

# Exploring “Close Relations”

Wahlström Henriksson, Helena & Klara Goedecke, eds. 2022. *Close Relations: Family, Kinship, and Beyond*. Singapore: Springer. (220 pages)

**FEMINIST AND QUEER** scholars interested in family, kin “and beyond” often express discomfort when asked to define their area of study. Personally, I find it hard to describe my own expertise, as terms such as “family sociology” not only fail to resonate but also impose limitations. On the one hand, there is a compelling need to argue for the importance and merit of studying relationships associated with the broader concept of family. On the other, there is an awareness of the oppressive baggage, connotations and limits inherent in the term. Several concepts have been suggested by researchers, and yet another one is put forth by the editors and authors of the anthology *Close Relations: Family, Kinship, and Beyond*. Informed by critical kinship studies rooted in anthropology, and by critical studies of family lives primarily within the field of sociology, coupled with insights from feminist and gender studies research, the anthology introduces the concept of *close relations*. According to editors Helena Wahlström Henriksson and Klara Goedecke, this concept has the potential to acknowledge “a certain quality of inter-human relationships, a lived experience of being close to somebody, a closeness that may be socially and culturally acceptable, and which may be legally regulated, or not” (2). The term

“close” furthermore enables a focus on both the “closed-off” and the “closeted,” illuminating moments when boundaries are drawn, and when they are resisted.

The volume is impressive in scope and ambition, which is both its weakness and its strength. With contributions from 19 authors covering five national contexts in 12 chapters (and, in addition, a comprehensive introduction) diversity is evident. The authors come from different disciplinary backgrounds, and use different methods and theories to analyse different types of empirical data, ranging from novels, life writing and legal documents, to interviews and autobiographical accounts. This demands a substantial commitment from the reader. However, the authors navigate this challenge by contextualizing their contributions in historical and social moments, which enhance the accessibility and significance of their work.

The contributions within this collection present insights into either previously unexplored topics, or familiar subjects approached from novel perspectives. Lena Ahlin’s careful analysis of narratives of adoptees from South Korea in American and Swedish literature shows how subjects become “affect aliens” in their countering of narratives of happiness and rescue, while simultaneously being “expected to perform the affective and ideological labor of allowing their adoptive parents to enjoy parenthood” (98). Anna Williams explores contemporary Swedish literature addressing migration and identity, with a particular focus on the perspective of children – now adults – of first-generation immigrants. Williams discerns the essential role of mothers in these narratives and delves into the narrators’ ambition to “speak for her,” which leads to a nuanced analysis of both giving voice to and appropriating that very same voice.

Several chapters offer original analysis of interview data focusing parenting “on the margins”, and when considered together, they highlight prevailing norms in parenting practices. Catrine Andersson and Charlotta Carlström explore the (im)possibility of combining polyamory with parenting, exposing the enduring strong connections between having children and notions of respectability, couple norms, and gender.

Kitty Lassinantti and Anna-Lena Almqvist's study of mothers diagnosed with ADHD, reveals the invisible demands of "cognitive responsibility" that is expected of all mothers; namely, the ability to organise and plan for their family members. When this ability is lacking, the gendered nature of such demands becomes visible and in need of medical treatment. Thus, the mothers in Lassinantti and Almqvist's study are medicalised into conforming to the role of "appropriate mothers", that is, subjects capable and willing to perform housework. Lina Šumskaitė and Margarita Gedvilaite-Kordusiene focus childless women's relations to "children of others" in a Lithuanian context, suggesting that while younger women may be shifting towards more individualised positions, there remains a significant social investment by childless women in kin networks. This, I argue, underscores the potential of extending research beyond the parent-child dyad.

The emphasis on the parent-child relation in nearly all contributions within this anthology is acknowledged by the editors in their introduction. They attribute this focus to the persistent "force of the parent-child dyad and, oftentimes, the nuclear family, in shaping the research" (7). While this observation may be correct, isn't it the responsibility of researchers, especially those of us explicitly seeking to transcend boundaries, to critically examine our own attention span, so to say? Could our theories, even those considered queer, inadvertently keep us set at specific focuses, despite our intention to explore broader perspectives and relationships? The potential in moving beyond the parent-child focus is visible in Leoni Linek's nuanced analysis of friendship – a relation that has also received quite a lot of attention in research – but Linek rightly points out that cross-gender friendship remains under-researched, and her analysis offers fresh insights into the workings of heteronormativity.

This collection of essays is impressive and inspires to more research on close relations, thus, also proving the suggested concepts' potential. In addition, it presents a compelling case for the strength of qualitative methods and analysis, as well as for the possibilities of cross-fertilization between academic disciplines. It leaves me curious of future endeavours

in feminist and gender studies of close relations, pushing boundaries beyond the pervasive force of the parent–child dyad, encouraging us to stretch our imagination to explore also other topics (siblings, neighbours, cousins, in-laws, care workers, pets), to strive towards a more encompassing understanding of the complex web of close connections that shape our lives.

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