

hosted@

<a href="#">Click Here To FIND</a>	<a href="#">Birth Records</a>	<a href="#">Obituaries</a>	<a href="#">Living Relatives</a>
	<a href="#">Death Records</a>	<a href="#">Cemetery Listings</a>	<a href="#">Surname Histories</a>
	<a href="#">Marriage Records</a>	<a href="#">Military Records</a>	<a href="#">And Much More!</a>
			<input type="button" value="Search"/>

Kinship, Marriage & the Family

## Kinship as Social Structure

*Saviour Formosa*

[Introduction](#)

[Theory](#)

[Description, role-sets and multiple roles](#)

[Conclusion](#)

[Bibliography](#)

## Kinship as Social Structure

### Introduction

I shall begin this paper with a confession in the sense that in order for a sociology student to write a paper that is anthropological s/he still needs to go back to his theoretical roots that rank more towards the structures that we have been immersed in. Such theorists as Radcliffe-Brown, Gellmer, Fox and Rivers give us an interesting view of the icing on the cake that we have been given reason to admire and hope for a piece in the near future. The anthropology writers have a cake of their own, in their own perspective, and sociology writers as I shall later mention may altogether acknowledge each others` writeups, but it all pertains to the student to listen, read and compare. An anthropology course helps to make us understand where most of our sociologically-conditioned structures came from. Robert K. Merton mentions social structures, but it must be the antropologists who inform us where most structures originate and which are basic for human survival.

I envisage a world where there are modern societies with primitive structures. This seems to be part of present realities with its tensions and contradictions, but take contemporary philosophical debates on planar or alternate world possibilities; where a primitive society moved through its developing stage without the need to go through phases such as described by modernisation theory or dependancy theory. Imagine a primitive society where instead of moving through what Adam Kuper called a "form of society based on territorial units, the family and eventually, the state" (Kuper 1988, pg 231), it remained on the basis of gift exchange but advanced to the stage of high technology. This is relational to a hippie age, but one can still live in a forest with the merits of technology at your fingertips. Structures such as kinship may have remained the same or changed through time, but the old structures still exist. Today this may be possible to examine and study, even take part in. Modern inventions in computer programmes have come up with a system called virtual reality where an anthropologist can not only view a society through whatever techniques he uses, but also take part in it and live in it. Such high end programmes are still a little way off, but types and ties of kinship can be examined, altered to see the results, and experiments be conducted. Those people may not be alive or real, but they are there and as a sociology student, I would definitely delve into it. Antropologists should be the first to to make such a move. Why not move into our private worlds without disturbing the last few indigenous people or the new cultures we are examining? There is enough data on modern social groups and as more is made available, it is easier for us to take a part in. These computer programmes may alter the methodology of modern research techniques but it is vitally important to be aware of new opportunities that will help the two disciplines to contribute to each others` existence.

### Theory

Back to theory and structures, I would first attempt to jot down a few points that have been picked up in my course of study, starting from definitions. Social Structure is defined as any recurring pattern of social behaviour; trivial as well as significant behaviour. It can also be said to be the enduring, orderly and patterned relationships between elements of a society. Here we hit our first snag as disagreement exists as to what is meant to be an 'element'.

A.R. Radcliffe-Brown thought of social structures as relationships of a general and regular kind between people, while

S.F. Nadel suggested roles as being the elements. Other theorists, propose institutions (ie: organised patterns of behaviour) as elements of social structure. Social institutions are necessary because they are functional prerequisites for a unit (from family to society) to keep itself in a constant state of flux.

Positivism interprets human action as caused by social structures of various kinds. Hermeneutics, in turn a general critique of positivism, is the theory and method of interpreting meaningful human action, and thrives in understanding human action in relation to some wider whole which gives it meaning. Thus the social structure as a whole can be said to give meaning to the individual action of its components.

When one analyses Kinship structure, in Gellmer's notes one finds that kinship structure theory is an important and well developed part of social anthropology. He says that "kinship structure is an aspect of society which is more tangible and stateable with accuracy than most theories. Kinship lends itself to comparison between societies" (Gellmer, 1987, pg 155). What are the components of kinship structure? Gellmer again states that there are two *senses* of kinship structure, the first of which is the specification of how a particular sub-class of biologically possible matings is selected. It means that there is a particular specification of how matings are ritualised, which lead to particular lineages and marriage practice. Take as an example descent in the Bantu tribes of Central Africa. Descent and mating practices trace back to an original ancestress or ancestresses known as 'mothers' of the lineage or clan and also in some cases from the brothers of these founding ancestresses. The Mayombe-Kongo group is a group of Western Congo peoples which practice matrilineal descent, succession and inheritance and give high marriage payments with the right of immediate removal of the bride. The system appears to be matrilineal but has a patrilocal expression. The husband takes the wife off to his village which indicates a patrilocal style of living. This he can do after having paid an immediate high marriage payment. But, what again compounds the matrilineage of it all is when the mother's children return to her brother's village at puberty. The children are then brought up by the brother until they in turn can marry themselves off repeating the same cycle (Radcliffe-Brown A.R.-Daryll Forde 1958).

These examples do conform to Gellmer's notion of structure in a particular society. He states that "where a society consists of people, male and female, any pair of whom can mate as far as biology is concerned" (Gellmer 1987 pg155), he is indicating that in actual fact, matings are not random in any society. This statement directly corresponds to the above-mentioned tribes' practices. They can mate as far as biology is concerned, but have to keep themselves to notions of matrilineage, patrilocality, and so on.

Gellmer's second sense of kinship structure is the correlation of social roles with kinship roles defined within the first sense of the term. These may not be logically entailed by biologically-defined relationships. Kinship structure in a sense specifies which roles, with what rigidity and to what extent, are so to speak functions of the biological kinship position of the agent (Gellmer, 1987, pg 155). This position of a person vis-a-vis his role in society is very much found in both anthropologists and sociologists and was studied in detail by Merton in modern structures. As a comparative study of a correlation between social roles and kinship roles, one can make a comparison between Gellmer's statement and that of Merton as regards role-sets and multiple roles. Every structure has its rights and with rights come obligations. It is here that one sees the validity of any writings on the wall of primitive societies. Merton refers to Ralph Linton who related the concept of the social role to the behaviour of status occupants with a pattern of orientation towards the patterned expectations of others. The latter accord the rights and exact the obligations. Linton also states that each person in society inevitably occupies multiple statuses, each status having associated roles (Merton Robert, 1968). Compare this to kinship and role between kin and a parallel is evident

Rivers, in his description of Melanesian society, helps us common mortals to understand how the nomenclature that these societies have, came to exist. With it he indicates the roles and terms. He says that in most cases in Melanesian society, a wife's sister is otherwise denoted by a term used for a sister, but the roles therein invested are still different. These denotations are only used for people of the same sex, but commonality of use of names does not have the same obligations. Each kinship relationship has its own psychological factors and connotations. Such psychological factors play a very important part in kinship nomenclature. Rivers states that "such psychological factors as come into action are only intermediate links in a chain of causation in which the two ends are definitely social processes or events or perhaps more correctly, psychological concomitants of intermediate links which are themselves social events" (Rivers 1968, pg77). Here psychology lends a hand to a statement which I wordprocessed earlier about the importance of the two disciplines of anthropology and sociology being in parallel motion towards *man watching*, so Desmond Morris found pleasure to utter. This helps sociology to run alongside anthropology as is indicated when Rivers says that "we should be shutting our eyes to obvious features of these Melanesian customs if we refused to recognize that the terminology of relationship here reflects sociology (Rivers, 1968, pg77). A toast for him.

### Description, role-sets and multiple roles

Going back to the description of structures, kinship has its own status and what Morgan called 'descriptive system'. Description varies with persons and with time. Roles vary too and when a particular person doesn't fit the norm, as the *inwerderde* (father's sister) in the Melanesian article, use of a descriptive term suggests a recent process to denote a relative who had previously lacked any special designation.

Each position in society or kinship, (status, as described by Merton), has not a single role, but an array of roles. The structure provided for by society, gives rise to the concept of the role-set: ie, the complement of social relationships, in which persons are involved simply because they occupy a particular social status. Rivers says that 'descriptive' is an inappropriate name for our own system, and it is necessary to find another. One can take Merton's role-sets then, which

moves a little bit forwards from what Rivers boldly recognizes that from a single person one should move to society and realize that there is a direct dependance of characters on an institution of the family. Rivers speaks of this system as the family (Rivers, 1968, pg 85). A person`s role-set in a family is relative to his kinship structure in that he has to say, do and act in direct relation to others in that social framework.

This concept differs from multiple roles which are a complex of statuses, as is a husband, manager, father, etc. The concept of role-set, on the other hand, is registered to the same role ie: being a teacher, relating to the correlative role of a student, but also to fellow wise men, medicine man, etc. Thus, each role in a system of multiple roles has its specific role-set. This can be described as Merton himself called it 'the notion of the role set at once leads to the inference that social structures confront man with the task of articulating the components of countless role sets.

Man has to organise the complexity of the role sets into an appreciable degree of stability. He has to have means to equilibrium, a term that Merton uses a lot. In fact he is called functionalist, due to the very fact that ultimately he speaks of equilibrium". On the other hand, I have my doubts about the excessive use of these concepts as regards equilibrium. Primitive societies were not as complex as those of today, but they still survived and we did the great mistake of civilizing them. They had very good structures with good inheritance rules, rules of naming and comparisons between what one got or what one had. We needed to go and modernise them. Holy Moses, is this for real, we study them yes, but civilize them, I have my doubts. How right were the Chinese to call us barbarians when we reached their domains! We went and created roles for positions in societies and worst of all we defined them for our private classifications. Once somebody defines he is limiting himself and those around him, but worst of all he is limiting the item under description itself. This is downright ridiculous. This again may be a criticism of Merton, which is also why I introduced him in this article and included sizable chunks of his theories and writings as comparison.

Merton states that monograms exist that show the workings of diverse type of formal organisations which have developed empirically-based theoretical extensions of how role-sets operate in practice. These could be compared and analysed through kinship-structures and their relationships. Kinship theory makes sense even more so when it is compared to demographics as Gellmer is stating. He said that in order to study all these societies, it is necessary to study demographics, by way of "stating that all names of a certain structure are equivalent to one kinship term in a particular society`s language" (Gellmer, 1987, pg 161).

Within this social structure, the emerging problem is, which social mechanisms dictate the norms of lineages and reduce conflicts among norms. One needs to identify the social arrangements which integrate as well as oppose the expectations of various members of the role-set.

Conflict appears ( which is the same as conflict in Spencer, Marx, Parson, Simmel and Sorokin), where the members are liable to hold different social positions differing from the status occupant in question. This leads to the extent that members of the role-set are diversely located in the social structure and are apt to have interests and sentiments, values and moral expectations, differing from the status occupant himself. What about the biological father`s feelings in the mother`s brother society? When considering the Bantu people of Central Africa, A. I. Richards, noted that the tribes there are mainly matrilineal as they practice a form of matrilocal marriage. There is a very remarkable degree of uniformity between the different tribes which practice this system in that they adhere to the mother`s rather than the father`s line. They also stress their communities` initiatives and interests towards the mother`s relatives. Blood is believed to pass through the female`s line rather than that of the male and even in sexual and pregnancy roles the male is there only for the quickening of the fetus in the woman which was already formed there. The child goes to the mother`s brother arms after being weaned and the biological father loses rights. His status is changed forever and has to look at his sister for her children to bring them up.

The participants in such systems are described in structural terms of locating the people in their interconnected social status. The factors adhering to each social status provides a framework for selective perceptions and judgements in relatively unstructured organisations which in turn come into action in time to cater for a new structured status and exchange of gifts and relationships, between the different members of the different family structures.

Kinship structures are not without powers of learned adaptations, successively transmitted through changed cultural mandates. This helps to mitigate the frequency and intensity of conflict in the society. For an individual caught in a stressful situation, the members of the kinship-structure can help in their particular evolved standards of priority over decision making to solve the stress.

Social mechanisms for reducing such conflicts can also be considered in terms of status sequences, that is, the succession of statuses through which an appreciable proportion of people pass through. These are achieved statuses (Linton) and ascribed statuses. Thus status sets are not combined at random but have to pass through from one status to the next. Passage of rites is such an example.

Kinship-structure needs also the effect of functions that help it to persist per se. These functions are prerequisites (preconditions) of the society. For these functions to persist, social and cultural norms are indispensable. The structures engage with a theory of function analysis: "just as the same item may have multiple functions, so may the same function be diversely fulfilled by alternative items" (Merton,1968). Functional needs in this sense are taken to be adaptive rather than determinant of specific social structures, limited only by the concept of structural consent.

If one takes the concept of functional equivalents and functional substitutes in contrast to the indispensable cultural

forms, there has to be prudence in stating that one set of functions cannot be substituted by other factors. This type of thought, is said to have been erroneously committed by Malinowski who said that in primitive societies, magic fulfills an indispensable function when a need cannot be satisfied by society.

Parsons on the other hand, reformulated this to the need of uncertain elements (such as Magic), which enter into the emotionality of pursuit goals, then at least functionally equivalent phenomena could be expected to appear. Forms of societal structures as kinship are also based on types of communication between the different elements of the same or different structures. Such an example is gift exchange, which is the combination of social with economic considerations and with the recognition of the value of the goods exchanged as an essential part of it, but equally important is the social relationship that the exchange creates.

Evans Pritchard, considers that material objects are the chains along which social relationships run. Gifts are one way of maintaining social relationships in all societies, and in small scale societies they are a particular important way of maintenance. This is the reason for bride-wealth and dowry. *'Give me your daughter for a wife and I will give you something back and status, to help enrich your own structure'*. One cannot change lineages but he can change relationships in such a structure, even if not totally eradicate them structurally. This reminds me of the Tunisian *suk* of the Medina in Sousse. One of the vendors told a friend of mine, in the Blues Brothers` film fashion- "How much for your wife". This is a remnant or a reflection of such exchanges. We must take this lighthearted approach but in a serious accountable manner in order to survive the data avalanche that is coming our way.

## Conclusion

In his introduction to the book "Kinship and Marriage", Robin Fox points at this when he says that the study of kinship as an aspect of social structure began with the lawyers and students of comparative jurisprudence. "This is why the study of kinship is replete with legal terminology and concepts; rights, obligations, *patria potestas*, contract, agnation, corporate, etc. The reasons for this are quite simple - inheritance, succession and marriage" (Fox 1967, pg16). Whatever way we look at things and situations, kinship plays a basic part in the upbringing of human individuals and nobody can negate that. Hsu says that kinship has a universal place in every human society and is not likely to be so irrelevant to social and cultural developments (Hsu 1971).

Whatever road we take to understand kinship as a social structure, it exists and very much so that we are bound to analyse it as it is. Anthropologists and sociologists have to continue its exposition and confirmation of existence and the ball will roll. Kinship ties between one member of a unit and another is relevant to any society and to humankind as a whole. Whatever the outcome, there is would still be a new area for exploration even if it means we move into the realm of virtual reality to test our hypothesis.

---

## Bibliography

- Abercrombie N., Hill S., Turner B. S., Dictionary of \_\_\_\_ Sociology, Richard Clay Ltd., Suffolk, 1988
- Davis J. - People of the Mediterranean - 1977 - Routledge & \_\_\_\_ Kegan Paul Ltd - ISBN 0 7100 8412 9
- Evans-Pritchard E.E. - The position of Women in Primitive \_\_\_\_ Societies - 1965 - Faber & Faber
- Fox Robin - Kinship & Marriage - 1967 - Penguin
- Gellmer Ernest - The Concept of Kinship & other essays - 1973, \_\_\_\_ 1987 - Basil Blackwell Inc - ISBN 0-631-15287-3 Pbk
- Hsu Francis L.K. - Kinship & Culture - 1971 - Aldine \_\_\_\_ Publishing Co - ISBN- 202-01078-3
- Kuper Adam - The Invention of Primitive Society - 1988 - \_\_\_\_ Routledge - ISBN 0-415-00902-2
- Mauss Marcel - The Gift - 1970 - Cohen & West Ltd
- Merton Robert, Social Theory and Social Structure, Collier- \_\_\_\_ Macmillan Canada, Ltd., Toronto, Ontario, 1968 Edition
- Merton R.K., Nisbet R., Contemporary Social Problems, Harcourt \_\_\_\_ Brace Jovanovich, Inc. United States of America, 1976 \_\_\_\_ Edition
- Radcliffe-Brown and Darly Forde- African Systems of Kinship and \_\_\_\_ Marriage - 1958 - Oxford University Press
- Redfield Robert - The Primitive World and its Transformations - \_\_\_\_ 1953-1968 - Penguin/Peregrine
- Rivers W.H.R. - Kinship and Social Organization - 1968 - Robert \_\_\_\_ Cunningham and Sons Ltd - ISBN 485 19534 8