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MANY MOTHERS, MANY FATHERS: THE MEANING OF PARENTING AROUND THE WORLD

Nicole L. Sault*

I. INTRODUCTION: KIN TERMS

Mother, father, brother, sister. What do these terms mean and how do we use them? Each kinship term serves as a label that summarizes a bundle of behavioral expectations, rights, and obligations. A child's first words are often kin terms, and the utterance of these words indicates not only the ability to arrange particular phonemes into recognizable sequences as words, but also shows a recognition of certain behavioral expectations associated with each term.¹

Although kin terms for mother and father exist in all societies, there is wide variation in how these terms are applied and what they mean. In the United States, many people assume that there is only one person a child will call "mother" and only one person a child will call "father." Stepparents, for example, are often distinguished with other designations, such as first names.

Yet, in societies throughout the world, words such as father and mother are extended to a range of other people. Among societies organized around matrilineal descent, that

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1. When are particular terms prohibited? Under slavery in the United States, for example, a slave woman's child was forbidden to call her "mother." As a New Orleans freedman explained: "I was once whipped, . . . because I said to my misses, 'my mother sent me.' We were not allowed to call our mammies 'mother.' It made it come too near the way of the white folks." LAWRENCE W. LEVINE, *BLACK CULTURE AND BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS: AFRO-AMERICAN FOLK THOUGHT FROM SLAVERY TO FREEDOM* 139 (1977), cited in Stephanie J. Shaw, *Mothering Under Slavery in the Antebellum South*, in *MOTHERING: IDEOLOGY, EXPERIENCE, AND AGENCY* 237, 237-38 (Evelyn Nakano Glenn et al. eds., 1994) (omission in original). A contemporary example is the use of the term "mother" in commercial surrogacy arrangements, in which the birth mother is referred to as "the surrogate" and the contract mother is called "the real mother." See, e.g., Katha Pollitt, *Contracts and Apple Pie; The Strange Case of Baby M*, *NATION*, May 23, 1987, at 667.

is, through a line of women, the word for mother is also applied to the child's maternal aunt. For example, among the Navajo of Arizona and New Mexico, "[o]ne considers all persons of one's mother's clan to be clan brothers and sisters The mother's clan is that of a 'mother' to the child. As an abstract concept the clan is referred to as *shimá*, 'my mother.' All the people of that clan are collectively 'my mother.'"² If you are Navajo and your mother's sister walks into the room, if you speak to her in Navajo you will address her as mother, not aunt. In a patrilineal society, in which descent is reckoned solely through the male line, children use the term "father" for both father and father's brothers. They do not call every man father, only men in their father's descent group.

In many societies, kin terms are also extended to include members of the same residential group. Among the Mbuti of Zaire, the hunting camp is considered to be a family, and the kin terms for father and mother are extended to all adults in the camp that are of the parents' generation. Each child will call several women "mother" and several men "father." When kin terms are extended to certain classes of relatives, the behaviors and expectations associated with these labels are also extended. Children know who their birth parents are, but the behavioral expectations of the terms "mother" and "father" are applied to everyone in the camp who is classified as a parent.³

II. THE MEANING OF KINSHIP IN THE UNITED STATES

In the United States today, "the family" is frequently a topic for discussion, with people choosing sides on a variety of legal, medical, and psychological issues. However, these discussions are usually framed within very narrow cultural premises. Frequently, in discussions of the family, a particular view of the world is presented as inherently natural and

2. Diana J. Shomaker, *Transfer of Children and the Importance of Grandmothers Among the Navajo Indians*, 4 J. CROSS-CULTURAL GERONTOLOGY 1, 7 (1989). Among the Keres peoples of the Southwestern Pueblos, "to address a person as 'mother' is to pay the highest ritual respect," and chiefs are honored with the title "mother." Paula Gunn Allen, *Grandmother of the Sun*, in THE SACRED HOOP: RECOVERING THE FEMININE IN AMERICAN INDIAN TRADITIONS 16, 29 (1986).

3. See COLIN M. TURNBULL, THE MBUTI PYGMIES: CHANGE AND ADAPTATION 33-35 (1983).

universal, and therefore beyond analytical consideration.⁴ Although "family values" are repeatedly cited, the cultural assumptions underlying these values remain unspoken.

In observing and comparing societies throughout the world, the cross-cultural research of anthropologists has shown that although kinship and family organization are characteristic of all human societies, they vary in form and meaning according to each culture's definition of what kinship and family constitute.⁵ This research also shows that the human concept of family is not based primarily on biology, nor does it exist independently of a cultural context. What is natural to humans and other animal species are biological attachment systems and genetic relationships between parents and offspring.⁶

Kinship in the United States has been studied on the basis of a very narrow view of biology that reduces the field to genetics.⁷ Yet, genetic connection is not the only biological system affecting kinship ties. Attachment to caregivers is itself a biologically mediated system that is not dependent upon genetic connections, as shown by cross-fostering experiments between animals of different species. For example, dogs will raise baby rhesus monkeys, and humans frequently raise the young of many species. This is also supported by ethological studies of releasing signals for nurturance in a variety of species, such as infantile facial features that include large eyes, a small nose, and distinctive coloring. The young of humans, monkeys, dogs, and other mammals are characterized by biological features that elicit a caretaking response.

4. However the term "natural family" is used, it is important to remember that the oldest and most enduring form of primate family is based on a mother-infant tie. See Sally Slocum, *Woman the Gatherer: Male Bias in Anthropology*, in *TOWARD AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF WOMEN* 36, 43 (Rayna R. Reiter ed., 1975).

5. The methodology for this anthropological research emphasizes community studies based on long-term fieldwork and includes participant observation, interviews, a household census, genealogies, life histories, and surveys.

6. Attachment is "[a] prolonged social relationship between two or more individuals, characterized by mutual interaction and by evidence of affective arousal when the relationship is severed or threatened." PETER C. REYNOLDS, *ON THE EVOLUTION OF HUMAN BEHAVIOR: THE ARGUMENT FROM ANIMALS TO MAN* 262 (1981). For further discussion see John Bowlby, *The Nature of the Child's Tie to His Mother*, 39 *INT'L J. PSYCHOANALYSIS* 350 (1958).

7. Strathern observes that "natural kinship" is "biologised." MARILYN STRATHERN, *REPRODUCING THE FUTURE: ESSAYS ON ANTHROPOLOGY, KINSHIP AND THE NEW REPRODUCTIVE TECHNOLOGIES* 19 (1992).

Throughout the world, humans classify kin according to cultural categories, not biological relatedness. Some people to whom we are emotionally attached are not genetically related to us, while we may feel no emotional attachment toward others to whom we are closely related genetically, and they may be excluded as relatives by the kinship system's terminology. For example, in unilineal descent systems, children are genetically related to both their maternal and paternal kin, but only one line of descent is used in reckoning lineage membership. Alternatively, some kinship systems apply the kin terms for parent or sibling to people who are more distantly related genetically. This lack of close correspondence between biological and cultural systems of relatedness is not simply a characteristic of so-called primitive people, but is a universal feature of human societies. The predominant view of kinship in the United States, however, equates family with biological connections, while the associated phenomena of attachment, care-giving, and co-residence are ignored.

The contemporary American view of kinship and family reflects the core values of this society. For the purposes of this discussion, I will focus on the core values of biology, individual independence, and exclusive control verging on ownership.⁸ These core concepts are expressed in people's beliefs and actions: what they say, how they behave toward one another, and the cultural products they produce, including proverbs, television, and films. Anthropologists, historians, sociologists, psychologists, and other scholars have noted the importance of each of these core concepts separately, but I believe it is important to consider all three together in order to fully understand how they influence American kin ties and define the meaning of parenthood.

The first of these three core concepts is biology. In the United States, parenthood is defined as biological, based on procreation, and symbolized by blood.⁹ People use the ex-

8. Additional core values of American kinship are fatherhood, the partible body, the bounded body, and whiteness. See Nicole Sault, *How the Body Shapes Parenthood: "Surrogate" Mothers in the United States and Godmothers in Mexico*, in *MANY MIRRORS: BODY IMAGE AND SOCIAL RELATIONS* 292-316 (1994).

9. See DAVID M. SCHNEIDER, *AMERICAN KINSHIP: A CULTURAL ACCOUNT* (1980). For a discussion of biological mothers as "bloodmothers" see PATRICIA COLLINS, *BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT: KNOWLEDGE, CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE POLITICS OF EMPOWERMENT* 119 (1990).

pression "blood is thicker than water" to contrast ties by birth and marriage. In the dominant ideology of the United States, priority is always given to blood kin, as when adoptive parents are contrasted with biological parents as the "real" parents connected to the child by blood.

No one in the legal profession would think that a term such as "water rights" reflects a species-wide agreement about how the world is organized, even though everyone drinks water; but parenthood as blood ties is often assumed to be a fact of nature, perceived and interpreted the same way everywhere.

Anthropologists recognize that parenthood and kinship in a broader sense are both culturally constructed, and that parenthood

has to do with the symbols, meanings and beliefs by which life is thought to come into being. It provides a view of what life is, how and by what or whom it comes into being and for what purpose, what the person is (both male and female), how persons are related to each other, the non-human world and the cosmos.¹⁰

Whereas some societies emphasize blood as the symbol for expressing the biological basis of defining kinship, anthropological research shows that other societies emphasize spirit, bone, milk, food, and other culturally important symbols.¹¹

A society whose symbols center around blood could conceivably emphasize shared blood as flowing between persons, as in Jamaica.¹² Yet this is not the case in the United States, where the biology of blood is expressed in terms of the unique autonomous individual.

The second core concept of American kinship is the independence of individuals. Individualism has long been recognized as a characteristic of the dominant ideology in American culture, and it is associated with the atomistic independence of individuals existing in isolation from one another. In this cultural system, independence is contrasted

10. Carol Delaney, *The Meaning of Paternity and the Virgin Birth Debate*, 21 *MAN* 494, 506 (1986).

11. See Anna S. Meigs, *Blood Kin and Food Kin*, in *CONFORMITY AND CONFLICT: READINGS IN CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY* 117 (James P. Spradley & David W. McCurdy eds., 6th ed. 1987); Johannes Wilbert, *Goajiro Kinship and the Eiruku Cycle*, in *THE SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY OF LATIN AMERICA* 306 (Walter Goldschmidt & Harry Hoijer eds., 1970).

12. See ELISA J. SOBO, *ONE BLOOD: THE JAMAICAN BODY* (1993).

with dependence, which is interpreted as a sign of weakness or failure. Competition is rewarded and encouraged through contests, prizes, and grade curves.¹³ Even within the family, individuals are socialized to compete for material resources as well as attention and affection. Parents vie with each other over the loyalty of their children and argue over custody rights.

The emphasis on individual independence is also connected to the third core concept in American kinship: the value placed on private ownership. In the United States, parenthood is generally viewed as a relationship of ownership that emphasizes control. Just as a man traditionally had rights over his wife, he also has rights over his children.¹⁴ Individual accumulation of property is associated with private ownership of that property, rather than communal responsibility of a kin group in caring for and raising a child.

As Rothman observes, ownership and property rights have been extended to one's body and one's child, and this ideology is expressed in the language and metaphors that people use to talk about themselves and their children.¹⁵ According to Smith, "a parent may not literally assert that a child is a piece of property, but may work on assumptions analogous to those which one makes in connection with property."¹⁶

In the United States, people talk about wanting a child of their own, and by this they usually mean a child born to them from their own genes to create a biological connection. Americans often think of "their" child as a possession which they alone control, free from the interference of others.¹⁷ People

13. WILLIAM A. HAVILAND, *CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY* 127 (1993). See also Betty Lee Sung, *Bicultural Conflict*, in *THE ADJUSTMENT EXPERIENCE OF CHINESE IMMIGRANT CHILDREN IN NEW YORK CITY* (1987); JOHN W.M. WHITING & IRVIN L. CHILD, *CHILD TRAINING AND PERSONALITY: A CROSS-CULTURAL STUDY* (1953).

14. See GENA COREA, *THE MOTHER MACHINE: REPRODUCTIVE TECHNOLOGIES FROM ARTIFICIAL INSEMINATION TO ARTIFICIAL WOMBS* 288 (1985); see also ARTHUR CALHOUN, *A SOCIAL HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN FAMILY FROM COLONIAL TIMES TO THE PRESENT* (1945).

15. Barbara Katz Rothman, *Beyond Mothers and Fathers: Ideology in a Patriarchal Society*, in *MOTHERING: IDEOLOGY, EXPERIENCE, AND AGENCY* 139, 150 (Evelyn Nakano Glenn et al. eds., 1994).

16. Janet Farrell Smith, *Parenting and Property*, in *MOTHERING: ESSAYS IN FEMINIST THEORY* 199, 202 (Joyce Trebilcot ed., 1984).

17. The American norm against interfering applies to everyone, even such close kin as the child's grandparents. Andrew J. Cherlin & Frank F. Fur-

do not willingly share control over a child, as seen by the difficulties divorced couples face in custody disputes that involve sharing their "own" child. Each parent wants full custody of the child, or complete ownership and control. Visiting rights are not usually awarded to the grandparents, aunts, uncles, or other members of either parent's kin group. Sharing would be interpreted as losing control.

The rights of ownership are also at issue in day care centers, for mothering is exclusive in the world of white working-class and middle-class women. As Nelson observes in her study of child care centers, "[m]otherhood confers the privileges of claiming, molding, and keeping; other people's children cannot be claimed, molded, and kept. To think that one can do so with other people's children creates a situation where . . . [the caretaker] can only be disappointed."¹⁸

These three core concepts of American kinship — biology, autonomy, and control — are all expressed in commercial surrogacy, which emphasizes biology in defining parenthood in terms of individual control. Concern with exclusive ownership is highlighted in the contract disputes that have brought surrogacy arrangements into the courts and created headlines like *Contract Mightier than the Womb*.¹⁹ The contracting couple seek a child for themselves, not one they will be forced to share with the birth mother.

The emphasis on rights over children as property is exemplified by the language surrounding the surrogacy debates. Those who criticize surrogacy argue that it entails buying and selling babies; whereas, those who defend surrogacy counter that it involves only renting a womb. In surrogacy cases, real estate terminology is used to refer to both the

stenberg, Jr., *Styles and Strategies of Grandparenting*, in *FAMILY IN TRANSITION: RETHINKING MARRIAGE, SEXUALITY, CHILD REARING, AND FAMILY ORGANIZATION* 344 (Arlene S. Skolnick & Jerome H. Skolnick eds., 1989). This norm of "noninterference" would be considered highly unusual in other societies in which grandparents are expected to have an important role in raising their grandchildren, such as in the Philippines or among the Maya of Guatemala. In Nigeria, *Hausa* children are reprimanded by adults other than their parents, and children are taught to obey. Enid Schildkrout, *Young Traders of Northern Nigeria*, 90 NAT. HIST. 44 (1981).

18. Margaret K. Nelson, *Mothering Others' Children: The Experience of Family Day-Care Providers*, 15 SIGNS 586, 595 (1990).

19. Richard C. Paddock & Rene Lynch, *Contract Mightier than the Womb, Ovum Chief Factor in Surrogate Ruling*, SAN JOSE MERCURY NEWS, May 21, 1993, at A1. Note that there is also a bias toward male ownership and control.

birth mother and her child. For example, a *New York Times* editorial argued that the contract parents "lost the lease on the womb; their lawyer seems something less than a crack real estate agent; and Mrs. Thrane [the birth mother] is keeping her property."²⁰

The language of surrogacy arrangements also portrays the baby as a commercial product, and as with other products, quality control is an important issue. In a surrogacy agency, clients can review portfolios of prospective surrogate mothers, complete with photographs and a list of such characteristics as eye color, intelligence, and personality. The surrogacy contracts are drawn up with clauses to protect the client, the contracting parent, against defective merchandise. The child is thought of as a custom designed product that should result in a perfect baby.²¹

III. THE IDIOM OF KINSHIP: NURTURING AND SHARING

Many of the world's societies are kinship based. Kinship is embedded in every institution of the society, including not only politics and economics, but religion, art, and language. In kinship-based societies, children are not socialized according to independence training, which reinforces individual independence, self-reliance, personal achievement, and competition, with the individual or peers as the focus. Instead, children are socialized with an emphasis on cooperation, obedience, indulgence, responsibility, and the kin group as the important point of reference.

In kin-based societies, being supportive of one another is key, and people are encouraged as kin to nurture each other by providing for one another, feeding each other, or protecting members of the group whether they be children or adults. The behavior of mutual support is reinforced by symbolic systems that emphasize the interconnectedness of people. Among the Hua of Papua New Guinea, for example, kinship

20. *Love for Sale*, N.Y. TIMES, Apr. 2, 1981, at A26. Note that commercial surrogacy contracts are illegal in Australia, Canada, England, France, and Japan. See ANDREW KIMBRELL, *THE HUMAN BODY SHOP: THE ENGINEERING AND MARKETING OF LIFE* (1993).

21. See THOMAS SHANNON, *SURROGATE MOTHERHOOD: THE ETHICS OF USING HUMAN BEINGS* 119 (1989); COREA, *supra* note 14, at 219; ROBYN ROWLAND, *Of Woman Born, but for How Long?*, in *MADE TO ORDER: THE MYTH OF REPRODUCTIVE AND GENETIC PROGRESS* 78 (Patricia Spallone & Deborah Lynn Steinberg eds., 1987).

is based not only on birth ties but on sharing one's vital essence through the exchange of substances essential to life, particularly milk, food, and water. This vital essence is associated not only with blood, but all bodily fluids, and is shared through "physiological oneness or communion that is created by postnatal exchanges, in particular of a woman's milk, of food, and of water."²² All the food a person produces or prepares contains some of their vital essence, so eating creates relationships between people and makes them kin because it mixes their vital essence. In other words, two people not related by birth can create kinship by feeding each other.²³ James Watson, the ethnographer of the Tairora of New Guinea Highlands, and Meigs call this "nurture kinship."²⁴

The Hua's emphasis on nurturing and sharing is characteristic of many kinship-based societies. These values are extended to include not only sharing food and other material resources, but also the responsibility for raising children and the benefits of their respect, affection, and care in later life. By example, in the Batek De' of Malaysia, where the ethic of sharing extends to all members of the gathering and hunting camp and "entitles all people in a camp to food. . . . This sharing occurs even when each family has procured similar food through their own labors."²⁵ At the same time, the sharing network facilitates child care, for "the entire camp absorbs responsibility for feeding children."²⁶

Child sharing is institutionalized in many cultural practices such as godparenthood. In Mexico, one way to experience parenthood is to become a godparent, a form of ceremonial sponsorship common throughout Latin America. Among the Zapotec, an indigenous people of Oaxaca in southeastern Mexico, godparents can sponsor ceremonies for baptism, confirmation, a wedding, sixth grade graduation, the funeral

22. Meigs, *supra* note 11, at 121. *Nu* is also in a person's sweat, body oils, urine, saliva, feces, hair, breath, and body odor. This means that "[a]ny act by which any of these substances is transferred between people serves to relate them at least minimally." *Id.* at 122.

23. *Id.* at 121.

24. *Id.*

25. Karen Endicott, *Fathering in an Egalitarian Society*, in *FATHER-CHILD RELATIONS: CULTURAL AND BIOSOCIAL CONTEXTS* 281, 283-84 (Barry S. Hewlett ed., 1992).

26. *Id.* at 284.

cross, a new house, or the rosary. In my research among the Zapotec, I found that godparents are expected to guide the child's religious development, to help in curing the child's sickness, and to assist financially with the child's schooling in terms of books, clothes, fees, or housing. Godparents serve as counselors to the child and have important roles in the child's marriage. People refer to the godparents as the child's second mother and father, for they share in raising and caring for their godchild, who may live with them for a period of time.

Among the Zapotec, sharing children is seen as natural and beneficial for the children, the godparents, and the community as a whole.²⁷ Parenthood is understood in terms of multiple roles performed by different people according to their personal gifts and abilities. For the Zapotec, having children means sharing children.

IV. INTERDEPENDENCE AS A CULTURAL VALUE

In American culture, independence is a core value, but in kin-based societies the cultural emphasis on nurturing and sharing reflects an understanding that interdependence is crucial to the survival of human groups. Nurturing and sharing are an expression of the view that no single individual can survive alone. Each person is dependent upon others throughout life, and recognition of this mutual dependence leads to interdependence.

In the United States, sleeping alone is usually considered desirable and necessary for privacy, and the phrase "sleeping together" is used as a euphemism for sexual intercourse.²⁸ However, in Mexico, particularly in rural areas, interdependence is expressed through cosleeping arrangements in which several people share the same bed or sleeping mat, either a

27. Nicole Sault, *Baptismal Sponsorship as a Source of Power for Zapotec Women in Oaxaca, Mexico*, 11 J. LATIN AM. LORE 225 (1985). Among the Maya of Guatemala, each child born into a community belongs to that community, and the candle that represents that child is burned "so that it will become part of the candle of the whole community." RIGOBERTA MENCHÚ, I, RIGOBERTA MENCHÚ, AN INDIAN WOMAN IN GUATEMALA 7-17 (Elisabeth Burgos-Debray ed., Ann Wright trans., 1984). The child learns from the community to be generous, "to have open hands" for sharing. *Id.*

28. Although Americans assume solitary sleep is "normal," infant-parent cosleeping "represents a species-wide pattern, and is practiced by the vast majority of contemporary peoples . . ." James J. McKenna, *Rethinking "Healthy" Infant Sleep*, BREASTFEEDING ABSTRACTS, Feb. 1993, at 27.

couple with their small children or same-sex relatives. When visiting relatives and friends arrive, they join others of the same sex in sleeping together. Sleeping alone is considered lonely and unpleasant, even a little frightening. In Japan, the term "skinship" is used "to characterize the value placed on parent-child cosleeping patterns and more general bodily contact as essential to the development of a sense of well-being and interdependence in the child."²⁹

In societies that emphasize nurturing, sharing, and interdependence, blood ties do not give parents inalienable rights over their children. All kin ties must be validated by nurturing through feeding, bathing, healing, or teaching. People do not have children in the sense of private individual ownership any more than they have land as private property. Children, land, and ritual objects all belong to the larger kin group. Children exist as members of the kin group and the community.

This shared responsibility is reflected in the fluidity of household membership, for children often live in more than one household while growing up. In some societies, it is expected that one or more grandchild will go to live with the grandparents and keep them company.³⁰ In other societies, it is expected that when children become teenagers they will go to live with another family in the community. People move in with their relatives in response to the varying needs of all the families involved, influenced by factors such as economic needs, political violence, sickness and death, educational opportunities, achieving gender balance, or personal preferences.

Child sharing also exists within the United States, but is generally ignored or devalued. Child sharing based on the values of nurturing and interdependence can be found in Native American relationships of sponsorship and grandparent-fostering. Among native Hawaiians, child sharing is culturally recognized through the *hanai* extended family and fos-

29. Ellen J. Pader, *Spatiality and Social Change: Domestic Space Use in Mexico and the United States*, 20 AM. ETHNOLOGIST 114, 126 (1993) (citations omitted).

30. Among the Chagga of Tanzania, for example, the grandmother has the right to ask for a grandchild to raise so that she is never alone without children. Sally Falk Moore, *Old Age in a Life-Term Social Arena: Some Chagga of Kili-manjaro in 1974*, in LIFE'S CAREER - AGING: CULTURAL VARIATIONS ON GROWING OLD 23, 24 (Barbara G. Myerhoff & Andrei Simic eds., 1978).

tering.³¹ Godparenthood is also practiced in the United States among people who continue to maintain their traditions brought from Latin America and Europe.

The best documented example of child sharing can be found among African-American families, in which people share parental responsibilities as a network of kin in a community. One scholar noted the mutuality in socializing children to become dependable members of the black community. As one woman explained:

I was raised in a Christian neighborhood. . . . They looked after each other. You know, like if someone was sick in the neighborhood, they didn't have to send out nowhere for people to come in and take care of them. The people in the neighborhood would take care of them. They would iron, cook, do everything. . . . Folk would just come in and take hold.³²

People are also cared for through temporary fosterage or child-keeping, and rights in children are distributed over a network of people who are entitled to assume parental roles.³³ Those who live up to their obligations are called kin.³⁴

V. A BROADER VIEW OF FAMILY AND COMMUNITY

Many of the problems that people face in the United States today are the consequences of cultural definitions of family that ignore the traditional kinship functions of sharing, cooperation, nurturing, and mutual support, while asserting the values of biology, independence, and control. The core values of American kinship are not unique to American society, for they are found elsewhere in the world, nor are they detrimental in themselves. However, these values have gained such ascendancy in contemporary culture as to ad-

31. For example, Queen Lili'u Kamaka'eha Ka'alianalii Neweweli'i did not give birth to any children, but "she embraced, as her own" three *hanai* children — Lydia Kaonohiponiponiokalani Aholo, Kaiponohea Aea, and John Dominis 'Aimoku. She herself was a *hanai* child as well. B.K. Dawson, *Liliuokalani's Legacy Lives On*, HONOLULU ADVERTISER, Sept. 1, 1995.

32. Suzanne Carothers, *Catching Sense: Learning from Our Mothers to be Black and Female*, in UNCERTAIN TERMS: NEGOTIATING GENDER IN AMERICAN CULTURE 232, 240 (Faye Ginsburg & Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing eds., 1990).

33. CAROLE STACK, ALL OUR KIN 27-30 (1974).

34. *Id.*

versely affect the ability of familial institutions to carry out their traditional functions of support and socialization.

Moreover, this cultural bias is reinforced by government policies and a legal system that consistently apply the values of biology, independence, and exclusive control while downplaying the values of cooperation, sharing, nurturing, and collective responsibility. This bias can be seen in the public policy and judicial decisions regarding the placement of children in foster homes or institutions, administration of benefits and services for children and families, disputes over child custody, adoption, surrogacy contracts, egg and sperm donation, kidnapping, child abuse and neglect, child care services, and grandparents' rights. We appear to be caught in a world view that pits individuals against one another while ignoring the fact that we are all in this together.

The task of the anthropologist is not to argue for specific legal remedies, such as advocating one type of child custody. Rather, the anthropologist's goal is to illuminate the cultural assumptions implicit in the framework of legal debate, so that the issues can be more clearly addressed and better evaluated. As Martha Fineman has observed, "legal regulation is grounded on societal beliefs and expectations that continue to reflect unexamined gendered politics, policies, and practices," and we hold on to these beliefs and ideologies with great tenacity.³⁵ But laws and government regulations, like all other cultural constructions, are based on human beliefs, values, and ideologies that change over time. We can examine the current cultural assumptions underlying these issues and reflect on the ways that other societies have addressed similar issues in order to develop alternatives that benefit children, parents, and communities.

For example, if we are going to continue talking about "rights in children," then we should examine what this means. In the dominant kinship system of the United States, rights over children are based on biological connections symbolized by blood. Fathering has meant begetting, whereas mothering has meant giving birth and nurturing, both of which are devalued. Rothman, Jagger, and Glenn have argued for a new definition of both fathering and mothering as a social relationship in which one individual nurtures and

35. MARTHA ALBERTSON FINEMAN, *THE NEUTERED MOTHER, THE SEXUAL FAMILY AND OTHER TWENTIETH CENTURY TRAGEDIES* 6 (1995).

cares for another.³⁶ This definition restores nurturance to a central position in defining kinship.

LeMasters and DeFrain have pointed out that raising a child is too great a responsibility for only one or two people to bear, and it is healthier for a child to have contact with a wide circle of people. By now most people have heard the African proverb that it takes a village to raise a child. As the anthropologist Margaret Mead argued decades ago, we need to restructure our communities so that people take responsibility for each other,³⁷ whether children, adults, or elders. Then each person becomes the concern of all.

Cross-cultural comparison can enhance our awareness of the complexity of human families and extend our concept of the social resources available for caregiving and parenting. Resources such as godparent ties, child sharing, and "skinship" grow out of a sense that as each person is nurtured the community is nourished as well. If Americans could begin to accept children in terms of a shared framework for nurturance, then the legal system could be used to devise solutions that accommodate a wider community, making it possible to satisfy more of the participants, and to create a stable and supportive network of kin commensurate with the needs of growing children. The alternative to independence is not dependence, but interdependence.³⁸ That means recognizing that we need each other both in order to survive and for the future of our children.

36. Evelyn Nakano Glenn, *Social Constructions of Mothering*, in *MOTHERING: IDEOLOGY, EXPERIENCE, AND AGENCY* 1, 3 (Evelyn Nakano Glenn et al. eds., 1994).

37. E.E. LeMasters & John D. DeFrain, *Folk Beliefs About Parenthood*, in *FAMILY IN TRANSITION: RETHINKING MARRIAGE, SEXUALITY, CHILD REARING, AND FAMILY ORGANIZATION* 266 (Arlene S. Skolnick & Jerome H. Skolnick eds., 1989).

38. In her discussion of gender roles in Hopi society, Schlegel uses the term "interdependence" to describe complementary relationships based on sharing and nurturing. Alice Schlegel, *Male and Female in Hopi Thought and Action*, in *SEXUAL STRATIFICATION: A CROSS-CULTURAL VIEW* 245 (Alice Schlegel ed., 1977).