

**KINSHIP (Social Science)**

**Kinship refers to relationships among individuals and groups that** are based on descent or marriage. The study of kinship covers how different cultures conceptualize these relationships, the linguistic terms by which they distinguish and classify kin, marriage rules and practices, and the social, political, economic, religious, and symbolic uses that human societies make of kinship. Kinship is a human universal, found in all societies, although the cross-cultural variation in all these aspects of kinship is significant.

**Anthropologists use a particular** set of symbols to represent kinship relations, see Figure 1. These symbols are used to construct kinship diagrams for many different purposes. For example, they can be used to represent an individual's genealogy as in Figure 2, which shows a male (called "ego" and shaded in the diagram) in relation to an array of relatives. This diagram also shows that ego's four grandparents are deceased and that while many of ego's relatives are married, his mother's brother is divorced and his mother's brother's son is unmarried but has a sexual relationship with a partner.

**The diagram labels ego's kin with English terms that** follow the Eskimo terminology system (named after the Inuit, who were once called Eskimos). Other terminology systems classify kin differently. For example, in the Hawaiian system, ego calls all female kin of his parent's generation (mother, mother's sister, and father's sister) by the same term he or she uses for mother. Worldwide, there are only a few major types of kinship terminology systems.

**Figure 1**

**As with kinship terminology systems,** societies vary in how they trace descent and how they use it to form important groups. Some societies follow unilineal descent, meaning that they trace membership in descent groups through one gender only. Unilineal descent may be either patrilineal (tracing descent only through males) or matri-lineal (tracing descent only through females). In patrilineal descent, both male and female children inherit affiliation with their father's descent group, but only males pass on membership to their children. Chinese societies show examples of patrilineal descent. In the matrilineal case, male and female children are members of their mother's descent group, but only females pass on this membership to their children. The Navajo Native Americans are an example of a matrilineal group. Unilineal societies trace descent through one gender only, but in virtually all societies individuals trace many other ties of kinship bilaterally, or through both parents.

**Figure 2**

Other societies trace descent cognatically, or through both males and females. All descendants of a founding ancestor may be members of the descent group. An example is the Kwaio of the Solomon Islands, where cognatic descent groups control territory and their members have rights to use this land. Most people of Europe and North America perceive descent cognatically but do not use this principle of descent to form significant groups.

**Worldwide,** patrilineal descent is the most common, covering an estimated 44 percent of world cultures. Societies tracing descent through both genders account for another 36 percent, whereas matrilineal descent covers about 15 percent of world cultures. Another rare descent type accounts for the final 5 percent.

**Many societies with unilineal or cognatic descent** use these descent principles to form important groups such as lineages and clans. Lineages are kin groupings in which members are cognizant of the paths through which they trace common descent. Clans are kin groups in which the exact routes by which people trace common descent are not known or considered: Individuals simply know their clan affiliations by inheriting a clan name from a parent. Some societies have both clans and lineages, in which case the lineages are subdivisions of the clans. The founding ancestors of clans are often considered to be mythological animals, plants, or special objects. Many clans have origin myths about how they were created from such mythological forces.

**In many societies descent reckoning thus links individuals** and groups together into larger kinship units in such a way that descent is a fundamental framework for the social and political organization of a people. In some societies descent groups are extremely important and powerful. They can be large corporations, owning property and other resources in common and transmitting rights to such property over the generations. Often descent groups are interwoven with religion, where, for example, members worship their ancestors in common.

**One of the ways in which descent groups are important** in the lives of individuals is that descent group membership specifies whom one may or may not marry. Very often descent groups are exogamous, that is, marriage is forbidden within them. In these cases, descent groups may arrange marriages with outside groups as a means of forging important social and political alliances with them. In other cases, descent group endogamy, or marriage within the group, is permitted or encouraged; for example, a man in a patrilineal system may be allowed or encouraged to marry his father's brother's daughter (or a father's father's brother's son's daughter). One consequence of descent group endogamy is that the wealth that both brides and grooms may inherit can be kept within the descent group.

**Like notions of descent,** the institution of marriage is found in all human cultures. Marriage may either be monogamous (two people, usually a man and a woman, are united in marriage), polygynous (a man is married to more than one woman at the same time), or polyandrous (a woman is married to more than one man at the same time). Monogamous marriages are the most common worldwide. Many societies permit polygyny, but in these, polygynous unions may account for only a fraction of all marriages. Polyandry is rare, but is found among some Tibetan populations and a few other groups.

Along with relationships of descent and marriage, anthropologists have studied how societies construct so-called "fictive" kinship, that is, kin-like relationships locally understood to be apart from standard kinship. Examples include adopted children, ritual siblings such as "blood brothers," and godparents. These kinds of relationships are found worldwide.

**The study of family relationships is important in many social sciences,** but kinship studies developed as a particularly significant specialty within the discipline of anthropology. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, the work of Lewis Henry Morgan (1818-1881) in the United States brought kinship into the fold of the discipline. Morgan focused on kinship terminology systems and interpreted them as reflecting earlier levels or stages of peoples' cultural evolution. This evolutionary perspective of Morgan and others was discredited by later anthropologists, but ever since Morgan, kinship study has continued to reflect the currents of the broader theoretical perspectives within anthropology.

**By the 1970s anthropology had accumulated** a considerable body of kinship data worldwide. But by this time also, some anthropologists contended that anthropological concepts of kinship had grown too rigid, that they did not quite fit with the way local peoples themselves were conceptualizing their own kinship. In this context, David Schneider in the United States and Rodney Needham in England charged that anthropological kinship was seriously flawed. Schneider in particular pointed out that anthropological concepts of kinship were rooted in notions of biological procreation, reflecting "kinship" as understood in the particular cultural framework of the Western world. However, other cultures often construct "kinship" relationships on other bases, such as common residence or food sharing. In other words, the anthropological concept of kinship had been an ethnocentric imposition of Western cultural constructs on other cultures.

**With this critique**, kinship in anthropology suffered a twenty-year decline, although it was kept alive within feminist anthropology, where it was studied in relation to gender. By this time a shift in kinship studies was evident. Over the first half of the twentieth century anthropologists studied kinship primarily as a key to peoples' social, political, and economic structures, often drawing comparisons among cultures. Through the 1980s, by contrast, kinship studies were conducted from within each culture separately, in terms of purely local categories and cultural meanings.

**Kinship not only survived in anthropology**, but, beginning in the 1990s, it revived. Influencing this revival was Janet Carsten, who sought to broaden the concept of kinship to make it cross-culturally valid. The work of Carsten and others also reflected another trend: the view of kinship as process. Their research demonstrated that in many societies kinship statuses or ties are not set once and for all by acts of birth, but rather emerge, strengthen, or fade through the process of human interactions, for example, the giving and receiving of food. Kinship studies of this period also incorporated the idea of kinship as choice. In the United States and Europe, for example, studies of gay or lesbian families, as well as studies of "blended" families consisting of stepparents and stepsiblings, have shown that meaningful kinship construction can be as much a matter of choice and commitment as biological connection.

**In the opening decades of the twenty-first century** the central question of kinship studies became not so much "How do kinship systems work?" but rather, "How do people work cultural constructions of kinship?" How do individual human actors confirm, challenge, or change these constructions? With this emphasis kinship studies focused on a wide variety of topics, including the impact on kinship constructions of the new reproductive technologies and new family forms, and the intersection of kinship with political struggles and transformations.

**Source:** <http://what-when-how.com/social-sciences/kinship-social-science/>