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If a family has an older person in it, it possesses a jewel.
Chinese proverb

Introduction

The following are some of the headlines that have appeared in English-language news sources in 2020 amid the coronavirus pandemic; the articles call attention to how and when grandparents can interact with their grandchildren safely:

“Spain warns elderly to keep away from grandchildren as COVID-19 cases soar.”¹

“When can I see my grandkids?”²

“New national lockdown childcare rules explained - and what they mean for parents and grandparents”³

“For grandparents this holiday, coronavirus separates them from grandkids: 'It's going to be hard'”⁴

Anthropologists know that growing older is conceptualized and experienced differently in different societies (e.g., Sokolovsky 2020). With its long-standing interest in kinship, anthropology has pointed out that in many places, the norm has been for the family to take care of their elderly. However, in varying locally inflected ways, global capitalism, neoliberal reforms, and national and international policies have often caused this care to shift onto others, due to changes in family and community structures and the expectation for younger generations to achieve financial success and independence (Danely 2019; Keimig 2020; Zhang 2020). For example, in China, attitudes towards care in institutional settings have become more favorable as it becomes evident that adult children are no longer able to care for their parents.⁵ Likewise, “changing family and demographic structures in the Arab region” (Hussein and Ismail 2017, 276) have made it clear that new policies and models of elder care that move beyond

the reliance on kin are needed. The elderly are increasingly being cared for by individuals and institutions outside of the family in certain countries, which is also due to the recognition that family members cannot always provide the complex care that some older relatives need.

Today, these same elderly have become a main focus of responses to COVID-19 in much of the world. The World Health Organization (WHO) states, “COVID-19 is changing older people’s daily routines, the care and support they receive, their ability to stay socially connected and how they are perceived.”⁶ The pandemic has exposed the complexities of growing older and has brought to light the point at which the family and politics merge in society. Older adults are being cared for both inside and, increasingly in various countries and locations, outside of the home, but they are also caregivers, especially to younger children (i.e., grandchildren). Some families may rely on older adults, such as grandparents, to care for younger children during working hours (usual business hours or blocks of shift work) because of the costs of childcare. Grandparents living with and taking care of grandchildren may also be a cultural norm, or some parents may find having grandparents live with them, or visiting each other, to be a way of keeping their parents engaged in everyday life. All these activities have become much more complicated during the pandemic due to the elderly tending to be at higher risk of infection. Data have also shown that this risk is confounded by socioeconomic status and race and ethnicity.⁷

The kin contract

COVID-19 has made both formal and informal caregiving much more complicated due to the relative ease at which the disease can be transmitted from person to person. To analyze this complexity of informal caregiving during the pandemic, we re-visit the concept of the “kin contract” developed by Suad Joseph (2005), in order to reflect on how the involvement of older adults in the care for others — especially grandchildren—within a household during the COVID-19 pandemic urges us to raise broader questions about belonging, identity, citizenship, and responsibility. Joseph explains, “The kin contract is organized around the notion that all citizens belong to families prior to membership in the state and that families claim the primary and primordial loyalties of citizens” (2005, 149). In her work on women’s citizenship in Lebanon, Joseph suggests that “families are critical mediating mechanisms for state political institutions” and that the family is central to “states’ social and political organizations and actions” (2005, 149). We find the “kin contract” to be a useful tool to explore the juncture in society at which politics and the family come together in general, and to illuminate how the pandemic has revealed that this joint is messy and quite precarious. Following Joseph, we pose that the relationship between the family and the state needs to be complicated and examined from the perspective of the everyday experiences and the negotiations that both parents and grandparents have to make, in particular with regard to caring for and visiting grandchildren during the pandemic.

There is much more to this story than the mere transmission of the coronavirus from one body to the other. The political response to COVID-19 reminds that bodies are always governed by the state and local authorities (Foucault 1990, Rose 1990); today they define the safe distance that must be maintained between bodies in order to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, and impose rules of comportment (e.g., the mandatory wearing of masks and face coverings in some places). Today, parents and grandparents must navigate state and local policies put into place to slow the transmission of the virus, and the guidance from national and international agencies like the World Health Organization and the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), all while needing to provide care for family members and the familial and cultural expectations for human interactions.

The “kin contract” enables us to account for these navigational practices, and to inquire about the everyday choices that parents and grandparents have made during the pandemic. There is ample reason to believe that the role of grandparents in family life has, in the current situation, become more important than ever before. Parents may be juggling work and their child’s school schedule (in-person or remote/virtual learning) and need to call on grandparents for help; or grandparents may have always played a role in childcare, and are now asked to keep a ‘safe distance’ from their grandchildren. In the midst of the pandemic, grandparents may feel an increased pressure to help with childcare, if parents do not have other options and cannot, for practical and/or financial reasons, stay at home. This moral obligation competes with an increased health risk, especially as places like the United States and Europe are moving into colder months, where activities are shifting from outdoors to indoors and there may be increased interactions between grandparents and children in enclosed spaces. The messaging that has accompanied security measures, is for all of us to act as if we are already infected, meaning we should monitor our behavior and take caution in order not to infect others. With this, grandparents who care for grandchildren face the dilemma of needing to abide by the guidance issued by authorities to protect themselves and the broader community, and needing to assist their adult children while they try to balance work and family life. This may mean they have to disregard some of this counsel, such as not socially distancing or wearing face masks when around others indoors, and that they have to choose between being a good grandparent and being a good citizen.

COVID-19 in Northern Virginia

Part of our interest in exploring the “kin contract” developed out of discussions of COVID-19 in Northern Virginia, in the areas surrounding Washington, D.C. All three of us live in Northern Virginia and have experienced the region’s response to COVID-19 first-hand. This piece is based on our use of an anthropological perspective to analyze public discourses, news and media, official reports, and our own experiences with the pandemic as it has unfolded since early 2020. In Fairfax County,⁸ where George Mason University is located, Latinx have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19 in the county, making up roughly 60% of the cases, even though Latinx are only about 20% of the population.⁹ News stories and comments on social media dealing with the reasons why COVID-19 has disproportionately impacted Latinx in this region, focus on the prevalence of multigenerational households among Latinx communities, their socioeconomic status, their immigration status, and the fact that a number of Latinx are essential workers (e.g., construction, landscaping, domestic work, childcare, or the service industry). As the story goes, “workers are more likely to be exposed to infection at work and then bring it home to their cramped apartments.”¹⁰ With the new school year upon the region this Fall, the concern that has circulated in local online parents’ groups, such as those created through Facebook, and among faculty and staff in public schools, is that children could contract the coronavirus and only express mild symptoms or none at all, but still transmit the virus to parents and grandparents who may live with or take care of them. There is a great deal of anxiety in the conversations about COVID-19 in Northern Virginia, and particularly among Latinx, as presented in the local media and briefings from authorities and academics on the COVID-19 situation. Given this, we considered where grandparents help with childcare regularly or on occasion, and the cases where grandparents are actively involved in their children’s lives and families. This is where the “kin-contract” proves to be a productive concept, since it exposes both tensions and intimate connections, that exist between the family and state/national levels.

Politics and the family: a sense of identity, responsibility, and belonging

COVID-19 is a public health crisis that calls on all of us to recognize the responsibility that we have to protect ourselves as well as each other. This responsabilization is clearly the rhetoric behind mask wearing and other security measures. For example, Dr. Robert R. Redfield, Director of the CDC since

2018, stated, “Cloth face coverings are one of the most powerful weapons we have to slow and stop the spread of the virus . . . All Americans have a responsibility to protect themselves, their families and their communities.”¹¹ “Responsibility” is also a pillar of the “kin contract.” As Joseph states: “The kin contract presumes that males and females, seniors and juniors are engaged in complex webs of rights and responsibilities for each other” (2005, 150). Today, the question is then: how do these “webs” of rights and responsibilities inform the decisions that parents and grandparents make with regard to grandchildren at times when they may counter the orders put in place at the state and/or local levels or guidance offered by health professionals and scientists to curb the virus’ spread?

An article in the *Washington Post* states, “There are no easy answers for grandparents yearning to be with their grandchildren. The situation is far from clear cut . . . and there is no unanimity among experts on the best approach.”¹² For grandparents who assist with childcare by watching grandchildren while their parents work, either living with them or visiting their home, this is even more of a difficult situation given without this care, parents may have to pay additional money for outside care. The financial livelihood of parents may be at risk without the grandparents’ contribution to the household. The economic aspects of care come into conflict with the potential physical danger of having grandparents be around grandchildren during the pandemic.

The “kin contract” brings to light the relationships among multiple interlocking domains of life during the pandemic—finances, politics, family, and culture – that are mediated daily and are an integral part of family life. Joseph’s concept helps us think through how grandparents and parents balance belonging to a family that has particular needs with their belonging to the broader community or nation, that also must be sustained and cared for, and in this crisis, more than ever, requests their full accountability. In this sense, the current pandemic also raises questions about what it means to be a citizen, and what the relation between citizenship and (grand)parenthood entails. Abiding by guidance provided by governments and other reputable entities is not always straight-forward, especially when we must *physically* care for someone else. Ultimately, these lived complexities highlight the ways that the relationship between the state and citizens is mediated by kin/the family. The “kin contract” shows that the family and the state are “mutually constitutive” (Joseph 2005, 149) even though they may at times contradict each other, as under COVID-19. For example, staying in a ‘bubble’ can help fight the spread of the coronavirus, but yet, grandparents may need to enter this ‘bubble’ to provide care, or are already living with their children and grandchildren, which could put them at higher risk if other family members have to travel outside the house for school or work.

Taking the “kin contract” seriously, also allows us to analyze how exactly the effects of economic inequalities have intensified in light of policies implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic. Multi-generational households may be of cultural importance for many who identify as Latinx, but for some who experience financial hardships or who are undocumented, multi-generational households can also – additionally or exclusively – be motivated by economic needs. Due to cultural inclination and socioeconomic status, many Latinx people live in multigenerational, interconnected homes that affect their ability to follow WHO/CDC social distancing/isolation recommendations without issue (Gil *et al.* 2020). This, of course, does not mean that Latinx communities are unaware of how to stop the transmission of the virus or disregard guidance from health care professionals out of neglect. Rather, due to economic needs and structural power imbalances in society that disadvantage certain groups, some live in multi-generational homes out of necessity to ensure that families, children, and the elderly are cared for. With care needs exacerbated by the pandemic, families may find themselves with working members spanning multiple generations, while childcare and eldercare are delegated to various family members, including adolescents. Although a health risk, coming together in these ways may be necessary for the good of the family and lessen the dangers involved with improper childcare and social

isolation of older adults, and may prevent additional financial burdens (e.g., paying for childcare) (Paredes *et al.* 2020; Thomas and Smith-Morris 2020). With responsibility to the family, in addition to the community and nation, ‘good’ citizenship (as historically and socially contingent), can come into conflict with the “kin contract.” Exactly this tension between citizenship and kinship values, raises questions about responsibility and belonging, as well as about identity and self-worth of older adults, given that grandchildren may figure greatly into how they define and think of themselves.

Concluding comments: the push and pull of the kin contract

Analyzing the impact of COVID-19 among Latinx in Northern Virginia and in the region more generally, we find that older adults must deal with a push and pull: do they see themselves as being part of the nation and therefore needing to adhere to social distancing guidelines to protect others? Or, if they provide care for their grandchildren, do they put their families’ needs first? As explored in this thinkpiece, the “kin contract” allows to focus on the nuances of the inherent relationship between kin/family and the state and the ways that these two are linked in people’s daily lives. The sense of duty that some families have towards their elder members, and the responsibility that elders may feel towards their children and grandchildren, have been impacted by the ‘new-normal’ of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some people in the United States feel that they cannot rely on the state for support during the pandemic – such as migrants, underrepresented and minority groups, including some Latinx, and those identified as vulnerable, such as the elderly. There have been several news stories reporting how poorly the United States has handled the pandemic as compared to other countries.¹³ In times like these, family and close social ties increasingly become their ‘safety net’ for care and support. However, current policies and guidelines put in place to curb the spread of the coronavirus do not always take this social and cultural web into consideration. The negligence of micro-social realities can affect older adults, and particularly those who have strong relationships with grandchildren or play a role in their care out of desire or need, as they are now forced to negotiate their relationship with their families alongside the need to slow the transmission of the virus, on the messy joint between citizenship and (grand)parenthood.

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