

Against the symbolism solution for why kinship is significant in the West

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Abstract. Is kinship insignificant in Western societies? This paper presents an objection to the symbolism solution for why it is significant.

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Can you say, "Kinship at the core"

When kinship's but a metaphor?

Kinship is a central topic of anthropology, but does kinship matter within industrialized Western societies? Marilyn Strathern presents an argument against its importance, but does not endorse the argument:

Kinship was the focus of one very detailed project in London (Firth, Hubert and Forge 1969), but as the authors point out, by comparison with many other societies with which anthropologists are familiar, kin groups beyond the nuclear family do not constitute units of the wider social system. We do not use such groupings as the basis of political organization except in the most informal way, nor as major channels of economic activity. Even the nuclear family emerges in some regions as less organizationally significant than in others... (1982: 74)

We can simplify the argument as drawing attention to how the rules for most Western institutions do not include kinship restrictions, such as that only people from a certain family can apply for a

certain job or that no one from a certain family can apply for it. There is no kin restriction on who can apply to be a lecturer, or a doctor at a certain hospital, and so forth. This fact apparently allows us to conclude that kinship is insignificant.

The problem is how to argue that kinship is actually significant. This is a solution that Strathern seeks to pursue:

Far from being conceptually marginal to economic and political stratification, kinship provides a way of talking about its implications... I am thus concerned with the way in which features of our kinship system may be used as symbols for other things... (1982: 77)

The solution Strathern sounds interested in pursuing is drawing attention to how kinship analogies are used in characterizing various things, within Western industrialized societies, such as the implications of economic and political stratification. But I am not sure if this solution is quite what she has in mind. I have some difficulty following the details she supplies. (I shall leave aside the implications just referred to.) Well, it is a solution that some people are likely to propose in broad outline and worth evaluating. Here I wish to introduce a worry: this role for kinship is dispensable.

To illustrate the worry, take a certain theory of concept application. Let us say that a concept, the concept of a G, is associated with features G1, G2, G3, G4, and G5. If anything has three of these features, then the concept of a G can be legitimately applied. That is a G. (The famous example is the concept of a game – that is a game.) But there is no requirement that G1 must be present or G2 and so forth. Here someone might speak of family resemblances as a

helpful analogy.¹ Some members of a certain family have the family nose whereas others do not; and some have the family eyes whereas others do not; and some have the family ears. Similarly, all the Gs are a family and some have a feature we associate with that family but not all do, such as G1. There are overlapping family resemblances. But this analogy from the domain of kinship is dispensable. The analogy is not somehow essential to this theory of concept application. And if it is dispensable it is not significant, or so says the objector. What someone will object is “The use of kinship analogies may be widespread in Western industrial societies, but they are dispensable and so do not serve to establish that kinship is significant in these societies.”

I suspect there is something wrong with this objection, but faced with an example like this, it seems difficult to undermine. How do you get past the person who bullishly says, “This symbolism use does not matter”?

References

- Strathern, M. 1982. The place of kinship: kin, class and village status in Elmton, Essex. In A.P. Cohen (ed.), *Belonging: Identity and social organisation in British rural cultures*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Wittgenstein, L. 1968 (third ed., translated by G.E.M. Anscombe). *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

¹ The analogy comes from Wittgenstein (1968), but I don't claim this is an accurate interpretation of his theory of concept application.