

**This Week's Citation Classic**®

**Sussman M B & Burchinal L.** Kin family network: unheralded structure in current conceptualizations of family functioning. *Marriage Fam. Living* 24:231-40, 1962.  
[Western Reserve University, Cleveland, OH and Iowa State University, Ames, IA]

This article summarizes the empirical evidence sustaining the existence and viability of families and kinship networks in interaction and the provision of goods and services to one another in prebureaucratic urban society. The summation of data questions the then-existing theory of the isolation of the nuclear family in the US and other complex societies. [The SSC<sup>®</sup> indicates that this paper has been cited in over 130 publications.]

### Families and Kin Networks: Alive and Well

Marvin B. Sussman  
College of Human Resources  
University of Delaware  
Newark, DE 19716

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In the summer of 1949, I had an exciting research experience that took me out of the ivy-covered walls of the university and into the field of real, live people. I was part of a small research team headed by Muzafer Sherif, participating in one of the earliest field experiments on group formation, structure, and interpersonal and intergroup relationships. Sherif, a brilliant and eclectic thinker, was field-testing laboratory experiments by creating the necessary conditions for examining group processes and phenomena.

I returned to New Haven from the summer camp where the study was conducted enthusiastic and intent on replicating the investigation using groups of ethnic adolescents. I quickly drafted a proposal for the doctoral dissertation that was efficacious and doable. Much to my surprise and chagrin, my mentors at Yale University dissuaded me from following this path since it was not viewed as mainstream sociology.

The point of this introduction, which is not at all relevant to the *Citation Classic*, is to indicate how

serendipity functions in the lives and careers of academics. In the course of pursuing my duties as an assistant instructor at Yale, responsible for a family course, doing the work of a drone, I read in one of the texts by R. Hill and W. Waller (at most a paragraph) that family connections, supports, and generational ties remained unstudied. The social theorists of the 1900-1950 period had so impressed the sociological establishment on the myth of the isolated nuclear family that there was no need to question this given. The notion dominant at the time was that the family was shorn of its important functions as a consequence of urbanization, industrialization, and occupational specialization. The "long arm of the job" determined where families would move and live. The family, dependent upon the economic system, would move to places where the breadwinner could find employment. High geographical mobility resulted in an isolated, weak, and dependent family system.

Impressed and somewhat dissident with the absolutism of ideas, I did a doctoral dissertation on "the help pattern in the middle-class family" (1951), published a few articles on this subject, and became an "expert" on this subject. In 1958 to 1959, I was asked to organize a three-day workshop on the topic of kin networks at the annual meetings of the Groves Conference on Marriage and the Family. A group of eight social-science scholars met in continuous session on the subject of family and kin network structure and activities. I chaired the session and asked Lee Burchinal of Iowa State University to be the session recorder. The interaction and exchange of empirical knowledge of this group of colleagues substantiated the original premise that there was more use than disuse of family and kin members in urban complex societies than heretofore believed. After preparing a report of the workshop, the kin network paper was written and published. The consequence was a plethora of research on the subject,<sup>1</sup> attempting to establish the existence of such networks. The stream of publications emanating from this notion was so extensive that, in a 1965 paper,<sup>2</sup> I pleaded that attention be directed toward exposition of the meaning and significance of interactive generational and kin ties to the involved individuals. Some scholars heeded this outcry. Today the literature on social supports has its genesis in the work establishing the viability of kin and family networks.<sup>3-5</sup>

1. Litwak E. *Helping the elderly: the complimentary roles of informal networks and formal systems*. New York: Guilford Press, 1985. 306 p. (Cited 55 times.)
2. Sussman M B. Relationships of adult children with their parents in the United States. (Shanas E & Streib G, eds.) *Social structure and family generational relationships*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1965. p. 62-92. (Cited 65 times.)
3. Ahlawat K S & Zaghaf A S. Nuclear and extended family attitudes of Jordanian Arabs. *Marriage Fam. Rev.* 14:251-73, 1989.
4. Atchley R C. *Social forces and aging*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1988. 525 p. (Cited 10 times.)
5. Pfeifer S K. *Mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law perceptions of interpersonal interaction*. Unpublished PhD dissertation. Newark, DE: University of Delaware, 1990. 320 p.