

Study looks at links between race, age, education and kinship ties

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Credit: Wallace Chuck from Pexels

Kinship ties with parents, grandparents, siblings, aunts and uncles and other family members can offer financial, educational, and societal support to individuals of all cultures.

Penn State researchers Jonathan Daw and Ashton Verdery, both assistant professors of sociology and demography, along with Rachel Margolis, assistant professor of sociology at the University of Western Ontario, are using [longitudinal data](#) to track differences in these ties across American society. Their work was published recently by *Population and Development Review*.

"We were looking for distribution estimates of different kinds of [relatives](#) that you don't typically live with, and it turns out there aren't really great estimates available," Daw explained. "So we looked at the data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID). It turns out we were the first to use it to study kinship outside of [nuclear families](#), and the neat thing about being the first to do something is that the results are going to be cool no matter what."

PSID is a longitudinal survey of a representative sample of U.S. individuals and families, which began in 1968 and is ongoing. The researchers looked at the data set of over 41,000 living interviewees, tallied up the relatives present in each participant's life, referred to as kin count, and then analyzed that data alongside factors such as age, race and education level.

Daw cites a few findings as key takeaways, starting with the relatively predictable kin count in relation to age. Participants under 40 commonly reported having cousins and aunts and uncles, and the majority of participants under 30 noted having [grandparents](#). This pattern applied to parents and siblings, too, in that the older the participant, the less likely they were to have these relations. The spouse tally was highest between ages 30 and 69, after which it began to decline. The average age at which respondents in the sample became parents was between 20 and 29.

Educational differences, while not as pronounced, also contained important information, according to Daw. "We found higher levels of

education are accompanied by an increased likelihood of having two living parents, grandparents and a spouse, along with a slightly decreased likelihood of having two or more children."

The researchers compared kinship ties according to race, noting that black participants reported more half-siblings and more total siblings overall compared to white participants. Because white participants reported having mainly parents, grandparents, spouses and aunts and uncles, while black participants reported higher counts of children, grandchildren, cousins and nieces and nephews, the researchers surmised that African Americans may tend to have younger relatives. The research team also observed a negative correlation between increasing number of children and rising socioeconomic class.

"We were interested not just in the averages but in the racial and socioeconomic differences. We know, for example, that whites live longer on average than African Americans. These are not novel realizations, but it's important to confirm. The takeaway from this is that the disproportionate share of older relatives found in white networks is a partial byproduct of this greater longevity," Daw said.

Looking forward, Daw said he is excited by the number of new research questions that surfaced over the course of the project. "I am intrigued at how the death of close and distant relatives will effect an individual's educational attainment. I also plan on exploring educational advantages across generations, and am especially curious about the influence of grandparents' education on grandchildren."

"I think it's important to recognize that this is a start, not a finish," he said. "We're looking at this broad view of what kinship and family means, not just limited by household walls and nuclear families, and all the myriad ways in which they can influence each other. This is an attempt to kick off a new line of research."

More information: Jonathan Daw et al. Kin Count(s): Educational and Racial Differences in Extended Kinship in the United States, *Population and Development Review* (2016). [DOI: 10.1111/j.1728-4457.2016.00150.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1728-4457.2016.00150.x)

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