kinship



18th-century family register*National Archives, Washington, D.C.*

kinship, system of social organization based on real or putative family ties. The modern study of kinship can be traced back to mid-19th-century interests in comparative legal institutions and philology. In the late 19th century, however, the cross-cultural comparison of kinship institutions became the particular province of anthropology.

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If the study of kinship was defined largely by anthropologists, it is equally true that anthropology as an academic discipline was itself defined by kinship. Until the last decades of the 20th century, for example, kinship was regarded as the core of British social anthropology, and no thorough ethnographic study could overlook the central importance of kinship in the functioning of so-called stateless, nonindustrial, or traditional societies.

Kinship is a universal human phenomenon that takes highly variable cultural forms. It has been explored and analyzed by many scholars, however, in ways quite removed from any popular understanding of what “being kin” might mean. As the theoretical core of the newly emerging discipline of anthropology, kinship was also the subject that made the reputations of the leading figures in the field, including scholars such as Bronisław Malinowski, A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, A.L. Kroeber, George Peter Murdock, Meyer Fortes, Edward Evans-Pritchard, and Claude Lévi-Strauss.

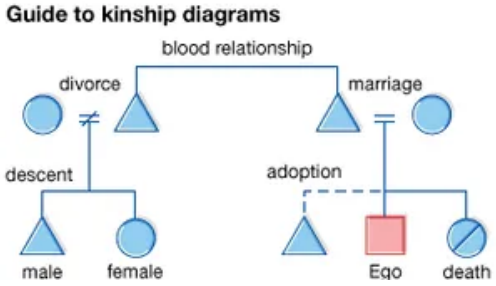
These and other anthropologists held that the importance of kinship in “primitive” societies largely resided in its role as an organizational framework for production and group decision

making. They typically described these realms of traditional culture (generally glossed as economics and politics, respectively) as being embedded in kinship and dominated by men. Studies of industrialized societies, by contrast, reflected sociological theories that tended to assume kinship constituted a private, domestic domain rather than a central feature of social life. For those whose work featured such cultures, kinship was of minor interest because it was constituted by close family relations and was considered to be the female domain par excellence. During the mid-20th century, studies of kinship became increasingly abstract and removed from the practice of actual lived relations and the powerful emotions that they engendered. Indeed, anthropological and sociological studies of the era were typified by highly technical, or even mathematical, models of how societies worked.

The rise of feminist and Marxist scholarship in the 1960s and ’70s was among several developments that challenged the basis of earlier kinship scholarship. The American Marxist-feminist anthropologist Eleanor Leacock and others brought to the fore the extent to which supposedly holistic practices of ethnography were actually concerned with men only, often to the point of excluding most or all information on the lives of women. The relative foregrounding of men in anthropological studies became less acceptable, and women’s experiences became a legitimate topic of scholarship. Meanwhile, materialist studies of so-called traditional and industrial societies were increasingly able to show the political and economic inflections of the “private,” “domestic” domain of the family.

Feminist anthropologists gradually shifted from documenting the world of women to analyzing the symbolization of gender itself. These studies of the late 1970s and ’80s challenged the intellectual edifice on which the study of kinship had been built and gave rise to a lively debate over the mutual definition of kinship and gender. This debate was part of a much wider questioning of the central tenets of anthropological method and theory, including the division of the field into discrete domains such as politics, economics, kinship, religion, and theory. These developments seemed likely to result in the displacement of kinship studies. However, the advent of new reproductive technologies (including in vitro fertilization), family forms (such as same-sex marriage), and approaches blending the separate domains of anthropology instigated the revitalization of kinship studies in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

The evolution of family forms



basics of kinship diagrams*Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.*

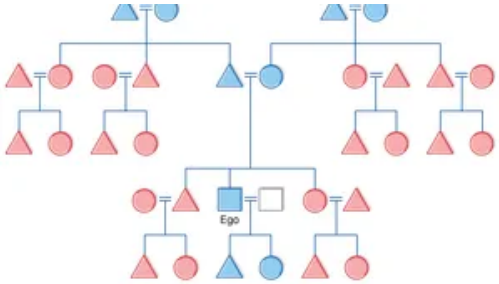
The earliest attempts at the comparative study of kinship institutions were undertaken by 19th-century theorists of cultural evolution. The most prominent of these scholars combined legal studies with ethnology and included Henry Maine, Johannes Bachofen, John Ferguson McLennan, and Lewis Henry Morgan. They attempted to trace the historical evolution of family forms from the most “primitive” to the most “modern” and “civilized.”

According to Maine’s theory, the earliest form of kin organization was a state of “patriarchal despotism” in which society consisted of an aggregation of families, each under the rule of the father. The evolution of society was characterized by Maine as a movement from “status” to “contract” forms of relationship—in other words, a change from relations ordered by ascribed positions in a familial system to one in which relations were based on contractual obligations freely entered into by individuals.

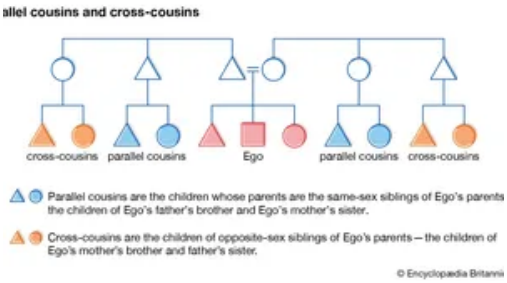
In contrast, Bachofen, McLennan, and Morgan posited that the earliest societies were ruled by women and that the forms of kinship used by these societies were rather less regulated than Maine had suggested. Between what Morgan labeled a state of “primitive promiscuity”—in which sex and marriage were quite unregulated—and the patriarchal monogamous family form of “civilization” (the evolutionary stage in which he placed 19th-century European and Euro-American society) came a sequence of intermediate stages. These varied depending on the theorist but typically included variations such as group marriage, exogamy (outmarriage), matriarchy, and polygamy.

Theories of cultural evolution were conservative in the sense that they demonstrated that the mid-19th century bourgeois family was the most “civilized” of kinship institutions. They were also speculative in that there was no direct evidence for the various early stages posited by Bachofen, McLennan, or Morgan; group marriage, matriarchy, primitive promiscuity, and so forth were merely colourful projections of the 19th-century imagination.

The evidence that these early theorists did use was partly derived from the comparison of the legal institutions and kin terms found in different societies. Collections and analyses of linguistic data by philologists, among others, demonstrated that while some cultures differentiated “lineal kin” (those in a direct parent-child relationship) from “collateral kin”



lineal kin and collateral kin*Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.*



parallel and cross-cousins*Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.*

(such as cousins, aunts, and uncles), others did not. In some cultures, for example, father and father's brother, or mother and mother's sister, were denoted by the same term. In such systems the terms for cousins would be the same as those for siblings—in other words, father's brother's son, father's son, and brother are classed together, as are mother's sister's daughter, mother's daughter, and sister.

Morgan called kinship terminology that differentiated lineal kin from others "descriptive," while systems that grouped lineal and collateral kin became known as "classificatory." He posited that classificatory terminology reflected a system in which a group of brothers shared their sisters in marriage and that it was a cultural survival from an earlier time in which either father and father's brother had been indistinguishable or the distinction held no social significance.

To Morgan this implied a system of marriage in which the identity of a specific father was unknowable while the identity of the mother was known but socially unimportant. The facts of pregnancy and birth appeared to differentiate motherhood from fatherhood in a crucial way. Motherhood was always recognizable—although not necessarily significant—whereas fatherhood required regulation to be identifiable. From this premise Morgan posited a hypothetical stage of "group marriage," and it was but a small leap to suggest an even earlier era of "primitive promiscuity" during which sex and marriage were totally unregulated (in fact, modern anthropology has demonstrated that no human society exists nor has existed in which sex and marital relations are not regulated in some way).

These early attempts to systematize the study of human kinship institutions produced models that have since been discredited but that left an enduring mark on modern anthropology in at least two ways. First, kin terminology long continued to be an important aspect of kinship studies. Indeed, the questions these early studies raised about the relationship between language and culture—e.g., Are kin terms a direct reflection of marriage practices?—have occupied a central place in anthropology. Second, such studies made apparent an important distinction between motherhood and fatherhood, acknowledging the former condition as inherently recognizable and the latter as less obvious. This distinction marked out another crucial area of study for kinship—the cross-

cultural study of beliefs about procreation. Both these topics are considered in further detail below.

For modern anthropology the most influential of the evolutionary theorists was Lewis Henry Morgan. While other 19th-century anthropologists generally based their work on library research, Morgan carried out fieldwork among the Iroquois and other Native American peoples. In *Ancient Society* (1877) he attempted to link the evolution of kinship institutions to technological changes and the evolution of property forms. He suggested a schema in which the earlier stages of kinship organization were linked to low levels of technology and to hunting, gathering, or fishing as modes of subsistence. In these early stages of human evolution, there was an absence of ownership of property. Later the development of pastoralism and settled agriculture—and, more importantly, the greater investments of time and energy that these activities engendered—fostered a vested interest in owning the products of labour, such as herds or cultivated land. A man would wish to pass on such products to his offspring, and it thus became more important to know who those offspring were. As a result, men attempted to exert greater control over women, thereby causing humanity to move sequentially through the stages of primitive promiscuity, group marriage, matriarchy, patriarchy, and polygamy, ultimately "achieving" monogamy.

Morgan's theories thus suggested a mechanism for the evolution of the family: technological developments and the concomitant changes in the ownership of property drove the development of new kinship institutions. His pioneering work on kinship terminology, as well as his grand evolutionary scheme, has retained a niche in the modern study of kinship. Indeed, although anthropology has for the most part long abandoned any evolutionary ambitions, echoes of Morgan's historical stages continue to crop up in some surprising places. This is partly through the historical coincidence that Morgan's theories were taken up by German expatriates Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in their work on precapitalist societies.

Marx and Engels were engaged in an ambitious project to analyze capitalist society and to demonstrate that the social institutions of capitalism were neither historically inevitable nor desirable. Morgan's work was of major interest to them for two reasons. The first was historical: his evolutionary scheme linking kinship institutions to technology and the ownership of property suggested how the particular social relations of capitalism might have developed from earlier social and economic systems. The second was comparative: Morgan had provided ethnographic evidence that the private ownership and control of property, which was dominant under capitalism, was not the only possible form that

property relations could take. Indeed, ownership by a group such as a clan or a lineage was by no means unusual in precapitalist societies that were organized through kinship.

Engels's *The Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884) was in fact largely based on Morgan's *Ancient Society*. It traced the evolution of family forms, linking them, as Morgan had done, to changes in technology and arrangements for the ownership of property. Despite their similarities, however, the two works were set apart by a crucial difference—Morgan's work was intended as a scholarly product, or an end in itself, while Engels's was revolutionary in tone and spirit. Rather than regard mid-19th-century European society and family life as the apotheosis of civilization, Engels was highly critical of these institutions. He had some particularly acerbic observations to make about the position of women in the patriarchal European bourgeois family—which, he argued, compared unfavourably to that of prostitutes. Marx and Engels were particularly influential on the kinship studies of Soviet and Chinese anthropologists, which retained a heavily evolutionist flavour long after such theories had been abandoned elsewhere. Engels's *Origins of the Family* was also taken up much later by feminists and inspired a number of studies of the position of women in so-called simple societies.

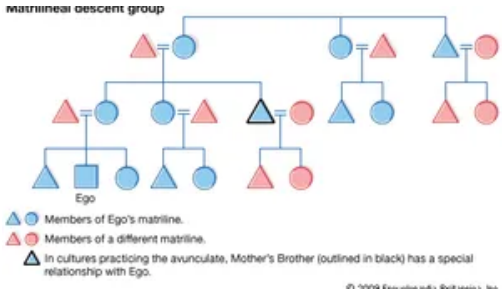
Descent theory

Kinship was regarded as the theoretical and methodological core of social anthropology in the early and middle part of the 20th century. Although comparative studies gradually abandoned an explicit evolutionist agenda, there remained an implicit evolutionary cast to the way in which kinship studies were framed. Indeed, scholarly interest in the cross-cultural comparison of kinship institutions could be traced back to a set of questions deriving from the cultural evolutionists.

The central problem addressed by anthropologists of the early 20th century was directly related to the colonial enterprise and focused on understanding the mechanisms for maintaining political order in stateless societies. Given that such societies lacked centralized administrative and judicial institutions—the bureaucratic machinery of the state—how were rights, duties, status, and property transmitted from one generation to the next? Traditional societies accomplished this task by organizing around kinship relations rather than property. This distinction arose out of the models that had been developed by Maine and Morgan, in which cultural evolution was driven by the transition from status to contract forms of organization and from corporate to individual forms of property ownership.

Prominent British social anthropologists of this period, such as Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, Evans-Pritchard, and Fortes, generally advocated a functionalist approach to these questions. The major premises of functionalism were that every aspect of a culture, no matter how seemingly disparate (e.g., kinship terms, technology, food, mythology, artistic motifs), had a substantive purpose and that within a given culture these diverse structures worked together to maintain the group's viability. For instance, these scholars saw the family as a universal social institution that functioned primarily to rear children. From their perspective this function was to a large degree self-evident and cross-culturally constant. The wider groupings recruited through kinship, which were the basis of political and economic organization, were much more culturally variable and hence of greater interest.

Fortes distinguished between the "private" or "domestic" domain of kinship and what he called the "politico-jural" domain. It was nevertheless true that Fortes in particular gave considerable explanatory weight to the emotional power of kinship. According to Fortes, what gave kinship its moral force was the "axiom of amity"—the idea that in the last analysis it is kin who can always be relied upon to help you out and who are the people you turn to when other help fails. Yet if this emotional content was the source of the power of kinship, it was also an area that lay beyond the province of anthropology. Fortes had been influenced by Freudian psychology, but his approach placed analyses of emotion and the unconscious mind in the domain of psychologists rather than anthropologists. Thus, British social anthropologists explored the ways in which kinship provided a basis for forming the kinds of groups—discrete, bounded, and linked to a particular territory—that were seen as necessary for a stable political order. Their explanations of these mechanisms became known as the descent theory of kinship.



unilineal kin system*Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.*

Kinship is always "bilateral"; that is, it consists of relatives on both the mother's and the father's sides. Of course the relatives on both sides of any individual overlap with those of others, creating a web of interconnectedness rather than a discrete group. However, the recognition of one line of descent and the exclusion of the other provides the basis of a "unilineal" kinship system. In such systems descent defines bounded groups. The principle operates similarly whether the rule of descent is matrilineal (traced through the mother in the female line) or patrilineal (traced through the father in the male line).

Unilineal kinship systems were seen by British anthropologists of this period as providing a basis for the stable functioning of societies in the absence of state institutions. Generally, unilineal descent groups were exogamous. They also acted as corporations: their members held land in common, acted as a single unit with regard to substantive property, and behaved as one "person" in relation to other similarly constituted groups in legal and political matters such as warfare, feuds, and litigation. That is, the members of a lineage did not act as individuals in the politico-jural domain, instead conceiving themselves to a considerable extent as undifferentiated and continuous with each other. This corporateness was the basis of the stability and structure of a society formed out of unilineal descent groups.

The distinction between matrilineal and patrilineal systems did not have any obvious implications in terms of women's political status, although it is sometimes assumed that a matrilineal kinship system must imply women's greater political power. Anthropologists make a clear distinction between matriliny and matriarchy, however: the former denotes a method of reckoning kinship, while the latter denotes a system in which women have overall political control to the exclusion of men. Similarly, patriarchy denotes political control by men to the exclusion of women.

Although women may be more highly valued in matrilineal than patrilineal cultures, the anthropological data clearly indicate that hierarchical political systems (whether matrilineal or patrilineal) tend to be dominated by men and that no period of absolute matriarchy has ever existed. Despite plentiful evidence to the contrary, a notional era of "pure" matriarchy has been invoked as a theme in some very diverse contexts, including not only 19th-century cultural evolutionism but also the more recent discourses of environmentalism (especially ecofeminism), Neo-Paganism, and the so-called Goddess movement.

Personhood, cohesion, and the "matrilineal puzzle"

The differences between matrilineal and patrilineal systems nonetheless drew the nature of personhood to the attention of descent theorists. Studies of matrilineal systems suggested that a particular nexus of problems might arise regarding political continuity in a context where the holders of office (men) did not pass their status to their sons. If a man's right to inherit an office was determined by who his mother was, then the political cohesion that seemed to be dependent on the father-son bond was potentially jeopardized. A number of solutions to what became known as the "matrilineal puzzle" were described, focusing variously on rules for marriage, residence, and succession. Perhaps the best-known of these

is the avunculate, a custom in which men have an unusually close relationship with their sisters' sons, often including coresidence.

The issues that underlay the so-called matrilineal puzzle were directly related to culturally specific notions about what constitutes a person. It was very clear that, in spite of wielding political authority, men in matrilineal systems occupied a marginal position as lineage members: they belonged by birth to the group of their mother, but on marriage they might be to some extent incorporated into their wife's group in order to ensure the succession of her children. Because a man's position as a member of a matrilineage was always to some degree compromised between affiliation to his mother's group and to that of his wife, the extent to which he achieved full social personhood—that is, an identity altogether within either lineage—was limited. Fortes's own work among the Tallensi of West Africa demonstrated very clearly that exactly the same argument could be made about women in a patrilineal system: women were always caught between being members of their father's lineage and that of their husband. Not fully members of either group, they were not considered full social persons. However, the significance of men's liminality vis-à-vis lineage membership seemed far greater and occupied more analytical space than that of women in mid-century studies, a view that reflected the androcentrism of the era's researchers.

Critiques of descent theory

Although descent theory dominated early to mid-20th-century British kinship studies, a number of problems soon emerged. It became apparent that the depiction of societies as neatly ordered by unilineal descent into clearly bounded, nested units of different scale was quite far from everyday political reality. Personal experiences of kinship could vary considerably from the normative models described by some anthropologists; Evans-Pritchard, for instance, demonstrated that individuals could not always unequivocally identify the lineage to which they belonged. Furthermore, as scholars from Britain, France, and the United States increasingly undertook fieldwork outside Africa—for example, in Polynesia, Southeast Asia, or New Guinea—it became clear that kinship was not always organized through unilineal descent. Despite Radcliffe-Brown's assertions to the contrary, bilateral (sometimes called "cognatic") kinship as well as bilateral descent groups (reckoned in both the mother's and the father's lines) were found to be statistically common, even though they did not provide the same kind of clearly demarcated groupings as unilineal versions of kinship.

A further issue of contention was the extent to which descent theory minimized the importance of marriage in the structuring of kinship. Both Evans-Pritchard and Fortes asserted the importance of various links between descent groups. Such links assured the wider integration of kinship groups over a particular territory and could include links formed through marital connections as well as the recognition of kinship ties in the line that was complementary to the principal line of descent (i.e., matrilateral ties in a patrilineal kinship system or patrilateral ones in a matrilineal system). In their opinion, however, the principle of descent remained paramount in assuring the stable functioning of societies without states. Many prominent British anthropologists of this era were soon locked in forceful debate with their colleagues elsewhere over the significance of descent relative to that of marriage.

Alliance theory

While British social anthropologists were focused on the existence of social rules and the ways in which members of different societies acted within a given framework of ideas and categories, French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss had a very different starting point. His work was motivated by the question of how arbitrary social categories (such as those within kinship, race, or class) had originated. He was also concerned with explaining their apparent compulsory quality, or presence within the "natural order," in societies. In *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1949), Lévi-Strauss turned to kinship to try to answer these questions. His model became known as the alliance theory of kinship.

Reciprocity, incest, and the transition from "nature" to "culture"

Profoundly influenced by the work of Marcel Mauss on the central role of reciprocal gift giving in "primitive" societies, Lévi-Strauss held that the transition from the animal world of "nature" to the human one of "culture" was accomplished through the medium of exchange: it was in the act of giving that the category of the self in opposition to another, or of one's own group to another group, was actually constituted. Thus, the first social categories originated not in the realm of ideas but through the exchange of gifts.

Lévi-Strauss suggested that, because women's fertility is necessary to the reproduction of the group, women are the "supreme gift." With no fair return for a woman except another woman, they must have been reciprocally exchanged rather than simply given away. The simplest form of exchange in this schema involved men exchanging their sisters. According to Lévi-Strauss, this set up a distinction between those who give wives ("wife

givers") and those who receive them ("wife takers"), thus creating the first kinship categories. Later, more-complex forms of exchange marriage were developed.

But what had encouraged this notional exchange of women in the first place? According to Lévi-Strauss, two factors obtained: the principle of reciprocity and the incest taboo. He suggested that the principle of reciprocity, essentially the recognition that gifts set up a series of mutual obligations between those who give and receive them, lies at the heart of human culture. Because women were unique in value, reciprocity ensured that men who gave their sisters away in marriage would in turn receive the sister (or sisters) of one or more other men.

Lévi-Strauss invoked the incest taboo as the second condition upon which the exchange of women was based, noting that it had the peculiar status of being well-documented as both a universal human phenomenon and one in which specific forms were culturally variable. That is, every culture proscribed sexual relations between some kin categories, but the particular categories of kin with whom sexual relations were prohibited varied from one culture to the next. He posited that, in being not only universal but also culturally variable, incest taboos marked humanity's transition from "nature" to "culture."

Elementary structures

Most anthropologists viewed incest taboos as negative prohibitions that had a biological basis (to prevent the inheritance of negative genetic traits) or reflected a particular nexus of cultural rules about marriage. In contrast, Lévi-Strauss saw incest taboos as positive injunctions to marry outside the group. These "positive marriage rules," which state that a spouse must be from a certain social category, were the titular "elementary structures" in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*.

Within sets of elementary structures (or positive rules), Lévi-Strauss made a further distinction between systems of "restricted exchange" and those of "generalized exchange." Restricted exchange involved just two groups of men exchanging women (for example, their sisters). Here the reciprocity was direct and immediate. Generalized exchange involved three or more groups exchanging women in one direction (from group A to group B to group C and back to A). Here exchange was delayed and indirect but held out greater possibilities in terms of the scale and number of groups involved.

For Lévi-Strauss, positive marriage rules combined with the rules of reciprocity as the basis for a general theory of kinship that emphasized exchange as the central principle of kinship

and indeed of “man’s” break from nature. He subsumed relations of consanguinity (blood ties) to those of affinity (marriage): whereas British structural functionalists saw descent ties—based on filial relations within the group—as paramount in kinship, the relations between groups had priority in Lévi-Strauss’s structuralist analysis. He also held that affinal relations framed the most basic and irreducible unit of kinship—what he called the “atom of kinship.” Where descent theorists defined a set of parents and children as the core of kinship relations, Lévi-Strauss defined it as a husband and wife, their son, and the wife’s brother. The presence of the wife’s brother signified the importance of marriage as a relation of exchange between men rather than a mechanism concerned only with ensuring reproduction.

Lévi-Strauss’s work demonstrated that human kinship was fundamentally cultural. Originally he had intended to proceed to an analysis of “complex structures” (those without positive marriage rules). There, he argued, the same principles of exchange and reciprocity were present but were implicit and hidden rather than explicit. In fact, he never completed this work but instead went on to a monumental study of myth. Anthropologists in France, however, have pursued Lévi-Strauss’s analysis of complex and “semi-complex” systems.

Critiques of alliance theory

As already indicated, Lévi-Strauss’s theories placed him in opposition to anthropologists who saw kinship as based on descent rather than marriage. This was not just a matter of whether consanguineal or affinal relations had logical priority. There was a fundamental difference between the analytical projects in which each of these groups of anthropologists were engaged. While structural functionalists in Britain and elsewhere aimed to describe the rules of kinship operating in particular societies, Lévi-Strauss was seeking to understand the origin of categories and thereby of human culture.

A common criticism of both descent theory and alliance theory was that they had a strong tendency to view kinship in normative terms, ignoring the variations of gender and of different social actors and omitting the experiential and emotional sides of kinship. Feminist anthropologists and others inveighed against Lévi-Strauss and other alliance theorists for their objectification of women. Other critiques addressed both theories’ androcentrism, their exclusive concern with “primitive” cultures, and their deficiencies in the analysis of residence and other aspects of kinship.

Despite these problems, Lévi-Strauss left a clear and enduring mark on kinship studies. The fundamental importance of treating marriage as an exchange between groups eventually

became a more or less uncontroversial tenet within anthropology. Particularly in New Guinea, Indonesia, and South America—regions where it was difficult to discern descent groups operating in the manner described by the classic models—exchange seemed to be the principle that unlocked a new way of understanding social life.

Kinship terminology

While British social anthropologists examined the functions of various social rules and institutions and French structuralists used the regularities that underlay those features in a search for the origins of humanity, American cultural anthropologists explored the idea that behaviour is ordered by social categories. This understanding, begun with Morgan in the 19th century, was exemplified by the works of Alfred Kroeber and Robert H. Lowie in the early 20th century, and continued with George Peter Murdock's mid-20th-century attempts to construct a typology of relationship terminologies.

From Kroeber and Lowie onward, these analyses drew from the work of linguists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf, who posited that people understand the world through the lens of language—that is, that vocabulary, grammar, metaphor, and the like literally shape one's experience of objective reality. Kin terminology, as an aspect of language, was thought to demonstrate how language shaped social categories and hence actual practices.

The study of kin terminology, however, developed into an increasingly technical area that had more in common with linguistics than with the study of everyday practices of kinship. During the 1950s and '60s such work reached its apex: the formal analysis of systems of classification on the basis of their different component distinctions within a semantic domain (or the building blocks of meaning in a given field), a process that became known as "componential analysis." In the United States particularly, anthropologists used this mode of analysis in a variety of domains ranging from kinship terminologies to ethnoscience (as with indigenous plant classification schemes). Classification was seen as a key component of the study of meaning and, as such, a central aspect of culture.

As anthropologists no longer assume an intrinsic connection between terminology and practice, the relative importance of the formal study of kin classification in Britain and the United States has declined. It remained an important theme in French anthropology, however. Françoise Héritier in particular developed Lévi-Strauss's earlier work linking terminology systems to particular forms of alliance on the basis of their association with various rules governing marriage.

Historical materialism and instrumentality

Once the debate between advocates of alliance and those of descent no longer seemed so salient, kinship began to be "reread" in a variety of ways. Some of these rereadings were inspired by the Marxist critique of anthropology in the 1960s and '70s and especially by the approach known as historical materialism. Here households, lineages, and other kin-based groups were examined as units of production; property was seen as the basis of relations; and class and social change were placed at the centre of research. Historical materialists drew inspiration from the earlier work of Morgan and of Marx and Engels on precapitalist society. In this sense such studies had either an explicit or an implicit evolutionary flavour; they analyzed kinship as a mode for structuring property relations and saw kinship and property institutions as central to the transition from precapitalist to capitalist and class-based society.

During the 1970s and '80s some studies highlighted the economic significance of kinship but began to view as central its more instrumental and strategic aspects—that is, the ways that one or a few individuals could use kinship to advance their personal interests. The work of Pierre Bourdieu, particularly his *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977), was especially influential. Bourdieu suggested that scholarly attention to rules may be misplaced, noting that they are often used to explain behaviour rather than to direct it; in other words, people often invoke rules only in retrospect, to rationalize actions they have already taken. A related insight was that kinship and the economy were often inseparable from each other; they were "mutually embedded" in the phraseology of the era. This implied that kinship could not be reduced purely to its economic or instrumental aspects. However, many scholars attempted to separate the various component parts of kinship in order to aid in its analysis, and their research tended toward rather reductionist accounts of the ways in which individual actors strategize or manipulate rules to achieve particular ends.

Households, residence rules, and house societies

During the 1960s and '70s another direction pursued in kinship studies involved the foregrounding of residence and the household as crucial dimensions of kinship. Marriage often entails a change of residence for one or both partners, and this approach reflected a concern with the interaction between property or economic relations and marriage rules. It was also spurred by research on societies in Polynesia and Southeast Asia in which kinship was reckoned bilaterally rather than unilineally. Finally, studies highlighting residential arrangements were more able than previous approaches to incorporate other

anthropological concerns such as gender, rules about symbolic and practical divisions of space, inheritance practices, informal domestic relations, and subjective and experiential aspects of place.

Meyer Fortes had already highlighted the significance of the cyclical aspects of residential arrangements. His work demonstrated the ways in which the household passed through various developmental stages as people married, had children, and grew old and as their children matured, married, and had children, triggering the division of the original domestic group. In one sense Fortes's outline of what was called "the developmental cycle of the domestic group" showed the movement and flux inherent in kinship arrangements. From another perspective, however, the stages he posited provided a rather static framework for considering the dynamic aspects of the growth and development of kinship groups. The stages themselves, and the overall cycle, seemed curiously isolated from historical and political changes in the world around them.

The British anthropologist Jack Goody's comparative work on marriage, inheritance, and the household in Europe, Africa, and Asia drew from these earlier studies but expanded Fortes's premise so as to examine the effect of major historical changes on property transfers and familial relations. In this sense Goody's work provided a link to the work of a group of historians of the family who were based at the University of Cambridge. This group analyzed historical records, and in particular parish records, to document shifts in inheritance practices and residential arrangements in the European family. About the same time, Raymond Firth used examples from Polynesian cultures to demonstrate how residence could combine with descent to provide a basis for social organization in the absence of unilineal descent groups.

All these scholars were concerned mainly with structural aspects of residence—the relations between marriage rules, property transfers, and the constitution of domestic groups. Residence also came to the fore in studies that had a different intellectual origin. In the late 1970s Lévi-Strauss returned to kinship, but this time in a less structuralist guise. He became interested in societies in which the most prominent institutions of kinship did not fit the models provided by either descent or alliance theory.

Looking first at the Kwakiutl of North America and then at a range of societies, some of which were historical examples, from Europe to Indonesia to Japan, he showed how the house itself emerged in these contexts as a prominent social institution. In these societies, houses were named entities (as with the well-known royal houses of Europe, such as the

house of Orange or the house of Windsor) that functioned as corporations, possessing material and symbolic wealth and preserving it through inheritance. Lévi-Strauss suggested that in these examples the house was a kind of intermediate institution that took its place between societies that were organized through kinship and those where social organization was based on class. He coined the term *sociétés à maison*, "house societies," to denote this particular social formation.

Lévi-Strauss's writing on the house was criticized by some as a throwback to evolutionary anthropology. His work was also criticized for his tendency to try to abstract a social typology of the house society from the diverse characteristics of houses within the various societies he analyzed. Nevertheless, Lévi-Strauss inspired a significant body of anthropological work that pays close attention to the social meanings of the house, as well as to its functions and the core activities that take place in and around it.

While some of this work displays a structuralist influence, it also provided an avenue for the exploration of new themes and illuminated old ones in new ways. Gender and domestic relations, marriage, the roles of children, the complexities of provisioning and feeding residents and visitors, and the symbolic division of space are just some of the areas opened up by a focus on the house in the study of kinship. These have encouraged a different way of studying kinship itself, putting a focus on its more experiential and emotional aspects and on the idea that kinship is an ongoing creation or process rather than a set of relations acquired ready-made at birth. The study of the house thus linked to work on related themes —most obviously, property and gender relations. But it also connected with studies of the role of place in the making of kinship, the study of material culture more generally, and the significance of objects and landscape in the relations people make with each other.

Culturalist accounts

As noted above, while anthropologists had made the study of kinship in non-Western cultures their particular preserve, the study of modern kinship in the West was on the whole dominated by sociologists. It was assumed by many practitioners of both disciplines that kinship was far less important as a social institution in the West and that it was clearly separable from political, economic, and religious life. The 20th-century Western family was viewed as an essentially private, domestic institution dominated by women and without wider political significance. Sociological and historical studies of the Western family tended to concentrate on its economic and instrumental aspects, including the transfer of property at marriage and through inheritance, rather than its ideological or

experiential qualities. This version of Western kinship was overturned partly by feminist studies, which subjected relations within the household, the control of property, and the concept of privacy to a sustained analytic scrutiny. The notion of the "private" world of the family as a haven from the "public" world of work and competitive economic relations emerged as an ideological construct that was itself a suitable object of analysis.

Among the first anthropologists to explore kinship in the West were Raymond Firth and his colleagues, who published accounts of kinship in London from the 1950s onward. In the 1960s and '70s the British anthropologists Edmund Leach and Audrey Richards led students in fieldwork in an Essex village, the results of which were later published by another British anthropologist, Marilyn Strathern. The American anthropologist David Schneider's *American Kinship* (1968) is generally acknowledged as one of the first important anthropological studies of kinship in a 20th-century industrialized setting. Rather than taking the ideological basis of kinship for granted or assuming it to be of less importance than strategic interests related to status and property, Schneider examined kinship as a cultural system that is based in shared symbols and meanings. This form of analysis became known as the culturalist approach.

Schneider suggested that blood was the core symbol of kinship in the United States. He characterized kin ties as bonds of "diffuse, enduring solidarity"—a phrase that carried faint echoes of Fortes's axiom of amity. Kin solidarity was derived from a combination of two sources: relationship as "natural substance" and relationship as "code for conduct." These in turn arose from two opposed orders in American culture—the order of nature and the order of law. Here Schneider was making an opposition between American cultural perceptions of the "natural" basis of kinship, which he posited lay in blood (genetic) ties, and of the legally enshrined code for conduct that regulated marital ties. Some relations, such as that between husband and wife, existed only in law, while others, such as that between an unacknowledged illegitimate child and its father, existed only by virtue of nature. Relations between "blood kin" derived from a combination of both.

Schneider's rendering of the cultural meaning of American kinship was immensely powerful, but it was also somewhat simplistic. Although his fieldwork had been carried out amid the ethnic and social diversity of urban Chicago, the vision of kinship that emerged was quite homogenized. Schneider wrote of how "Americans" understood kinship—without differentiating for class, gender, age, or ethnicity. Critics (including Schneider himself in later years) emphasized that, in contrast to this monolithic characterization of American culture, individual participants would in fact have articulated different versions

of kinship and its meanings depending on their particular position in American society as well as their own life histories.

By dismissing this degree of cultural normativity as implausible in advanced capitalist societies, critics of *American Kinship* spurred a realization among anthropologists that their analyses of non-Western peoples had assumed similarly unrealistic degrees of cultural homogeneity. Such assumptions became increasingly untenable and more or less politically suspect among anthropologists, whether they worked in postcolonial or Western contexts.

Despite these initial problems, the endeavour to explicate kinship as a symbolic system of meanings that carries over into other ideological spheres (such as religion) had a strong influence on subsequent studies. Many later accounts of kinship, both in Western and in non-Western societies, have retained the core of the culturalist approach while also paying close attention to local experiences and understandings of kinship and providing nuanced depictions of how people in a given culture might have divergent understandings of kinship depending on their age, sex, ethnicity, personal experiences, or other attributes. Many culturalist studies have tried to show how these qualities and the perspectives they may engender articulate with each other—that is, to explain how and why particular combinations of these attributes (e.g., middle-aged, middle-class, black father or elderly, working-class, white mother) create particular or characteristic points of view. In the early 21st century, culturalist research also included the examination of the relationship between kinship and nationalism and the ways in which the ideologies of kinship can be co-opted for political purposes.

Feminist and gendered approaches to kinship

From the 1960s onward the feminist movement and the scholarship it inspired have had a very obvious impact on kinship studies. This resulted first in a number of important works that documented the lives of women, which had previously been omitted from ethnographic accounts. Women’s involvement in households and domestic arrangements, trade, exchange, labour, religion, and economic life was rendered in detail, making the gaps in previous cross-cultural studies all too visible.

By the end of the 1970s, attention had begun to shift from women to the symbolization of gender itself. This shift can be connected to a broader questioning of gender roles outside (and within) the academy and was marked by the analytical separation of the terms *gender* and *sex*, among other things. Studies of women had made it eminently clear that there were very few characteristics that could be attributed both exclusively and universally to one sex

or the other; whether one was expected to be strong or weak, aggressive or passive, serious or humorous, disciplinarian or nurturing, and so on depended on cultural expectations, not on biology. To clarify this difference, scholars came to use *sex* to refer to biological characteristics, the most obvious of which are the genitalia (e.g., male, female, or hermaphroditic). In contrast, *gender* referred to a social category comprising the roles and expectations a culture had for men, women, and (in some cases) additional genders, such as the *berdache* (men who live as women and women who live as men, found in some traditional American Indian cultures) or the *hijra* (men who live as women, found in some parts of India). Studies of gender as a symbolic system focused on the roles that men and women played, on ideas about what constituted a proper man or woman in a particular culture, and on how differences between men and women were perceived in that culture. They sought to avoid prior assumptions about what these differences were.

Anthropology seemed uniquely well-placed to examine cross-cultural variation in gender ascriptions. Feminists in the West were questioning the assumptions on which the patriarchal nuclear family was based and looked to anthropology for examples of alternative arrangements from contemporary non-Western societies. Households, domestic arrangements, marriage, procreation, childbirth, and other aspects of what had previously been defined as kinship were of course central to the study of gender. As a result, one issue that soon emerged was the extent to which kinship and gender could be considered as separate analytic domains. How did they articulate with each other? Did kinship define gender relations, did gender exist prior to kinship, or were these domains "mutually constituted"? The anthropological study of gender very quickly placed in question both the analytic viability of kinship as a field of study and its centrality within the discipline.

Feminists also argued that institutions such as the family and the household, relations between men and women, and the meaning of being a man or a woman were understood quite differently in different cultures. Rather than accept Western definitions of such concepts, anthropologists and sociologists began to subject them to analytic scrutiny. How was it that these institutions appeared to be "natural" and "given" when they were actually culturally variable? Of particular interest were the ways in which political hierarchies emerged from these seemingly natural categories or distinctions. What kinds of cultural processes were involved in the production of such hierarchies, and how had they achieved the illusory appearance of being natural or given?

Challenging the conceptual basis of kinship

The study of kinship came under attack not just from feminist and gender scholars but also from those who considered it a subject of marginal interest compared with politics or religion. For these researchers, studies of symbolic systems and of the politics of resistance deserved (and soon took) a more prominent place than those of kinship. There was also a sense in which the rather arid debates between kinship theorists contributed to the growing marginalization of their studies. One theme of these debates concerned the definition of kinship itself: could something called “kinship” be compared cross-culturally? Or were the differences between how kinship was defined in different cultures so great as to render the comparative endeavour invalid?

Both British social anthropologist Rodney Needham and the aforementioned David Schneider launched powerful critiques of the comparative study of kinship. At issue was the relationship between “physical” and “social” ties. Since the early 20th century, anthropologists had generally emphasized that they studied the social aspects of kinship. The actual physical or biological relationships were either unknown or irrelevant to the cross-cultural study of kinship institutions. Instead the point was to document and analyze how kinship was understood within a particular culture, including culturally circumscribed notions about procreation.

This simple division between the social and biological aspects of kinship masked an underlying paradox in the way the subject had been defined. As David Schneider pointed out in his *Critique of the Study of Kinship* (1984), anthropologists consistently assumed that kinship was based on sexual reproduction or ties deriving thereof. Schneider argued that the centrality of sexual procreation as a core symbol of kinship in European and Euro-American culture thus underlay most studies of kinship; in other words, anthropologists had brought into the field their own cultural assumptions about what kinship comprised. This was necessary in order to ensure the subject’s analytic coherence, but it also created a paradox in that scholars had for a long time been aware that procreation was understood quite variably in different cultures. In particular, ethnographic accounts suggested that not every culture connected sexual intercourse and procreation.

The most famous (and hotly debated) case of this disjuncture was found among the Trobriand islanders of Melanesia, who had been studied by the eminent anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski at the beginning of the 20th century. Malinowski had shown that while Trobrianders were quite aware of the connection between sex and procreation for animals, they asserted that among human beings pregnancy was achieved through the action of ancestral spirits. This led to several decades of discussion between

anthropologists, some of which was about the significance or interpretation of different kinds of knowledge. Edmund Leach, among others, argued that assertions such as those made by the Trobrianders were actually expressions of religious beliefs and thus were meant to be read in the same way as Christian beliefs about the Virgin Birth—that is, as phenomena that took place on a metaphysical plane that was outside (or at the fringes of) the spectrum of ordinary experience. This was quite different from more pragmatic, everyday knowledge about farming or animal husbandry. It was not that Trobrianders were ignorant of the connection between sex and procreation in humans—they were simply making religious statements that should be understood at a quite different level.

Schneider suggested instead that the anthropological study of kinship was based on assumptions that were not necessarily valid cross-culturally. In certain cultures, sexual procreation was not regarded as the core of kinship, and therefore there was no analytic consistency to the comparison of kinship between cultures. He argued that the various domains into which anthropologists divided social life—kinship, politics, economics, religion, and the like—had no analytic validity. In this sense there was a convergence between Schneider's critique of the way in which kinship had been studied and the feminist project. In both what had previously been seen as "natural" or universal could no longer be taken for granted.

Reproductive technologies, social innovation, and the future of kinship studies

If in the early 1980s it seemed that the study of kinship was in decline, in the 1990s it appeared to be reviving. However, this was kinship in a rather different guise. Kinship had been transformed above all by the interest in gender, which had forced a very thorough reexamination of the way in which kinship had been constituted as a subject of academic concern. By the late 20th century the symbolism of procreation, gender roles, emotions, and households and their everyday activities had all become prominent themes of study. The culturalist influence encouraged anthropologists to examine both their own and indigenous assumptions about kinship more closely. However, the meaning of kinship, paradoxically perhaps, is less self-evident than it seemed in the mid-20th century, in part because studies have foregrounded such diverse themes as physical substance, houses, the person, children, motherhood, fatherhood, and feeding. Their starting point has been to examine what "relatedness" comprises in a particular culture, rather than assuming it in advance.

Above all, Schneider's insight that anthropological definitions of kinship rested on the Western assumption that kinship derived from sexual procreation, and that this was manifestly not the case in every non-Western example, forced a rethinking of what constitutes kinship. The centrality of procreation in Western kinship has also highlighted another analytic assumption. As noted above, anthropologists and sociologists had long emphasized that their interest was purely in the social aspects of kinship rather than the physical or biological ones (which were in many cases quite unknowable in the absence of genetic testing). In so doing they were of course reiterating (rather than analyzing) a division central to modern Western thinking. Adoption, which in Western societies is thought of as a social connection (albeit one that is modeled on biological ties between parents and children), makes this disjunction at the heart of kinship very clear. It is not surprising therefore that adoption, as well as other forms of what had previously been labeled "fictive" kinship (that is, kinship that is not based on biological or marital ties; blood brotherhood and godparenting are other examples), has emerged more prominently as a topic for research.

Many of these studies have focused on new and emerging forms of kinship in the West. In this respect the study of kinship has been stimulated by the perceived changes in the nature of the family in Western societies. Instability and divorce in heterosexual marriage, the advent of same-sex marriage, gender equality, gay rights, falling fertility rates, and increasing numbers of people living on their own all suggest some profoundly new practices and experiences of Western kinship.

Although it might have been assumed that the distinction between the physical and the social was relatively stable and straightforward in the West, studies have revealed complex shifts in the mutual definition of these terms. Analyses of kinship practices among gays and lesbians, for example, have demonstrated that the opposition between biological and social ties may turn conventional understandings on their head. American anthropologist Kath Weston's informants' "coming out" stories revealed that they conceptualized biological kinship as temporary and uncertain because biological kin had been known to disrupt or sever kin ties upon learning of a relative's homosexuality. Meanwhile, her informants' friendships were invested with certainty, depth, and permanence and were discussed in an idiom of kinship by those whose experience of biological kin had been thoroughly disrupted. Ellen Lewin, another American anthropologist, has found similar complexities in her studies of lesbian and gay parenthood.

Developments in reproductive technologies have highlighted another way that the boundaries between the “natural,” given domain of kinship and the “cultural,” technologically alterable world of science are by no means fixed or impermeable. Anthropologists have once again turned to the opposition between nature and culture—this time to demonstrate that the supposedly “natural” world of kinship can no longer be thought of in these terms. Some technological interventions, most notably various medical forms of birth control (e.g., oral contraceptives, the intrauterine device, the diaphragm, vasectomy), were common by the later 20th century. Others—in vitro fertilization, surrogate motherhood, artificial insemination, and other technologies—had become part of the cultural repertoire, if not the actual practice, of many ordinary people. By the early 21st century the anthropology of kinship had joined with the anthropological and sociological study of science and medicine to provide a rich avenue of exploration that brought together culturally based ideas about bodies and procreation with an examination of how scientists, medical practitioners, patients, policy makers, and the general public experience and articulate understandings of fertility and medicine.

The profound implications of being “socially” (technologically, or scientifically) able to intervene and remake what had previously been seen as the “natural” means of kinship suggest that kinship may take on quite new meanings and that this in turn may have a profound effect on Western knowledge practices more generally. Marilyn Strathern has argued that the significance of kinship for Euro-Americans in the past was that it constituted that part of the social world that was naturally given rather than subject to choice. Once it becomes technologically alterable, as well as increasingly refracted through the language of consumer choice, this “given” quality of kinship is profoundly disrupted. Just what the effects of reproductive technologies will be—both in the West and in non-Western cultures—remains uncertain and is the subject of academic and wider debate.

Janet Carsten

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