3 Kinship Theory

3.1 Social Anthropology and Kinship Identity

In 1871 with the publication of his work, *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity of the Human Family*, Lewis Henry Morgan, “the father of American anthropology,” and, more specifically, “a founder of kinship studies,” influenced the way in which many anthropologists would approach kinship: via biological relatedness (consanguinity) or via marriage (affinity).¹ A radical shift in kinship studies came in the works of David M. Schneider who advocated a “cultural” approach to kinship, which entails the ethnographer striving to capture the significance, meaning or symbolism of the insider perspective, commonly known as an “emic” understanding.² After his own ethnographic work had been harshly criticized,


Schneider concluded that his fieldwork had filtered and misrepresented, what he thought were, “ethnographic facts.” Schneider later argued that all fieldwork involves, at best, the “shadow of translation,” and, at worst, anthropology has seen many things at one period only to decide later either that they were never there at all or that they were not what they were thought to be. The theoretical framework that Schneider questions is that of biological “facts.”

Calling into question fundamental presuppositions of kinship theory, Schneider attacks the “virtual unanimity in defining kinship in terms of human reproduction.” As to why human reproduction holds a “central place” in anthropological studies of kinship, Schneider inquires, “Why not for example, the customs surrounding eating, or a dozen other things universal to human beings and equally vital? The short, quick answer is that kinship has been defined by European social scientists, and European social scientists use their own folk culture as a source of many, if not all, of their ways of formulating and understanding the world about them.” By questioning the biological groundings of kinship theory, Schneider concluded that “kinship” studies are obsolete: “To put it simply, my criticisms [of kinship scholars] is not that they used a theory to screen what the native said and to convert it into what they reported. I do the same thing. No one can do anything different. My complaint is that their theory is wrong.”

After Schneider’s denial of kinship as an analytical category anthropologists either ignore kinship altogether – as Schneider suggests – or develop further his destabilizing of “biological” kinship. One way in which scholars have attempted to circumvent Schneider’s denial of kinship as an analytical category is by replacing the notion of biological kinship with alternate demarcations, such as

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3 Schneider’s doctoral dissertation (1949) on the Island of Yap was published in various works from 1953 to 1962; see bibliography and his own review of his critics in Schneider, *Critique*, 5ff.


5 Ibid, 193. On Morgan and others, see Schneider, “What is Kinship All About?”

6 *Critique*, 193.

7 Ibid, 4. See his earlier paper, “What is Kinship all about?” 269, where he calls kinship a “non-subject” which “exists in the minds of anthropologists but not in the cultures they study.”

"relatedness" and "shared substance." Another attempt to salvage kinship studies has been the "neoevolutionists," who recognize that earlier studies assuming evolutionary principles – that is they placed European "civilization" as the most advanced of all societies – have been dismissed as ethnocentric, yet reintroduce a revised evolution and/or biological understandings into the discussion of kinship. The primary critics of such approaches have been feminist scholars who argue that any attempt to naturalize kinship or gender unavoidably results in chauvinistic understandings of sexes. Moreover, many agree that "scientific 'facts' are not 'pure truths' waiting to be discovered, but cultural creations of the scientist." The feminist approach has further destabilized "kinship" as a category so that anthropologists now incorporate issues of gender and power into their discussions. Louise Lamphere articulates how feminist and political economists insist on "new ways of looking at societies," which she summarizes by saying,

Research on kinship has shifted over the exploration of reproduction and sexuality, the analysis of new forms of family, and the impact of colonialism and transnational forces on populations across the globe. We are studying kinship through examining

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ideologies, using narratives, and placing the anthropologist among his or her subjects (rather than as an aloof analyst).  

Many scholars agree with Schneider’s insights on kinship as a social construct and yet disagree with any deduction that the analytical category of kinship is obsolete.  

Kathey-Lee Galvin declares, “I would argue... that while the Schneiderians have exposed Western biases in anthropological kinship and demonstrated the value of emic approaches to ‘kinship,’ it does not follow that on another level etic concepts and cross-culturally valid models cannot be...
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developed. While debate continues over the validity of any universal analytical category, most ethnographers can concede to Schneider’s suggestion to allow a qualified understanding of kinship to serve as a model which can be tested empirically in other societies.

To summarize, the direction of recent kinship studies is multifaceted in that anthropologists recognize that western constructs such as “Blood is thicker than Water” should not limit what could be subsumed under the rubric of kinship in other societies. Many now concur with Schneider’s critique:

The division of the sociocultural world into institutions, domains, or rubrics of kinship, economics, politics and religion which are presumed to be universally vital, distinct functions and the major building blocks out of which all cultures or societies are made assumes a priori what should be the question: of what blocks is this particular culture built? ...We then approach a particular culture and describe it first in terms of one, then another of these institutional entities. And then comes the great discovery! All of these institutions are inextricably interrelated and intertwined so that in any particular case they cannot be distinguished!

The resulting trend allows scholars to move fluidly between what were once hard and fast theoretical distinctions. Issues of power, politics, class and economics now regularly fall under the study of kinship. Not only have feminists intertwined kinship and gender, many anthropologists view gender identity, ethnic identity and class identity as inextricable from kinship. When turning to kinship in the Roman Empire and to Christian understandings of kinship in North Africa, these insights will allow questions of marriage and descent to be seen in conjunction with gender, power and other ideological constructs. The aim will be to focus less on Tertullian’s biological or affinal relationships, and more on how Tertullian portrayed his relationships and his kinship identity.

15 “Schneider Revisited: Sharing and Ratification in the Construction of Kinship,” in New Directions, ed. Stone, 122. Similarly, Carsten, “Introduction,” 5; ref. A. Strathern and M. Lambek, “Introduction: Embodying Sociality: Africanist-Melanesianist Comparisons,” in Bodies and Persons: Comparative Perspectives from Africa and Melanesia, ed. Lambek and A. Strathern, (CUP, 1998), 23, for the view that comparison is inescapable in ethnographic work because of the ethnographer’s culture. Carsten, “Introduction,” 14, also cites Yanagisako and Delaney, eds., Naturalizing Power, esp. their article, “Naturalizing Power,” for the possibility of cross-cultural analysis in a post-Schneiderian approach which has lost the distinctions between kinship, politics, economics and other categories, saying that the recognition of these categories as cultural constructs allows for such cultural constructs to be compared cross-culturally. In agreement are Parkin and Stone, “General Introduction,” 19, “Although there are differences over how much significance to accord the biological foundations of kinship, a wider measure of agreement has returned that its study should, and can, be comparative.”

16 A Critique, 197.


18 e.g. Anderson-Levy, “Colliding/Colluding,” 185-203.