

College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University

DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU

Sociology Faculty Publications

Sociology

2018

Kinship

Ellen Block

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, eblock@csbsju.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/sociology_pubs



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Block, E. (2018). "Kinship." In Marc H. Bornstein (Ed.), *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Lifespan Human Development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 1234-1236

Copyright © 2018 SAGE Publications. Reprinted by permission of SAGE Publications.

Block, E. (2018). "Kinship." In Marc H. Bornstein (Ed.), *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Lifespan Human Development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 1234-1236.

Kinship

Kinship is a term used broadly in the social sciences, particularly in anthropology, to mean the web of social relations that make up families. It is a useful framework for thinking about changes over the lifespan because people's roles within their families and social networks change as they age and as the social and political economic contexts in which they live shift. There are three main concepts that help to explain the importance of kinship across the lifespan: kinship is created through practice, kinship is processual, and kinship is inherently flexible. This entry will provide a brief history of kinship studies, then it will explore each of these three concepts, explain how they are relevant to understanding the lifespan perspective, and provide illustrative examples.

History of the study of kinship

In the first half of the 20th century, kinship studies focused on documenting and categorizing biological and genealogical relationships between people, which led to fruitful cross-cultural comparisons of the different ways people organize their social, political and economic lives. However, in the 1970s and 1980s, the concept of kinship underwent a period of upheaval where a number of scholars questioned its usefulness as an area of inquiry. They argued that kinship overly emphasized biological notions of descent that stemmed from Western logics. Furthermore, most early studies attempted to construct grand theories of kinship that described the roles and responsibilities of kin members of different ages and stages, but did not, in fact, reflect the diverse realities of people's everyday lives.

Contemporary approaches to kinship – also called relatedness – rely on people’s own understandings of their kinship relationships instead of emphasizing idealized notions of family structures and roles. While biology is still important to contemporary understandings of kinship, it is subject to cultural interpretation and is not the only pathway to kinship. This broadened approach allows for new ways of thinking about relatedness, which is more inclusive of a variety of kin relations and is based on people’s own experiences of their social realities.

Kinship as practice

Kinship relations are created and maintained through practice, which varies widely across cultures. While people’s own explanations of what makes family are often posited as “natural”, they are, in fact, cultural. For example, some cultures trace their lineages only through the father’s or mother’s line (patrilineal versus matrilineal descent), while some – like most families in the United States – view themselves as equally related to their mothers’ and fathers’ families (bilateral descent). While these different ways of thinking about families are seen as natural and self-evident from within groups, they are established and maintained through cultural practices that include household makeup, inheritance, ancestor worship, naming practices, marriage rules, and caregiving obligations.

A demographic perspective is particularly important to understanding kinship across the lifespan. As people move through the age strata, their roles within their kin groups shift. One of the practices that has the greatest impact on shaping kinship is procreation. Even before birth, some aspects of babies’ kinship are predetermined: their families have ideas about who they are related to and how, who is expected to care for them, and sometimes even who they will be expected to marry when they grow up. For example, in some societies, babies born outside of a recognized parental union (such as marriage) will not be seen as related to the father’s kin,

whereas in other societies, the marital status of the biological parents will not impact the kinship of the child. Yet, even as these familial relations are often set, a children's feelings of relatedness are largely shaped through practice – who performs the daily acts of caring, washing, feeding, and comforting a child? With whom does the child live? In addition, various adoption and child fostering practices, assisted reproductive technologies, and a rise in the acceptance of alternative family forms have changed the role that biology plays in childrearing.

Another one of the key practices that shape kinship is marriage. At the time of marriage, men's and women's kinship networks shift in different ways. Cultural practices and individual preferences determine various aspects of life including: how a marriage partner is chosen, to whom a person is allowed to marry, what the newly married couple is called, where they live, what kinds of goods are exchanged at the time of marriage (if any), who is responsible for what kinds of labor (both inside and outside of the household), what legal rights and duties the couple has, and how the dissolution of the marriage impacts both partners. Furthermore, marriage and fertility rates have declined globally, and kinship ideals and practices change in accordance with these broader demographic shifts as well as changing ideas about gender.

Since the study of kinship has focused more on reproduction and procreation, and as people are living longer, we know less about how kinship changes in later life. As adults age, their roles within the family shift in multiple and varied ways, and this largely has to do with the perceived value of the elderly as well as the way in which their care is structured. Elderly people (and even ancestors) are viewed differently across cultures. In some cultures, elderly people are cared for in nursing homes once they can no longer care for themselves. In other cultures, where familial care of the elderly is expected, elders are largely cared for by family members, usually women. In other contexts still, the elderly are expected to provide child care, particularly in

contexts with high rates of labor migration or the disruption of parental care because of disease or dislocation. Undoubtedly, the aging process alters a person's role within their kinship network, changing their social and economic position within the family. Yet, as with other stages of the lifespan, the context in which ones lives largely determines the practices that will shape the experience of aging across communities and cultures.

Kinship as process

Essential to understanding the role of kinship over the lifespan is the idea that kinship is processual. In other words, people do not always transition from one stage of life to another at a discrete moment in time. Rather, people's relationships to others are shaped over time. For example, in many southern African cultures, marital status is not achieved at a precise moment in time, but is solidified over time through the exchange of gifts and through the birth of children. Among certain groups in Malaysia, kinship is accrued through shared food and other substances such as blood and breastmilk. Viewing kinship as processual moves away from the idea of the lifespan being divisible into discrete time periods (such as childhood, adolescence, parenthood, old age, etc), and instead emphasizes the importance of practice in shaping kin relations over time.

Kinship as flexible

Finally, it is essential to recognize that kinship is inherently flexible. Kinship beliefs and practices adapt to both familial and societal changes. For example, kin relations are impacted by laws, war, disease, forced migration, increased urbanization, natural disasters, and political upheaval. In these circumstances, kinship practices must be flexible in order to adapt to difficult situations that disrupt familial bonds.

However, not all changes in kinship are brought about by catastrophe. The varying ways that people create their families is important to understanding how the flexibility of kinship can impact people at different stages of the lifespan. One obvious example are the various ways that people bring children into their families that challenge previously held notions about what makes someone kin. LGBT couples, for example, may bring children into their lives in a variety of ways, some of which are impacted by the availability and viability of reproductive technologies, and some of which are dictated by laws that recognize (or deny) gay marriage, that allow a non-biological same-sex parent to adopt their partner's child, or that allow same-sex couples to adopt a child that is not biologically related to either parent. In contexts where biological children and legal forms of marriage are highly valued, however, the forms of kinship that emerge through other processes and practices are potentially subject to different (and often fewer) forms of protection. In these contexts, having access to the full legal rights of marriage is particularly important because it is the main way that kinship is recognized.

Assisted reproductive technologies further complicate this picture as parents choose from a variety of ever-changing possibilities. For example, a lesbian couple who chooses to use implantation or in-vitro fertilization (IVF) will have to decide which member of the couple will carry the child, who the sperm donor will be (a known or unknown male), and what role the sperm donor will have in the child's life. Infertility also raises questions around the role of biology in creating families, and this is further impacted by the context in which one lives. For example, while infertility clinics abound in the Middle East where procreation is an essential part of marriage and adulthood, different religious doctrines for Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims determine whether or not a couple can pursue third-party gamete donation. While it is, of course, impossible to provide a comprehensive account of all the different ways kinship flexibility

impacts the lifespan at various stages, the inherent flexibility in kinship makes it both able to respond to changes in society, and renders kin relations negotiable and subject to reinterpretation and change.

Ellen Block

See also Family Life-Cycle; Culture; Marriage; Aging; Parenting; Assisted Reproductive Technologies; Parenting by Lesbians and Gay Men/Outcomes for Children and Youth;

Further Readings

Carsten, J. (2000). *Cultures of relatedness: New approaches to the study of kinship*. Cambridge University Press.

Collier, J. F., & Yanagisako, S. J. (1987). *Gender and kinship: Essays toward a unified analysis*. Stanford University Press.

McKinnon, S. (2001). *Relative values: reconfiguring kinship studies*. Duke University Press.

McKinnon, S., Cannell, F., Bear, L., Bodenhorn, B., Carsten, J., & Feeley-Harnik, G. (2013). *Vital relations*. SAR Press.

Sahlins, M. (2013). *What kinship is-and is not*. University of Chicago Press.

Stone, L. (Ed.). (2002). *New directions in anthropological kinship*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.