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UNDERSTANDINGS OF FAMILY AMONG WIVES AND HUSBANDS:
Reconciling emotional closeness and cultural expectations

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ABSTRACT:
Family research has highlighted an increasing fluidity in understandings of family with many recent studies focusing on personal relationships and on the relational character of family phenomena in diversifying familial contexts. In this study we explore how personal understandings of family are constructed by balancing individual preferences and general rules of kinship. This article focuses on who is considered a family member by wives and husbands in opposite-sex couples after the first years of (the first) marriage. The data consist of qualitative interviews with 32 individuals, women and men from 16 couples, living in Southern Finland. Information on family
conceptions was collected using the Family Network Method (FNM) questionnaire completed at the end of interviews. Our results show that despite the conventional family structure within which interviewees live — that is, a married opposite-sex couple, most often with children — understandings of family vary greatly between spouses. The family form does not determine interviewees' views on who constitutes family. Rather, family understandings draw from balancing between perceived emotional closeness, genealogical proximity and cultural expectations, producing different and sometimes conflicting tendencies of family belonging delineated in our analysis.

**Key words:** Family understandings; couples; nuclear family; emotional closeness; family relations; kinship relations

1. **Introduction**

Research on family has highlighted an increasing fluidity in understandings of family, distancing itself from the idea of ‘the family’ (e.g. Gabb 2011; Smart 2007). Many studies focus on personal relationships, the relational character of family phenomena and the ways in which relationships are lived and understood by people living within different familial contexts (e.g. Jamieson 2005). Openness to individuals’ everyday discourse has brought forward ‘layered meanings’ of family; Becker and Charles (2006) highlighted that while multiple meanings are attached to family in different contexts, individuals talk in terms of a hierarchy of family membership arranging family relations along an order of importance.

This study more closely examines the ways in which people’s subjective understandings of family membership comprise the intertwining of felt emotional closeness within relationships, genealogical proximity and cultural expectations. We explore personal conceptions of family, focusing on who is considered a family member by wives and husbands in opposite-sex couples after the first years of marriage. The research participants, therefore, consist of individuals living in their first union, in most
cases with young children — a structural setting called ‘the family’ (Morgan 2011). In this article, however, we look beyond the institutional setting of the couple and investigate the extent to which a particular family form, the nuclear family, determines individuals’ personal understandings. We aim to scrutinise the grip of cultural norms regulating family and kinship as hierarchical systems that prioritise, for instance, relationships based on genealogical proximity.

Family relations form a complex setting in which people invest their creative energy and emotions (Carsten 2004) and construct emotional closeness between intimates (Ben-Ari 2012). This setting focuses on care and the practicalities of everyday life as well as the sharing and exchange of material objects (e.g. DeVault 1994; Morgan 2011; Smart 2007). Thus, we investigate understandings of family from the perspective of belonging, whereby individuals’ views regarding who belongs to their family signify identifying with and emotionally attaching to specific people and relationships as a family (Yuval-Davis 2006). Our interest lies in the different ways of drawing a boundary between those considered family and those who are not (Castrén and Widmer 2015; Jamieson 2005). Although cultural expectations and norms influence the ways in which people are included in or excluded from one’s family, we employ no prior conceptions of the types of relationships included in our study. Instead, we examine the demarcation of family among other significant relationships as a question requiring empirical study (see Ketokivi 2012). We aim to contribute to the discussion on family understandings from the perspective of conjugal couples who are often considered as conserving the most ‘traditional’ family conceptions in contemporary societies.

We collected our data in Finland, where cultural understandings of family remain entwined with the ideas and practices of a developed Nordic welfare state (Forsberg 2005; Yesilova 2009). All citizens are provided equal access to public services such as
free education, healthcare and day-care, underlining the role of the state as an ultimate safety net for its citizens. This has undermined the role of family relations as a source of economic and practical support and led to an understanding of family concentrated on small nuclear units, which are autonomous and independent from wider kin networks (Forsberg 2005).

In comparison with other European countries, a late age at first marriage, a relatively high level of fertility and a high number of children born out-of-wedlock all characterise family formation in Finland (Jokinen and Kuronen 2011: 15–17). Women’s labour market participation is high, and gender equality both in paid and unpaid work also enjoys a relatively high level (ibid.: 31–34). Compared to European rates overall, family dissolution occurs rather commonly in Finland (Official Statistics Finland 2016a). Yet, due to women’s labour force participation, liberal family values and state support, the cultural script of single motherhood, for example, is no longer only characterised by stigma and economic hardship (May 2011a). More than half of first children are born to unmarried mothers and cohabitation is common across all age groups (Official Statistics Finland 2016b). While marriage may no longer represent a prerequisite for having a family, it remains popular but more for love and romance than out of religion or family tradition (c.f. Perelli-Harris et al. 2014).

In cultural terms, the distinction in the Finnish language between the immediate family from the wider kin network remains rather significant. During the twentieth century, the term ‘perhe’ (family) came to mean first and foremost a nuclear family unit composed of an opposite-sex couple — preferably married — and their biological children (Yesilova 2009), while ‘suku’ is a more general term referring to all those related by descent or alliance or both. Such linguistic differentiation between two categories of people manifests an order of importance in which those closest to oneself are distinguished from
those further away. Hence, in the Finnish cultural context, labelling someone family is indeed a powerful expression of association.

2. Demarcating family

The idea of a shared biogenetic substance has been central to Euro-American conceptions of family and kinship (Holy 1996: 25). Since the seminal work of Schneider on American kinship (1980 [1968]), the dualism between biological and social aspects in ‘western’ kinship has been emphasised as a focal point. The primary dimensions of kinship draw from the order of nature highlighting ‘blood’ relations, and from the order of law referring to relations formed by marriage or other institutionalised forms of alliance (ibid.). Because Euro-American kinship is bilateral, meaning that both the mother’s and the father’s relatives of both genders are considered relatives, the size of a person's kin group may be quite large (Eriksen 2001). This emphasises the role of the individual in delineating the group of relations s/he considers significant (Déchaux 2002). According to Schneider, even if all cousins are relatives to some extent and thus deserve equal treatment, in practice some cousins may be considered relatives while others are not due to physical or socio-emotional distance, and ultimately, the amount (or lack) of what he calls diffuse, enduring solidarity (Schneider 1980 [1968]: 65, 67, 73).

Schneider’s distinction between biogenetic and social aspects of comprehensive kinship has been contested, and research has brought forward other dimensions that highlight the creativity of the human mind and malleability of social practices (see e.g. Carsten 2004; Thompson 2001). Contemporary family and kinship relations have been characterised by an attempt to reconcile two significant although opposed conceptions (Déchaux 2002). The first represents an assigned membership that situates the individual within a group or a collective such as a kinship line. The second draws from
the modern ideal of a social tie, freely chosen by an autonomous individual, highlighting the subjectively experienced aspects of relationships. This results in what Déchaux (2002) calls 'subjectivist affiliation', a process of identification during which what is received at birth is balanced by what an individual chooses.

Subjectivist affiliation creates a floating type of family membership that calls for analytical tools attuned to the complexity of family life (Déchaux 2002). In her analysis on everyday kin relations in contemporary France, Weber (2013; see also Déchaux 2008) investigates ‘practical kinship’ from three perspectives that highlight feelings of symbolic affiliation (lineage), the network of active kin relations in which people are embedded (kin group or kindred) and the sharing of everyday life, resources and the domestic division of labour (maisonnée). Weber’s conceptualisation is valuable since it brings together the individual and social aspects of family belonging that exist, for example, in reference to blood relatives, in the use of family names and in the sharing of economic resources among intimates.

In their analysis on the suffusion of characteristics of family and friendship, Spencer and Pahl (2006) demonstrated how choice and commitment are central to all personal relationships. They distinguish between ties given and chosen, defining given ties as those ascribed through family and kinship or through mutually defined roles such as among neighbours. Chosen ties depend more on feelings of emotional closeness and need nurturing to develop. However, given and chosen ties are not strictly separated from each other; in lived relationships the boundaries between them often blur. (Ibid. 41–42, 112.)

Previous studies on family understandings have primarily dealt with situations other than the opposite-sex nuclear family unit, such as post-separation situations (e.g. Aeby et al. 2014; Castrén and Widmer 2015; Stewart 2005; Walker and Messinger 1979) and same-sex couples (Roseneil and Budgeon 2004; Weeks et al. 2001). Researchers
often highlight the importance of studying family ties as lived relationships rather than defined by their institutional context, thus drawing attention to practices as well as personal sense-making and emotional aspects of relationships (Mason 2011; May 2011b; Morgan 2011; Smart 2007; Widmer et al. 2008).

In an analysis on stepmothers’ family understandings, for example, Church (1999) found several different criteria for considering someone family: blood, marriage, residence or felt emotional connection. Church’s interviewees emphasised one particular relationship, such as a parent–child relationship or a couple relationship, as constitutive in their family understanding (ibid.; see also Castrén 2008). Furthermore, relations of care have been identified as significant in understandings of family within stepfamily contexts (Castrén 2017). In a study on post-divorce childhood, Ritala-Koskinen (1997) noted that children consider either co-residence or biological ties as the most important criteria for family membership.

Research on same-sex relationships has questioned family membership based on kinship and the heterosexual couple; instead, friendship networks appear to form ‘families of choice’ (e.g. Weeks et al. 2001). According to Roseneil and Budgeon (2004), the meanings of family are experiencing radical challenges due to the ‘queering of the family’, by which they mean the heterosexual couple’s loss of its hegemonic position in favour of friendship ties. Close relationships and living arrangements are individually chosen and individuals living outside the context of a heterosexual couple may be included in one’s family (ibid.).

The meanings attached to family vary not only across different family situations but also based on social and cultural contexts. Becker and Charles (2006) studied the meanings applied to the term ‘family’ by individuals living in socio-culturally different neighbourhoods in Britain. They found variation based on the socio-economic and ethnic
background of participants, as well as the context in which the term was used in an interview. Two principal ways of using the term ‘family’ emerged: firstly, it referred to those who counted as family, referring to different groups of people in each interview; and, secondly, it implied a moral dimension often bound to practices of providing support and keeping in contact. (Ibid.)

In investigating how personal family understandings evolve in the relational setting of a married couple’s joint network in Finland, we apply a configurational perspective that views families as dynamic constellations of relationships (Widmer 2010; Widmer et al. 2008). Networks or configurations are characterised by interdependencies and unevenly distributed power (Elias 1978) and, depending on the cultural context, some interdependencies may have a more defining role than others. Ketokivi’s study (2012) conducted in Finland, for example, showed that the heterosexual couple represents a significant organising principle along which individuals’ configurations of intimate ties are arranged and which demarcates the immediate family among other personally significant relationships such as close friends and extended family. The sphere of family intimacy evolved around the couple and was mostly inhabited by a partner and children alone. Even if the ordering principle was sometimes challenged by what she calls alternative intimacies, it applied to persons living within and beyond a couple’s relationship. (Ibid.)

3. Data and methods

The data analysed derive from a wider longitudinal study conducted in Finland on young couples’ networks of relationships during the early years of marriage. In total, 19
opposite-sex couples\(^1\) were interviewed around the time of their wedding (see Castrén and Maillochon 2009; Maillochon and Castrén 2011) and after three to nine years of marriage. Here, we draw from the material collected at the second time point\(^2\) during which 16 couples participated.

The analysed material includes three types of data. Firstly, we draw from individual in-depth interviews with 32 men and women representing 16 couples. Secondly, we investigate the interviewees’ views on who belongs to their family, collected as a part of the interview using a specific methodological tool known as the Family Network Method (hereafter FNM; Widmer 2010). Thirdly, we use questionnaire data providing detailed information on the couple’s wider network of relations. In the analysis presented here, we primarily use the material collected using FNM, but draw from the interviews and the questionnaire data for more information when necessary.

Participants ranged in age from 26 to 41 (mean 33.5), and mostly represented the middle class based on education and occupation and lived primarily in the Helsinki metropolitan area. Out of 32 interviewees, 24 participants worked full-time, with the remainder working part-time, on family leave, unemployed, studying full-time or were currently not working due to a medical condition. With one exception, participants were all of Finnish origin and all had lived in Finland since childhood.\(^3\) Despite differences in the length of marriage (3–9 years), all couples were more or less at the same stage of

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\(^1\) At the time of the interviews, only couples consisting of two individuals representing the (legally) opposite sex were allowed to marry in Finland. According to the interview discussion, interviewees consisted of men and women whose gender identity matched their biological sex.

\(^2\) The interviews took place between March 2014 and June 2015.

\(^3\) One research participant had been internationally adopted as an infant.
their married lives. They had a relatively long history as a couple (6–17 years) and all couples except one had cohabited prior to marriage. Twelve couples had children and four were childless, either voluntarily or involuntarily.

In our analysis we focused on data gathered using FNM, a tool developed to collect information on people’s personal understandings of family and on interactions between family members (Widmer 2010). FNM has primarily been used in quantitative research studies (e.g. Wall and Gouveia 2014; Widmer 2006), but in this study we applied it to qualitative analysis. Research participants were instructed to list all of the people they considered their family members based on their personal understanding, notwithstanding what was generally meant by family or what other people might think. The interviewer wrote down the names provided. Detailed information about the persons listed was requested, including their first name, age, gender and their place of residence. Information on the relationship between the interviewee and the person listed included the type of relationship (for example, husband, child, mother, etc.), duration of the relationship, frequency and modes of contact. The information gathered using FNM formed the core data for our analysis.

After the interviews, a questionnaire was sent to the couples asking for systematic information on the couple’s wider marital network (Rands 1988). The questionnaire data allowed us to investigate family relations as embedded within the marital network. It also entailed values related to the perceived emotional closeness between the interviewee and both the persons listed in FNM and other individuals mentioned in the couple’s marital network.4

4 Three couples did not return the questionnaire and the closeness values can thus be analysed for only 13 couples. However, we did not exclude these three couples from our analysis, since
Our method of analysis draws from a configurational approach, also known as a figurational approach, developed for the qualitative analysis of family configurations. This method combines some basic tools of network analysis with a qualitatively oriented interest in multiplex relationships (Castrén and Ketokivi 2015). Family understandings are investigated in terms of the family composition — that is, what kinds of relationships are included as ‘relation types’ — and in terms of the perceived emotional closeness of relationships. These two aspects highlight both an outsider and an insider perspective on family understandings and allow us to scrutinise the selection processes in which individual preferences meet cultural and normative understandings. (Ibid.)

During the first phase of analysis we focused on the variation in relationship types. These included spouse and children, members of the interviewee’s family of origin, the spouse’s family of origin as well as more distant relatives. Other types of relations mentioned as family members included, for example, friends and spouse’s friends, while one interviewee mentioned the family dog. Second, we investigated the listed family members couple by couple with a particular interest in the emotional closeness and the demarcation of family. Each list was contextualised by comparing it to the background information and the family history of each interviewee. Most had lived with both their biological parents and nearly all had siblings. At the time of the interview, 21 of 32 interviewees had parents who remained married. Seven interviewees had lost one parent, and nine of the parents had re-partnered after a divorce or the death of a spouse.

To grasp the varying repertoires of potential family members we use the term extended family of origin. This refers to interviewee’s biological and step-parents,
parents’ new partners and their children, siblings and step-siblings and their partners and children. The term brings to the fore the relational setting in which an individual selection process takes place and helps delineate the differences in how individuals demarcate family as a unit of belonging.

4. Who is considered family?
We asked participants to name the individuals belonging to their family according to their own personal understanding. Across our data set, interviewees listed 187 family members representing 30 relation types, demonstrating ample variety in the relationships demarcated as family.

At the level of individual participants, the number of persons listed as family varied between 2 and 21 (mean 8.7). Yet, the number of people living in the interviewees’ households varied from two to five (mean 3.13) meaning that family understandings often extend beyond the household. All interviewees included their spouse and children (if they had any), while only six interviewees did not add another person. Considering the prevalent understanding of family in Finnish society as drawing from the nuclear family model (see Forsberg 2005; Yesilova 2009), we note that in the majority of cases subjective family conceptions deviated from this cultural perception. However, we found no clear difference between how family was demarcated among interviewees with children and among childless interviewees.

In addition to the spouse and children, the most frequently listed individuals consisted of the interviewee’s parents, siblings and parents-in-law. Three out of four interviewees saw their parents, or at least one of them, as belonging to their family. At least one sibling (or, in a few cases, a step-sibling) was mentioned by 22 interviewees, and parents-in-law (or one of them) were mentioned by half of the participants. The inclusion of parents and siblings illustrates the significance of the biogenetic bond and
highlights the importance of lineage in constituting family belonging (see e.g. Déchaux 2002).

When examining the closeness values of those listed in FNM and thus included in personal family understandings, it is hardly surprising that for the most part the individuals mentioned were considered very close on an emotional level. Emotional closeness was evaluated on a scale of 1 to 4, where 1 meant very close, 2 quite close, 3 not very close and 4 not close at all. No one listed as a family member received a closeness value of 4. While parents included in an interviewee’s family were mostly rated as very close emotionally (mean closeness value 1.18 for all parents listed in FNM), those not included were on average less close (mean 2.30 for parents excluded from FNM). However, felt emotional closeness towards parents did not automatically indicate inclusion in interviewee’s family and two interviewees who considered one or both parents very close did not list them as family members. This suggests that while emotional closeness is important, other dynamics are also involved in family belonging. We will return to this issue after examining spouses’ family understandings in relation to each other. Here, we aim to determine to what extent the nuclear family structure as a specific relational setting influences the composition of an individual’s family understanding.

4.1. Convergence and divergence in spouses’ family understandings

For all couples, the family members listed by a wife and a husband only partially overlapped. Sometimes this was due to the fact that both spouses mentioned individuals from their own extended family of origin, automatically rendering the spouses’ lists different from each other. In fact, among six couples the spouses defined family in a somewhat similar fashion, listing the same types of relations as family members. Tanja
and Mika, for example, a couple in their late 20s with one child, both included all of the adults in their own extended family of origin, some from the spouse’s extended family of origin and some close friends. Mika listed nine individuals as family members, while Tanja listed 14. Their lists overlapped only partially due to differences in the size of their extended families of origin, respectively, not as a result of differences in the way in which family was perceived.

However, in most cases divergence between the spouses' lists of family members resulted not from differences in the size of the extended families of origin but from how family was demarcated. The divergences we found seemed to follow two types: in the first, one spouse stuck to the nuclear family model while the other was more inclusive (six couples); and in the second, both spouses were inclusive beyond the nuclear family but in very different ways (four couples).

Maija and Akseli, a couple in their 30s with two children, serve as an example of this first type. While Akseli stuck to the family of procreation and mentioned only Maija and their two children, Maija included 14 people altogether in her family — all adult members of her and Akseli’s extended families of origin plus her grandfather. Akseli’s family understanding was quite exclusive, following the conventional cultural model of family as a small unit revolving around a couple (see Yesilova 2009), whereas Maija perceived family as a kin group that includes both spouses’ extended families of origin in their entirety.

In the second type of divergence both spouses stretched family membership beyond the family of procreation, but applied a quite different logic in doing so. For example, Jonna and Tapio, a couple in their early 30s with no children of their own, acted as a host family for foreign exchange students (see Table 1).

[Place here Table 1, size half page]
Jonna’s family understanding centred around her family of origin: in addition to her husband, she listed everyone from her extended family of origin except her mother’s husband’s three children from his previous marriage. She included no one from Tapio’s extended family of origin. Tapio’s list, by contrast, looked quite different. In addition to Jonna and his own extended family of origin, he listed Jonna’s mother and her sisters. He also included the couple’s two exchange students. While both spouses stretched family membership beyond the boundaries of the couple and biological kinship, Tapio’s perception was more inclusive since it extended to non-relatives the couple hosted. Such a family conception illustrates Weber’s (2013) concept of *maisonnée* that highlights the significance of sharing everyday life. While the exchange students were not very close (closeness values 2 and 3), sharing their home, food and daily routines created a sense of family belonging for Tapio. Neither of the two exchange students was listed as family by Jonna, indicating that for her a relationship based on sharing daily life did not evoke feelings of family in contrast to one based on lineage or kindred.

Although convergence existed in terms of how some couples demarcated family, the prevalence of divergence suggests that the relational context of the nuclear family unit does not determine individuals’ family understandings in any axiomatic way. Indeed, the divergence we noted within the context that conserves the most ‘traditional’ conceptions suggests a high level of individualisation regarding family understandings within contemporary society. Moreover, despite the emphasis on maternal lineage in Euro-American kinship noted in the literature (e.g. Yanigasako 1977), we found no consistent gendered pattern in women’s and men’s demarcations of family.
4.2. Selection process: Reconciling personal preferences and rules of kinship

Next, we focus on the selection of family intimates from the perspective of subjectivist affiliation (Déchaux 2002), highlighting the reconciliation of personal preferences and more general rules of kinship in the evolution of family belonging. When selecting family members, individuals’ personal preferences mould the family into a relationship constellation that draws from three sources. Firstly, it draws from a personal experience of emotional closeness; secondly, from norms organising kin relations into an order of primacy highlighting genealogical proximity; and, thirdly, from the different ways in which these intertwine in lived relationships. Emotional closeness is central in the evolution of family belonging; yet, due to cultural expectations that grant preference to familial intimacy over friendship (see e.g. Ketokivi 2012), non-kin as family entails a particular logic in the selection of family intimates. In addition, emotional closeness entwines with kin categories in ways that suggest the existence of conflicting dynamics affecting the selection process.

4.2.1. Friends that become family

Family members that provide perhaps the most obvious proof of an individual’s freedom to define his or her family consist of friends. Friends do not have a culturally determined position in the Finnish familial context, and, as noted by Spencer and Pahl (2006: 59), friendship differs from other relation types, such as a relative or a neighbour, because it is fundamentally a chosen tie. Although close friends can be referred to using family terms in everyday language (‘she’s like a sister to me’), there is no cultural expectation for including even close friends in one’s family. Instead, selecting friends as family members stems from personal preferences and emotional closeness. However, several
dimensions of a friendship relation emerge as significant when friends are included in one’s family.

Seven interviewees listed one or more friends as family. In almost all cases the friends consisted of individuals considered either very close or quite close, and involved long-lasting friendships. Maarit provides one illustration of a family understanding consisting of friends. Married to Tomi, they are both in their 30s with three children. After listing her husband, the couples’ children and both her own and her husband’s extended families of origin in their entirety, she stated, ‘I do have a very extensive understanding of family because I really want to also include Seija, Annika and Kerttu’. Maarit thus includes three female friends with whom she shares a history of 20 to 30 years. She considers herself very close emotionally to all three, and they are all godmothers to the couple’s children. In the interview, she continued, ‘Somehow it would feel incomplete if they were not included’.

Liina offered another example, when she included a female friend, Jaana, in her list of family members. Liina and Jaana had become friends when working abroad. Despite currently living in different countries, they remain very close to each other. Jaana visits frequently — she visited Liina’s family during the Christmas holiday and again the following summer for several weeks. Jaana is also the godmother of the couple’s eldest child. As Liina puts it:

‘She’s really important to our children and our children are important to her, actually to the extent that […] if something happened to us we hope that she would be the one to take them’.

Jaana holds a special position among Liina’s friends and entered the sphere of family intimacy. Their friendship developed during their time as expatriates, a special life phase for both characterised by sharing the hardships of everyday life in a foreign country. The family belonging that emerges from such circumstances comes close to what Weber
(2013) refers to as *maisonnée*. Regardless of current geographical distance, this dimension was preserved in the relationship through long visits to each other’s homes and holidays spent together.

In most cases, those friends listed as family also served as godparents to the couples’ children. Godparenting can be viewed as a way to reinforce a long-lasting, emotionally close friendship. Furthermore, unlike other family friends, godparents are invited to family rituals (e.g. baptisms and other life course rituals) customarily reserved only for close family and kin (see Castrén and Lonkila 2004).

Our analysis suggests that a long shared history and felt emotional closeness, often cemented through the special tie of godparenting, can transform friends into family members. This process is similar to suffusion described by Spencer and Pahl (2006: 117) in which relationships with friends acquire characteristics conventionally ascribed to family and which become, to some extent, *chosen-as-given ties*.

### 4.2.2. In-category selection and transitivity in family belonging

While no predetermined position for friends exists within the sphere of family intimacy, genealogical proximity should influence the positioning of relatives within the family sphere. Due to the amount of shared biogenetic substance, one’s siblings, for example, are likely closer family members than one’s cousins, and all siblings are kin to an equal degree (see Schneider 1980 [1968]: 23–24). However, when selecting family members, such cultural expectations intertwined with interviewees’ personal preferences and, in particular, with the perceived emotional closeness of relationships. This resulted in a complex dynamic. On the one hand, this dynamic indicates that as a system determining family membership kinship has indeed lost some of its compelling power. On the other hand, it highlights that emotional closeness does not offer an exhaustive explanation for
family belonging. We will first look at in-category selection and then transitivity in family belonging.

By in-category selection, we refer to cases in which individuals of the same relationship category were treated differently; for example, when only one of many siblings was listed as a family member. In-category selection took place among many different relationship categories in interviewee’s own and their spouse’s extended families of origin, such as for siblings and, although more rarely, parents. However, most often this involved in-laws such as siblings’ partners, spouse’s siblings, spouse’s siblings’ partners and parents-in-law.5

An example of in-category selection emerges in the case of Sanni, a mother in her mid-20s of one child. She listed her husband, child, mother and sister as her family members, but not her father. Excluding one parent while including the other was exceptional in our data. In Sanni’s case, the omission of the father likely resulted from the loss of contact after her parents’ divorce. For most of Sanni’s childhood, she and her father did not share their everyday lives; consequently they did not share the dimension of everyday life (see Weber 2013). While bound by descent, this was insufficient to evoke feelings of familial intimacy and constitute family belonging.

Tomi, a 36-year-old father of three children, offers an example of in-category selection among in-laws. Tomi had three brothers-in-law, consisting of the husbands of his two sisters and his wife’s sister’s cohabiting partner. When asked to list his family members, Tomi included only the husband of one of his sisters with whom he was very

5 While all our interviewees were married, not all of their siblings and parents were married. Instead, some cohabited or were in living apart together (LAT) relationships. Within the ‘in-law’ category, we do not differentiate between these types of partnerships.
close emotionally, but excluded the other two brothers-in-law. In the discussion that followed, Tomi mentioned that although he was also good friends with his two other brothers-in-law he did not see them ‘as belonging to my family’. In-category selection suggests that individuals from the same kin category are not always treated equally.

Tomi’s case illustrates how in-law relations can become given-as-chosen ties (see Spencer and Pahl 2006: 113–115) in which the characteristics of a dyadic relationship, such as emotional closeness and feelings of affinity, play an important role. Here, kinship as a structure appears to carry little significance as a rationale for including a person in one’s family.

Interestingly, however, we also found a contrasting tendency towards in-category selection highlighting the importance of the positions within the kinship structure and undermining emotional closeness as the primary determinant of family belonging. This tendency draws from transitivity, which refers to a process of mediation in feelings of affinity. That is, individuals tend to develop a positive perception of the friends of their friends and negative notions of the enemies of their friends (e.g. Krackhardt 1987; Scott 2013). Transitivity played a role in cases where ‘not so close’ persons were listed as belonging to one’s family. While most family members were considered emotionally very close or quite close (receiving closeness values 1 or 2), Table 2 lists those family members who were not very close (receiving a closeness value 3).

As shown in Table 2, most ‘not very close’ family members consisted of in-laws of some kind (highlighted in bold). The table also reveals the only relation type in which being ‘not very close’ is more frequent than any other value: ‘sister’s husband’. When a sibling, especially a sister, is perceived as emotionally close and considered a member
of the family, her husband may also be included even though he is not emotionally close to the participant. Similarly, the husband of an interviewee’s mother is included in the family even if he is not very close to the participant.

These cases bring to the fore the importance of transitivity in family belonging. ‘Being’ family is thus not exclusively based on how people feel about the dyadic relationships in which they are involved, but a person’s position within the extended family structure can also be important. In contrast to accounts highlighting dyadic relationships and choice, such as Weber’s notion of kindred (2013), family belonging can involve mediation. While in-category selection highlights the emotional closeness in the dyadic relationship, the transitivity of family belonging underlines the importance of kinship as a structure of genealogical proximity. To some extent, in-category selection and transitivity indicate two opposing tendencies in the complex dynamics of family belonging.

The analysed selection processes reveal those relationship types more inclined to suffusion. While one’s spouse and children are always considered family and are thus not the object of in-category selection, several cases of in-category selection exist among in-laws. This finding illustrates that the further out one moves on their genealogical tree, the greater the boundary between given and chosen ties blurs (Spencer and Pahl 2006) and the looser the grip of cultural expectations or kinship rules. Friends provide the ultimate example of this. Since no rules of kinship apply, the inclusion of friends in one’s family relies solely on other dimensions. Since friendships develop throughout one’s life course and are reinforced by the ties of godparenting, friends occasionally cross the boundary and become — or are identified as — family. This allows more freedom for individuals to express their personal feelings of family belonging and reach beyond descent in search of their ‘place in the world’ (Déchaux 2002).
5. Conclusion

We have explored wives’ and husbands’ personal understandings of family by examining family composition, two overlapping configurations within a couple and the selection processes whereby complex dynamics of family belonging emerge. Our analysis illustrates the ways in which interviewees reconciled their personal experience of emotional closeness in contrast to cultural expectations regarding family and kinship. Family belonging developed from the intertwining of these aspects, resulting in configurations that reflect a floating type of family membership (Déchaux 2002).

Among our interviewees, one’s spouse and, when applicable, one’s children formed the nucleus of the family. But, mostly, definitions of family reached beyond the nuclear family to include a varying set of people from the interviewee’s own and their spouse’s extended family of origin, to include even non-kin. In all couples the two spouses’ lists of family members differed. While in some couples spouses held similar ideas about family composition, most couples expressed considerably divergent understandings when comparing individual spouses. This finding illustrates that the relational context of the ‘traditional’ nuclear family does not determine individuals’ family understandings in any axiomatic way.

The interviewees reconciled individual choices on the one hand and an assigned membership to a group on the other (see also Maillochon and Castrén 2011), and the selection processes delineated followed subjectivist affiliation (Déchaux 2002). While emotional closeness was in most cases connected to listing a person as family, our analysis highlighted three additional tendencies influencing the evolution of family belonging. Firstly, including friends in the family meant stepping outside the kinship structure, indicating the growing significance of emotional closeness. When friends crossed the boundary and became family, it was based on a long-term relationship, shared life experiences and a special bond cemented through godparenting. Friends
were not included in the family as replacements or compensation; instead, they appeared alongside ties based on descent and alliance. The idea of compensation was not found in the choices of childless interviewees either, since none of them mentioned a friend as belonging to their family. The logic of the inclusion found in our study thus differs from that described in studies among same-sex couples and chosen families (e.g. Weeks et al. 2001).

Secondly, within the kinship structure the qualities of the dyadic relationship could also become of ultimate importance. This happened in what we call in-category selection. Thus, when, for example, in-law relations became given-as-chosen ties (Spencer and Pahl 2006: 113), emphasising family belonging as built on personal preferences, shared emotional closeness and mutual interests. Thirdly, and in contrast to in-category selection, in-laws might be included in the family even when very little emotional closeness exists in the dyadic relationship, focusing instead on the transitivity of family belonging.

Our analysis highlights the different dimensions of family belonging, outlined by Weber (2013) as lineage, kindred and maisonnée, all of which can overlap in multiple ways. The dimension of maisonnée becomes crucial when an interviewee included relations that did not fall within the most common classifications, such as exchange students living with a host family or the exclusion of a father who lost contact with his daughter. Typically, most listed family members consisted of all of three dimensions of kinship.

Despite living in the specific relational setting of an opposite-sex couple, the individuals in our study are not uniform in their understanding of family. They share the idea of the family of procreation as the nucleus of their family, but extend family belonging beyond that in many ways. The divergence revealed in our analysis shows that an
understanding of family evolves in a particular familial historical context (see Widmer et al. 2008). In addition, personal preferences play an important role. While the nucleus remains uncontested, all relations beyond the family of procreation are subject to individual affinities, reflections and choices.

Our findings illustrate the constitution of family understandings in a small sample of married women and men predominantly in their 30s, often with young children. This represents a specific life stage concentrated on the family of procreation or, in the case of childlessness, on the couple. As life trajectories and relational settings of families differ, we cannot claim to have covered all possible ways of delineating family belonging. In addition, definitions of family vary in different contexts; for example, in situations of crisis or need, family might be defined in a different way. However, this study confirms that in order to grasp the dynamics of family belonging researchers must analyse personal family understandings as evolving in a particular life-historical, relational and cultural context.

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Understandings of family among wives and husbands:
Reconciling emotional closeness and cultural expectations

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### TABLE 1. Lists of family members provided by Jonna and Tapio

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jonna Name</th>
<th>Type of relation</th>
<th>Tapio Name</th>
<th>Type of relation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tapio</td>
<td>husband</td>
<td>Jonna</td>
<td>wife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ritva</td>
<td>mother</td>
<td>Ritva</td>
<td>wife’s mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ella</td>
<td>sister</td>
<td>Ella</td>
<td>wife’s sister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erika</td>
<td>sister</td>
<td>Erika</td>
<td>wife’s sister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antero</td>
<td>mother’s husband</td>
<td>Hilkka</td>
<td>mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jarno</td>
<td>sister’s husband</td>
<td>Heikki</td>
<td>father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesse</td>
<td>sister’s husband</td>
<td>Tiia</td>
<td>sister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ella’s child</td>
<td>sister’s child</td>
<td>Petri</td>
<td>sister’s cohabiting partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erika’s children</td>
<td>sister’s children</td>
<td>Tiia’s children</td>
<td>sister’s children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carolina</td>
<td>previous exchange student</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucas</td>
<td>current exchange student</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### TABLE 2. Relationship types for persons considered ‘not very close’ (closeness value 3)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship type</th>
<th># of persons in this relation type</th>
<th># of persons considered ‘not very close’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother’s or father’s spouse*</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sister</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sister’s husband*</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brother’s wife*</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse’s sister</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse’s sister’s husband*</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse’s friend</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse’s friend’s spouse*</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exchange student</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>83</strong></td>
<td><strong>16</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Includes marital partners, cohabiting partners and living apart together (LAT) partners.