
Special Section: Re-Imagining the Margins of Kinship

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Introduction to the Special Section

Marginality is often discussed in terms of law, criminality and poverty. This special section expands the discussion on marginality and the margins into the sphere of what are often our most intimate relationships: kinship.

While kinship is often approached through its positive, affectionate aspects, such as ‘mutuality of being’ (Sahlins 2011), this special section draws attention to the dark side of kinship (cf. Lambek 2011; Das 1995), its ‘hierarchies and exclusions’ (Carsten 2013: 230) by focusing on its margins. We understand kinship as characterised not only by relationships commonly understood as biogenetic relatedness, but also including a wide array of other relationships, such as those created through committed everyday care (Borneman 1997), choice (Weston 1997), and other forms of ‘kinning’ (Howell 2003). Although kinship is traditionally seen to belong to the private and the domestic realm, feminist authors have for a long time shown that it is crucially intertwined with questions of power, politics, law and inequality (e.g. Rubin 1975; Strathern 2005; McKinnon & Cannell 2013; Thelen & Alber 2017). Therefore, as political, legal, economic and sociocultural norms and possibilities shape individuals’ experiences of kinship, the forms of support, exclusion or discrimination taking place in kin relations offer an intimate perspective on marginality.

While marginality is often approached as a state of weakness, several authors have shown how the margins can grant persons particular perspectives and forms of agency and power that allow them to

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resist and challenge their exclusion (Butler 2015; Das & Randeria 2015; Das & Walton 2015; Rao 2015; Scott 1985, 1992; Tsing 1993). Most importantly, marginality can be understood as an ambiguous state: on the one hand as something forgotten and discriminated against, but on the other, as crucial for 'the centre' to define its identity (Green 2005: 10, 218-219; Tsing 1993, 1994). Therefore, marginality is not always shaped by a straight-out rejection, but may be characterised by more subtle forms of social disregard. Who, then, can be understood as being at the margins of kinship?

Frequently, those who do not conform to normative understandings of gender and sexuality become 'exiles from kinship' (Weston 1997). LGBTIQ+ and gender non-conforming persons often face forms of discrimination and exclusion from their family and kin relations in various parts of the world (e.g. Zengin 2019; Shirinian 2018). However, persons who may be excluded or rejected by their biogenetic, native family, may find forms of kinship and support through other kinds of relationships (e.g. Weston 1997; Sorainen 2020; Mizielńska & Stasińska 2014, 2019).

Nevertheless, in some places such as contemporary Russia, where two of the articles in this special section are situated, such marginalisation from kin relations is accompanied by imprints of criminality and lawlessness, highlighting the legally and politically as well as socially precarious position of those at the margins of kinship. However, in other places such as contemporary Cuba, which the final article in this section discusses, the official legal and political climate is relatively supportive of sexual and gender diversity, but sociocultural understandings are still discriminatory, pushing some people to the margins of kinship. Elsewhere, such as in Finland (the focus of the first article in this section), the legal, political, and social climate are considerably accepting of sexual and gender diversity, yet there are still obstacles in the way of full gender and sexual equality. By exploring how the margins

of kinship take shape in diverse historical and sociocultural contexts, these articles compare and contrast varied processes of marginalisation and their complex social consequences.

This special section consists of four articles which were created over a four-year research project ‘CoreKin: Contrasting and Re-imagining the Margins of Kinship’ (2016-2020, grant number 297957) funded by the Academy of Finland and led by Dr Antu Sorainen. The articles all discuss a particular aspect of being at the margins of kinship by drawing on original empirical research material.

The first article, ‘(Re)Defining Legal Parenthood and Kinship: The Limits of Legal Change in the Finnish Child Custody Act of 2019’ by Anna Moring, examines the changes in legal understandings of kinship, parenthood and family in the process of redrafting the Act on Child Custody and Right of Access in Finland. Through an analysis of legal discourses, it argues that Finland took on an internationally leading role in separating the parent’s right of access from custody, biology and legal parenthood. This change created a shift from a biogenetically understood notion of kinship towards a more flexible, individualised notion. However, while redefining some older forms of marginality, this process simultaneously left some forms of structural exclusion unattended, therefore displaying the complexly ambiguous character of marginality.

The second article, ‘Babushkas between Lesbian-Headed Families and the Russian State: Making an Intelligible Model of Extended Mothering’ by Alisa Zhabenko, shifts the discussion to Finland’s neighbouring Russia, where LGBTIQ+ identified persons are in a particularly difficult situation in the midst of authoritarian state regulations. Drawing on various forms of empirical research data, this article focuses on the details of the kin relations of a group of Russian lesbian women and, in particular, the centrally important character of the grandmother, *the babushka*. The article shows how, as a traditional element of Russian extended understandings of kinship, grandmothers come to form

a protective ‘shield’ between the LGBTIQ+ hostile state and lesbian couples with children, by creating the illusion of a widely socially accepted family model. The article displays how biogenetic understandings of kinship are highlighted in lesbian families through the central position of the birth-giving mother’s maternal grandmother, and relates this to the particularities of Russia’s legal, political and social context that is exceptionally hostile towards LGBTIQ+ relations. This way, although discourses on LGBTIQ+ kinship often highlight their ‘chosen’ character (Weston 1997), in some contexts, biological understandings are emphasised.

The third article, “‘Thank God, I have a Separate Dwelling’: Restructuring Kinship through Grandmaternal Sidelining in the Heterosexual Families of Russian Natural-Parenting Mothers’ by Anna Avdeeva also focuses on grandmothers in Russian kin relations. However, this article examines self-identified Russian followers of ideas of ‘natural parenting’, whose understandings of kinship prioritise the relationship between a mother and a child in the context of a heterosexual nuclear family. They reject the child’s other relations, such as grandmothers, as a potentially harmful influence on the child. Therefore, this new understanding of kinship contests a more ingrained idea of Russian kin relations, whereby grandmothers have traditionally played a central role, contributing to the increasing nuclearisation of Russian kin relations and marginalising grandmothers in a new way. However, the article shows that only privileged and economically stable individuals are able to reject the support of their wider kin members and redefine the margins of kinship as a question of personal preference.

The last article in the collection, ‘Marginalisations and Redefinitions of Kinship in Contemporary Cuba’ by Heidi Härkönen, explores shifts in understandings of kinship and experiences of marginality amongst low-income Cubans. This article draws on long-term ethnographic research amongst a community of poor Havana residents to show how, in the context of the large-scale political,

economic, legal and social developments that have been taking place in Cuba since the 1990s, structural shifts may create unexpected forms of social marginalisation. Resonating with the two previous articles with their focus on Russian grandmothers, this article concentrates on the experiences of an elderly mother and grandmother, who should be at the centre of local kin relations in terms of traditional understandings of Caribbean, mother-centred kinship. However, in the contemporary context shaped by poverty, crime, new ideas of sexuality and novel privileges of money, she comes to face marginalisation because of the actions and identities of her kin, but also to find new sources of support at the margins. The article argues that marginality in this case does not create a form of political or social resistance, as many authors have suggested, but is ambiguous and shifting in the context of structural changes.

As a whole, this special section makes an opening towards re-imagining the margins of kinship in several ways. It shows that we need to expand our understandings of marginality from the usual discussions of crime, poverty and sexual and gender non-conformity, towards more varied forms of marginality that may emerge in the intimate context of kinship and other particularly close relationships. It highlights how studies of kinship need to pay attention to not only those at the centre of kin relations, but also to those who may find themselves at its margins, and the socially, legally, politically and economically complex consequences that such marginality may create. It demonstrates that political, legal and other structural developments may create shifts in understandings of both marginality and kinship, redefining some older forms of exclusion, but also shaping some new blind spots for state policies, legislation and everyday sociality. It displays the contextually varied complexity of understandings of biogenetic and other, alternative ideas in defining kinship and its margins, and their multiple consequences for individuals' lives in terms of identity, subjectivity, relatedness and day-to-day practicalities of care. Finally, this special section contributes to feminist discussions of law by drawing attention to the multiple ways in which law as an abstract system may

create complex and contextually varying intimate social consequences for individual experiences of kinship, and how, only rarely, the daily practicalities of kinship may become reflected in legal processes.

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