

Kinship Universals and Variation – Brief Project Description

Kinship provides individuals with a basic part of their identity in all societies – and typically does so at two distinct but connected social levels. Domestically it provides people with homes, practical and emotional support and the corresponding obligations, and access to a short-range web of bilateral ties. Politically it provides people with claims to citizenship, and to lineage and ethnic identities – as well as clusters of rights and duties associated with property and inheritance. In many societies it is ritually elaborated in the form of godparenthood, milk-kinship and so on. Kinship thus provides an important link between individual identity and social cohesion.

The new project on *Kinship Universals and Variation (KUV)*¹ aims to study these themes in a distinctive way – namely by returning to Radcliffe-Brown’s vision of kinship studies as the centre-piece of a natural science of society. Consistently with this, our emphasis is on explicitly formulated, testable theory from wherever it may come. One important source is socio-biology (a.k.a. evolutionary theory) which has produced a body of clearly formulated, thoroughly tested propositions concerning relationships within the web of domestic kinship. However, valuable as this work is, we do not think that socio-biology is the only, or even the main, potential source of scientific kinship theory. Despite the famous post-Schneiderian turn, we believe that the main sources of valid theory remain the classical traditions of social, cultural and cognitive anthropology. Interesting new developments within these traditions focus particularly on the structural and semantic analysis of kinship terminologies, and on the historical sequencing and ecological correlates of different kinship systems.

Within KUV we will be pursuing two distinct but related lines of research. First is the effort to formulate and clarify the propositions in each theoretical tradition, and to compare them critically with one-another in order to identify commonalities, contrasts, and gaps that call for more theoretical work. The second is to use empirical data to evaluate the predictions of alternative theories. For this purpose we aim to use existing data sources wherever possible – including individual ethnographies, comparative data bases such as the Human Relations

¹ Undertaken by the “Integration and Conflict” department of the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle/Saale, Germany.

Area Files and the Ethnographic Atlas, as well as historical and statistical sources where these are appropriate.

But we also plan to extend the research methods developed in the EU-funded KASS project that was coordinated by this institute. These combined multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork with the use of a computerised Kinship Network Questionnaire (KNQ) which implemented Rivers's genealogical method in an extended and standardised form. The KNQ was developed for use in European societies – and one of the first practical tasks of the new project is to adapt the questionnaire for use in other continents and other kinds of society, including nomadic and peasant communities, and societies with very different forms of kinship organisation.

Although our ambitions are large, the project itself will be small – at any rate to start with. It began formally in May 2013 and the first step was the formation of a three-person research team consisting of two social anthropologists, Günther Schlee and Patrick Heady (project coordinator) and one evolutionary anthropologist, Alexander Pashos. A visit by GS and PH to the Minzu University of National Minorities in Beijing in June 2013 has opened what we hope will be a fruitful collaboration with Chinese colleagues, testing and redeveloping the KNQ for researching kinship practises in the very varied communities of contemporary China.

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