

## Decolonizing Relatedness and Kinship: Kyle's Grandchildren

**Pamela Downe, PhD (University of Saskatchewan)**  
[pamela.downe@usask.ca](mailto:pamela.downe@usask.ca)

Kyle was a trusted research participant. For over eight years, he was a key interlocutor in my research on parenting in the context of HIV/AIDS. Kyle was also dying. His lung cancer had progressed quickly. After years of living with HIV/AIDS and opioid addiction, his body was exhausted, and therapeutic interventions were not effective. Kyle did not want to die in the hospital. One of his biggest fears was that his grandchildren would have no official say in his care. “They are my legacy. I trust them the most. They won’t be allowed in the hospital room if I’m there.” Kyle’s grandchildren included his great nieces and nephews, cousins, the young people who came to know him well at the AIDS Saskatoon drop-in centre, the grandchildren of close friends and former foster home brothers, as well as his own children’s sons and daughters. These are the children who are an integral part of Kyle’s family and, in his words, “make me a Cree grandfather.” Unfortunately, Kyle’s desire to die at home with his grandchildren around him could not happen. He became too ill. As he feared, the children were not permitted in his hospital room. He died in 2011 with his sister holding his hand.

In the palliative care unit where Kyle died, only “close family” are permitted to visit. The narrow interpretation of “family” did not align with the realities of care in Indigenous communities. Hospital staff made no accommodation for the fact that family roles in Indigenous communities are largely defined through the responsibilities that people have towards each other rather than genealogical assignment. The contrast between these interpretations of family undoubtedly sounds familiar to many anthropologists. It reflects the contrast between the early disciplinary focus on the political structures of kinship and the broader understanding of relatedness that characterizes the field today. As I have argued elsewhere (Downe 2021, 27), early studies of kinship focused on how networks of economic and political power were maintained by family structures and patterns of inheritance. Anthropologists relied largely on colonial models of linear descent even when the peoples with whom they worked experienced family life differently.

Over time, anthropologists’ focus shifted from the static and structural dimensions of kinship to the ways that families function as social units of intimacy, nurturance, and collective belonging. The concept of relatedness came to the analytical foreground. Janet Carsten (1995) was particularly influential in challenging not only the biological determinism of colonial kinship models but also the very distinction between the biological relations and the social bonds that constitute relatedness. She advanced the argument that categories of blood- and fictive- relatives

often overlap to such an extent that the distinctions commonly drawn between them do not represent the dynamic and relational dimensions of kinship.

The shift in how anthropologists approach the study of kinship has opened important spaces for critical engagement. The need to decolonize the narrow definitions of family that are reinforced in institutional practices of hospitals, courts, and social services (among others) has become abundantly clear. The need to center the role that children play as agentive and productive family members is now well understood. It is within this space that anthropologists must now take up the challenge of application. How can the anthropological insights of relatedness guide structural change so that others who find themselves in Kyle's situation will be able to leave this world with their grandchildren, and all their relations, around them?

## References

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## Author Biography

Pamela Downe is a professor in the Department of Anthropology, University of Saskatchewan. As a medical anthropologist, her research focuses on infectious diseases and syndemics, illness ethnography, and maternal care. Her most recent book is *Collective Care: Indigenous Motherhood, Family, and HIV/AIDS* (University of Toronto Press).

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**Author contact:** Pamela Downe, PhD (University of Saskatchewan), [pamela.downe@usask.ca](mailto:pamela.downe@usask.ca)

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