1 Introduction: cultures of relatedness

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In recent years new life has been breathed into the anthropological study of kinship. This volume brings together some of the sources of the new vitality by exploring local cultures of relatedness in comparative context. The authors describe what 'being related' does for particular people living in specific localities in Africa, China, India, Madagascar, Alaska, and Europe. Rather than taking the content of 'kinship' for granted, they build from first principles a picture of the implications and the lived experience of relatedness in local contexts. It is a truism that people are always conscious of connections to other people. It is equally a truism that some of these connections carry particular weight – socially, materially, affectively. And, often but not always, these connections can be described in genealogical terms, but they can also be described in other ways.

Consider, for example, the Nuer, who constitute a paradigm of a lineage-based society and, as such, a classic case in the anthropological literature. Nuer are revealed here in very different terms from those in which generations of students have come to understand them (notwithstanding the complexities of Evans-Pritchard's (1940, 1951) original ethnography). In this volume Hutchinson describes how, under the conditions of profound social and political upheaval experienced in southern Sudan, the connections and disconnections of Nuer relatedness have come to be understood not only in terms of blood and cattle but also through the media of money, paper, and guns. That these media are potentially convertible into each other, and that food is convertible into blood, and blood into milk and semen, lends an extraordinary degree of transformability to Nuer idioms of relatedness. This 'unboundedness' not only provides a strong contrast to the classic understandings of Nuer kinship in terms of descent groups, but has important implications for how we consider idioms of relatedness more generally.

Likewise, if we consider Iñupiaq relatedness as described here by Bodenhorn, much anthropological wisdom about what constitutes

kinship is called into question. Placing a high value on individual autonomy, Iñupiat strongly deny that ties deriving from procreation exert any overriding moral force. Whereas claims based on different contributions to productive work are described as permanent, 'biology' does not constitute an immutable basis for relations. One of the purposes of this volume is precisely to interrogate the role of biology in local statements and practices of relatedness. In this introductory chapter I situate local practices in a broader comparative context. For the Iñupiat, it is clear that a rejection of biology as constituting the moral bedrock to kinship does not mean that relatedness, as locally constituted, is irrelevant – on the contrary, Bodenhorn makes clear that Iñupiat constantly seek to acquire more ties through naming practices, adoption, and marriage. Crucially, however, these ties are seen as optative rather than given.

The aim of describing relatedness in indigenous terms appears deceptively simple. But it is of course part of a more ambitious project. That project involves assessing where the anthropological study of kinship finds itself at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and where its future might lie. The study of kinship was the very heart of anthropology for nearly a century. In the North American, European, and British schools, from Morgan to Schneider, Durkheim to Lévi-Strauss, Rivers and Malinowski to Radcliffe-Brown and Fortes, the major theorists of anthropology made their mark in the study of kinship (cf. Parkin 1997: 135). It seemed more or less impossible to imagine what anthropology would look like without kinship. And yet from the 1970s on, the position of kinship as a field of study within anthropology has been under question. 'Under question' is something of an understatement. For most anthropologists confronted with the question 'Whatever happened to kinship?', one might say quite simply, as David Schneider did in an interview published shortly before his death, 'the kinds of problems changed' (1995: 193–4).

In Schneider's view, the shift away from kinship was part of a general shift in anthropological understanding from structure to practice, and from practice to discourse. Kinship lost ground – most obviously to gender. But this was part of a wider recasting of the nature of social and cultural life which involved the breaking down of the discrete domains of economics, politics, religion, and kinship which had defined anthropology. This recasting occurred alongside what Schneider termed a 'democratisation of the intellectual enterprise' (1995: 197) in which concerns about social justice, from feminism and the civil rights movement, were crucial. Schneider's view was shaped, of course, by events inside and outside the North American academy. It was more generally

true, however, that social stability was no longer the central issue in anthropology. And in one way or another, the study of kinship – whether in evolutionary, functionalist, or structuralist guise – had been bound up with explanations of social stability.

But Schneider also noted that, perhaps surprisingly, kinship in the 1990s had 'risen from its ashes' (1995: 193) – a fact which he attributed to feminist work, to studies of gay and lesbian kinship, and to Marilyn Strathern's *After Nature* (1992). If it is true that kinship has undergone a rebirth, there is no doubt that the 'new kinship' looks rather different from its old-style forebears. It has become standard, in works on kinship published since the 1980s, for gender, the body, and personhood to feature prominently in the analysis, while relationship terminologies are barely referred to, and kinship diagrams scarcely make an appearance. 'The kinds of problems changed.' This volume is one attempt to understand in what ways the problems changed, and how kinship might look as a result.

The present collection is intended as both a new departure and a return to comparative roots. It begins to explore how the issues underlying recent work on kinship in Euro-American cultures, on new reproductive technologies, on gender, and on the social construction of science in the West impinge on the study of relatedness cross-culturally. Much of this recent work has been concerned with a set of issues about 'nature' or 'biology' in Euro-American cultures.

A central theme running through this volume is the relationship between the 'biological' and the 'social'. If 'biology' or 'nature' has been the grounding for the 'social' in the West, and this relationship now appears to have been 'destabilised', can we put our understanding of this process of destabilisation to work in studies of non-Western cultures? What kind of relevance does this breaching of our foundational certainties have for how we understand and compare relatedness cross-culturally? Rather than beginning with a domain of kinship already marked out, the authors in this volume describe relatedness in terms of indigenous statements and practices – some of which may seem to fall quite outside what anthropologists have conventionally understood as kinship. The chapters which follow suggest not only that biology does not everywhere have the kind of foundational function it has in the West, but that the boundaries between the biological and the social which, as Schneider demonstrated, have been so crucial in the study of kinship are in many cases distinctly blurred, if they are visible at all. These new understandings may force us to conclude that kinship needs to be reinvented in a post-modern, or – to use Bruno Latour's (1993) term – 'non-modern' spirit.

A note on 'relatedness'

It should be clear from the outset that this is a book with a particular mission. That mission is to bring together two trends in recent anthropology. One trend involves the investigation not just of kinship, but of 'nature' and wider knowledge practices in the West. The other, taking a broad and imaginative view of what might be included under the rubric 'kinship', describes the ethnographic particularities of being related in a specific cultural context. The authors collected here have all worked on one or both sets of problems.

The particular aim I have sketched necessarily involves constructing a selective version of anthropological history. In this introduction I highlight a set of issues revolving around the separation of biological and social aspects of kinship in anthropology, and I trace one particular thread of continuity in recent work. If in places the argument appears dismissive of previous renditions of kinship, this is unintended. I take it for granted that in order to say something differently one constructs rather partial versions of what went before (I have made this explicit at various points below). But of course the new relies and builds on the old, and I make my full acknowledgement here to the insights and inspiration provided by the scholars I cite as well as many that I do not.

The version of anthropological history which I give below leans heavily on the work of David Schneider and employs a concept of culture which may seem more foreign to British readers than to those trained in the American anthropological tradition. British students (we like to think) have been accustomed to think of kinship in terms of the social – as in social rules, social organisation, social practice (see Bouquet, this volume). American cultural anthropology focuses on meaning. But my sense is that there has for a long time been an implicit rapprochement between these schools which can be attributed as much to the influence of Lévi-Strauss and Dumont as to the writings of American cultural anthropologists.

Particular versions of history sometimes demand different terms. The authors in this volume use the term 'relatedness' in opposition to, or alongside, 'kinship' in order to signal an openness to indigenous idioms of being related rather than a reliance on pre-given definitions or previous versions. In this introduction I have also used 'relatedness' in a more specific way in order to suspend a particular set of assumptions about what is entailed by the terms social and biological. I use 'relatedness' to convey, however unsatisfactorily, a move away from a pre-given analytic opposition between the biological and the social on which much anthropological study of kinship has rested. As a term, it is of course

open to criticisms – many of which apply equally to 'kinship'. The obvious problem with relatedness is that either it is used in a restricted sense to convey relations in some way founded on genealogical connection, in which case it is open to similar problems as kinship, or it is used in a more general sense to encompass other kinds of social relations, in which case it becomes so broad that it is in danger of 'becoming analytically vacuous' (Holy 1996: 168).[1] Readers will perceive that 'relatedness' offers no neat solutions for the comparative endeavour – merely that its use has enabled me to suspend one set of assumptions, and to bracket off a particular nexus of problems, in order to frame the questions differently. 'Relatedness' makes possible comparisons between Iñupiat and English or Nuer ways of being related without relying on an arbitrary distinction between biology and culture, and without presupposing what constitutes kinship.

Issues about the natural and the social are of course central to two other areas to which anthropologists have recently given much attention: the body and gender (see, for example, Broch-Due, Rudie, and Bleie 1993; Lambek and Strathern 1998). As I discuss below, the parallel is hardly coincidental. But the study of the body and of gender in anthropology can be seen as part of a shift *away* from kinship in anthropology. One purpose of this volume is to confront these issues head on within the frame of kinship, rather than taking a more circuitous route via gender or the body. The volume thus reiterates in a new way a very old tenet of anthropology – the centrality of kinship.

This collection also reiterates an ambitious commitment to the *comparative* study of kinship in the face of an increasing emphasis on cultural particularism. The reluctance to engage in generalisation is one effect of the sustained attack on the concept of kinship and the increasing attention given by anthropologists to the diversity of the meanings of kinship (cf. Holy 1996: 172–3) – although, as Schneider noted, 'symbols and meanings can be compared just as easily as modes of family organisation, the roles of seniors to juniors, or the methods of agriculture' (1972: 48; cited in Marshall 1977: 656). And, as Andrew Strathern and Michael Lambek (1998: 23) remind us, ethnographic work is always at least implicitly comparative in that the society of the anthropologist is inescapably present. In this volume the analytic language of kinship, as well as certain Euro-American everyday practices and discourses of kinship, explicitly fall within the comparative frame.

It is noteworthy that there has been almost no prominent collection of essays devoted to the cross-cultural comparison of kinship since the publication of Jack Goody's edited volume *The Character of Kinship* in 1973. There have of course been many innovative studies since. But

these have either focused on kinship in a local or regional ethnographic context, or have made something else – gender, personhood, houses, bodies, death, procreation – the main object of comparison, with kinship emerging as a prominent subsidiary theme.[2] I address the reasons for this long gap in what follows. But, if nothing else, it may be timely to attempt a fresh look at kinship in comparative perspective.

My introduction is thus clearly not intended to provide a history of the anthropological study of kinship since the nineteenth century. That task has been undertaken by others (e.g. Kuper 1988). Nor do I offer either a new introductory textbook (e.g. Barnard and Good 1984; Holy 1996; Parkin 1997) or a comprehensive survey of the various trends in kinship studies since the 1970s (e.g. Peletz 1995).[3] Instead, I attempt a particular take on 'whatever happened to kinship?' – a take in which David Schneider has a pivotal role, poised as he was, in a unique way, between the old-style kinship and the new.

Whatever happened to kinship?

Schneider is a key figure for a number of reasons. Although he was at one time part of the formalist tradition of kinship studies (see, for example, *Matrilineal Kinship* (1961), which he co-edited with Kathleen Gough), his later work was highly innovative. His *American Kinship: A Cultural Account*, which was first published in 1968 and reprinted in a second edition in 1980, was highly influential for later culturalist analyses of kinship – a point which I take up below. A crucial aspect of Schneider's influence is the role played in his writings by 'nature' or 'biology' and its separation from law, which is itself encompassed by 'culture'. The significance of biology in his writings is often highly contradictory (cf. J. A. Barnes 1973: 63–5), but these contradictions are at the heart of understandings of kinship and of wider knowledge practices in Euro-American cultures. The distinction between the biological and the social is also central to the analyses of local cultures of relatedness presented in this volume, and it is for this reason that I dwell on it at some length here.

Schneider's *A Critique of the Study of Kinship* (1984) can be read as a commentary on his earlier monograph *American Kinship: A Cultural Account* (1980). In the first book he outlined American kinship as a cultural system, explicating its symbolic logic. This was in many ways a path-breaking work, exemplifying a symbolic approach to culture. Schneider argued that sexual reproduction was a core symbol of kinship in a system which was defined by two dominant orders, that of nature, or substance, and that of law, or code. The sexual union of two

unrelated partners in marriage provided the symbolic link between these two orders. It resulted in children connected to their parents through blood ties, or 'shared biogenetic substance', symbolising 'diffuse, enduring solidarity'. The idiom of nature was crucial to American kinship: 'The family is formed according to the laws of nature and it lives by rules which are regarded by Americans as self-evidently natural' (1980: 34). Here sexual intercourse had a critical symbolic role:

> All of the significant symbols of American kinship are contained within the figure of sexual intercourse, itself a symbol of course. The figure is formulated in American culture as a biological entity and a natural act. Yet throughout, each element which is culturally defined as natural is at the same time augmented and elaborated, built upon and informed by the rule of human reason, embodied in law and in morality. (P. 40)

The role of the 'natural' or 'biological' here is telling. As Franklin comments, at least three different 'natures' emerge from Schneider's analysis of American kinship beliefs: biology, as in 'shared biogenetic substance'; nature, as in 'what animals do'; and human nature, as in 'man is a special part of nature' (1997: 54). The contradictions between these different 'natures', however, remain unexplored in Schneider's work. Franklin (1997: 54–5) demonstrates the tension in Schneider's analysis between 'nature' as a coherent symbolic idiom in American kinship, and 'nature' or 'biology' as a separate and distinct realm of scientific facts. As Schneider wrote in 1968:

> These biological facts, the biological prerequisites for human existence, exist and remain. The child does not live without the milk of human kindness, both as nourishment and protection. Nor does the child come into being except by the fertilised egg which, except for those rare cases of artificial insemination, is the outcome of sexual intercourse. These are biological facts . . . There is also a system of constructs in American culture about those biological facts. That system exists in an adjusted and adjustable relationship with these biological facts.
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> But these biological constructs which depict these biological facts have another quality. They have as one of their aspects a symbolic quality, which means they represent something other than what they are, over and above and in addition to their existence as biological facts and cultural constructs about biological facts. (1980: 116)

Franklin observes how such passages indicate that Schneider in fact preserved the same distinction he started with:

> On the one hand, Schneider was arguing that there is no such thing as a biological fact *per se* in American kinship systems – there are only cultural interpretations of them. On the other hand, he was also arguing that there *are* 'natural facts' within science which are true and which are separate from the cultural constructions of them. (1997: 55; original italics)

A similar problem underlies Schneider's later work, *A Critique of the Study of Kinship* (1984; see Carsten 1995a). Here Schneider subjected the history of the study of kinship to the same kind of analytic scrutiny he had previously applied to American kinship, and demonstrated how sexual procreation was central to anthropological definitions of kinship – in this respect his argument reiterated one that had already been made by Needham (1971a).[4] Schneider showed that this was an indigenous assumption in Euro-American folk beliefs about kinship which had been imported into anthropological analysis. It was hardly news, however, that sexual procreation was not necessarily central to local idioms of relatedness – notably in the famous example of the Trobrianders, or in the case of the Yapese whom Schneider himself studied, where the link between coitus and procreation in humans was reportedly not made (see Malinowski 1929; Leach 1967; Spiro 1968; Schneider 1984; Delaney 1986; Franklin 1997). If 'kinship' was not the same thing in different cultures, then the comparative endeavour of anthropology failed, because like was quite simply not being compared with like. Schneider, like Needham before him, concluded that 'there is no such thing as kinship' (Needham 1971a: 5), and that the discrete domains into which anthropologists divided up the world – kinship, economics, politics, and religion – had to be abandoned. His argument thus had particular relevance for the comparative study of kinship.[5]

Although Schneider took the discussion about the role of biology in the anthropological study of kinship rather further than he had in *American Kinship*, he still seemed to hold back from abandoning the very separation which he was investigating – that between culture and biology:

> [T]he point remains that culture, even were it to do no more than recognize biological facts, still adds something to those facts. The problem remains of just what the sociocultural aspects are, of what meaning is added, of where and how that meaning, as a meaning rather than as biological fact, articulates with other meanings. (1984: 199)

Schneider's *Critique* was very successful in demonstrating the Euro-centric assumptions at the heart of the anthropological study of kinship. This was undoubtedly one of the many nails in the coffin of kinship, and contributed to the shift away from the study of kinship in the 1970s. It was somewhat paradoxical therefore that his earlier work on American kinship, flawed as it was, provided a highly fertile model for later culturalist accounts of kinship, one to which Strathern (1992a: xviii) and others have made clear their debt. Schneider is a pivotal figure in the study of kinship precisely because of the link between these two projects – and this provides a crucial distinction from Needham's

writings. Perhaps it is not surprising in retrospect that Schneider's stronger position, which focused on the 'meanings' of kinship rather than on formal properties, seems to have offered greater possibilities for the future study of kinship. By illuminating the role of nature or biology in American folk versions of kinship *and* in anthropological analyses of kinship, and by beginning to explore the connections between these two strands, Schneider left a particularly fruitful avenue for later scholars to pursue.

Marilyn Strathern claimed David Schneider as 'anthropological father' to *After Nature* (1992a: xviii), and this link is reiterated in Schneider's own comment on his *American Kinship* – one which might almost be taken as the epigraph for Strathern's book:

> Nor did I notice until almost after it was all done how much the Euro-American notion of knowledge depended on the proposition that knowledge is *discovered*, not invented, and that knowledge comes when the 'facts' of nature which are hidden from us mostly, are finally revealed. Thus, for example, kinship was thought to be the social recognition of the actual facts of biological relatedness . . . The idea that culture, and knowledge, is mostly a direct reflection of nature is still very much with us, however inadequate that view is. (1995: 222; original italics).

The central point of Strathern's argument is that nature can no longer be taken for granted in late-twentieth-century English culture. In Thatcherite Britain, the effects of technological developments – particularly the new reproductive technologies – and the extension of consumer choice to domains in which such choice had not previously applied, have resulted in a destabilisation of nature.

> Nature, at once intrinsic characteristic and external environment, constituted both the given facts of the world and the world as context for facts . . . Although it could be made into a metaphor or seen to be the object of human activity, it also had the status of a prior fact, a condition for existence. Nature was thus a condition for knowledge. It crucially controlled, we might say, a relational view between whatever was taken as internal (nature) and as external (nature). (1992a: 194)

What Strathern calls the 'modern cycle' involved a new conceptualisation of the ground for knowledge. In this new conceptualisation, nature does not disappear – in fact it becomes more evident – but its 'grounding function' is lost through being made explicit. If, for example, one considers the effects of the new reproductive technologies, which are often claimed to be merely 'assisting nature', then kin relationships, which in the past would have been seen as having their basis in nature, and could then be socially recognised – or not – may now be seen as either socially constructed or as natural relations which are assisted by

technology. As Strathern (1992a: 195–6; 1992b) makes clear, the significant shift is that what was taken to be natural has become a matter for choice; nature has been, as she puts it, 'enterprised-up'. The more nature is assisted by technology, and the more the social recognition of parenthood is circumscribed by legislation, the more difficult it becomes to think of nature as independent of social intervention (1992b: 30). It follows from this that knowledge itself, which previously was seen as 'a direct reflection of nature', as Schneider put it, no longer has such a grounding in nature. It is not just nature, then, but knowledge itself which has been destabilised.

Kinship has a critical role in these shifts in knowledge practices precisely because, in the English view, kinship is defined as being the meeting place of nature and culture (Strathern 1992a: 87). Kinship facts can be seen as simultaneously part of nature and part of culture. Kinship performed a kind of dual function – it was based in a nature that was itself regarded as the grounding for culture, and it also provided an image of the relation between culture and nature (ibid. 198).

Strathern explores the cultural effects of 'the demise of the reproductive model of the modern epoch', where individuals can no longer be placed simultaneously in different contexts as social constructions and as biologically given (1992a: 193). Future technological developments, such as the mapping of the human genome, suggest that the shift from nature to choice will further destabilise the reproductive model. In the endless proliferation of a highly politicised discourse about consumer preference, new reproductive technologies, and gene therapies, it becomes possible to imagine 'a cultural future that will need no base in ideas about human reproduction' (p. 198).

Strathern's conclusion highlights once again the centrality of pregiven biological facts to Western knowledge practices and kinship relations. The cultural construction of a scientific realm of 'natural facts' has, of course, itself been made the subject of study by historians of science. Thus, for example, Haraway's (1989, 1991) work on primatology demonstrates how the boundaries between nature and culture are much more permeable than either biological or social scientists might suppose. The 'traffic between nature and culture' (1989: 15), which she illustrates through particular histories of the relationships between primates and those who studied them, puts into question the role of 'biological facts' as a domain separate from culture. Here scientific facts are shown not simply as 'pure truths', placidly awaiting discovery in a natural world, but as actively constructed by scientists whose work practices, gendered identities, and career paths situated them in particular historical and cultural milieus.