arise in identifying the guardian (or family) of the child.

Language

Kinship system differ by kinship statuses (e.g., social bonds) and also through the terminology used to describe lineages and kin (Levi-Strauss, 1963). The predominant kinship system in mainstream Canada and many other western nations is a bilateral kinship system, where family terms used to

identify maternal vs. paternal relationships are not distinguished (e.g., aunt, uncle, cousin) (Schwede, 2004). Indigenous kinship systems, on the other hand, are not always bilineal: rather, matrilineal and patrilineal kin may be differentiated using different terminology (Morphy, 2006). For example, one Australian Indigenous population identified children by their generational position in a lineage.

CONCLUSION

We can conclude that the concept of family is highly complex and may include a myriad of factors, particularly for Indigenous people in Canada. It is important that data users recognize the complexities inherent in predetermined definitions. Current definitions employed by population-based surveys may be used for the purposes of enumeration or counting the number of families in a given area or country in a given time. However, family boundary ambiguity may impact the conceptualizations of family population estimates, and survey or census responses, for and by Indigenous people. It can be suggested that definitions of family should match the needs of the researcher, policy maker, or individual interested in describing families and may include factors other than those included in a general systems theory approach (i.e., residential status, biological ties, and legal status). Understanding cultural components including kinship system, differences in terminology, and mobility patterns are important for definitions of Indigenous families. Regardless of the approach, recognition of the complexity of families and of the limitations of using one definition versus another is necessary, particularly for Indigenous groups. From this review, recommendations for further research can be made.

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