Social Relationships: Marriage, Family, Kinship, and Friendship

Chapter Outline

- Marriage
    - Marriage as a Social Process
        - Monogamy and Polygamy
        - Flexibility and Negotiation in Marriage
    - Marriage and Economic Exchange
- Family Structure
    - The Nuclear Family
    - The Polygynous Family
    - Extended, Joint, and Blended Families
    - Brother–Sister Relationships
    - Families of Choice
- Families and Change
    - Divorce and Remarriage
    - International Migration and the Family
- Kinship and Systems of Relatedness: Ways of Organizing Human Interdependence
    - Patterns of Descent in Kinship
        - Bilateral Kindreds
        - Unilineal Descent Groups
    - Lineages
        - Patrilineages
        - Matrilineages
    - Kinship Terminologies and Classification
    - Kinship and Alliance
    - Kinship and Practice
        - Adoption
        - Negotiation of Kin Ties among the Ju/'hoansi
        - *Compadrazgo* in Latin America
        - Euro-American Kinship and Reproductive Technologies

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- Beyond Kinship
    - Friendship
    - Sodalities
        - Age Sets in Eastern Africa
        - Secret Societies in Western Africa
- Theories of Relatedness: Kin-Based and Non–Kin-Based Societies

Key Points

1. Human beings are highly social creatures. We depend upon one another to survive and solidify this interdependence through relationships of **marriage**, **family**, **kinship**, and **friendship**. How we are related to others is a central concern to all of us, though we rarely reflect on it.

2. Marriage is a social process that creates new relationships by transforming the status of the participants, stipulates the degree of sexual access the married partners may have to each other, positions children, and creates relationships between the kin of the partners.

3. Marriage patterns differ across the globe. A number of societies, including Canada, recognize same-sex marriages, while others do not. Some cultures value **monogamy**, while others value **polygamy**—either polygyny (multiple wives) or, less frequently, polyandry (multiple husbands). Polygyny is common in areas where males control the means of production and polyandry is common in areas where women control the means of production, often in horticulture-based societies.

4. **Bridewealth** is commonly found in patrilineal societies and involves a payment of symbolically important goods by the husband's lineage to the wife's lineage, often as compensation for the loss of the wife's productive and reproductive capacities (all children born to her are, after marriage, considered to "belong" to her husband's lineage). **Dowry** is typically a transfer of family wealth from parents to their daughter at the time of her marriage. Dowries are often considered the wife's contribution to the establishment of a new household and have been considered by some to be a "payout" of the female's inheritance.

5. Not all cultures share the same definition of a typical family structure. Different family structures produce different internal patterns and tensions. Common forms of family arrangements are **nuclear**, **extended**, **joint**, and **blended**. In North America, the nuclear family, (two parents and the kids they share), is the form with which we are most familiar. In many cultures, **families of choice**, or fictive kin, are also recognized. These are among people who are not related through blood (consanguine) or through marriage (affine) but still perform the role of a relative (as a mother, father, aunt, or uncle, for example). Families of choice or fictive kin help illustrate that kinship understandings are strongly based on the performance and expectation of the role.

6. Most human societies permit divorce, although it is not always easy. The reasons for divorce vary across cultures, but often include cruelty, adultery, or childlessness. In some societies, only men may initiate a divorce; in others, it is the woman who controls divorce.

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7. Kinship principles are based on, but irreducible to, the perceived universal experiences of mating, birth, and nurturance. Descent (bilateral or unilateral) links members of different generations with one another. Most Canadians are familiar with **bilateral descent**, where people are linked to the kin of both parents. In patrilineal descent, emphasis is placed on the father's side of the family and with matrilineal descent, the mother's side of the family is emphasized. Often reproductive narratives match these forms of lineages by either denying or highlighting the roles of one side over the other in the "creation" of the child.

8. Anthropologists traditionally recognize six basic systems of kinship terminology. In recent years, however, anthropologists have become quite skeptical of the value of these idealized models because they are highly formalized and do not capture the full range of people's actual practices. Kinship terminologies pay attention to certain attributes of people that are then used to define different classes of kin.

9. By culturally prescribing certain kinds of marriage, lineages establish long-term alliances with one another. For example, two major types of prescriptive marriage patterns in unilineal societies are a father's sister's daughter marriage system and a mother's brother's daughter marriage system.

10. Kinship systems are governed by many social and legal rules, but they also offer flexibility. **Achieved statuses** can be converted into **ascribed statuses** by means of adoption. In some cultures, kin ties are open to negotiation; they can also be formed through relationships other than those of blood or marriage (fictive kin). Kinship is best understood as a cultural construction that cannot be reduced to biology.

11. Every society provides ways of establishing links with non-kin. The giving and receiving of gifts, using kinship names to refer to a person, and performing aspects of the role are some of the ways that non-kin come to be understood as "true-kin." It is sometimes difficult to draw a neat line between kinship and non-kin relationships because kinship terms may be used between friends and/or kinship roles may be the prototypes for the roles expected of friends. Close relationships—such as those between friends or co-members of a **sodality**—cultivate a sentiment of enduring diffuse solidarity.

12. Early anthropologists described and explained the differences they saw between kin-based and non-kin-based human societies. They thought of kin-based societies as "primitive," characterized by personalized, face-to-face relationships, ascribed statuses, and mechanical solidarity. In contrast, they considered non-kin-based societies to be "modern" and characterized by impersonal relationships, achieved statuses, and organic solidarity. They found that larger societies require more complex, specialized divisions of labour; they also found that specialized divisions of labour make it more likely that institutionalized relationships will develop between non-kin. Thus, it is not surprising that kinship plays a reduced role in most contemporary Western societies. Fortunately, recent kinship studies have recognized the ethnocentrism embedded in early studies and now the **relatedness** of individuals is studied as a dynamic important aspect of our everyday lives.

13. Contemporary studies of kinship tend to focus more on issues of **culture** as opposed to the traditional emphasis on **social structure**. The symbols and meanings that we use to talk about kinship demonstrate how humans culturally construct the significance of kinship in their lives. A focus on non-traditional families and new reproductive technologies has revived kinship studies.

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Key Terms

Achieved statuses Social positions people may attain later in life, often as the result of their own (or other people's) effort.

Affinal Related through marriage.

Age sets Non-kin forms of social organization composed of young men born within a specified time span, which are part of a sequence of age sets that proceeds through youth, maturity, and old age.

Ascribed statuses Social positions people are assigned at birth.

Bilateral descent The principle that a descent group is formed based on connections of relatedness made through both a mothers and a father.

Blended family A family created when previously divorced or widowed people marry, bringing with them children from their previous marriages.

Bridewealth The transfer of certain symbolically important goods from the family of the groom to the family of the bride, representing compensation to the wife's lineage for the loss of her labour and for child-bearing capacities.

Clan A descent group formed by members who believe they have a common (sometimes mythical) ancestor, even if they cannot specify the genealogical links.

Conjugal family A family based on marriage; at minimum, a spousal pair and their children.

Dowry The transfer of wealth from parents to their child (usually a daughter) at the time of the child's marriage.

Ego The person from whose perspective the kinship associations are being mapped and/or discussed.

Endogamy Marriage within a defined social group.

Exogamy Marriage outside a defined social group.

Extended family A family pattern made up of three generations living together: parents, married children, and grandchildren.

Family At minimum, a woman or a man and her/his dependent children.

Family of choice A family created over time by new kin ties as friends and lovers demonstrate their genuine commitment to one another.

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Friendship The relatively unofficial bonds that people construct with one another that tend to be personal, affective, and, often, a matter of choice.

Joint family A family pattern made up of brothers and their wives (or sisters and their husbands) along with their children living together.

Kinship Social relationships that are prototypically derived from the universal human experiences of mating, birth, and nurturance.

Lineage A descent group composed of consanguineal members, or blood relatives, who believe they can trace their descent from known ancestors.

Marriage An institution that prototypically involves a man and a woman, transforms the status of the participants, carries implications about sexual access, gives offspring a position in society, and establishes connections between the kin of a husband and the kin of a wife

Monogamy A marriage pattern in which a person may be married to only one person at a time.

Non-conjugal family A woman and her children; the husband/father may occasionally be present or completely absent. (Or, less commonly, a man and his children; the wife/mother may be present or completely absent.)

Nuclear family A family made up of two generations: parents and their unmarried children.

Polygamy A marriage pattern in which a person may be married to more than one person at a time.

Relatedness The socially recognized ties that connect people in a variety of ways.

Secret societies Non-kin forms of social organization that initiate young men or women into social adulthood and reveal 'secret' knowledge to initiated members.

Segmentary opposition An approach to dispute resolution and social organization in which groups beyond the most basic emerge only in opposition to other groups on the same hierarchical level.

Sodalities Non-kin forms of social organization; special-purpose groupings that may be organized on the basis of age, sex, economic role, and/or personal interest.

Unilineal descent A pattern of descent in which a descent group is formed based on connections of relatedness made through either a father (patrilineal descent) or a mother (matrilineal descent).

Review Questions

1. What are the implications of new reproductive technologies for understandings of kinship and descent?

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2. What role does kinship play in North American daytime soap operas?

3. Does friendship sometimes mimic kinship?

4. Discuss the gay marriage debate in Canada. What might anthropology contribute to this debate?

5. What are the implications of different types of kinship systems for the status of women in various societies?

6. Do we value our consanguineal kin differently from affinal kin? Why might this be so?

7. Do we treat close friends and close friends of family members as kin sometimes? Is there a valid and active concept of fictive kin in Canadian society?

8. What factors have contributed to the age of marriage being pushed to later in life for so many people?

9. While endogamy seems apparent in many other societies, we tend to not think about it much. Discuss the endogamous categories of people that Canadians might prefer their children marry.

10. What family forms have replaced the nuclear family in Canada as nuclear families have declined?

11. While a typical Canadian sees their family in a bilateral way, valuing both mother's side and father's side of the family, is there a unilineal aspect to Canadian kinship?

12. Is the concept of friend in some ways more important in the lives of an individual than the concept of kin?

13. Can you apply Emile Durkheim's ideas about solidarity to Canadian kinship?

14. Are the social behavioural roles of kinship categories universal? How might the social behavioural roles of mother, father, brother, and sister vary from one society to another?

Additional Resources

Films

- *A Joking Relationship*. Directed by John Marshall. Documentary Educational Resources. 1962.

  This short film depicts a casual moment between a young Ju/'hoansi woman and her grand-uncle. It illustrates the Ju/'hoansi joking relationship allowed between alternating generations (see p. 173). A clip is available on this site (scroll down to "1962"):
  http://anthropology.si.edu/johnmarshall/timeline.html

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- *Her Name Came on Arrows*. Directed by Allison and Marek Jablonko and Stephen Olsson. CEM Productions. 1982.

  French anthropologist Maurice Godelier interviews some Baruya people of Papua New Guinea to learn about their kinship systems and rules of marriage.
  A clip is available to watch here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Og8nWjPnSR8

Annotated Video Links

- A preview of the concept of "kinship" as used by anthropologists. Important terms and concepts covered include genealogy; Ego; avuncular; cross-cousin; parallel-cousin.
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=axrx6KzRGig

- The Complicated Chinese Family Tree. A brief humorous look at the extreme complexity of Chinese kinship terminology that seems outside of what is common in anthropology.
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nCFRoILS1jY

- The Child the Stork Brought Home – preview. An intimate portrait of the gestational surrogacy arrangement. The film follows the story of a couple from when they retain a surrogate through to the birth of their child.
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vrulp7qpz8Q&list=PL1A92056DB661E44E

- Two Gay Dads, Two Kids, a Normal Family. An interesting profile of two men raising two typical four-year-old twins.
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B9x_E7Gj2qw

Websites

- Genealogy Relationship Chart
  This chart explains the cousin system as used in the English language (e.g., “first cousin twice removed”).
  http://genealogy.about.com/library/nrelationshipchart.htm

A Critical Look

By Roberta Robin Dods

Cultural Approaches to Childhood

Starting in 1869 and continuing well into the twentieth century, more than 100,000 children were shipped from the United Kingdom to Canada (Library and Archives Canada 2010). In some cases, the children were orphaned or abandoned, with no relatives willing to care for them. In other cases, impoverished parents were persuaded to send their children to be raised in what were promised to

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be wonderful new homes full of opportunity. Some of the children were as young as three or four, and most never saw or heard from their families again. Once in Canada, these children—who came to be known as "Home Children"—were sent to live and work on farms. In effect, many were treated as little more than slave labour—overworked and under cared for. Many were also subjected to horrific abuse, both physical and sexual.

This situation was not unique to Canada. Home Children were also sent to Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa during the same period, with the practice continuing into the 1970s in Australia. Similar child migrations were effected within the United States through programs run by the Children's Aid Society. Between 1853 and 1890, thousands of poor New York City children were transported to the Midwest and the West. Although some of these children were able to maintain links to their families, many suffered feelings of isolation, and their working conditions were far from ideal.

At the time, the people responsible for displacing these children believed that they were doing good work. They belonged to social organizations intent on bettering the situation of the poor, instilling strong work ethics, and promoting their version of Christian values. The nineteenth-century view of working-class children as "economically useful" and capable of working full-time by the age of 12 was also a factor (see Davin 2001).

From a contemporary Western perspective, these sorts of efforts seem misguided. Undoubtedly, our cultural view of childhood has softened over the past century and a half. Today, most of us agree that childhood is a time for learning and having fun. Most of us also feel strongly that children belong with families who love and take care of them. Children are seen as innocent and vulnerable, and therefore in need of protection from the harms of the adult world. We tend to look at even older teenagers as being in need of a certain amount of protection. Our laws reflect these views, with the age of majority (i.e., the age at which an individual has the legal standing of an adult) being 18 or 19, depending on the province or territory.

Yet ideas about childhood and laws governing how children should be treated are not the same in all regions of the world. In some cultures, the age of majority is much lower. Young people (principally girls) are encouraged to marry and start a family—therefore taking on

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traditional responsibilities of an adult—well before they turn 18. Often more troubling, however, are practices of forced child labour. The International Labour Organization (ILO 2013) estimates that 168 million children between the ages of 5 and 17 are employed as child labourers, and that 85 million of these children work under hazardous conditions that jeopardize their "physical, mental, or moral well-being." Hazardous conditions are commonly encountered by children working in mines, in the sex trade, and in "sweatshops" that manufacture various consumer goods (e.g., clothing, fabric, and electronics).

In most cases, children are forced to work by poverty. But it is not only poverty that makes child labour a reality for so many children. Indeed, a major and increasingly powerful driving force is globalization—more specifically, the widespread economic processes that bind the world's economies together in a single global market. In many ways, Western demands for low-priced goods—inexpensive T-shirts, shoes, flowers, toys, and so on—have driven manufacturers to use child labour to keep costs down. So it seems that just as the Home Children of past centuries were victims of rapid urbanization, so too are many of today's child labourers victims of globalization.

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