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**Comparing the  
Significance  
of Kinship in  
Contrasting  
Cultures**

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KINSHIP has become certainly an important division of study within the discipline of anthropology, largely because of its intimate relationship with almost every social level, influencing how people interact with one another, who they interact with and ultimately how they see and understand themselves. According to the dictionary, kinship is involved with “relationships by blood, or consanguinity; affinity with relationships brought about by marriage.” (Beattie, 1966). As will be demonstrated in this short article, kinship is a much more complicated matter than envisioned in this definition, involving “relations of authority and subordination, of economic exchange, of domestic cooperation, of ritual” (Beattie, 1966).

It is important to note that we as Westerners should be very careful in our analytical approach because of the restrictions provided by our own ‘kinship’ system. Like in other areas of anthropology, kinship studies have also been plagued by the problem of ethnocentrism.

Firstly we have to understand that the notion of ‘kinship’ is as much a mental process as it is a practical one; the way people consider their kin is based on different religious and philosophical conceptions to our own resulting in an incredible contrast in the way people view their environment and the people populating it. To be able to encompass this complexity it has been necessary for anthropologists to develop a theoretical discourse which encompasses modern conceptions of kinship within a larger pattern, rather than developing simply a theory that uses our model as the standard.

In this article I will be discussing ‘kinship’ in the context of large-scale, contemporary (western) societies, and demonstrating the similarities and contrasts to those kinship systems existing in small-scale societies. Our own kinship system has to be placed into its own context, resulting from political and economic developments. It is clear then that such a system can and should not be used as a basis from which forms in ‘simpler’ societies deviate. It will be demonstrated that, in fact, our society with its emphasis on the individual and scientific development, the strong bindings of ‘kinship’ have been replaced by different types of social bindings with people who are not necessarily part of our ‘descent group’. It will also be demonstrated that these societies which are sometimes referred to as ‘simple’, have in fact a much more complex and all-encompassing view of the social structures surrounding them, one that makes our own seem lightweight and superficial. Only after discussing these matters will be able to make some contrasts and conclusions.

To begin, it is important to consider the modern ‘nuclear’ family, one in which the central family core is the binding unit: characterised by the roles *father*, *mother* and *the children*. According to Edward Shorter “the nuclear family is a state of mind rather than a particular kind of structure or set of household arrangements” (Shorter, 1977). This conception of the family derives from a “single, basic form—bilateral descent, strongly emphasised nuclear family, and a distinct but secondarily important kindred” (Schneider and Homans, 1971). In this sense, our concept of the family is more than simply a biological reality, but is closely connected to how we are *taught* to think about this structure and the people that are directly involved in it. The

question is, why have we ended up with this conception of the 'nuclear core' family unit. A combination of historical, economic and scientific reasons can be proposed.

David Schneider presents us firstly with a scientific proposal. According to Schneider the basic belief underlying our conception of family can be taken from our conception of the origin of children. He states that it is believed that "both mother and father give substantially the same kind and amounts of [genetic] material to the child, and that the child's whole biogenetic identity or any part of it comes half from the mother, half from the father." Our cultural formation in which the 'biological' father and mother play the strongest roles is based therefore on a scientific conception. These scientific facts accepted in our cultural have helped to form the basis for our 'nuclear' family system; kinship is defined by this "biogenetic relationship" (Schneider, 1971) and is in fact a cultural formulation.

Economic and political developments can also be related to the emergence of this particular social structure. The technological expansion since the industrial revolution, and also since then the advent of the computer age, have definitely affected the way people are bonded and the ties they hold with their 'families'. For economic purposes, it is more convenient for a small family unit to be able to break away from the 'nest' and support itself rather than being involved in a large community who lives together in the same compound. This is inevitably coupled to the technological and economic development resulting in the expansion of the cities. It could be even suggested that in modern societies the importance of kinship depends on socioeconomic circumstances: 'Upwardly mobile' people keep only shallow ties with members of their kindred, if they keep them at all; in contrast 'downwardly mobile' people may be neglected by their kindred; members of spatially static occupation groups can but need not, and so on. (Schneider and Homans, 1971).

This introduces a factor that may seem obvious to us: as members of post-industrial societies, we are forced to become involved in a myriad array of different corporate groups as may be aligned to our professions or situation within life. If it is considered that in small scale societies, almost every person with which you interact is considered in some way to be 'kindred', then the real contrasts begin to arise. According to Keesing "because our system is bilateral, has no descent groups, and distinguishes *lineal* relatives from *collateral* ones, we think of kinship in terms of chains of genealogical connection between individuals." He goes on to say that our conception of the family in this way brings about great confusion and misunderstanding when observing different cultures (Keesing 1986). It will soon be made clear precisely how 'open-minded' we have to be when trying to understand these smaller-scaled societies.

First, it is important to consider the problematic element of searching for essential 'similarities' between kinship in large and small-scale societies. Let's begin with the concept of 'family'. According to Keesing (1986) the biological connection between father, mother and child forms the "basis of kinship bonds," although he is wary to make generalisations about how this basic union can be generalised into social

reality. To demonstrate the problems of ethnocentrism, we can quote Tomkins who in his article on the *Biopsychosociality of the Family* suggests that “the family *is* universal and that it *had* to be so. It has to be so, because mothers and babies are *in fact* drawn to each other, because human development *requires* it, and it *can* happen on sufficient scale *only* with biological mothers” (Tomkins, 1965). If this is accepted as a given, we would expect that in all societies on the earth, the only relationships which are considered valid in child-bearing are those which involve the biological mother and her child. This is of course wrong, because even in our society non-biological mothers are more often than not considered to be equally good mothers for adopted children, just as in simpler societies this emphasis on biological motherhood loses its importance when the belief system doesn’t even recognise that motherhood is in fact a ‘biological’ process. The suggestion of the everpresence of ‘family’ can also only be accepted as a given if the notion of ‘family’ can be considerably extended from the strictly nuclear unit proposed by Tomkins.

Another important cultural factor connected to kinship is that involved with exogamy and the avoidance of incest. It can be generalised that every culture has to some degree been affected by incest avoidance conventions resulting in ‘exogamy’ where members of a given descent group are forced to marry *out* of their own group. The concept of exogamy and social conventions regarding incest has been a hot point for contemporary anthropological research, brought under the lime-light when Freud proposed his theories related to human sexuality. Since then, we have come a considerably long way and these traditions are viewed under a completely different light, under which a more general cultural theory for exogamy can be viewed. According to White “the prohibition of incest has at the bottom an economic motivation. [...] Inbreeding was prohibited and marriage between groups was made compulsory in order to obtain the maximum benefits of cooperation. If this theory be sound, we should find marriage and the family in primitive society wearing a definite economic aspect. Incest was defined and exogamous rules were formulated in order to make cooperation compulsory and extensive, to the end that life be made more secure” (White, 1971). I would suggest that such a theory has wider implications than for simply ‘primitive’ societies, explaining also our own cultural conventions concerning incest. Freudian theories based on western sexual repression may have been significant to a middle-class Viennese society, but are not plausible if tested with any number of small-scale societies. With such a theory based on the political and economic importance of survival, misinformed Freudian conceptions concerning the expression of unconscious sexual drives and aggressions, can be thankfully left in the past.

Another factor that is of some importance in both large and small scale kinship systems is the necessity of ‘names’ and ‘titles’ to distinguish different members of a given social group. In our society, it is considered not only polite but necessary to call our relatives with the correct term. Jack Goody, in his article discussing the different title used to refer to grandmothers as *nannas* quotes a grandmother who is discussing her ‘title’: “One of my grandchildren called me Kate the other day. Said his mum did so. I told him off proper. And her too. What if he called you that in the street?” (Goody, 1969). In smaller-scale societies also, the importance of ‘naming’ is

important in that one is immediately recognised as belonging to a certain cultural group. According to Keesing (1968) “a man finds security and status and a firm feeling of ‘belonging’ in his own group. [...] The importance of this group difference is reflected in classificatory terminology; father’s brothers and even father’s sisters may be called ‘fathers’. [...] In such cases the effect of the classificatory terminology is to stress the *group* membership of these relatives.” Although contrasting conventions of ‘naming’ exist, it is in both cases clear that this phenomena is still highly important in both cases to help give a person a feeling of security in his/her position within the social structure.

Other similarities can be demonstrated by examining certain relationships between members of a given family group. It can be generalised that in most societies, inheritance occurs usually unilineally, either patrilineally or matrilineally both for particular types of properties as well as statuses. According to Beattie (1966) “in Western Europe, name and title almost invariably pass in the male line.” This has an impact on the way different members of a given social group interact with one another. In many small-scale patrilineal societies, the relationship between the father and the son is often the most formal and authoritarian. Beattie suggests that “in societies like these it is almost as though the son were committing an offence against his father simply by growing up, and must be punished for it, or must at least make token reparation.” In contemporary western society this type of formal relationship between son and father can still be detected. The son often has the most ‘responsibility’ in that he is considered to be the one who will ‘take over the business’ or be successful financially. As a result of this, the relationship between the father and the son can be considerably strained and contrasts considerably with a father-daughter relationship. Another comparable relationship is that shared between the father and the daughter in large scale western societies and many small scale patrilineal societies: at the point of marriage the daughter becomes “lost to her own lineage,” a factor common with our own society (Beattie 1966). When a woman marries, she in general takes the name of her husband and through this symbolic ‘name-taking’ is considered part of his family. The fact that the daughter will inevitably leave the family to form a part of another descent group makes the relationship considerably less tense than that between the father and the son in both large and small scale patrilineal societies.

The last factor which we can consider in both large and small scale societies is that involved in the connections between social groups that are emphasised in different ways and at different times in life. Keesing (1986) suggests that “in tribal societies the ties of kinship between individuals come out most dramatically in the focal points of a person’s life—birth, initiation, feasts, marriage, death. The action group that mobilises around a person in support, celebration, or mourning is in almost all societies crystallised from networks of the individual’s relatives and in-laws.” In large-scale societies also, different social groups are called together for support or for other purposes at important events, the kinship circle widening depending on the importance of the event. Raymond Firth, in his analysis of English kinship, confirms this: “there is a type of group which assembles at a wedding or funeral and in which

may be represented most of the partinomial kin groups which have traceable genealogical relation to Ego. This is assembled on a bilateral basis. But in this it is similar to kin groups all over the world.” This presents a useful image: the widening circle of connections in which different groups are emphasised at different times, playing roles in the social life of an individual as is important to the social structure involved.

Now that we have observed some points of similarity, it is important to approach the matter a little more closely and observe some of the primary ‘differences’ that could result in confusion when an analytical methodology is taken from a modern perspective. Firstly it is important to discuss in a little more detail the conception of a kinship ‘clan’ from which basic corporate units are formed in smaller-scale societies. Beattie provides with some useful beginning points:

“clan members form a category of people rather than any kind of closely-knit, cooperating group. [...] Sometimes they are unaware of the genealogical connections, if any, which links them with their presumed common ancestor and with each other. But they usually *think* of their interrelationships in kinship terms: a fellow clansman is always a brother, a father or a son, however remote he may be genealogically” (Beattie 1969).

This ‘mental’ rather than ‘biological’ conception of kinship has provided some difficulties to western analysts who have been trying to impose western social categories where they simply are not wide enough conceptually to be able to fit. Although this lineage membership may be compared to some kinds of group memberships in western society, they play a much more important and distinctive role in the life of those belonging to a small-scale society. Further than that, in Western society most people are members of a great many different associations and groups, all with different aims and different membership, and most importantly with people who are *not* members of the same descent group. In small-scale societies organized in terms of unilineal descent, this one principle of organization forms the basis for practically all of a man’s social relationships outside his domestic family (Beattie 1966). Almost every person with which one has some type of interaction can be considered in some way a ‘relative’ or ‘kin’, and this is certainly not true of large-scale modern societies. Beattie confirms this statement in the following quote: “considerations of kinship are confined to only a small portion of the total activities which Ego enters into.” In addition to that, we can return to groupings in which many relatives are considered under the same terminology. Beattie provides us again with more useful material:

“Basically, what is happening here is that a group of siblings are being thought of as a kind of unit. They are all, in a way, the same sort of relative, and so are thought of as being in a sense interchangeable with one another, thus a man may have many ‘fathers’ and many ‘mothers’” (Beattie 1966).

In a system of this kind, kin who would be reckoned as quite distant relatives in Western European terminologies may be called the same terms as very close ones.

Even more surprising from a western perspective, in many societies a father's sister is called 'father', with the qualification of 'female' added, and mother's brother is called 'mother', with the qualification 'male' added. According to Beattie (1966) "this kind of usage seems at first sight very extraordinary to Westerners, for whom a relative's sex and kind and degree of relationship involved are the important things, not his or her group membership."

Further contrasts are presented by the ways in which the concept of marriage and child ownership varies. In smaller-scale societies, the concept of polygamy is quite common. From our own conception, this has often been interpreted as highly 'unnatural' behaviour because of the many taboos we have developed on this subject; a person is only allowed to be married to one person at one time. Of course, in cultures where this is freely accepted, polygamy can have useful social functions, involved intimately with areas of power, politics and economics. This contrasting perspective on marriage has an impact on child ownership. In smaller-scale societies, the ownership of children is not necessarily bonded to the biological mother herself but the descent group to which she belongs. Divorce, therefore, means to many women that the children have to be left behind. It is considered quite natural in these cases for another woman (for example the sister of the ex-husband, or a replacement wife) to take over the role of 'mother'. In western society we have had considerable problems adapting to this concept, expressed through the complexity of laws and social conventions that help to define who has 'rights' over the children in case of divorce. The role of a 'step-mother' and a 'step-father' have often particularly unpleasant social overtones because of the non biological connection with the daughter or son involved: consider all the western fairy tales in which the evil characters take these roles. In order to understand other cultures and their attitude to motherhood and fatherhood, we have to take a good close look at our own and recognise that it is not in fact based on 'universal' truths (as Tomkins would like to suggest) but cultural formulations.

It is clear then that although there are essentially some similarities between kinship systems present in large scale and small scale societies, the contrasts presented by small scale societies flagrantly break some social conventions which we consider sacred. Traditional notions of the home, the hearth, the 'nuclear' family with which we are familiar, have to be viewed from a certain distance when trying to interpret other cultures that don't follow the same rules. Although it is sometimes a difficult process to escape from our ethnocentric conceptions, especially regarding social structures, developments in contemporary analysis of kinship demonstrate that it is well and truly possible for us to develop a 'theoretical language' which can encompass both small and large scale societies. We have to be simply aware of the boundaries provided by our own culture.

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