

## LEARNING KIN TERMS: A SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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The first observation on the topic of how children learn kin terms from a social anthropological perspective must be that not very much work has been done on it, despite the emergence of a corpus of work on the anthropology of children in the last half-century or so. This may be because of a general rejection within the profession of an early attempt at explanation, that of the Polish-British anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski in the 1920s. His explanation was bound up with the different but related theory of extensionism, which, by contrast, is far from dead. In order to understand his explanation, it is necessary to go into what is meant by extensionism in some detail.

This states, essentially, that where primary kin one genealogical step away from ego share terms with relatives more than one step away, the nearer designation is the 'focal' one, other specifications of the term being 'extensions' of it. Examples include the well-known terminological equations father = father's brother, mother = mother's sister, sibling = parallel cousin (i.e. mother's sister's children and father's brother's children) and child = same-sex sibling's child (i.e. a man's brother's child and a woman's sister's child). In the first two cases, father and mother are the focal specifications of their respective terms. This position also started with Malinowski, and it has been followed by anthropologists influenced by him, including Meyer Fortes, Harold Scheffler and his collaborator, the linguist Floyd Lounsbury and Warren Shapiro. As far as Malinowski himself is concerned it affects his psychological interests, which were never far away from his more social, or cultural, anthropology. That is, the stress in his explanation is more on how the individual agent cognizes such terminological relationships than on their social foundations. Extensionism itself has been opposed by structural-functionalists and especially structuralists, for which it is the entire category that one should focus on in conducting analyses: for example, one should take M and MZ together as a single category of the classification if they have the same terms. Anthropologists associated with this line of argumentation include Claude Lévi-Strauss, Rodney Needham,

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Louis Dumont and myself, as well as Edmund Leach, who tackled this question with explicit reference to Malinowski's own material (1958), being contradicted shortly afterwards by Floyd Lounsbury (1965). At root, this comes down to the difference between genealogy involving the stepwise calculation of relationships and the use of whole categories as an aspect of language use. Extensionist theory relies on the significance of genealogical thinking; structuralist, anti-extensionist positions on the primacy of category.

However, Malinowski took extensionism further and in *The sexual life of savages* (1929) claimed that children too relied on extensionism in learning kin terms. That is, they learned the terms for referents within the nuclear family first, starting with the mother (henceforward M; the primordial bond for Malinowski). They then learned to see mother's sister, in this example, as a kind of mother. In the Trobriand Islands, where Malinowski worked, mother's sister was always a presence for her nieces and nephews and almost a substitute mother for them, hence an intimate relative both sociologically and terminologically. This, for Malinowski, aided the child in seeing the association between mother and mother's sister within the Trobriand kinship terminology as plausible and therefore in adopting it (Malinowski in Young ed. 1979: 85ff.). However, he also admitted that there was what he called a 'different feeling-tone' (ibid.: 91) when the term was used for the mother's sister rather than the mother.

What his theory does not explain is what happens when the kinship terminology has a different pattern, as in English, where there is no terminological equation between parents and other kin types, and where there is instead an aunt category also including both mother's sister and father's sister and both mother's brother's wife and father's brother's wife. No doubt the two consanguineal aunts might be considered closer to ego than the two affinal ones. But regardless of affective closeness or remoteness, they all fall into the same category, with mother's sister and father's sister in particular being at an equal genealogical distance from ego: there is no extensionism in the terminology itself. Thus, the British infant is not likely to be able to learn the English classification in the same way as Malinowski suggests of its Trobriand counterpart. And in any case, among the Trobrianders too, what if ego has no actual mother's sister? Also, do children really learn kin terms in a set order, starting from the nuclear family and moving outwards? Or is the order more random, depending on when particular relatives come into their lives? More generally, the usual objection is that what children learn is a pre-existing, culturally determined classification. They are not making it up each time: that is, it is not the case that each child creates or constructs the classification through the psychological or cognitive procedure that allegedly leads to the making of these

extensions. Malinowski's explanation is often taken as suggesting this, probably unfairly, but more recently Warren Shapiro has suggested it quite explicitly (e.g. 2013), and Lounsbury (1965) certainly hinted at it. The most we can say is that this is how the child may learn a classification that existed before he or she was born. There is also a link between extensionist theory and a further doctrine of Malinowski's, namely the primacy of the nuclear family as the site not only of care, but also of socialization. This is another theory that is not borne out by worldwide ethnography, where extended, joint, stem or matrilineal families may be more significant.

At the present day, however, it is probably more important to consider the possible contribution of evolutionary psychology here. Some years ago, Barry Hewlett pointed out that there was little interest in kinship in such approaches, compared with, say, the genesis and transmission of religious ideas or of group and network formation (2001: 103). One problem with this experimental approach is that, while it may be possible to show humans grouping and regrouping concepts into categories in isolation from any collectivity in laboratory or other experimental conditions, there is no proof that those subjects are not acting on the basis of preconceived ideas derived from their own collective life and prior socialization into it (cf. also Parkin 2009). In fact, learning by children is a matter of trial and error, of making mistakes and being corrected by adults, of having what seems to be a natural gift for the free association of ideas curbed and redirected by adults into the socially 'proper' way of doing things. All children can do is learn a pre-existing classification, rooted in the respective speech community, and partly or wholly under the influence of their parents or other authority figures.

Ultimately, therefore, for the anthropologist the actual family situation provides a better environment than a lab for such studies, one in which certain basic predictions can be made, such as the fact that, assuming regular cognitive development, the infant will learn the existing classification eventually, however many fits and starts there have to be first. And we can also predict something about how children are taught kin terms and categories by, for example, being informed that a certain visitor is their cousin, or being told to thank Auntie for her present. We should also acknowledge that they may have terms of their own: for example, in Berlin playgrounds, German *keule*, literally 'club', but also 'mate', is reported as being used for elder brother (Thomas Zitelmann, personal communication), despite being feminine in grammatical gender.

However, I acknowledge that the researcher interested in these questions will want more than that. For example, the cognitive psychologist presumably wants to know how, and at

what developmental stage, the infant learns first, to draw distinctions consistently and correctly, and secondly, learns their significance, as well as how these two steps are related and, perhaps, the order in which different categories emerge in the infant's consciousness as either fully formed or merely tentative. One question must be, therefore, how these developments match, or are a reflection of, the infant's cognitive development generally. However, for the social anthropologist there is another issue here, namely differences between both world cultures and families within them in how and when the family's influence as a collectivity makes itself felt.

For example, does a time come when the infant is expected to know, or has to be taught, who its relatives are, or is it left more or less to its own devices, except when it asks a question about relationships or makes a mistake? Also, what part does schooling play in this, given especially differences in educational philosophies and practices globally, not to mention in the availability of modern schooling. In short, there is clearly variation in how different societies perceive and deal with this problem. Nonetheless, while long-term fieldwork with a single family not one's own is probably unfeasible because of the number of years the process typically takes, as I have just suggested, the family situation does approximate to a 'natural' controlled environment in which certain things can be predicted.

At this point, I return to a point touched on earlier, namely the very different patterns of kinship terminology one finds around the world in unpredictable distributions. Thus at the minimum we have various forms of prescriptive system, sometimes called Dravidian and Kachin, which are associated with cross-cousin marriage. These are the only forms that very obviously reflect the operation of specific social rules, here rules about whom one should and should not marry. There are also so-called Crow-Omaha systems, which exhibit some form of lineal unity, respectively matrilineal and patrilineal, through equations linking referents in different generations down one or more matrilineal or patrilineal parallel to one's own. As a result, we get equations like mother = mother's brother's daughter (Omaha; not mother = daughter, NB) and father = father's sister's son (Crow; not father = son, NB). There are also terminologies that give a separate term to every kin type within a certain genealogical range from ego, sometimes called Sudanese. Conversely terminologies called Hawaiian or generational give the same term to all kin in a particular generation. Then there are systems like English, which isolate primary kin but unite second-order kin like parents' siblings and siblings' children on both sides of the family and have one umbrella term for one class of remoter kin, namely cousin, in all generations. Malinowski's explanation might suit the first and second of these, as they may well equate each parent with his or her same-sex sibling,

though do not always do so by any means. But this does not apply to the other cases, where such equations are lacking by definition. Malinowski's theory therefore cannot be a universal theory, and even in its own terms problems have been identified with it and objections raised to it. Finally here, what happens when, as on Yap and Chuuk, studied by David Schneider and David Labby, and by Ward Goodenough respectively, kin terms, though they exist, are rarely used in either address or reference?

One early anthropologist with an interest in children and their upbringing, at the instance of her supervisor, Franz Boas, was Margaret Mead. She wrote one book on the Omaha of North America (1932), indicating that children are not taught the kinship terminology as a system, but merely corrected for each use; also that grandparents often take on this role. More famously, she worked in Papua New Guinea, where she reported (1963 [1930]: 77) that 'Children use no kinship terms among themselves and are not conscious of exact relationships'. Moreover, they tend to ignore adults' attempts to explain terms to them and focus more on individual identities than relationships, not like adults – a comparison that is perhaps not totally clear but that recalls a point of Piaget's. Mead says, 'The first consciousness of relationships outside the household group comes with the recognition of some common avoidance' (ibid.). In her example of this process, one event, the moving into the village of a sister's husband whom they must avoid, forced a group of children to reassess their relationships and learn the adult system.

This suggests that learning to use a kin term properly is associated with the behaviour expected in relation to it. In another passage, from *The Basuto* by E.H. Ashton (1952: 43), we are told that children often use a wrong term for, for example, their mother if they hear a different term being used by another individual who is related differently to her. This either leads to spasmodic attempts at correction or to ignoring the error until the child corrects it itself. The child may also be applauded or mocked for the correct or incorrect use of kin terms.

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