

When Norms are Thicker Than Water: The Harm of Normalizing and Prioritizing Biological Relationships

If you discovered someone online and spoke to them just a few times through Facebook, would you let them stay on your couch when they are in town? Probably not, because we learned in Kindergarten that strangers are dangerous. However, if that person was your long-lost sister, you may answer differently. In both scenarios, she is a stranger, but the biological bond indicated in the latter had an impact on how she may be treated. This demonstrates my claim that biological bonds are prioritized in society, and I suggest this is a product of the normalization of biological families. I explain how the normalization of biologically-related families and the prioritization of biological relationships excludes and diminishes certain family forms and relationships. I demonstrate some implications of this disparity to argue that the normalization of biological families and the prioritization of biological relationships, while appearing harmless to some, is harmful to many.

Normalization of Families and Granting Privilege

The phrase “blood is thicker than water”, an ancient proverb many recognize today, implies that relationships within family are the strongest and most valuable in comparison to others. However, commentators have recently claimed that the original phrase reads: “the blood of the covenant is thicker than the water of the womb” (Matteo, 2018, n.p.). While there are not yet any historical sources that confirm this etymology, using “water” to refer to the amniotic fluid of the womb does seem to make more sense than using “water” to refer to friendship. Matteo suggests the actual meaning is that the bloodshed in battle bonds soldiers together with greater strength than biological ties. Not only has the proverb been used incorrectly in this case, but its meaning has been completely reversed to suggest biological ties are inherently strongest.

If this is truly the original version of the phrase, the fact that a blatant misinterpretation remains so prevalent today signifies just how common it is to believe in the superior strength of biological relationships. The prioritization of the biological tie stems from the belief that biology and family are inherently connected, which is a link enforced by the *normalization* of biological families.

When one is biologically related to their parents and siblings, they rarely have to explain how they are related; simply referring to each other as family implies a biological tie. This demonstrates the fact that being biologically related to one's family members is the *norm*. Norms represent dominant ways of understanding something about human behavior and existence. They mold what the individual perceives to be normal or innate about themselves, others, and the world around them. In doing so, they also dictate what is *abnormal*, as every behavior or way of existing is defined in relation to or in contrast from the norm. Because the biologically-related family is the norm, families that are *not* biologically related can only be understood as they compare to biological families (Weston, 1991).

The normalization of biological ties between family members enforces an inseparable link between family and biology. The very fact that terms exist to describe non-biological ties alludes to the biological relation as the default form from which all others differentiate (Weston, 1991). This keeps biological ties at the center of our understanding of family, which makes the association between family and biology unbreakable. Consider the term "adoption", for example. Schneider (1984) makes the assertion that adoption is "only understandable as a way of creating the social fiction that an actual link of kinship exists. Without biological kinship as a model, adoption would be meaningless" (p. 55). In other words, terms used to describe familial

relationships that are not formed through birth only exist because the relationships that *are* formed through birth are at the center (Weston, 1991).

The normalization of biologically-related families appears harmless, as it is relatively common for someone to consider individuals they are biologically related to as their family. However, normalization of something comes with *abnormalization* of everything else, which means those who align with a norm can be granted certain privileges at the cost of others. As Johnson (2006) put it, “any category that lowers our status relative to others can be used to mark us; to be *privileged* is to go through life with the relative ease of *being unmarked*” (p. 33). Not having to explain how one is related to their family members, as mentioned earlier, is an example of the privilege that results from aligning with a norm and thus being “unmarked”. A child who is labeled as adopted, on the other hand, loses that privilege because they are marked by their differences from the norm.

While this may seem like a minor cost, it has deeper implications. The underlying message is that a child that is not biologically related to their parents is “not quite” their parent’s child, because they require an explanation as to how they are related. This is demonstrated in Weston’s observation: “For years, and in an amazing variety of contexts, claiming a lesbian or gay identity has been portrayed as a departure from kinship” (p. 22). When a person comes out as a member of the LGBT+ community, they are often met with questions about their future family and are pitied as if they have given up the possibility to have “their own” children. The assumption that biologically-related children are off the table is already misguided, as there are multiple reproductive options available for gay couples. The bigger assumption, though, is that a family without a biological connection is almost like a step down from the biologically-related family they could’ve had.

It is important to note here that privilege is granted to those who *align with* the norm, which suggests the norm has a particular definition and perception. One family can align with the biological family norm without actually having a biological tie, and at the same time a biologically-tied family can still fall outside of the norm. For example, a white couple with an adopted white child fits the family norm, despite lacking a biological relation. On the other hand, a white couple who has a mixed child through a sperm donor (and therefore still holds a biological relation with the child) does not align with the family norm. This is because the norm itself does not depend on actual biological ties, rather a particular perception of biological ties. Fitting into the biological family norm depends on what the norm defines as a “biological tie”, and what the norm defines as a “biological family”.

How Definitions Delegitimize

In order for family forms and familial relationships to deviate from the normalized definitions of these terms, the terms themselves must be open to multiple interpretations. In other words, “family” and “familial relationship” must have many possible interpretations in order for one definition to be normalized and prioritized while others are delegitimized and disregarded. For example, consider the larger concept of “the family”. There is ongoing debate about what the term means, what forms it can take, and what relations it can refer to. When David Popenoe (1993) defined “the family” in his analysis on family decline, he acknowledged that his definition excluded other people’s interpretations of the term. However, he says that no definition can capture all, and that “if the definition were more inclusive...it would be less meaningful” (Popenoe, 1993, p. 529). In a previous paper, I concluded from his statement that the term is defined by whatever each person understands it to mean (DeFelice, 2018). This

translates directly onto the sub-concept of a “biological family”. While it seems as though a biological relationship can only take one form, the term “biological” can actually refer to many different connections. The fact that we understand “biological” to mean one particular type of relation, despite there being many possible variations, demonstrates the way in which normalization of one definition delegitimizes others.

Consider the definition of a “biological mother”. One might suggest that the biological mother is the person who produces the egg from which a child develops. Producing an egg which later becomes a child is certainly a biological process, so it is reasonable to suggest the relationship between this person and the child is biological. However, carrying a child to term and then giving birth to them is also a biological process. In the case of surrogacy, is the woman who produced the egg the biological mother or is the surrogate the biological mother? In our society, the woman who produced the egg would be considered the biological mother. However, her relationship to the child is not any more “biological” than the surrogate’s relationship to the child. She is only considered to be the biological mother because the norm defines “biological” in terms of the reproduction of genes. One can be biologically related to other people in a number of different ways, but the norm determines which biological relation is the default and legitimate relation. In defining “biological” as a genetic link, the norm delegitimizes and disregards other non-genetic relations, regardless of their actual “biological” aspects. This delegitimization devalues the relationships and families themselves, as they are not viewed as “biological enough”.

When Norm Becomes Harm

Because the word “biological” is defined by the norm as a genetic tie, the normalization of the biological family demotes other relationships. When someone claims the biological tie is stronger than all others, they are claiming we should prioritize our relationships with those we are genetically related to, as these are the strongest relationships we have. This diminishes the relationships between non-biologically related family members, such as adopted children and their parents or stepchildren and their stepparents. The effects of privileging biological relations span across family forms.

The norm enforces the assumption that genetics outweigh other ways of being related, which can present problems to those who are not related in this way. There is a reason why an adopted child reuniting with their long-lost genetic parent is a storyline in many tv shows and movies. The biological connection between the genetic parent and the child is seen as the “original” relationship, and this person is considered their “real” parent. As mentioned previously, social norms mold what the individual perceives to be normal or innate about themselves, and thus assist the individual’s identity formation. When the norm suggests that what it means to have a family is to be biologically related, and thus implies this is a way to understand who one is, where does that leave people with no connection to their biological parent? It is no surprise that people go through lengthy investigations to find their genetic parent. Otherwise, they encounter a sense of loss, as if they do not know parts of themselves because they do not know their biological parents. In a study observing adoptive children, Nickman et al. (2005) found three forms of loss were commonly expressed: ““overt loss” of relationships and familiar environments, “covert loss” of self-esteem because they had been relinquished or removed, and “status loss” arising from feelings of stigmatization within the family or society at large. Today, almost all adopted children manifest at least one of these types of loss” (p. 989).

Additionally, in a situation where one child is adopted and their siblings are biologically-related to their parents, there are even more psychological implications. The study found that “in comparison with these [non-adoptive] siblings, the adoptees felt stigmatized within their families or were treated differently” (p. 991). A child’s label as an adoptee might leave them feeling as if they will never have the same familial connection that their siblings have to their parents.

Without the normalization of biologically-related families, adopted children would be viewed as no different to the parents than their biological children, and would develop their identity without feeling lost.

The normalization of biological families can present problems to birth parents as well. A study examining birth parents who placed their child for adoption demonstrated that the social stigma surrounding this choice introduces high levels of grief associated with intense feelings of shame (De Simone, 1996). Parents who put their child up for adoption, even upon recognizing they could not provide a healthy life for a child, are still often demonized and accused of abandonment. After all, society suggests that biological parents are the people who are supposed to love you most. David Velleman (2005) argued that bringing a child into the world without the intention of this child having contact with one or both biological parents is morally wrong. In the case of adoption, he claims that “the child needs to be parented by someone, and [in the case of adoption we can assume that] it cannot or should not be parented by its biological parents, for reasons that would outweigh any value inhering in biological ties” (p. 361). This suggests that the value of biological connection is inherent, and so strong that only the worst circumstances are strong enough to outweigh it. It implies that only when the circumstances are dire should a child be put up for adoption; otherwise the biological bond is more important. The normalization and prioritization of biological relationships can suggest it would be better for a child to suffer in a

home with their biological parents than thrive in a home with people to whom they are not biologically related.

“Homogeneity” is to “Privilege” as “Difference” is to “Detriment”

Although the word “biological” is defined by the norm as a genetic tie, the normalization and therefore privileging of biologically-related families is not simply the privileging of genetically-related individuals. On a deeper level, it is the privileging of homogeneity. When Velleman (2005) described the importance of biological families, he said “in coming to know and define themselves, most people rely on their acquaintance with people who are like them by virtue of being their biological relatives” (p. 364–65). This sentiment is reflected through the prioritization of biological families, which shows that when society suggests biologically-related families are the norm, it is really suggesting families that *appear* to be genetically related are the norm. For a child to appear as though they are genetically related to their parents, they simply have to look physically similar, and in doing so their family fits into the norm. Families that are represented in movies, in magazines, in children’s books, and even in the photos that come with picture frames are often made up of individuals who look like they are genetically related. We don’t know if the picture-frame families are actually related- in fact, the individuals are likely to be randomly-selected models- but we automatically assume that the group of people in the photo are a family because they look the same. The normalization of biologically-related families is really the normalization of homogenous families, which privileges this family form over others.

The privileging of homogeneity comes at the cost of families who do not look genetically related. If individuals rely on people similar to them for self-identity formation, and are not

similar to their biological relatives, they may have trouble defining themselves as a part of the family. My mother told me that when I was a little girl, she took my sisters and I to a picture-frame shop, and I saw countless images of “families” in the frames. She said I burst out in tears and would not stop repeating: “These people match! Why don’t we match? Is our family broken?”. My brown skin made me feel like I was in the wrong family, despite the fact that I am genetically related to my white mother. I am reminded of this every time I stand in a line with my family and they get asked, “is she with you?”. If the normalized understanding of family was simply a group of genetically-related individuals, I would fit right in. However, to be a normalized family, all the members must “match”. I was forced to define myself not by the connections and features I shared with my family, but by the differences I had from them. Genetic ties aside, the normalized understanding of the family is one that is homogenous, so the prioritized families are those whose members are similar.

Conclusion: Is Water Thicker Than Blood?

To defend the norm, one could argue that the biological bond is stronger than any other by using scientific research that claims this to be true. For example, it has been suggested that the feeling of connectedness a pregnant woman has to her baby predicts the strength of their future relationship (Siddiqui & Hägglöf, 2000). However, Walsh et al. (2013) contested these findings, because they failed to show *how* these feelings differentially influence the relationship, therefore it may not be anything more than a correlation. In fact, an analysis of lesbian parents in custody battles showed that when care is evenly distributed between the mothers, the “children will not distinguish between one woman and the other on the grounds of biological relationship” (Millbank, 2008, p. 157). This shows that biology itself makes no difference on relationships

between family members, therefore the assumption that it does must be informed by social forces. The normalization of the biologically-related family is what lies behind the assumption that biological bonds are the strongest connections, as scientific research fails time and time again to prove this true.

In conclusion, water and blood are just fluids. Biology only appears to make relationships stronger because the norms suggest this is inherent, and therefore people place different expectations on biologically-related family members. As Weston (1991) stated, “biology is no less a symbol than choice or creation. Neither [biology nor social ties] is inherently more “real” or valid than the other” (p. 35). Relationships between biologically-related individuals and the relationships between individuals who are not biologically related should not be hierarchically organized. In a society that normalizes biological families, however, there will always be a disparity between family forms and relationships depending on their relation to the norm.

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