

Kinship and gender: an introduction essay



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In the book "Kinship and Gender: An Introduction" the author Linda Stone helps new students in anthropology understand basic concepts of meanings to kinship, gender, lineage and clan, matrilineal, and marriage just to name a few.

Bring certain twists into the picture such as American views on kinship and gender and new technologies in reproduction that is changing the old concepts. The book gives a cross-cultural study of gender with a focus on human reproduction, giving the social and cultural implications of their roles in reproduction, marriage and kinship. This book is at an introductory level and I found it to be very basic and easy to understand. By outlining meaning culturally and historically it will help any first year anthropology student to understand terms and concepts that relate to kinship and gender in culture and society. The first half of her book deals with kinship and every society recognize the relationship of each individual to other individuals through birth and marriage. Different societies have different kinship systems, no two of which are alike.

Some societies may consider a very large proportion of the population as kin, while another society might restrict the recognition of kin to the nuclear family and parents of the man and wife. Some systems include all members by birth and exclude all members of the kin group. Not only is the question of who is a kinsman important, but also how the individual views the members of his kin group, and how this reflected in terms applied to members of the kin group. In one society, the individual might address all kinsmen of the same sex of the parental generation by the same term.

In Western society, there are two terms for the kinsmen of the same sex of the parental generation: father and uncle. A third alternative is to address each individual of the same sex of the parental generation by a separate term such as father, father's older and younger brothers or mother's older and younger brothers would all have different terms of address. The lumping together of certain relatives under one term often reflects the behavioral relationship between any one individual and this terminological group. So if a number of men are referred to as father all are obeyed and respected. Another element of kinship organization is the different possibilities of reckoning descent. Societies can reckon descent through father and his family, patrilineal or through the mother and her family, matrilineal.

Through either parents or either parent's family is bilateral or bilineal. There is a fourth, which includes all the other possibilities. These varied systems affect the boundaries of kin group membership and types of address found in a society. Terminology for cousins is important. The children of both parents' siblings are cousins to the parent's own children. The child of cousins is cousins and their children are cousins and so on.

The child of a person's first cousin is called first cousin once removed. In ethnology the distinction between parallel cousins, the children of a parent's siblings of the same sex and cross cousins is extremely important since one of these cousins is in many societies either the preferred or the proscribed marriage partner. The study of kinship has been one of the primary interests of cultural and social anthropology. This area has been studied intensively for a number of reasons, among which are the importance of the kin group for economic, religious, and political functions within the society, and the <https://assignbuster.com/kinship-and-gender-an-introduction-essay/>

fact that the kin group is often the main source of education and protection of the child within the society. In most societies kinsmen work together, assist each other and have rights and duties to each other which do not exist between non-kin. Even in modern industrial societies, kinship still plays an important economic and social role in giving security to the new family and assisting in times of crisis.

When thinking of Gender and how it relates to humans and anthropology we first think of how females and males differ. The first thing that usually comes to mind is sex, the biological characteristics that distinguish males and females. Primary sex characteristics consist of a vagina or a penis and other organs related to reproduction. Secondary sex characteristics are the physical distinctions between males and females that are not directly connected with reproduction. Secondary sex characteristics become clearly evident at puberty, when males develop more muscles, a lower voice and more hair and height, while females form more fatty tissue, broader hips and larger breasts. Gender in contrast is a social, not a biological characteristic.

Gender consists of whatever traits a group considers proper for its males and females. Gender varies from one society or one culture to another. Sex refers to male or female, gender refers to masculinity or femininity. You inherit your sex, but you learn your gender as you are socialized into specific behaviors and attitudes of your culture. The sociological significance of gender is that it is a device by which society controls its members.

Gender sorts us on the basis of sex, into different life experiences. It opens and closes doors to power, property and even prestige. Like social class,

gender is a structural feature of society. Incest sexual relations between persons related by blood varies in different cultures, according to the variation in conceptions of blood relationship, but almost everywhere there is a incest taboo upon brother and sister, mother and son, or father and daughter sexual relationships.

History records that royal incest was an approved practice among the god kings of ancient Egypt and Peru, and the mythological stories of the creation of the world and man frequently accord incest an outstanding role. But behavior that is considered acceptable for kings and legendary gods is often tabooed for ordinary mortals. Incest is socially countered by the taboo as well as by elaborate systems of exogamy which is marriage only with partners from outside the kinship group, and class marriages. In modern civilization incest is forbidden by law as well as by custom. All societies recognize marriage and historically evidence indicates that the husband and wife relationship is an extremely ancient one.

Some cultures permit plural wives and some have allowed plural husbands. Some groups consider the bonds of matrimony to be religious in nature, while other groups consider them to be civil in spite of differences in form and auspices. The marital relationship is the basic social unit among virtually all demographic groups. Men and women can coexist in a variety of different ways one is promiscuity which is a system of sex relations without any restraints or rules. In a culture where promiscuity was institutionalized all males would be eligible to mate with all females.

Age differences, blood ties, and marital status would be disregarded. This is usually a feature that is non-human. Another is group marriage which involves the marriage of several men to several women without differential ties binding any single couple. Under group marriage, incestuous relations and mating between adults and children are prohibited. Group marriage is extremely rare and many anthropologists have questioned its existence.

Polyandry refers to the marriage of one woman to several men. This form of matrimony is somewhat more common than group marriage, but is also quite rare. It occurs in only about one percent of the population, but when compared to polygyny that would be a different story. It is quite common throughout the world. In fact most primitive groups permit polygyny even though it is not accepted in most western concepts.

Then there is monogamy which is the marriage of one man to one woman. It is the only variety of marriage recognized in every society and culture and is the most widely practiced of all the marital forms. Clans as anthropologists use the term are a group where main characteristic is descent for a common ancestor. Members may or may not be closely related biologically, but each member considers all other members his relatives. Descent is traced either matrilineally or patrilineally.

Most clans are exogamous, marriage within the group is forbidden. Many clans are totemic, believing themselves descended from a clan animal. A common place of residence is another characteristic of clans. Functions of the clan may include government of the group, support of members in case of wrongs or attack, and regulation of economic affairs including property,

social affairs such as marriage and training of the young, and religious and ceremonial activities. Clans are found in all parts of the world and may be a stage in cultural evolution leading to the development of the state. In Ireland and Scotland the term had traditionally been applied to a nonexogamous group of families having the same name and claiming the same ancestor.

Group feeling was strong and clans fought as units. New Reproductive Technologies or, as some prefer today since they are no longer new, Assisted Reproductive Technologies have made it even more apparent that the biology or culture is divided into two parts. The nature or nurture components breaks down in gestational surrogacy (where the surrogate is not genetically related to the child), and the courts, legislators, or the parents have to decide who is the real mother of the child. In the case where a woman has her egg fertilized in vitro and another woman carries the embryo to term, you have two biological mothers. It is even possible to have three biological mothers with two distinct women providing different DNA to the oocyte.

In these cases, there is no unique natural mother and surrogate motherhood and American kinship, this raises considerable uncertainty about maternity. In this situation, the parents involved try to sort out their relationships by choosing between biological relatedness and nurture as it suits their needs. The question of whether the genetic or nurturing mother is the primary parent has been answered in Australia and England by legislation determining that the woman giving birth is to be considered under the law as the mother of the child. In these countries, the surrogate is the legal mother

of a child. This is different from adoption, where the cultural or adoptive parent becomes like the primary, biological or genetic parent.

In Australia and England, the surrogate is the primary parent. Here, cultural processes are involved in establishing the natural order. The older conception of nature being independent from culture and based upon an objective biological process can no longer be maintained. The breakdown of a natural division between biology and culture in surrogacy can be applied more generally. Nurturance, especially from birth to death, is a cultural process necessary to human social development and is as natural as the biological reproductive process. They are equally important.

Instead of assuming a basis of a natural biology as the basis for cross-cultural comparisons, both culture and biology need to be considered if we are to achieve useful generalizations. What is required in kinship with the recognition of a cultural or biological matrix is an appropriate framework for analysis that produces both meaningful categories and productive cross-cultural comparisons. The uncertainty about the nature and future of kinship is basically due to the maintenance of the age old dichotomy between culture and biology. Instead of recognizing that both are natural and fundamental aspects of human social relationships, there are debates over which one is fundamental, questions about how to relate the two, and a lack of knowledge about models that can adequately deal with the new state of affairs in kinship. In the conclusion to the final section, Linda Stone sums up the state of affairs by stating that, " We are in fact still debating what kinship really is, the extent to which cross-cultural comparisons of kinship are valid, whether or to what extent genealogical connections are universally drawn,

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and whether or in what sense kinship can be understood in relations to human biology”.

We need to reorient the notion of kinship and utilize the relativistic framework of contemporary science if we are to adequately analyze human social relations and produce productive generalizations in kinship.