

Fictive Kinship Relations: a Comparative Study of University and Immigrant Life

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INTRODUCTION

In beginning this project, I mused about the different areas in which my fieldwork could be conducted. After contemplating this for quite a while, the realisation finally came to me that the best possible place to study would be the one that I have grown to love over the past two years. The little coastal town of St. Andrews has such a diverse group of people all sharing in the life of this unique place that I now consider a home away from home. Some of what makes this town so special to so many students is its rich history of tradition. Being almost 600 years old, there are many traditional aspects of St. Andrews that I could have chosen, but with so much happening throughout the year, I had to narrow down my search. For many of my friends and me, the best tradition is that of the academic family and Raisin Weekend. For me, this part of student life has been incredibly fulfilling, not just in the sense of getting settled in a new place, but also for lasting friendships that I never would have had otherwise. Everyone I spoke to on the subject had the same general feeling about their academic families and loved every minute of getting to know them.

At the start of Fresher's Week each year, thousands of new first years can be seen trolling bars and house parties for willing third years to take them under their wing and into a new kind of familial relationship. Through academic families, freshers have the opportunity to form bonds with older students who will guide them through the new adventures of life at the University of St. Andrews. In my experience, my academic parents gave me the best Raisin Weekend I could have hoped for, introduced me to a whole new set of people I never would have known otherwise and we will hopefully remain friends for the rest of our lives. Raisin Weekend is takes place for two days in November in which academic parents get their children incredibly drunk, dress them up in silly costumes and send them, with hangovers, to a foam fight. This is just a small part of what makes academic families such an enjoyable tradition.

In the process of interviewing students at the university, I hoped to come across someone who could tell me why they decided not to involve themselves in this tradition but was not able to find anyone. I think this is significant in showing that most students embrace this tradition wholeheartedly, which has allowed it to continue for so many years. In an anthropological sense, the St. Andrews tradition of the academic family can be likened to the bonds formed in migrant communities across the globe. The shared uncertainty of embarking on a journey through an unfamiliar culture makes is alike to both university students and immigrants. My interviews with students combined with anthropological research on immigrant populations shows how the relationships forged between newcomers and established members of a community are beneficial to the incorporation of these groups into a new society.

FICTIVE KINSHIP

Starting a new life in a new place is always intimidating and often quite overwhelming. The academic family tradition at the University of St. Andrews provides a buffer for incoming students to help them adjust to what their new life will be like for the next four years. Similarly, immigrants moving to another country face many challenges transitioning into an environment to which they are completely alien. In order to move forward, they must find some comfort in the people around them and begin friendships to help guide them through the foreign environment. Everyone wants to feel accepted and, for example, 'Raisin weekend, at its best, brings a sense of belonging and security to student life,' (Pitkeithly 2006), like the bonds formed in migrant groups do. Kinship bonds, often not genetically related, exist in both situations, with people clinging onto what help comes their way. These relationships, formed without consanguinity, are known as fictive kinship. Fictive kinship is used to describe kinship relations or social ties that are neither affinal, meaning related by marriage, nor consanguinal, meaning related by blood. This form of kinship is relevant to people who form relationships in which they regard another as being part of their family due to ties of affection or emotional significance. In St. Andrews, the academic family can provide

an emotional bond like this between first years and third years, just as immigrants might form similar bonds with people met during their transition. In a new environment, a helping hand or a friendly face is the most welcome thing someone can see and the connection that follows can bring comfort and support for long after.

Part of the immigrant community in every city around the world consists of people who have left their families in home countries to establish a life and make a better living in a place before bringing them over. Many of these people send money they have earned home in order to support the family that still remains at their place of origin. Fictive kinship exists in these situations between the lone individual trying to put down roots in a different country and already established families who have previously gone through the same experiences. In Asian immigrant populations in the United States, 'unattached males are usually befriended by families in the immigrant community,' (Curry & Ebaugh, 2000: 199) who frequently invite them for meals and integrate them into their own family. Children often end up calling these men uncles, as they see them often and spend a considerable amount of time with them. When the uncles eventually bring their families to the United States with them, they are also incorporated into these fictive kin relationships as aunts and cousins.

For the academic children of St. Andrews, a comparable experience to that of the uncles in Asian immigrant communities is seen through house parties and dinner parties. As families already established in a place might include lonely immigrants into their social circle, so do academic parents. In order to get to know some of the student body better, parents will invite their children to parties or dinners that their friends are throwing. This opens up another whole side of a first year's social life, as it allows different years to get to know each other and, in a small town like St. Andrews, it is important to meet people in different stages of their university studies. Every informant I interviewed talked in some way about feeling accepted through invitations to these kinds of parties. When asked how being in an academic family has impacted her university experience, a third year called Olivia answered, 'it opened up more possibilities from a social point of view, especially when we were in halls, and at the

start of the year, it gave us access to dinners and parties where we met people we might never have otherwise known.' Being involved in the social elements of a community are paramount to becoming an active part of a new space and these social opportunities become an aid for this.

In looking at fictive kin relations, social capital must also be addressed. Social capital plays a role in the assimilation of immigrants into a new society as it, 'refers to positions and relationships in groupings and social networks...that can serve to enhance an individual's access to opportunities, information, material resources, and social status' (Curry & Ebaugh, 2000: 190). A fictive kin system enhances an immigrant's social capital and becomes a resource for aiding their integration into a new society. Social capital through fictive kinship acts as a support in the process of settling into an unfamiliar environment. In rural Bangladesh, these relationships are established for both social and economic capital. They can exist between upper and lower-caste people where it is possible for, 'poor persons to ask influential persons of the village for financial assistance in exchange for taking care of them in their old age,' (Curry & Ebaugh, 2000: 192) providing mutual gain for both parties and a life-long relationship like that of kin. In countries like the United States, immigrants can sometimes find their surroundings quite unfriendly and so, 'fictive kin serve as social and economic resources that can be used in a hostile social environment,' (Curry & Ebaugh, 2000: 194) making the transition process easier and less emotionally stressful. For students, academic families can prove useful in later life, not just for friendships, but also for providing contacts in the job market after leaving university. Social capital is therefore an important aspect of fictive kinship.

SUPPORT SYSTEM

For immigrant groups, religion can prove to be a source of acceptance and solace and many fictive kin associations are established in a religious setting, like a baptism. Baptisms are the act of initiating an individual into a religion and making them a part of a network of people with shared beliefs. During the baptismal ceremony, 'note the

ritualization of a child being accepted into “God's family”,’ (Cornwell & Thomson, 2009: 1) making them associated with fictive kinship through their faith and others who engage with it as well. The godparents of the individual being baptised form a fictive kinship connection with the newly baptised, their parents and with any other godparents the baptised person may have. Migrants can use these relationships to form closer ties between themselves and another individual, giving them an ally in their new home through spirituality. The duty of a godparent is to watch over their godchild and this system of support can prove paramount in starting a new life somewhere. Having someone to rely on, ‘increases the feeling of solidarity and group identity...migrants...depend on these fictive kinship relationships to help them adjust to their new environment and become acculturated,’ (Carlos, 1973: 86) as they can be advantageous throughout the process of becoming a part of the society.

In the Vietnamese immigrant population in the United States, ‘brothers and sisters may not be consanguinally related but part of a fictive kin network,’ (Curry & Ebaugh, 2000: 198) like that of the fictive kinship relation in St. Andrews. For students, their academic parents might adopt a large number of other children and automatically, those are considered your brothers and sisters. In Asian communities, a parent’s close friends would always be considered aunts or uncles, even though no blood relation exists (Curry & Ebaugh, 2000: 198). Similarly, in St. Andrews’ academic families, a parent’s close friends are a child’s academic aunts and uncles and often engage in Raisin Weekend activities alongside these parents and the aunt’s or uncle’s own academic children, who would then be considered academic cousins. In both these instances, the fictive kin relations extend far beyond any sense of a nuclear family as, ‘even though the child may use these familial terms in addressing the adult, he or she may have no blood relationship to that individual,’ (Curry & Ebaugh, 2000: 199) which incorporates many people into what one may consider to be a part of their family.

Both in immigrant communities and in St. Andrews, fictive kinship exists to provide support to newcomers in the population. In St. Andrews, academic families help new students to quickly learn the intricacies of their new environment, just as in

immigrant communities, 'fictive kin systems bind people to one another emotionally and socially...to mitigate hostility...and enhance community solidarity' (Curry & Ebaugh, 2000: 201). Arriving in a new place for the first time seems so much easier when there is someone there for guidance and support through the first steps of homogenising into the culture. For the students of St. Andrews, academic parents become this system of comfort that they can turn to for advice. I remember receiving advice from my academic father on navigating my way through the balance of coursework and social activities. Trina, a second year student, share similar memories and related to me that, 'being in an academic family has provided a support network for me throughout my university life. My parents told me what to expect and how to handle certain situations, while cousins, brothers and sisters went through the experiences with me,' showing how useful this tradition of fictive kin relations has been to her.

For some people, academic parents provide an inlet into larger social networks and provide a means to meet new people. For Alex, another second year student, his parents integrated him into the student experience and introduced him to people in more senior years, which in turn enhanced his social life at the university. For immigrants, a similar reaction is relayed by which those who provide 'social support for a newly arrived immigrant' (Curry & Ebaugh, 2000: 205) often establish 'a lifelong relationship between that individual and all members of the host family' (Curry & Ebaugh, 2000: 205). The feeling of being aided in a foreign situation makes both students and immigrants bond with those who help them.

INCEST TABOO

In societies that utilise fictive kinship terminology, an incest taboo is created in relation to those that an individual calls by kinship terms. This contrasts sharply to the conceptions of incest in the academic families of St. Andrews. In Shanti Nagar, India, 'the application of kinship terminology to all the people of a North Indian village appears to be related to...the extension of the incest taboo to all women born in the village,' (Freed 1963: 88) therefore making sure that fictive kin do not overstep the boundaries

of who they consider family. Relatives in this society are treated with the upmost respect and care and any intimate relations would constitute as morally reprehensible. In the North Indian village, 'the existence of a fictive sibling tie is said effectively to prevent the initiation of a sexual liaison,' (Vatuk 1969: 267) because the relationship between brother and sister requires high respect, which would be violated if sex were involved. However, a contradiction arises here, which relates back to the frequent instances of academic incest in St. Andrews. The fictive tie between two people who are considered brother and sister is supposed to prevent a sexual relationship, but in fact, it 'permits a degree of freedom of interaction between persons of the opposite sex which cannot take place...unless the man is younger than the woman's husband,' (Vatuk 1969: 267) and this can be taken advantage of to facilitate an illicit sexual relationship, 'for the association of such a couple will not be openly questioned,' (Vatuk 1969: 267) making it easy for them to spend time together without supervision.

The incest that is supposed to be forbidden due to fictive kinship is entirely allowed, and often encouraged, in St. Andrews. During the activities of Raisin Weekend, academic parents have been known to force their academic children to kiss each other or face punishment in the form of alcoholic consumption. Also, quite often, academic fathers will engage in sexual relationships with their academic daughters, because, as fourth year Luke told me, 'quite often at this age, girls will go for guys who are older to hopefully find someone more mature. Guys will go for younger girls because it's such a small town and your year just gets boring.' Luke openly admitted to me that he has no shame in the fact that he committed academic incest frequently with one of his daughters throughout his third year. The relationship only ended recently and he mused to me that, 'neither of us had any expectations, so it actually brought us closer and we became better friends as a result. I have a big soft spot for her now. I definitely wouldn't take it back, I had a great incest experience.' The culture of incest in this sleepy Scottish university town is one that has been present throughout the history of the tradition of academic families. Though a fictive kinship exists between academic father and daughter, there are no qualms about breaking that familial barrier and giving way to

lust. I asked another student whether he committed academic incest or not to which he replied, 'Well yea, of course, but I was far too drunk to really notice or give a damn!' which shows the lack of seriousness or taboo that surrounds St. Andrews' idea of incest relations among fictive kin.

CONCLUSION

Without my academic family, I would not be living in the space I am now or with the same people. I most likely would not know as many third and fourth years as I do and I certainly would not have formed as close relationships with them as I have now. Becoming a part of the St. Andrews community would also have proved much more difficult without that support, as there are many different aspects of university life, and of life generally in this town, that took adjusting to. Everyone I talked to in my interviews agreed that the academic family tradition is an important aid to succeeding in student life. The fictive kin bonds formed through academic families are like those of immigrants coming to a new place and creating relationships with those around them in order to assimilate to an unfamiliar situation and culture. One of the students I interviewed, Charlie, detailed that having academic parents, 'helped me to get stuck in. If anything, it sped up the settling in process hugely and made me feel a lot more comfortable in a place I hardly knew,' which is the same reaction I got from most students. This is also a view many immigrants might have when asked how the people they met upon arrival helped them to find their way through the unknown. Fictive kinship connections are essential in providing the support and understanding that an individual needs when starting a new life.

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