

**WHAT IS KINSHIP ALL ABOUT? AGAIN.
CRITIQUE OF *THE CAMBRIDGE HANDBOOK
OF KINSHIP*, EDITED BY SANDRA BAMFORD**

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***Abstract:** The world of anthropology has witnessed a recurring rhetorical title: “What Is Kinship All About?” and now this article titles itself “What is Kinship All About? Again.” Why? Whereas we have over a century’s worth of ethnography and theory focusing on the centrality of kinship in human society and in anthropological theory, in 2019 a Handbook is published that names itself “Kinship” but, despite its claim and to the contrary, it is not about kinship at all. The Handbook editor explicitly states that it is about “conceiving kinship,” with kinship reduced to gendered social relatedness. In response, we re-affirm the centrality of kinship as a domain universal in human societies by way of a critique of the Handbook and a comprehensive review of its contributing chapters. Countering the Handbook’s denialist — or in Harold Scheffler’s famous term, dismantling — position, we bring to the fore the already determined universal properties that define the boundaries of the kinship domain and the logical properties that universally define the category of kinship.*

Our editing of three special issues of the journal *Structure and Dynamics* (2013, 2016, 2019)¹ followed by initiating the publication of a new journal titled *Kinship* and published through eScholarship at the University of California, has made it evident, we hope, that kinship is alive and well and is a central aspect of human societies. Both ethnography and anthropological theory have shown that kinship encompasses a well bounded domain of social relations and is a universal category. Yet this handbook, published in 2019, suggests unawareness of developments in the field of kinship. While the title, *The Cambridge Handbook of Kinship*, indicates that the publication is about kinship, it is not. Worse, the editor, Sandra Bamford (2019) in her introductory chapter, “Conceiving kinship in the twenty-first century,” opines that the handbook is intended to be a “state-of-the-field survey” (p. 6) that addresses “the breadth that characterizes contemporary kinship studies” (p. 7). While this stated scope is what one would expect from a handbook, the difficulty here is that the reader is misled, by stated claims, into the labyrinth of a territory better labeled “gendered social relatedness.” The handbook is not about the study of kinship. Rather it purports, as the Handbook editor states, to “conceive” kinship.

More accurately, the Handbook reduces what it refers to as kinship to social relatedness, which is an orientation that developed in response to the issues raised by David Schneider (1984) in his book *A Critique of the Study of Kinship*. The authors of the handbook’s chapters agree with his assertion that kinship is a non-subject. Accordingly, the Handbook finds disjunction, and divergence, not continuity and elaboration, in kinship research as one goes from its beginnings in the latter part of the nineteenth century to the present. There is even an earlier beginning if we incorporate, as we should, the seminal work by the 14th century scholar, Ibn Khaldun (El Guindi 2020: 67-74).

Schneider’s writings become for the Handbook’s authors a pivotal point for a supposed transformation in kinship research whereby kinship relations considered initially to be a “reflection of nature” (Riggs and Peel 2016: 5) are now considered to be, as in this handbook, an “artifact of culture” (Riggs and Peel 2016: 5). A corollary of this presumed transformation is Sarah Franklin’s (2019: Chapter 5) assertion that it is the studies of gender (and personhood) by feminist theorists that provide the historical basis for challenging the presumption that kinship systems are based on a genealogically grounded system of kinship relations.

How kin terms relate to one another and to genealogical relations has typically been expressed in kinship publications through kinship diagrams that visually make evident the relationship of kin terms to genealogical relations. Diagrams are graphic conceptualizations and, as such, have been central to the study of kinship systems since the publication by Lewis Henry Morgan (1871) of his book, *Systems of Consanguinity & Affinity of the Human Family*. Morgan made use of diagrams to visually express the profound structural differences in terminologies worldwide that led to his distinction between descriptive terminologies – those that are consistent with a genealogical distinction between lineal and collateral genealogical relations – and classificatory terminologies – those that regularly violate this distinction and so have structural organization that is not based on genealogical relations derived from reproduction. However, the Handbook’s 740 pages and 29 chapters neither include kinship diagrams nor tables of kin terms for any soci-

ety, nor kinship diagrams illustrating the structural organization of kin terms and how that structure relates to the social organization of a society.

Strikingly, fundamental aspects of kinship are totally missing. Notably, “kin term” and “kinship terminology” do not even appear as entries in its index, as if these constructs are not relevant to coverage of kinship as a field of study. Nor does incest for that matter. Two core elements characterizing the domain of kinship are ignored. Accordingly, “the considerable body of theoretical and technical knowledge that has been accumulated in the anthropology of kinship over the past century” (Debaene 2013: 18) through countless ethnographic accounts and virtually an unlimited number of scholarly articles has been left out.

The Handbook authors make it explicit that their accounts of kinship systems are well-situated within the framework of post-Schneider thinking that sees kinship as being cultural in substance with “themes derived from a feminist agenda” (Vilaça 2007; 348). The handbook, then, has to be seen as a guide to how kinship is now being understood by only some anthropologists, which puts it closer to an ideological position than to scholarly coverage.

The handbook is divided into 6 sections, each (except one) with 5 chapters. The sections are: (1) Opening Frameworks, (2) The (Non) Biological Basis of Relatedness, (3) Reproducing Society: Gender, Birth, and Power, (4) Transnational Connections, (5) Technological Conceptions, and (6) Kinship and the Nation State. The section titles frame the way the study of kinship is now being envisaged as a culturally formulated system of relatedness established through performative action in which gender, birth and power are key structuring factors that transcend national boundaries and are said to play a crucial role in the nation-state. The underlying premise of the Handbook is that, pre-Schneider, kinship relations were assumed to be a reflection of nature and it is only post-Schneider that, allegedly, this invalid presumption has been removed and kinship is now understood correctly to be an artefact of culture.

To set the stage for this scenario, the first section of the Handbook includes a chapter by Carol Delaney (2019: Chapter 2) that provides a brief history of the study of kinship. Delaney takes the reader from Morgan (who is said to have assumed that groups having what he called classificatory terminologies “simply didn’t know the ‘facts of life’” [p. 41]), to Bronislaw Malinowski (presented as the inadvertent instigator of the Virgin Birth controversy [p. 42]) and then to Schneider, who “radically changed our thinking ... [by] [s]tressing that kinship is a cultural, rather than a natural, system” [p. 44]). The difficulty with this reduction of kinship research prior to Schneider to a “natural system” view of kinship is Schneider himself. Consider his repeated recognition throughout his book that the assumption of kinship being founded upon genealogical relations biological in nature has long been challenged and rejected in kinship research. Schneider points the reader to “the move in the last decades of the nineteenth and the early decades of the twentieth century to sharply separate social from physical kinship” and notes that “social kinship did not simply mirror physical kinship, and so the separation of social from physical kinship” (p. 190). What Schneider is referring to is the split between those scholars such as Edvard Westermarck, Bronislaw Malinowski and Sigmund Freud who considered that “kinship was directly determined by the physical or biological conditions of reproduction” (p. 190) as opposed to other scholars such as Emile Durkheim, Arnold van Gennep, Northcote Thomas and William H. R. Rivers for whom “kinship was a matter of social convention and not biological fact or fiction” (Schneider 1984: 107). If there is a nature/culture dichotomy in kinship research, it did not

originate with the writings of Schneider but, as Schneider makes evident, traces back to the earliest kinship scholars.

The first section ends with Chapter 6 in which Janet Carsten (2019) opines that “Kinship is a practical realm of action” (p. 146) and – here borrowing from Marshall Sahlins -- “kinship is a ‘mutuality of being’” (p. 143). It is hard to imagine, though, that anyone would disagree that “kinship is a practical realm of action,” but what Carsten seems to be saying is that kinship is *only* a “p[ra]ctical realm of action” and so when, for example, the Trobriander Islanders consider a man’s genealogical grandfather to be *tama* (translated as ‘father’) to that man because of the kind of foods the genealogical grandfather feeds to him, it is his action that makes him *tama* to that man despite his genealogical relationship to him (Montague 2021).

The problem with reducing kinship to performative action is that, on the one hand, the instantiation of the Trobriand kin term symbol *tama* and on the other hand, what makes *tama* a kin term symbol, are being confounded and treated as if they are one and the same thing. The performative action of feeding another man and thereby becoming *tama* to that man requires that *tama* be a kin term symbol already part of the cultural knowledge of Trobrianders prior to the action of feeding in order that the man doing the feeding is instantiated as having the *tama* relation to the man receiving the feeding. Instantiation, in the form of feeding in the Trobriand case, makes the donor *tama* to the recipient, but becoming *tama* presumes the kinship relation of *tama* that is being instantiated is already part of cultural knowledge. It does not arise through the performative action of feeding, yet the critical matter of understanding how kin term symbols are organized and become part of cultural knowledge is excised if kinship is reduced to performative action.

The meaning of a kin term symbol like *tama*, then, needs to be understood in two ways. One is through how it is culturally instantiated and thereby given substantive meaning. The other is its structural meaning arising from the generative logic through which a kinship terminology comes to consist of a conceptually and logically bounded set of kin terms that jointly form a consistent, comprehensive and computable system of kinship relations (see Read 2007). Numerous ethnographic accounts (see references in Read 2018) illustrate the way culture bearers compute kinship relations directly from kin terms viewed as cultural symbols without needing reference to genealogical relations.

The logic for so doing is part of the cultural knowledge that culture bearers gain through enculturation by virtue of being born into, and raised in, a community with a shared culture. When the computational logic underlying the kin term computations utilized by culture bearers is made explicit, it becomes evident that a kinship terminology inherently has the structural form of what is known mathematically as an abstract algebra (Read 1984). (The algebraic aspect of kinship terminologies has been recognized by the Russian Academy of Arts & Sciences through sponsoring a journal named *АЛГЕБРА РОДСТВА* (‘Kinship Algebra’), with Professor Vladimir Popov of St. Petersburg State University as Editor.)

The connection of kinship terminologies with abstract algebras enables the culturally grounded, generative logic that underlies the structural organization of a kinship terminology to be worked out algebraically. The means for constructing an algebraic model for a kinship terminology is discussed by the first author in Read (2012a) and applied to the classic, kinship terminology of the Kariera, an Aboriginal Indigenous group in western Australia (see Read 2012b).

Working out an algebraic model for the Kariera terminology expands our ethnographic understanding of Australian kinship terminology systems. The algebraic model for the Kariera terminology shows, for example, that what heretofore has been called a prescriptive marriage rule constraining marriage behavior is, instead, structurally necessary for the logical consistency of the Kariera kinship terminology (Read 2012b). In effect, without the marriage rule there would be no Kariera kinship terminology.

It is to be noted that Schneider makes explicit the centrality of cultural symbols and their conceptual organization through his proclamation about anthropology -- modified here so as to refer to kinship research as a subdomain of anthropology:

*The first task of [kinship research], **prerequisite to all others**, is to understand and formulate the [kin term] symbols and meanings and their configuration that a particular [kinship terminology] consists of.* (p. 196, expressions in square brackets replace original text; italics and emphasis are in the original)

Schneider, however, never provided such an account and reduction of kinship research to discussion of performative action cannot provide an account like this, yet such accounts have already been developed, using algebraic modeling, for a wide range of kinship terminologies (see Read 2016) as part of a large body of contemporary books and journal Special Issues dealing with kinship research today (e.g., Allen et al. 2008; Buchler and Selby 1968; Dzielb 2007; El Guindi and Read 2016; Feinberg and Ottenheimer 2001; Godelier 2011; Graburn 1971; Jones and Milicic 2011; Kronenfeld 2009; McConvell et al. 2013; Read and El Guindi 2011, 2019; Shapiro 2018; Trautmann and Whiteley 2012), none of which are referenced, let alone discussed, in this handbook.

Though the Handbook authors frame kinship research as if it is to be divided into pre- and post- Schneider, three of the Handbook chapters do include data running contrary to such a division. Ellen Lewin (2019: Chapter 11) reports that while gay and lesbian couples without children tend to form relationships with others who share similar sexual viewpoints, her interviews show that with the occurrence of children, biology reenters since lesbian couples with children find “biological relatives to offer the most reliable kinds of caring ... because of the ‘natural’ bonds that blood kin have for one another” (p. 267). Mary Weismantel and Mary Elena Wilhot (2019: Chapter 8) report on Andean kinship and refer to its early concern with “identities as socially constructed rather than biologically determined – a trend that began with Lévi-Strauss ...” (p. 183) and sees continuity in Andean kinship research rather than a pre- post- Schneiderian divide. These authors conclude that “kinship studies have much to learn from Andeanists and from Andean people” (p. 201). Lastly, James Leach (2019: Chapter 9) applies a distinction made by Marilyn Strathern between Mode 1 relations (“takes as given the entities that are related” [p. 213] and Mode 2 relations (“entities themselves are given form by the relation” [p. 213]) to the life-cycle rituals among the Reite on the Rai coast of Papua New Guinea and finds a “transformed relation between MB and M and F” (p. 223), thus genealogy (inadvertently?) reappears despite having been eschewed as a western imposition by the followers of Schneider.

Other than these exceptions, the handbook centers its subject around social relations in order to counter any claim that kinship is grounded in biology. This, of course, is ironic since Morgan, a century and a half ago, discounted genealogy/biology as the basis for the classificatory terminologies and turned to culturally determined marriage rules to account for them. Almost

a century ago, W. H. R. Rivers (1932) noted that in parts of Melanesia a man becomes a father culturally through paying the midwife of a woman's newborn child, hence "blood relationship is quite inadequate as a means of defining kinship" (p. 52). This implies a cultural account of kinship echoed in Chapter 23 on surrogacy by Elly Teman and Zsuzsa Berent (2019) when they comment that the group, Surrogate Mothers Online, upon referring to themselves, say "they are not the mother of the baby" (p. 541). Genealogical relations, then, as expressed by culture-bearers, are instantiated by a group's understanding of what, culturally, makes for a mother, a father, a child or a spouse and not by appeal to biological facts.

A fundamental error in the Handbook lies in the very foundation of the claim that it is about kinship whereas, hidden between the lines, it accepts the myth that kinship does not exist because all of these ethnographic realities addressed in the individual contributions allegedly cannot be accounted for by the tools developed over a century of kinship study. The question remains: How do we determine that a domain of human activity is kinship? This was explicitly answered in the recent empirically-founded book by Fadwa El Guindi (2020), the second author of this critique. Her book, *Suckling: Kinship More Fluid*, published scans of the original correspondence between David Schneider and Claude Lévi-Strauss revealing how Schneider's remarks were taken out of the original context in order to advance the Handbook's focus on gendered scholarship rather than understand them in the context of the anthropological study of kinship. It also demonstrates how practices such as 'suckling,' often discussed as 'Milk Kinship,' re-affirm further that the universal category of kinship is at once biological, societal, and cultural with an underlying transformational quality.

We need to remember and appreciate the fact that there is no known human group without kinship, and there is no kinship without kin terms or rules of incest.. It is remarkable that humans engage universally in a process of distinguishing relatives by using a set of kin terms shared within cultural traditions (Tanaka 1977). A certain logic, an algebra as it were, is followed. It is a logic that cannot be located in biology alone nor society alone, but rather in its universality. It is necessarily invoked by a capacity embedded in the cognitive architecture of the mind (El Guindi 2020: 6).

For social relations to be identified as "kinship" they need to have social organizational features such as culturally shared classification of relatives, with assigned kin terms (a special kin terminology), applied vertically and horizontally, not simply dyadically. To be considered kin, individuals corporately share the responsibility of building and the obligation of protecting a shared reputation, a shared honor, a shared estate, a shared name, throughout their lifetime and after the death of individuals (El Guindi 2003 [1999]). Relations are bound by formal rules of avoidance and extended prohibitions. There are features, then, that together constitute essential properties of the analytic category of kinship, distinguishing kinship relations from other social relations. These are empirically derived features. Just as we cannot or should not, as anthropologists, sit in an armchair and 'write culture,' we should not put together a Handbook on the basis of imagining, or hoping, or, as the Handbook editor writes, "conceiving" what kinship should be. We know what kinship is. It is not what the Handbook proclaims kinship is about.

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