Max-Planck-Institut für ethnologische Forschung
Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology

Kinship Cognition and Practice
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Organisers: Günther Schlee and Patrick Heady (Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology)
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Connections between cognition and practice are, or should be, at the heart of the anthropology of kinship.

The concern with cognitive systems and their practical implications goes back to the very beginning of kinship anthropology: to Morgan's discovery of Iroquois kin terms which, with their cross/parallel distinction, classified genealogical connections in an entirely different way from his own English-language terminology. He argued that the difference must be causally associated with differences in political, residential, marital and property institutions. Almost 80 years later this belief was decisively vindicated by Murdock, whose comparative analyses established strong statistical correlations between various features of kinship terminology and corresponding aspects of practical social organisation.

Despite this empirical demonstration of the close connection between systems of cognition and practice, anthropology still lacks a coherent and agreed body of theory that can account for these correlations. The purpose of this conference is to review the problems, and to identify theoretical and methodological approaches that may help us to close this gap.

The next few paragraphs outline some of the issues that may be relevant.

The strong correlations between terminology and practice argue against the fashionable idea that differing kinship systems are the outcome of unconstrained cultural choice. They would be more compatible with the existence of common cognitive principles whose application can vary in a limited number of ways to create, or allow for, particular systems of practical interaction.

As an initial exploratory device, it may be helpful to divide the overall problem into two parts

1. the connections between terminology and kin identity
2. the connections between kin identity and practical behaviour

Each of these sub-problems has several aspects.

Terminology and Identity

There are two issues here which have generally been considered separately.

The first (aka *kinship algebra*) is the study of terminologies as consistently integrated logical systems (for some recent accounts see Lehman, Kronenfeld, and Read).

The second issue concerns what kind of reality the terms actually refer to. Historically this question has generated a series of debates about which of a pair of contrasting meanings is fundamental: biological connection versus social belonging; genealogical position versus category membership; ascription versus performance; and so on. It is arguable that both sides in these debates miss a more fundamental point: namely that, in their default setting, kinship terms refer simultaneously to all these levels, thereby expressing systems of composite identity.

The deeper theoretical problems are: (i) why in each society these different aspects of identity are brought into a single conceptual system; (ii) how exactly these interlocking identities are reflected in, or shaped by, a corresponding set of relational kin terms: and (iii) what are the *general* mechanisms that bring about this result in each *particular* society?

Identity and Practice

A key issue here is what behaviour, if any, is intrinsic to any kind of kinship identity – because it is part of the underlying cognitive model, either as an implication or as an indicator of shared kinship. Focusing on *implications*, some theorists, such as Schneider and Sahlins, opt for a minimal account: mutual involvement and practical goodwill, but nothing more. Others, such as Lévi-Strauss, Fortes, Barry and most socio-biologists, would include incest avoidance – though with varying ideas as to the scope of the behaviour and the psychological mechanisms involved.

There are arguments for extending the list of intrinsic behaviour. Co-residence and spatial positioning may function as universal *indicators* of kinship – as in the Westermarck hypothesis, some theories of kinship terminology (Leach, Bennardo), and the recent ethnographic focus on the house (Carsten and Hugh-Jones).

From houses, it is a small step to arguing that property relations are intrinsic to the notion of kinship – Needham was inclined to think so, and Schneider thought this true of pacific islanders (though not, apparently, of Americans!). Goody also places property close to the heart of kinship.

Residence and property are closely linked to political allegiance – and this too has been placed close to the heart of kinship by theorists such as Radcliffe-Brown, Fortes, Lévi-Strauss and Chapais.

Theorists who hesitate to treat property and allegiance as inherent aspects of kinship, might still explain the connection in cognitive terms – since all three involve identities, and there may be psychological advantages in treating these identities in congruent ways.

Causal Chains and the Problem of Exceptions

Combining the two links *terminology-identity* and *identity-practice*, it would in principle be possible to explain the cross-cultural correlations. The connection might operate in a passive way, with political or economic changes originating outside the sphere of kinship creating new *de facto* identities that were subsequently reflected in terminology. Or it could be the outcome of active kinship strategies, using kinship terms to promote specific perceptions of identity in order to create the practical relationships which they make possible. This suggests a double research agenda: seeking to clarify the underlying cognitive principles, and analysing situations in which the pattern of kinship identities is observed to shift.

The greatest difficulty in this research agenda may lie in specifying each link in the cognitive chain in a way that allows for the observed variation without becoming so vacuous that it loses predictive power. Simple formulations can often be confronted by counter-examples. The tension between shared kinship and new sexual relationships is a famous case in point. Stressed

in many societies, and treated by several theorists as a cognitive universal, there are nonetheless societies in which marriages within the kinship group are actively approved. This is often taken as evidence that incest rules are purely cultural. Theorists who wish to argue otherwise need to explain, more clearly than they have yet done, why and how the inherent tension can sometimes be overcome.

This brief discussion is meant to be suggestive, not prescriptive or exhaustive. We would welcome papers that deal with any aspect of the relationship between kinship cognition and kinship practice, including the internal logic of cognitive systems themselves.

Papers could be theoretical, or based on ethnographic, comparative or historical studies. They could also be methodological – outlining innovative approaches to the collection and analysis of relevant data – including methods that draw on cognitive psychology or network theory.

Please email abstracts to Patrick Heady (heady@eth.mpg.de) by **15th May 2016 at the latest**. If you would like to discuss possible themes before submitting an abstract, please feel free to do so.

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