Conceptualization of family: complexities of defining an Indigenous family

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Abstract

Defining family is complex, particularly when considering cultural aspects, characteristic 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 differences 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

The concept of family is a fundamental way of operationalizing social structure (Cox & Paley, 1997). Demographers, sociologists, policy planners, and decision 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 enumeration 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 structures 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; Bartholomew, 1964; Limaye, 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. Indigenous1 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 Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups have been well established (Smith, 1999; 1 The term, "Indigenous" is a used in this paper in substitution of "Aboriginal". "Indigenous" is viewed to be more inclusive of the various Indigenous populations in Canada and in other countries (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, 2014b). 3 Waldram, Herring, & Young, 2006). If perceptions of family differ between Indigenous and nonIndigenous 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, commonalities 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.

Objectives

The concept of family is complex as definitions differ based on theoretical perspectives, demographic and policy needs/uses and applications, and on the purpose of its use and application. As Canadian researchers, we are interested in understanding the relevance of current 4 family theories and definitions for Indigenous populations. We hope to bring forth greater insight on the implications of using non-Indigenous definitions for Indigenous families and alternative ways to define family. Thus, the goal of the present review is to examine existing theories and literature to understand definitions of family and their relevance to Indigenous populations. More specifically, the purposes of the present review are to 1) provide an overview of current ways to define family found in the research literature; 2) address the implications of using general definitions to define Indigenous families; and 3) conceptualize components of family particularly relevant in an Indigenous context. Starting with the literature review, we first describe Indigenous groups of Canada and the importance of defining family for various populations and institutional bodies. Methods of the literature search are then outlined, followed by a synthesis of findings from the literature review, which are presented in the following order: 1) current ways to define family through the general systems theory, 2) complexities of defining family through the theory of family boundary ambiguity, 3) issues in defining families specifically for Indigenous people through current definitions, and 4) factors to consider in understanding an Indigenous family. This review is concluded with a discussion and conclusion which allow for a discussion of the implications of these definitions, in particular in an Indigenous context.

Indigenous peoples of Canada

Although Indigenous groups in Canada are numerous, diverse, and include many groups, three Indigenous groups, Indian (or First Nations), Métis, and Inuit, are recognized by the Canadian 5 Constitution Act of 1982. First Nations people include status and non-status Indian people (AANDC, 2010a). A First Nations person with status, as recognized by the federal government of Canada, is an individual that is registered with the government under the Indian Act as a First Nations person (AANDC, 2010b). The term, "First Nations" is typically used instead of "Indian", though the latter is the recognized term listed in the Canadian Constitution Act (1982). Métis historically refers to the offspring of European traders and First Nations women (AANDC, 2010a). Currently, Métis includes those of "mixed First Nations and European ancestry" (AANDC, 2003, 2010a). The term "Inuit" originates from the Inuktitut language, which means "the people" (AANDC, 2010a; ITK, 2014).

Origins of Inuit identity include "Indigenous people of Arctic Canada" of four Inuit land-claim regions: Nunavut, Nunavik, Nunatsiavut, and the Inuvialuit region of the Northwest Territories (AANDC, 2010a; ITK, 2014).

Family definitions

– who needs them and why? Families are defined through a range of terms for various reasons, including providing information for government and regulatory agencies, social service programs and community organizations, researchers and academics, and families themselves. To provide a basis for the utility and relevance of family definitions, details on how family definitions are used by various forms of institutional bodies are provided herein.

Government and regulatory agencies.

Government and regulatory agencies use specific measures to define families for specific objectives. For example, definitions of family used by national statistical agencies in western societies (e.g., Statistics Canada, U.S. Census Bureau, 6 Australian Bureau of Statistics) define families based on household composition (Milan & Bohnert, 2012; Vespa, Lewis, & Kreider, 2013). These definitions are used to understand and report on national population demographics on families and family types, including economic implications, such as the number of families who are homeowners, number of those living below poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013b), as well as changes in family living arrangements (Milan & Bohnert, 2012; Vespa, Lewis, & Kreider, 2013). These definitions may also serve institutional purposes, such as identifying dependent taxation benefits, or for the purposes of regulatory law (e.g., family law) (Canada Revenue Agency, 2014). As an example, definitions of 'child', 'parent', and 'spouse' are specifically outlined in provincial (e.g., Ontario, Canada) family law (Family Law Act, Chapter F.3, 1990) in Canada. These definitions are needed to understand the eligibility of rights or obligations of individual family members, such as the rights of guardianship of a child and obligations of parents to dependents (Family Law Act, Chapter F.3, 1990). Specific terms are also provided in the case of divorce and separation, and child and spousal support (Family Law Act, Chapter F.3, 1990). Legal definitions indicate precise terms for family definitions, unambiguously allowing individuals to understand their rights within the law.

Social service programs and community organizations.

Social services and community organizations are dependent on definitions of family. Social services may use specific family definitions to determine custodial rights of an individual, such as determining who would be the legal guardian of a child in the case of death of the child's parents/guardians (Child and Family Services Act, Chapter C.11, 1990). On the other hand, community organizations may allow 7 individuals to determine their own family unit for participation in family-related programs (Aboriginal Family Services Centre, 2014).

Researchers and academics.

While demographers and program planners use specific terms for defining family in populations, researchers and academics have also developed specific terminology with different concepts. Family scholars may examine perceptions of family and the impact on family functioning (Gardner, 1996; Pasley, 1994); social scientists may examine theoretical frameworks of family and challenge family

definitions (Boss & Greenberg, 1984; Levin & Trost, 1992; Trost, 1990). In contrast to the use of unambiguous and clearly specified definitions of family, family scholars acknowledge that there is not a single or correct way to define family (Bernardes, 1999; Tillman & Nam, 2008; Tomás, 2013; Trost, 1990).

Families themselves.

Perceptions of family vary among families and even among individuals within a family. Perception of family among individuals and families themselves is personal and influenced by factors including, but not limited to, cultural norms, social and biological relationships, economic dependence, and residence (Brokenleg, 2000; Levin & Trost, 1992; Schwede, 2004). For example, inclusion of extended family members as part of the family may differ among families, possibly due to their involvement and location of residence. A divorced or distant parent may be viewed as part of a family by one individual (e.g., child) but not by another (e.g., ex-spouse) (Carroll, et al., 2007).

Methods

For this literature review, peer-reviewed scholarly articles as well as 'grey literature' (e.g., government publications and book chapters) were included. The 'Google Scholar' search engine was used to gather relevant sources, using a combination of the following search terms, "family definition", "family theory/concepts", "Indigenous/Aboriginal family", "cultural family", "family boundary ambiguity" and "family type". Initially, the literature search was focused on North American Indigenous families; however, as the search yielded few results, the literature search was extended to include literature from Australia and New Zealand. In addition, when an article was found to be relevant, other articles by the same author(s) were searched and obtained. First, general concepts included in definitions of family were identified. Next, factors influencing the concept of family specific to Indigenous populations were conceptualized. In conceptualizing components relevant to Indigenous families, we conducted a process of thematic mapping. As we reviewed current literature, key points were noted.

Current ways to define family

Based on our review of the literature and the various purposes by which families are defined by government and regulatory agencies, researchers and academics, social services and community organizations, and individuals, we identified three key components in defining families: blood ties, legal status, and residence. Each component is in line with a general systems theory approach in defining family. In the following sections, the general systems theory is outlined, followed by a description of blood, legal, and residential status concepts as they apply to this theory.

General systems theory

The general systems theory, introduced by Bertalanffy (1950), suggests that families may be viewed as organized systems defined by set boundaries. Each family unit is identified as a separate system. Within each system, a hierarchical structure of subsystems exists, defined by clear boundaries. Subsystems may be a parent, child, or a sibling to the child. Boundaries within a system differentiate the subsystems, and interactions between subsystems define the roles and functions of each person (Cox & Paley, 1997).

A general systems theory approach in defining family is evident in western society and is used by demographers and for purposes related to national statistics. For example, the national censuses in both Canada (i.e., "census family") and the USA (i.e., "family") limit the definition to immediate family members living at the same dwelling (Statistics Canada, 2013; U.S. Census Bureau, 2013a). Terms such as "economic family" (Canada) or "family group" (USA) extend the definition to include extended family members living at the same dwelling (Statistics Canada, 2012b, 2013; U.S. Census Bureau, 2013a). In such cases, the boundary of the household unit defines what is considered 'family'. Apart of residential location, clear boundaries of a family unit may also be defined by biological or legal relationships.

Residence Family

Residence family may be defined by those who reside at the same dwelling, creating a discrete family unit. For instance, "census" and "economic" families are defined as families living in the same household. A census family may include a couple (opposite or same sex, married or common law) with or without children; a single parent family; or grandparent(s) living with their grandchildren (without their parents) (Statistics Canada, 2011). Census family types are examples of economic families, though an economic family may expand to include other relatives residing at the same dwelling (Statistics Canada, 2012b), supporting the general systems theory of a family. By Statistics Canada's definition (2012b), an economic family "refers to a group of two or more persons who live in the same dwelling and are related to each other by blood, marriage, common-law or adoption". Through the boundaries of a household unit, a family unit is clearly defined.

Blood relationships

Family may be defined through blood relationships. Individuals often use biological ties to identify and understand their relation to other family members (e.g., parent, sibling, grandparent). Family based on biological relationships is also recognized at the institutional level (e.g., government/regulatory agencies and social services). For example, an individual may gain the estate of a deceased biological parent, regardless of whether there was any social interaction (Ontario Ministry of the Attorney General, 2014). Thus, two individuals related by blood may be identified as a family regardless of where they live or whether they have a close relationship.

Legal status

A family may be defined by law, which may be the result of marriage or adoption. For example, various government institutional bodies define marital status by common-law, married, separated, divorced, widowed, and single (Kreider & Simmons, 2003; Milan, 2013; Statistics Canada, 2012c). In Canada, a common-law couple refers to a person (over the age of 14 years old) living with a partner, but not legally married to said partner, for at least 12 consecutive months (CRA, 2013; Statistics Canada, 2012a). This is similar to 'common-law marriages' that are recognized in some states of the USA, though specifications of eligibility differ by state. Through legal terms, definitions of family are clearly defined.

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 require 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, Boss (1977) 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 perception 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 census data due to misrepresentations in household membership. Among complex households, Schwede (2004) found that respondents were more likely to include 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). Rosenberg 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 (Rosenberg & Guttmann, 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; Rosenberg & Guttmann, 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, variances 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 the 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 peoples due to different lifestyles, social 17 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 rare, is higher 18 among First Nations, Métis, 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 grandchildren (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%), Métis 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 a 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.

Components of an Indigenous family

In addition to highlighting the complexities of using general concepts to define Indigenous families, this literature review has identified additional components that may contribute to the conceptualization of an Indigenous family. Through a process of thematic mapping, four themes emerged: identity, kinship systems, language, and mobility.

Indigenous identity

Cultural (i.e., ethnic) identity and the impacts of life experiences on identity emerged in the literature as influential to defining family for Indigenous people (Barsh, 1994; Bourassa, et al., 2005; Health Canada, 2003). The residential school experience, for example, has been argued to have had an

influence on cultural identity and the connection to family for many Indigenous people in Canada (Castellano, 2002; Morrissette, 1994). Indian residential schools were implemented and operated by churches and supported by the federal government of Canada between 1930 and 1990s (Robertson, 2006; Bougie, 2009) and separated students from their 20 families (Robertson, 2006). Such experiences may have impacted conceptualizations of Indigenous family through the reinforcement of western norms (Morrissette, 1994).

Legal status as an Indian (First Nations) person may also be related to the conceptualization of family and to whether or not a family is considered an Indigenous family. Before 1985, registered Indian women lost their Indian status when they married a non-Indian man and subsequently were not able to pass registered Indian status to their children. Legally, the family was considered 'non-Indigenous'. Conversely, if a registered Indian status man married a nonIndian woman, the woman gained Indian status (AANDC, 2010b). The passing of Bill C-31 in 1985 changed the terms so that women (and their children) who had previously lost their registered Indian status were re-instated and those who married non-Indian men were considered to have status (O'Donnell & Wallace, 2011). Nonetheless, "the imposition of [such legislation] on Indigenous families was a direct disruption of traditional Indigenous definitions of family" (Bourassa, et al., 2005).

Kinship systems

A kinship system is the basis of many people's perceptions of family. Rooted in cultural and social norms, kinship systems may differ throughout the world, but are particularly evident within Indigenous populations. The predominant kinship system in Canada and other western nations typically reflects connections through blood, marriage or, adoption. This is similar among Indigenous kinship systems, although there is an increased emphasis on social bonds (Ives, Sinha, Thomson, & Powell, 2011). For instance, kinship statuses employed to describe 21 Australian Indigenous familial relationships include 'blood kin', or individuals who are biologically related; 'affinal kin', or those related through marriage; and 'classified kin', or those who have "earned a particular role and stature within a family" (Pattel, 2007). Thus, a classified kin does not require biological or legal associations to be considered part of the family. Similarly, some Inuit communities in Canada identify family members through honor and social relations (Searles, 2010). Inuit kinships may not only be connected through birth, marriage, or adoption but also by a person's name, i.e. 'name-soul' (Searles, 2010). When a person is given a name-soul, they are typically given the name of someone who recently passed away, spiritually connecting that individual with the recently deceased, their family, and their identity (Searles, 2010). Name-souls are not only inherited through genealogical ties, but also through social bonds (Searles, 2010). Therefore, the Indigenous kinship system may include broader social ties, thus impacting conceptualizations of family.

Language

Kinship systems 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 identifies children by their generational position in a lineage

(Morphy, 2006). The term, 'waku' refers to children of a woman as well as the children of her female siblings, while the term, 'gaathu', refers to children of a man and the children of his male siblings; children of the man's female siblings would still be referred to as 'waku' (Morphy, 2006). Nevertheless, if Indigenous kinship systems are defined by a different lineage system and kin terminology, general definitions of family may not fully capture Indigenous familial relationships, and may even result in misclassification of family relationships in surveys (Schwede, 2004). Indeed, Morphy (2006) found that a lack of congruence in kinship terminology between an Australian Indigenous kinship system and the predominant non-Indigenous kinship system resulted in incomplete data on family relationships. Accordingly, it may not be possible to simply translate existing western kinship terminology to a different language and culture and expect the terms to be equivalent.

Mobility

Different mobility patterns among Indigenous people may influence definitions of family, particularly when family is conceptualized based on household membership (Morphy, 2007). Generally, Indigenous people have higher rates of mobility than non-Indigenous people. In Canada, both Indigenous men (43.6%) and women (46.2%) had higher rates of mobility than their non-Indigenous counterparts (40.8% each for men and women) from 2001 to 2006 (Quinless, 2012).

In addition to single residential mobility, Indigenous people may move within multiple residences due to reasons such as education and employment. Indigenous children in Australia were found to move frequently between residences, residing with various relatives (Morphy, 23 2007). Though this is a norm within this Indigenous community, multiple locations of residences among dependents may complicate the representation of an Indigenous family by a household unit (De La Puente, 1995). Thus, instead of defining Indigenous families by households, Morphy (2007) argues that Indigenous families may be better represented through a nodal network accounting for kinship and social relations, where each node (family/ settlement) is connected through complex familial relationships, different kinships, and mobility.

Discussion and conclusions

Based on the review of the literature, family definitions in western society are generally based on blood ties, legal status, and residence, reflecting a general systems 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 (Schwede 2004). Particularly among Indigenous groups (in Canada), 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 complicates 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 (Carlson & Meyer, 2014).

Culture and in part, social constructivism, influence perceptions of family. Social constructivism is defined as "an epistemological perspective based on the assertion that humans actively create the realities to which they respond" (Lyddon, 1995). Thus, social interactions and experiences influence the cultural lens of an individual (Young & Colin, 2004). As such, factors influencing perceptions of family may differ between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. To further understand the implications of defining family, an awareness of the unique cultural influences is needed. Particularly among Indigenous groups, factors such as identity, kinship system, language and mobility, need to be taken into consideration when defining an Indigenous family. Actively building upon the knowledge of Indigenous culture and families, particularly at an institutional level, may reduce such discordances among individuals (Lee & Greene, 1999).

Although this literature review conceptualizes significant components of definitions of Indigenous families, family definitions may differ among the three Indigenous groups of Canada (i.e., First Nations, Métis, and Inuit) and among other nations (e.g., USA and Australia). Each Indigenous group is unique in heritage and cultural practices, languages, and traditional beliefs. The further refinement of definitions of families by each Indigenous group, however, is beyond the scope of the present review; it is, nonetheless, an interesting topic for further investigation.

Lastly, it is of interest to note that family definitions have evolved over the years, as factors such as changes in gender roles and the perceptions of parenthood and marriage have influenced 25 societal interpretations of 'family' (Furstenberg, 2014). Social demographers identify such patterns of change as 'convergence to divergence' in family trends, as family forms have deviated from traditional norms over recent years (Furstenberg, 2014). Thus, though there is a set of legal family definitions used by national/federal and provincial/state agencies, the increasing variance in family types may be reflected at the institutional level over time. As an example, starting in 2001 in Canada, the definition of common-law couples in the census was changed to include both opposite-sex and same-sex relationships. Following the legalization of same-sex marriages in Canada in 2005, Statistics Canada's definition of married couple families was changed to include both opposite and same-sex marriages. As there is the recognition that perceptions of families are evolving, western definitions of family may evolve, which may become more or less applicable to cultural subgroups. Hence, though there is a clear sense of the boundaries such as those that are legally defined, such boundaries are not permanent and may change over time.

From this literature review, 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. This includes further investigation of the means by which family lineages in Indigenous

(i.e., First Nations, Métis, and Inuit) cultures can be conceptualized, examining the influence of terminology/ language in data collection, and continuing research to further understand perceptions of family among Indigenous groups. It is important to continually work to understand the implications of defining family through specific definitions, in particular general definitions applied to specific subgroups, as such definitions may be incomplete in describing a family in a specific context.

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