The Family Friend Zone: An Exploration of the Categorisation of Non-Related Family Members

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The book lay open, balanced half on my lap. I was sitting curled up on the sofa, relaxing into the deep-backed cushions as I read along, listening to the sweet, familiar sounds of Swedish. I had just read through this book myself, and now my uncle was helping me to go back and tease out any words I was unsure of. Languages can evolve in much shorter time spans than humans, and this book was written at the start of the 20th century; we both knew my knowledge of modern Swedish might not include all of the words in the book, even though it was for children. "Men båda korgarna har han ju kvar med bären så granna och fina så nog var den drömmen riktigt sann (But both of the baskets he had were left with berries so shiny and beautiful he knew the dream had been real)". Our review had started when I asked for clarification on how and when to use the word "ju" in Swedish, because I am learning, and my uncle is a native speaker. "It's an exaggerator," he said, "but hard to explain out of context. Can you show me where in the book?" I flipped to the last pages and pointed at the sentence. After his explanation, he asked if there were other words I was unfamiliar with; it was an old children's book, but a very classic Swedish story that he had read to his kids. This copy, in fact, was a birthday gift to his youngest son many years ago. "Ja, säkert. Till exempel, vad är det här? (Yes, sure. For example, what is this?)" We turned to the page before, re-reading the words together. He pointed out words that he thought might be tricky to grasp for someone who had been learning the language for only one year, and I made my best guesses from knowledge or context. When we reached the end of that page, it was only natural to turn back another one. At some point in reading together, our identities changed from native and learner to uncle and niece. "Och Putte undrar: 'Hur ska det gå att båda korgarna med oss få, vi är ju mycket för korta?' Men gubben visslar på ekorrar två. De korgarna svänger på ryggen, se så, i några skutt är det borta" (And Peter wonders: "How will we be able to carry both of the baskets with us, when we are too small?" But the old man whistles for two squirrels. They swing the baskets on their backs, as you see, and with a hop they are gone). This reappearance of the "ju" snapped me back from the comfortable haze of being read to. I was suddenly very aware that we had crossed the line from one set of identities to another, and moreover, we both felt the switch.

My Uncle Per is not my biological uncle, just like my cousins Lars and Sven are not actually my cousins. My mother and Per lived together with their mothers when they were both young children, cementing the idea of a sibling relationship. Per and his mother moved back to Sweden after a few years, but his mother, Gittan, and my grandmother have stayed in close contact both professionally and personally, allowing for the sibling bond between my mother and uncle to develop again in adulthood. When I moved to Europe, the bond and feeling of being uncle/niece grew stronger, and I found myself increasingly having to face our relationship as a topic of conversation. I began learning Swedish a year and a half ago, inevitably leading people to ask: why Swedish? My answer was "I have family there", but the more I said it, the more I thought, is that really true? This essay will explore the topic of non-familial relationships with people who are called by familial titles. The focus will be on the usage of family terms, specifically "aunt" and

"uncle", to address people with whom there are no biological or legal ties. This usage is not honorific, but refers concisely to a familial relationship between two unrelated people. My method included interviewing my own family and extended familial relations, as well as other white Western Europeans and Americans from my peer group. Most were not formal interviews, but spontaneous accounts after I mentioned the topic of my project and asked the subject if s/he had any similar experiences. People were often intrigued to explore the idea of this relationship, as many had experienced it, but not thought of the dynamics and meanings out of an intrapersonal context.

Power Dynamics

I have found that familial categorization leads to two expressions of power dynamics: outside the relationship and inside the relationship. I would define the "outside dynamics" as claiming someone as your own to other people, much in the way that one might casually mention a blood relative that lives abroad. They are the "Oh, I have family there" relationship. The "inside dynamics" can be defined as claiming someone as a particular way of being your own, more focused on the two people inside the relationship. The latter is where a lot of the linguistic power of familial titles come into play; calling someone "uncle" to their face is more consequential than mentioning your Swedish family in passing. The social theory of self-categorization applies to this idea of a familiar term being given to a new member of that social group. John Turner and his colleagues build off ideas of Henri Tajfel when they determine that, "…self-categorization (an individual act) is the generative source of social categorization (a group act)" (Maines 1989: 1515). In plainer words, this means that the act of social categorization, or "outside dynamics" comes from the self-categorization of an individual or individual relationship, or "inside dynamics".

Outside Dynamics

"Outside dynamics," as I have called them, tend to exist in a singular space; one part of the family relation speaking with one or multiple outsiders. This dynamic creates an ease of explanation. With heavy emphasis on blood relationships in the societies I have studied, a speaker can be relatively certain that the listener will have experienced, or be familiar with, the concept of an aunt, uncle, or sometimes, cousin. This shared understanding helps to create an "us/them" mentality and categorize or construct how the relationship works (Qanbar 2001). The familial title relays backstory and context to the subject and person. When I asked my mother about her own experiences with creating this dynamic as a parent, she told me directly, "I wanted you to be able to claim them as family too". This "claim" again, will many times act as a verbal shortcut in situations where the specifics of relations are not needed or necessarily relevant, but an established connection is useful. One of my informants, Jenna, chooses an alternative shortcut. When introducing her father's second wife's children, who are far younger than she, she tends to say their given names, rather than their relation to herself. Her partner, she said, will often step in and specifically name them as siblings (i.e. "This is Jenna's brother"). This claim of familial labels creates a strong sense of specific relational bonding between two people, a claim to outsiders about the relationship they two have: both between themselves, and how their relationship should be approached from the outside. Turner's conclusions again address the structure that specific categorization provides to society: "these categorizations are then the bases for attitudes and subsequent behaviour in various situations" (Maines 1989: 1515).

Inside Dynamics

"Inside dynamics" have a more fluid feeling, because they exist in the space between two specific people, moving and transforming with them. This "dynamic" is claiming someone as a particular way of being your own. For example, people can inuit the difference between a mother and grandmother, even as those relations change over time. Personal accountability is trickier, especially outside of the more regulated Western blood kinship systems, where one party's idea of the relationship might not identically match the other's, hence the dynamic aspect. Family titles are a boon in this case, as they, again, come with many preconceived notions not only about actions, but also emotional support and connection. Specifically, when parental friends are introduced to children, the label of "aunt" or "uncle" helps to relate a friend to the child. It is a category that sets up the dynamic between them and what is appropriate.

When studying family relationships, one should ask the question of why the familial title is given in the first place; what makes an "aunt" or "uncle" different from a friend? "Categorization is an essential cognitive and developmental achievement… categories are especially valuable in infancy and early childhood, when many new objects, events, and people are encountered" (Bornstein and Arterberry 2010: 350); the difference between an "uncle" and a "friend" is the behaviours connected with the terms. Without that difference, more generally, children would have to treat each new encounter as separate and incomparable to anything else. The use of a familial title for an adult, parental friend as family will dictate a different set of behaviours than one that is just a guest, as well as decreasing the catch-all nature of "friend". Familial titles carry more weight as they have a hierarchical aspect inherent, or an implied relational categorization between the two individuals, which "friend" leaves more open. If someone is your parent's friend, what are they to you? The word "friend" also does not reinforce the thread of relation as with "aunt" or "uncle", which immediately refocuses on the parent as a pivot point (mother-sister, mother-daughter). One of my informants, Cynthia, described her childhood in a military family as having strict boundaries between the adult world and the children's world. She did not have any "aunts" or "uncles", and unlike most of my other informants was sure her parents did not have any friends who could have been candidates. The lack was due partially to the nature of military life and the clear separation of personal worlds. There was no need for a relationship between friends and children, hence, no need for categorization. Here, the boundary is physical separation, but the naming of the position of a parent's friend in a child's life often helps to make that boundary clear as well. An example of this is found in the tradition of academic families in St Andrews. Third year academic "mothers" and "fathers" "adopt" first years as academic "children", providing insights unique to the adoptive parents' experiences of life in St Andrews. The idea of calling someone by a title or family name to denote the boundaries of a relationship and appropriate actions (again, age and experiential gap) extends to the "academic" as well. This limits the viability of the connection to the university setting only; any mention of "academic family" immediately codes that interaction as an education-context, and most likely terminates at the graduation of the parents.

One of the specific reasons that I believe these relationships can and should be looked at in the two divided categories of "outside dynamics" and "inside dynamics" is the fact that many of the university aged informants that I spoke with told me that they no longer used these titles, at all.

Many had a non-familial "aunt" or "uncle" that they were introduced to when they were younger, but as they grew older, they no longer used that title when addressing them. The move away from formality adds support to my theory of "inside dynamics", where the title is used as a model or mould. While this specification of a relational dynamic is important in certain situations, such as that of a child and a close parental-aged friend, as the two become more equal in social standing and relative experience, the delineation becomes less necessary, and sometimes hindering. One of my sources grew up calling her parents and other family members by first names, and when she went into day-care found it very shocking to be required to address her teachers as "Auntie". Instead of respectful, it felt patronizing and unnecessarily distancing, a sense not present in the other parts of her life. The titles seemed to create a distinction between two people, or a reminder of their social roles; this provides what many people see as needed structure as a child, but an awkward distance as adults who are aware of the social boundaries.

When speaking of power, there arises more corruptive dynamics. Connotations come with a familial title, so it matters when the titles are taken away or omitted. Although Jenna's partner will intercede and introduce her step-siblings as her brothers and sisters, this is because Jenna herself refuses to refer to them as such. She described that in their dynamic, the age gap between them requires an explanation of their relationship to each other, but she cannot bring herself to call them step-siblings, much less introduce them fully as her siblings. To complicate things further, they readily refer to her as their sister. This disjoint in description relates to the previously discussed idea of "inside dynamics", where specification is needed to establish how to interact in a confusing relationship, as well as the tension created by the mismatch of relational positional assessments. Her reluctance also serves to illustrate my next point: non-blood relationships are seen as more volatile in Western societies and are therefore not as respected. The perceived lower status reflects on Jenna's mother limiting her formal relationships to blood relatives. Restrictive action by a newcomer can highlight the status quo of a society; introducing non-familial relatives into a strictly titled relationship requires established power in the "outside dynamics" as well as the "inside dynamics". Therefore, it could be seen to mean more in terms of social obligation versus choice to give someone a title that equates them with that permanent bond.

Family over Biology

One major component of this whole project has been my personal involvement. The idea of the line between family and friends has played a very big part in the last few years of my life. My early relationship with my "Uncle" Per remained much closer to the "outside dynamics" I outlined earlier. I had known that there was a relationship between my family and his, and by extension myself and him, but it was not specific until I started interacting with him and his family more. Even with the title, there are still complex parts, especially as I increase my independent connection with him and his family. In recent years, he has become more an uncle to me than to my sister. Where does our line of connection end? The question of our connection is compounded, as well, by the fact that, while my mother never formally introduced him to me as my uncle, she considers him her brother. Does this level of family distinction from both sides mean I get more of an "in" on his side? A smaller separation also exists, brought to the forefront by my American informants and my own personal experience: heritage claims. There is an extreme emphasis placed on family connections in the

United States; "...to be an American, you have to do something that people of other countries have never had to do: You have to figure out how you fit into America" (Hershberger 2014). There reaches a point where the biological distance between the two relatives becomes necessary because one person does not say anything about the other in a place where heritage is a way of establishing and defining yourself. I have referred to Per as my uncle in the US, only to contradict myself and explain the nuances of our relationship so my listeners do not get a false impression of my family history.

This question of distinction became salient during the spring break of my second undergraduate year, when I was preparing to go back to Sweden but had not specifically asked if I could stay with Per in his apartment for my trip. I found myself stuck at the first line: how do I formally address a man who I have never called "uncle" to his face, has never been introduced to me as Uncle Per, but who nevertheless is my mother's brother and has played an increasingly important role in my life? In Swedish, family relationships are spelled out, your grandparents are referred to as "mother's father" (morfar), "father's father" (farfar); aunts and uncles, as well as nieces and nephews, are expressed in their adjacency to the middle-man parent. So, I settled on calling my mother's 'brother' exactly that: morbror. It felt more specific and distant than "uncle", because the wideness of the category meant that I was referring to both the most far away, honorific relationship, as well as the nearest, biological relationship. The spelling out of the Swedish term felt to me like a safe distance, where it was so specific that there was no gap in knowledge between us; he would not be able to interpret the title differently. This played into the two strongest connections I had with him: my interest in his native language, as well as our relationship through my mother to each other. When gathering data for this project, I spoke with Cynthia, who previously talked about growing up in a military family, a long-time personal friend of my mother's, who I had not been introduced to in a familial relationship. At the end of my interview with her, because it had been quite informal, I asked if it was alright to use our conversation, and to name her. She said it was fine to use our conversation, and that I could call her "Aunt Cynthia" when I spoke about her. She made this offer as a direct reference to the topic of the interview and was not actually expecting me to refer to her as Aunt. However, her reference solidified my sense of the difference between the people I grew up with—close friends of my mothers who could have easily been named family relations— and the "adoptive" uncle that I do have.

A final question to address is the relationship of non-related family members to biological family with the same title: how does this decisive inclusion work with biological family members? One of my informants, Chloe, told me about her own experience. She called one of her mother's close friends "uncle", which originally made her mother's brothers uncomfortable. The inclusion of friends as family links one specific person with one specific part of a larger family group. Almost never does the "uncle" relationship extend beyond one particular child or group of siblings. The part that is perceived as the most startling, and perhaps unsettling, is the direct act of comparison when using "uncle" to describe multiple people, across multiple relationships. Speaking directly to another member of the same category is where it is most important to consider family titles as social categories and their crossings of "outside" and "inside" dynamics. In-category relationships can be the hardest to manage because they imply "outside" and "inside" dynamics at the same time. My sister often chides me for speaking of "my mother" to her, when we exists in the same category- that of a daughter. While

there is a biological truth in speaking of "my mother" versus "our mother" or simply "Mom", the specific personal pronoun incites the "outside" dynamics; it is subtextually implying that the listener's point of view on this relationship is only as one from the outside, dismissing subjective "inside" knowledge of similar relationships to the specific speaker. My sister is my mother's daughter, as I am, the same way that Chloe is the niece of her biological uncles, as she is of her "adoptive" uncle. Once Chloe's uncles met her other "uncle", they became much more open to him and his presence in Chloe's family. The unique quality of this dynamic calls for refocusing on the reason for the categorization and difference between family and friend: clearer relationships.

Richard Jenkins states that "social identification – knowing who we are and who others are – is a pre-requisite of social action" (2000: 8). Friends and family play an enormous role in all of our lives, so the analysis and investigation of what these ties and relationships mean is vital to understanding society, others, and especially ourselves. The importance and recognition of the role categorization plays in our social lives has the implication of extending to language acquisition as well. As I have argued above, clear categorization may be important for the development of children's minds. This connection extends beyond family terms into colour theory, where adjective order had an impact on children's ability to grasp colour categories. English uses colour words "pronominally", meaning English speakers do not say "balloon red" like Spanish or French speakers might, but instead "the red balloon". "In the first case ('the balloon is red'), kids learn that 'red' is the name of a property, like wet, or sharp, while in the second case ('the red balloon'), kids learn that 'red' is more like a proper name" (Dye 2010); in the case of familial names, the title of "uncle" acts as the property or special distinct aspect of that person's relationship to another. All family relationships are special, and creating more ways for people to claim each other, as family, as friends, or as family friends, only strengthens the meaning of the bonds.

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