

# 5

## The Anthropology of Biology: A Lesson from the New Kinship Studies

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A combination of influences over the past few decades has steadily raised the profile of the anthropology of bioscience and biomedicine, and this field has now become a well-established subdiscipline.<sup>1</sup> This new field has several antecedents. The move within the discipline towards greater reflexivity and the critiques of various kinds of ethnocentrism contributed to the emergence of bioscience as a subject of anthropological study in the 1990s – a transition that was aided by the emergence of the human genome project as a source of both ethical uncertainty and funding for research into its ethical, social, and legal implications (Franklin 1995). Anthropological interest in new reproductive technologies in this same period further encouraged a more critical engagement with biological models of “natural facts” (Strathern 1992a, 1992b), and Sandra Bamford’s (2007) pioneering account of a society in which physiological explanations of conception play only a minimal role in understandings of both reproduction and kinship has offered a distinctive foil against which to contrast a Euro-American emphasis on biology that has increasingly come to be seen as extreme. At the same time it has remained unclear precisely how biological and physiological explanations function in contemporary society, since they are at once apparently literal and yet are often employed in ways that are self-evidently figurative (Franklin 2003; Nelkin and Lindee 1995). The dual quality of biological explanations also appears as a difference between what people say and what they do (many couples emphasize the importance of having a biological child of their own but will use a variety of means to achieve this end, including other people’s eggs and sperm, Thompson 2005). Another striking and well-documented distinction is the considerable difference between how

DNA is interpreted in a lab and how those technical meanings change as they travel across different contexts (Fulwiley 2011; M'charek 2005; Rapp 1999). Likewise, the meaning of a biological fact to a specialist scientist may be considerably more vague and uncertain than it might appear to be in an article about that same biological fact in a magazine or newspaper (Franklin 2013).

These polysemic qualities of the biological are hardly surprising given that, like ideas of the natural, biology serves a wide variety of functions in many systems of both formal and informal knowledge – from ideas about kinship and gender to models of plant and animal life. Furthermore, it is clear that ideas about biology are changing rapidly. And the addition of new terms to refer to biology, such as cis-gender, or synthetic DNA, seem at once to reify the emperor's clothes that were never there and to camouflage still further the question of how many different forms “biology” can take simultaneously. Consequently, biology remains an unresolved lesson in hermeneutical practice within anthropology, and ethnographers have responded creatively to this challenge – through multispecies models of environment (Kirksey 2014), studies of oceanography and symbiosis (Helmreich 2009), ethnographies of the metabonome (Levin 2013), and new contributions to the field of epigenetics (Landecker 2011), to name but a few contributions to this rapidly expanding field.

This chapter attempts to offer a singular perspective on the ways in which anthropologists continue to struggle with the question of how to study biology by revisiting one of the key anthropological debates about biological facts in the 1980s, namely the now famous crucible of gender and kinship studies that has continued to generate so many new avenues of enquiry for the discipline. While offering a reinterpretation of the origin story of the new kinship studies, and in particular the place of the “biological facts of sexual reproduction” in many accounts of its emergence, the primary aim of this chapter is to revisit some of the ways biology has been theorized by feminist scholars at a time when the anthropology of biology is expanding more rapidly than ever.<sup>2</sup> By this means, we can forge new agendas for an anthropology of biology – both in terms of what anthropology can contribute, and how anthropological approaches overlap with those from other disciplines. Although a scholarly argument, the aim here is also political: if biology is often politics by other means, it's all the more important to continue to keep track of their shape-shifting variegations with all the clarity we can muster.

## 5.1 Paternal Paradigms?

Standard accounts of the emergence of the field of new kinship studies in anthropology have accurately and consistently emphasized the foundational influence of David Schneider, and in particular his analysis of

the role of biological facts and biological science in the study of kinship. While rightly acknowledging Schneider's influence, however, this now canonical narrative also has its shortcomings. In particular, it commonly obscures both some of the key confusions in Schneider's models of biology and science, and more importantly the very different source of influence on the new kinship studies that came from feminist critiques of reproductive biology. Significantly, and also curiously, Schneider's many arguments against the biologization of kinship never engaged with any of the similar arguments being made by several generations of feminist writers from the 1940s onwards about the overemphasis on biology in both normative and professional accounts of gender, and this disconnection may be more revealing than previously assumed. Since critical interrogations of how the biological facts of sexual reproduction are represented, and a sustained challenge to the exaggerated gender binarism that is so often legitimated in their name have been core strands of feminist scholarship for at least three-quarters of a century (or longer, depending how this history is reckoned), it is crucial to distinguish the feminist critique of biology-as-politics from Schneider's account of biology-as-culture – and to critically examine the significant gap between the two. Interestingly, the lessons here are not only about how biological arguments have been variously used within anthropology, but how the histories of such intellectual “genealogies” have themselves been biologized.

Intellectual genealogies, after all, provide crucial resources in the formation of disciplinary identities: they are literally canon fodder. Highly gendered and unmistakably racialized canonical histories are further biologized through idioms such as the “founding fathers” of disciplines, leading to fierce ongoing criticism of established canonical histories as lineages of occlusion and mystification – as well as histories of colonization and subjugation which position the white male intellect, or “genius,” as the origin of canonical thought with no regard to the circularity of a system that constantly conflates the hegemonic privilege of white male intellectuals with their own individual talent.

Consequently, the discipline of anthropology is no exception to the new expectation that canonical thought be taught both as a received history of conceptual development, and as a case study in the forced exclusions and histories of violent appropriation the canon at once reproduces and conceals within itself.

The canonical status of David Schneider's work on American kinship is a productive example to engage with, not least because he would happily have volunteered to be a founding father “straw man” for a text book case of anthropological decanonization (a pursuit he avidly practiced himself). Schneider's positioning as the “father” of the new kinship studies ironically recapitulates some of the very same structural dynamics and cultural codes he engaged with as a kinship theorist, not least in his most

highly cited textbook, *American Kinship* (1968). The very fact that this publication has been cited more than 15,000 times (according to Google) raises another question that Schneider might himself have posed about gender, genealogy, and academic reproduction – namely what might be called the naturalization of scholarly citation. The lessons here are not only canonical: they point directly to the much wider role of naturalizing and biologizing discourses, concepts, and idioms – indeed they point to exactly the same problem of biology as consciousness that feminists have been critiquing since feminism first began.

Genealogizing, in anthropology as elsewhere, has form – and its form has a content that the familiar and familial idiom of Schneider's intellectual paternity tellingly reveals. The irony of his "fatherly" role in begetting the new kinship studies wasn't lost on Schneider, much as he might have engaged with it more explicitly, for example in his conversations with Richard Handler (1995). Schneider had been an early supporter of feminist scholars at a time when not many established senior male anthropologists stepped forward to show solidarity, and he actively sought to promote the work of feminist theorists such as Gayle Rubin, Ellen Lewin, Kath Weston, and Sylvia Yanagisako who brought the relation of gender and sexuality to kinship to prominence in the 1980s and 1990s. The complicated questions that surround the overlapping idioms of intellectual and biological paternity are the true conceptual heirs to anthropology's famous "virgin birth" debates, in which Schneider played a central role as a critic of the obviousness of biological paternity in the 1960s – perhaps fittingly in the journal *Man*.

Part of the problem then, as now, is the lack of an adequate critical language with which to discuss "biology" or "the biological," which in turn makes it hard to specify, exactly, what "biologizing" or "biologization" mean. "Biology" refers both to a discipline and its object of study: "the biology of the human female" is what you might read about in a textbook on "reproductive biology." Traditionally, "biological" refers to the phenomena studied by the "life sciences" – as opposed to the "hard sciences" that study things like stars. However, stars are "born" and "die": they have "life cycles," as do hurricanes and volcanoes. These overlaps become even more complex in everyday and popular culture where, for example, it is now common to refer to a corporation's "DNA" or the "male" and "female" parts of electrical devices. However, the borders between scientific and idiomatic, or expert and popular, uses of biological terms matter for more than technical reasons. Indeed, given the oddly vast range of uses of the biological, it is somewhat surprising an anthropology of biology is not itself a core subject within the discipline already.

But like Gayle Rubin's (1975) account of psychoanalysis as a feminist theory *manqué*, the non-existence of an anthropology of biology is a case of *enfin presque*. It's not that anthropologists haven't noticed the proximities between languages of gender, genealogy, and generation, and

it is to David Schneider's credit that he not only noticed but foregrounded the ubiquitous biologisms that saturate everyday American parlance. Like many feminists before and after him, Schneider demonstrated how biology is more than an influential branch of the life sciences, because it is even more influential far beyond the lab as a source of cultural ideologies, assumptions, "common sense," or everyday mythologies that are used to justify, legitimate, or "explain" social roles and norms, many of which are directly responsible for gender stereotypes, such as the idea that women are weaker at math and scientific abstraction. There is, furthermore, an obvious overlap between Schneider's critique of biology in the context of anthropological research on kinship and critical feminist analyses of how "the facts of life" are often used to justify restrictive and hierarchical gender norms. Indeed garden-variety biological determinism has long been viewed as one of the most politically important targets of modern feminism, and has been used as a prime example of patriarchal oppression by scores of influential feminist authors and theorists - from de Beauvoir (2014 [1949]), Firestone (1970), and Butler (1990) to Haraway (1978a, 1978b, 1989, 1991, 2007, etc.), Martin (1987, 1991), and Keller (1983, 1995). According to many feminist critiques, biology and evolution are two of the most insidious and pervasive legitimating metanarratives of male dominance. Moreover, as feminist activists such as the Boston Women's Health Collective (1976) have long argued, biological explanations of women's reproductive capacity has long been used as one of the chief mechanisms to ensure subordination of the female sex. Probably one of the best known anthropology of biology articles (although not commonly referred to as such) is Emily Martin's (1991) "The Egg and the Sperm," which both humorously and tragically illustrates the ways in which both popular and "textbook" biology exacerbate masculinist hegemony, reshaping even cellular and molecular life in the image of heroic male agency to the detriment of women's health, agency, equality, and sanity.

Although the irony of positioning Schneider as the "father" of the new kinship studies has not been lost on many commentators, less attention has been paid to what this version of intellectual paternity both obscures and distorts. Morgan Clarke, for example, argues in his account of kinship's "overt comeback" as a form of gender studies that feminists were inspired by Schneider's work "questioning as it did [the] 'natural facts' of 'biological' reproduction that were held to ground Euro-American conceptions of gender relations" (2008: 156). While not technically false, such accounts are also not entirely accurate. Not only had feminist anthropologists been critiquing the natural basis of gender (and even the idea of there being a natural basis for anything) long before Schneider examined the cultural role of biology in American kinship systems, but they had also done so in far more depth. Above all, they had identified what Ruth Hubbard would call "the politics of biology" much earlier on,

and had made it a prime target of feminist critique. In contrast to the neutral and detached accounts of the male breadwinner in *American Kinship*, feminists have tended to view everyday biological sexism as oppressive and immoral. To say they found Schneider's work "inspirational" is true, but not for his critique of gender inequality (which was muted), nor his critique of "nature" – which feminists had already developed much further than Schneider ever would. As we shall see further below, feminists such as Marilyn Strathern (1992a, 1992b, 2016) (one of the architects of what has come to be known as the new kinship studies), were inspired by Schneider's *model of culture*. In particular, Strathern valued his support (and she dedicated her 1992 book *After Nature* to him), but as her recently published early work on gender demonstrates (2016), Strathern had been theorizing gender, kinship, nature, and biology in unison since the 1970s. It is thus an interestingly complicated claim that it was Schneider's critique of natural facts that links him as a founder figure to the new kinship studies: this makes sense looking backwards only if you leave out most of the rest of what was going on (which in general is what lineages do ...).

In relating a tale of two biologies – how biology is analyzed within anthropology, and how discipline formation is itself biologized – it is helpful to reconsider the question of how Schneider's analysis of biology came to be seen as a template, or ancestor, for the feminist contribution to the new kinship studies. Schneider was supportive of feminist scholarship and the aim here is not to dismiss his contributions to feminist – and later queer – anthropology. His work also served as a model for feminist anthropological work on gender through his turn to culture as a mechanism of social action, and his attempt to morph a Parsonian concern with social institutions into a structuralist account of culture-as-code. But there is less of a connection between the feminist attempt to analyze gender in the 1970s and Schneider's cultural account of kinship than might appear from the vantage point of their presumed shared origins in the 1990s. Given the now established narrative about the diffuse enduring solidarity that links *American Kinship* to the new kinship studies, what is telling is instead the historical distance between them. This specific historical disconnect is worth revisiting precisely because it sheds light on a more general problem, namely what it is an anthropology of biology should be addressed to, exactly. The historical disconnect between the "biology" feminist anthropologists were analyzing in the 1970s and the "biology" David Schneider had in mind suggests that neither project recognized much kinship with the other. It is as telling that Gayle Rubin does not cite David Schneider or Clifford Geertz in her analysis of "the sex/gender system" as it is revealing that Schneider never cites any feminist scholars in any of his works. The reason for the disconnect is that they had very different political as well as analytical aims. For Schneider, the anthropological critique of biology needed to be brought closer to how anthropology views religion. Religion isn't taught in anthropology

in terms of a dual focus on the actual or “real” underlying facts of divinity as opposed to the various cultural interpretations of this undeniable empirical certainty. Schneider’s point was that kinship is taught in this way, and the question he very helpfully started asking is whether anthropologists could study biology the way they study religion, ritual, exchange, magic, or mythology (Boon and Schneider 1974). The question feminist scholars had been attempting to address for decades, but from a very different standpoint, was how arguments that posit biology as a basis for gender and kinship are reproducing inequalities.

## 5.2 Myths of Biology

Much feminist research on biology, for example, is premised on the argument that biology functions as a form of social mythology. This is at once a claim that has been made by innumerable feminist authors and activists, and one that has been associated with both revolutionary political change and heavy social penalties. To question the biological basis of sex, Shulamith Firestone claimed on the first page of *The Dialectic of Sex*, is to risk being declared insane: “the reaction of the common man, woman and child ... to changing such a fundamental biological condition,” she writes, is that “You must be out of your mind!” (Firestone 1970: 1).

This gut reaction [to] so profound a change ... is an honest one. That so profound a change cannot be easily fit into traditional categories of thought, e.g., “political,” is not because these categories do not apply but because they are not big enough: radical feminism bursts through them. If there were another word more all-embracing than revolution we would use it.

(Firestone 1970: 1)

Even in the early 1970s, Firestone was treading a well-worn path to the bonfire of biological excuses for sexist society. It is now more than 60 years since Ruth Herschberger forcefully set out one of the earliest feminist critiques of what she called “patriarchal myths of biology” in *Adam’s Rib*, the pioneering feminist text she wrote between 1941 and 1946. Herschberger claimed that the extreme male bias in biological narratives about sex and reproduction is a primary source of sexist imagery and female subordination in the first iteration of an influential argument that became foundational to twentieth-century feminism. Her comprehensive critique of sexist biological bias includes a lengthy satire of how the egg and sperm are depicted in standard reference texts through familiar gender clichés.

[T]he male sperm is by all odds the central character. We watch his actions with breathless suspense. He is an independent little creature,

single-minded, manly, full of charm, resourcefulness and enterprise, who will make his own minute decision to swim toward the egg. The female egg is portrayed as the blushing bride, ignorant but desirable, who awaits arousal by the gallant male cell. The egg, like the human female, is receptive ... The sperm is the purposeful agent in reproduction; the egg learns direction and purpose only after union with the sperm.

*(Herschberger 1970: 72)*

In Herschberger's far-reaching review spanning sexology, primatology, genetics, physiology, psychology, behaviorism, evolution, gynecology, anatomy, and embryology, the biological and medical sciences are repeatedly identified as the source of unhelpful fictions concerning sexual difference and "innate" male and female traits. Keenly attentive to the prescriptive slippage between "normal" and "natural," Herschberger repeatedly returns to the biological facts of sexual reproduction, which she claims play a critical role in perpetuating and legitimating both sexual difference and sexual inequality. The "marked difference" between women and men – that the former have babies – has been heavily overplayed, she argues. Most of the time, she notes, women are not having babies, and for most of their lives they are not even fertile. Reproduction, she proposes, is a weak excuse for dichotomizing humanity.

The history of mankind has been the search for some difference between individuals and groups of individuals – color, geographical location, sex – that would really count for something, a difference on the basis of which society could get organised, once and for all, and settle down to peaceful senility ... The marked difference that distinguishes women from men is one of the most palpable differences to be found. It is women who have babies, men who cannot. Among legislative groups, in fact, women are sometimes regarded simply as the pregnant species. While only women can have babies, it must be remembered that they are not always having them. Women, during the childbearing period between adolescence and menopause, are not even fertile much of the time.

*(Herschberger 1970: 171)*

The problem with biology, according to Herschberger, is not only the insistence on binary sexual types, or even the hierarchical way in which such differences are ordered, but the silencing effect of such authoritative scientific claims, which give the appearance of placing the natural facts of sexual hierarchy beyond question – as established, objective truth. The problem with biology, she is suggesting, is its effects on consciousness. In a context of such pervasive and sexist biologism, the mere mention of menstruation, motherhood, or childbirth, she argues, brings with it such an "overwhelming" determinism of women's character, psychology,



instincts, and capacities that they have “silenced the tendency on the part of women to question [their] uniformity” (1970: 174) – thus rendering women complicit with their own devaluation. “Must a woman cultivate only that uniqueness which distinguished her from man (and links her with the animals), or is she to be allowed to exhibit some purely human characteristics as well?” (1970: 177)

Writing almost simultaneously in the 1940s, on the other side of the Atlantic, Simone de Beauvoir notably opened her account of “Destiny” in *The Second Sex* with a chapter entitled “The Data of Biology.”<sup>3</sup> Like Herschberger before her, de Beauvoir condemns biological science as a foundational source of sexist mythology, and points her finger in particular at the representation of reproductive roles: “Woman? ... she is a womb, she is an ovary”(1974: xv), de Beauvoir sarcastically proclaims at the outset of her influential mid-century feminist primer. The primacy of reproductive roles in defining maleness and femaleness, de Beauvoir repeatedly claims, rigidly confines each sex to a narrow path, while perpetually stratifying them in unequal complementarity. Famously de Beauvoir analyzes allegorical accounts of the egg and sperm as figurations of immanence and transcendence, asking why such philosophical principles have been so fundamentally confused with biological form.

Despite the fact that the biological facts of sexual reproduction were already an established target of feminist critique by the mid-1960s, when an unprecedented outpouring of feminist literature began to saturate popular media and public debate, the feminist critique of biology – and in particular reproductive biology – showed no signs of waning in the following decade. To the contrary, the dissection of biological mythology became even more elaborate, and politically central, to a vast range of feminist critiques including the classic accounts of Firestone (1970), Greer (1970), Evelyn Reed (1970), Kate Millett (1970), Anne Koedt (1970), and Robin Morgan (1970) at the outset of a decade that would conclude with pivotal and far-reaching critiques of biology from Donna Haraway (1978a, 1978b) and Adrienne Rich (1976). A parallel feminist revolution was of course well under way within anthropology in this same period, to which a critique of the role of biology was central, leading to an interrogation of not only sex and gender but the very basis of scientific investigation itself (Strathern [1974] 2016).

### 5.3 Cultural Anthropology

When he began his project on American kinship in the 1950s, David Schneider had recently moved to the University of Chicago, where he took charge of The Kinship Project – a research initiative that would lead to many publications, and ultimately to his influential 1968 monograph *American Kinship: A Cultural Account*. Schneider’s kinship project was a mid-century

hybrid, combining a Parsonian approach to social structure and action with an early version of symbolic anthropology, partly based on the work of Lévi-Strauss, but also inspired by Ruth Benedict's model of cultural pattern. Like Clifford Geertz, who was also Parson's student, Schneider sought to establish a cultural approach to American kinship, modeling his efforts in part on the ethnographic studies of British anthropologists Raymond Firth (1956) and Michael Young and Peter Willmott (1957) of kinship among urban households in London. However, although he had a substantial interest in kinship systems, the American kinship project was explicitly intended as an effort to develop new ways to model cultural systems. As so often in the past, kinship analysis in Schneider's case exemplified a new methodology – one that would ultimately come to be known as “interpretive,” “symbolic” – or simply “cultural” anthropology.

Parsons had outlined a sociological model of American kinship in the early 1940s, distinguishing between the “procreative family” and the “family of orientation.” To Parsons, the interesting feature of the American family was the high level of independence of the conjugal unit from the wider family network – a fact which led him to differentiate American from European kinship, and to refer to “conjugal families” (1943: 184). In her study of urban kinship in London in the mid-1950s, the British sociologist Elizabeth Bott (1957) developed the related observation that conjugal independence was cultivated in inverse proportion to social network density. This finding allowed her to contrast conjugal roles, and to emphasize the wide range of their variation according to different circumstances. A similar contrast was explored in Young and Willmott's studies of Bethnal Green (inner London) families who moved out to the suburbs, isolating them from wider kin networks, and often increasing the isolation of wives who previously might have spent more time with siblings or parents than their husband or in-laws.

This was not the analytical path Schneider chose to follow in his attempt to isolate a new and different set of systemic elements unifying American kinship – namely its core cultural symbols. As Schneider himself later described his aim, it was “to beat the culture drum,” and thus to show how culture was itself a kind of institutional force (Schneider in Handler 1995: 203). He sought to identify, isolate, and elucidate the cultural and symbolic basis of American kinship, and thus to establish a “cultural” version of Parsonian structuralism, with its emphasis on roles, functions, sanctions, norms, and corresponding types of social system. But in his elaboration of the relation between the symbols of “love,” “diffuse enduring solidarity,” “nature,” “blood,” and “family,” variation in social practice was sacrificed to consistency of cultural pattern in the name of identifying the underlying symbolic logics organizing the meanings of kin relatedness, and giving the kinship system its grammar or “code.” In order to depict American kinship as a unified cultural system, the pieces had to neatly interlock in the same way Parsonian roles, structures, and

institutions had in order to demonstrate and explain the social forces holding them together.

Schneider was not unaware of feminism, and he had undoubtedly read Simone de Beauvoir as well as other feminist works – possibly including Herschberger. His argument that biology performs a symbolic role in American kinship complemented the feminist claim that biology has many functions above and beyond its role as a form of scientific description or analysis (and even that biology has a mythical function in social life). The arguments of Herschberger, Firestone and de Beauvoir anticipate those of Haraway (1989, 1991, 1997), Martin (1987, 1991), Keller (1983, 1995), and many other later feminist scholars who analyzed biological discourse in much greater depth to demonstrate how biological facts are used to script normative and appropriate gender behavior. Dozens of feminists in the 1980s including Ruth Bleier (1984, 1986), Anne Fausto Sterling (1985, 1987, 1989), Ruth Hubbard (1988a, 1988b, 1990), and Lynda Birke (1980, 1982, 1986), among others, showed how biology and genetics serve as the source of deterministic arguments about innate capacities that have a substantial influence on the definitions of social roles, institutions, and identities. Schneider's argument about the role of biology in American kinship had arrived, by a different route, at the same conclusion: biology provided a code or grammar for the cultural systems on which social roles were based.

Albeit for reasons that had nothing to do with feminism, Schneider could easily have been seen, at least superficially, to be nailing his colors to the same mast as contemporaneous feminist authors such as Germaine Greer, who dismissively referred to “the secret ministry of biology” and its doctrinal ordinations (1970). Indeed Schneider did not need to spell out the implications of his arguments about biology as a source of social rules, since feminists already had. Schneider's most substantial affinity with feminism came from his use of structuralism to demonstrate the capacity for cultural systems to have institutional effects. For example, in its combination of structuralist analysis with quasi-feminist content, *American Kinship* clearly anticipates the logic of Sherry Ortner's “Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?” published shortly afterwards in 1972. In Schneider's account, as in Ortner's, the biological facts of sexual reproduction – and the “marked difference” that women have babies – are analyzed as a cultural code, or structural fiction, guiding social action. However, whereas Ortner's article, first published in *Feminist Studies* in 1972, and later reprinted in the pioneering feminist anthology *Woman, Culture and Society* edited by Lamphere and Rosaldo (1974), was an explicit critique of female subordination, and denounced “the universal devaluation of women,” Schneider's project had no such aim, and makes no mention of sexual inequality, feminism, or what was coming to be known as “sexual politics” (Millett 1970).

This omission is important since a lack of attention to feminism and sexual politics had significant and limiting consequences for Schneider's

argument about both culture and kinship. For example Schneider's argument about the importance of sexual difference to the "codes" of American kinship could not be extended to other "codes" – such as those of American nationalism. It also became impossible to historicize these cultural codes. As Carol MacCormack and Marilyn Strathern would later argue in their landmark 1980 anthology *Nature, Culture and Gender*, the symbolic systems of nature, culture, and sexual difference are distinctively intertwined in the Eurocentric imagination in a way that is neither universally shared nor even consistent with earlier periods of European history (1980). Their deconstructive effort to challenge the intransigent binarisms of much anthropological analysis was also aimed at feminist anthropology, and Strathern's banner headline "No Nature, No Culture" (1980) anticipated some of the most important later works in gender and queer theory, including Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990). Apart from the moral reasons, a concern with women's subordination might have been more fully acknowledged in *American Kinship*, the omission of a critical concern with sexual politics and sexual inequality in Schneider's work significantly limited and impeded his project initially to deconstruct the kinship category, and later to reject it altogether.

As notable as the lack of any reference to gender inequality or feminism may be from *American Kinship*, published in 1968, an even more striking absence is the lack of any reference to feminist anthropology, or feminist scholarship in general, from Schneider's later, final, and most radical, book, *A Critique of the Study of Kinship*, published in 1984. Here, in a continuation of his heated and longstanding argument with Rodney Needham over structuralist accounts of kinship, Schneider substantially extends his signature claim that kinship is a figment of the Eurocentric imagination. His *Critique* is centrally concerned with the "biological mechanisms" on which kinship is supposedly based, as well as the role of natural science as an authoritative belief system, and he returns repeatedly to the status of biological science and "the facts of life." As in much of his earlier work, Schneider was centrally concerned both with the language and imagery of the life sciences, and their relationship to idioms such as the blood tie. More than any other source of imagery, however, he is concerned with sexual intercourse and the corresponding model of the biological facts of sexual reproduction. These are the tools he wishes to employ to demonstrate that kinship is a cultural system made up of core symbolic units, and it is an argument he first sets out in full in what is still his most popular, influential, and best known book.

## 5.4 Sexual Intercourse

*American Kinship* was written for the influential Prentice Hall "Anthropology of Modern Societies" series, and it was intended to mark a shift toward

the anthropological study of contemporary Western culture as well as to demonstrate the application of “one particular kind of cultural analysis” (1968: iv). In his Editorial Foreword to the book, Schneider further emphasizes the value of this approach for the reader who will be familiar with the examples being presented, so that “the student is provided with a particularly clear example of how this theory of culture works, since the data are American data and as such are familiar to every American reader” (1968: iv). He then begins his exegesis by emphasizing the isolation – or “differentiation” – of the domain of kinship in American kinship. Unlike premodern societies in which “whatever a man does ... he does as a kinsman of one kind or another,” in the United States “all of these institutions are quite clearly differentiated from each other” and “one owns property in one’s own right and enters into economic relations where one chooses and according to rules which are supposed to be quite free from the constraints of kinship, religion or politics” (1968: v–vi). Religion, employment, and politics are similarly differentiated from kinship, and for Schneider this has a major analytic advantage, because it enables analysis of a kinship system “as close to its ‘pure form’ as possible” and thus promises to reveal “the question of ‘the nature of kinship’ in the sense of establishing just what the distinguishing features of kinship consist of” (1968: vi).

Schneider’s concern is thus both to demonstrate a method of cultural analysis and to perform an exegesis on a specific cultural system, and his core method is through the interpretation of the elementary symbolic units – or what he calls cultural constructs – of the American kinship system. A cultural system is made up of basic cultural elements and core ideas which have a grammar and a syntax defining their relations to each other. But culture is also more than a language, and cultural symbols are more than words, because in addition to the rules governing how words are used, and the multiple meanings of words that correspond to different contexts, “the cultural construct has a reality of its own” (1968: 5), and it is this distinct property of cultural meaning Schneider is at pains to reveal. His debt to Lévi-Strauss, to semiotics, and to structuralist anthropology is clear in his methodological ambition to isolate and examine the “core symbols” of American kinship that are “formulated as a part of the cultural system” and thus to show how “meaning is systematically elaborated ... throughout its differentiated parts; and how the parts are differentiated and articulated as cultural units” (1968: 8). *American Kinship*, Schneider clarifies, is not about how Americans do, or think, or talk about kinship – although it is based on data drawn from all three of these activities. It is instead, he clarifies, “about symbols, the symbols which are American kinship” (1968: 18).

Schneider begins his analysis with the two kinds of relative that can exist in American kinship, namely those that are defined by blood and those who are established through marriage.

The blood relationship, as it is defined in American kinship, is formulated in concrete, biogenetic terms. Conception follows a single act of sexual intercourse between a man, as genitor, and a woman, as genetrix. At conception, one half of the biogenetic substance of which the child is made is contributed by the genetrix, and one-half by the genitor.

(1968: 23)

Americans do not believe the man contributes the bone and the woman the flesh, and they don't believe the male seed is the primary cause of the establishment of pregnancy. Americans believe in nature, biology, and science: "In American cultural conception, kinship is defined as biogenetic. This definition says that kinship is whatever the biogenetic relationship is. If science discovers new facts about biogenetic relationship, then that is what kinship is and was all along, although it may not have been known at the time" (1968: 23).

In American kinship blood establishes a bond "which is 'real' or 'true' [and] 'by birth' [so it] can never be severed, whatever its legal position" (1968: 24). Based on the real, true, and scientifically verifiable facts of nature, "nothing can terminate or change the biological relationship" that exists between a parent and child, or siblings, who are permanently related as blood kin regardless of how they behave toward each other (1968: 24). Even if people deny the scientific authority by which biological facts are determined to be real, true, and objective facts of nature, the point remains that "the cultural definition is that kinship is the biogenetic facts of nature" (1968: 24, fn). Blood is a substance, a material thing, and divisible: people can trace their blood, and they have differing proportions of genetic substance from different sides, lines, or relations, which are part of their unalterable nature as individuals. Blood is thus a core symbol defining both a category of relation, and an essential element of individual kin identity.

Whereas the blood relation is natural, material, unalterable, and cannot be terminated in American kinship, relationships by marriage in this same system are none of these things – indeed they are the opposite. Whereas the blood relation is part of "the natural order of things" corresponding to "the way things are in nature" and "the facts of life' as they really exist" (1968: 26), marriage is an artifice defined solely by convention, or in Schneider's term it is "a special instance of ... the order of law" manifest as both a "pattern for behaviour" and a "code for conduct." This purely social order – the order of law – consists of "rules and regulations, customs and traditions" which are in turn derived from "the government of action by morality, and the self-restraint of human reason" (1968: 27). These two classes of relatives – those that derive from the order of nature and the order of law – yield the three main categories of relatives in American kinship: those who are related by blood, those

who are related by marriage, and those who are related by both – who include the parents and offspring in the nuclear family unit.

It is from the latter point that Schneider extends his initial exegesis of nature, science, and biology beyond the American cultural construct of blood relation to include the nuclear family, and he does so via “the act of procreation.” Sexual intercourse “is the symbol in terms of which members of the family as relatives and the family as a cultural unit are defined and differentiated in American kinship,” he writes: “Male and female, the opposites, are united in sexual intercourse as husband and wife” (1968: 39). In his attempt to provide an “ethnographic account of the cultural unit, ‘the family,’ in American kinship” (1968: 32–33), Schneider first returns to ideas of what is natural: “the family is formed according to the laws of nature and it lives by rules that are regarded by Americans as self-evidently natural” (1968: 34). So too is the sexual division of labor “only natural, in the American view”:

Women bear children, nurse them, and care for them. This, according to the definition of American culture, is part of women’s nature. They can do these things by virtue of their natural endowment ... men do not bear children, nor can they nurse them from their own bodies. The cultural premise is that they are not naturally endowed with ways of sensing infants’ needs ... It is in this sense that the distinctive features or defining elements of the family posit the mated pair who rear their young in a place of their own.

(1968: 35–36)

He adds that the family is also more than merely a natural entity, being the outcome of human reason “added to” the facts of nature, so that ultimately the cultural construct of the family in American kinship selectively combines elements of the order of nature on the one hand and the order of law, or rule of reason, on the other. The nuclear family, in this view, is not so much a partial whole, as a single unit in which different cultural logics are combined to create a distinctive hybrid entity.

This ability of the family not only to combine, but to resolve, the differences between the order of nature and the rule of reason, is repeated, Schneider argues, by the role of the family unit as a mediator between relations of blood and relations of law. This is why, he argues, the act of sexual intercourse is the core of the American kinship system: it is the “figure [which] provides all of the central symbols of American kinship” (1968: 37).

Sexual intercourse as an act of procreation creates the blood relationship of parent and child and makes genitor and genetrix out of husband and wife. But it is an act which is exclusive to and distinctive of the husband–wife relationship: sexual intercourse is legitimate and proper only between husband and wife and each has the

exclusive right to the sexual activity of the other. These are the tenets of American culture ... All of the significant symbols of American kinship are contained within the figure of sexual intercourse, itself a symbol, of course. The figure is formulated in American culture as a biological entity and a natural act.

(1968: 38–40, *passim*)

Sexual intercourse is furthermore “a symbol of love,” and occupies a uniquely central symbolic position as the sole unifying act mediating between, and conjoining, conjugal and parental, or cognatic, types of love. The act of procreation is “a symbol of unity, or oneness” uniting the “flesh of opposites, male and female, man and woman [and] also in the outcome of that union, the unity of blood, the child ... The child thus affirms the oneness or unity of blood with each of his parents and with his siblings by those parents. At the same time, that unity or identity, of flesh and blood, that oneness of material, stands for the unity of cognatic love” (1968: 39).

In her recently published manuscript on sex and gender, originally written in the early 1970s for a series that folded, we can now see that Marilyn Strathern would have been among the very first authors to turn to Schneider’s work as a useful resource for feminist anthropology, and her use of his work is instructive. Like many other feminists writing in the early 1970s, Strathern was centrally concerned both with the role of biology in the reproduction of gender hierarchies, and with its status as a symbol or myth. Central to her analysis of both the sexual division of labor and gender conflict was the use of sexual relations and sexual difference as “seductive symbols.”

Myths frequently contain within them symbols. A symbol is an item, often a concrete, material object, which stands for something else, often an abstract notion, a value, an aspect of a relationship. It describes one thing in terms of another. Like myths, symbols make statements which put certain values on the thing being symbolized. They express emotions people have (or should have) toward these things. Whether we call something a myth or a symbol is largely a matter of analysis. Take the dogma of Mae Enga men: “females can harm males.” In so far as it purports to be a statement about the physical capacities of females, in which Mae Enga men believe, an outsider could call it a myth. It is a fact Mae Enga men hold about women but one which does not correspond to physical reality. We can dismiss it as a lie; or we can say that Mae Enga men are afraid of something and this is how they express their fear. But supposing the anthropologist suggests that one of the origins of this fear is the fact that the women with whom men most often come into contact come from enemy groups, and enemy men certainly have to be feared because they (in reality) kill men of one’s own group. Then we can look on the phrase



“females can harm males” as a symbol – it stands for something else. It stands for: “men can be harmed by the groups from which women come.” Wives originate in enemy clans, and wives are enemies too.

(Strathern [1974] 2016: 20)

As we can see from Strathern’s analysis, she was at once describing what men and women do, and how these actions are represented and interpreted. Her exemplification of symbolic representation cut two ways: she described the kinds of statements people make about each other in a specific community, and then she described how these might be interpreted, and indeed how an anthropologist might hypothetically have challenged those interpretations by giving the statements a different meaning. Her book, she explained, was “concerned with both kinds of symbols” – meaning what symbols mean to people consciously or unconsciously when they use them in their native context, and what they mean to outsiders.

Characteristically, Strathern went on to significantly complicate her argument by pointing out that symbols are not only made out of objects, or people, but may also use relationships as their currency. And when relationships are used as symbols, she pointed out, their meaning becomes especially ambiguous. It was here that she drew on Schneider’s account of sexual intercourse and biology to make a cultural point about symbols.

David Schneider, in his account of American kinship, makes just this point. He is concerned with the place of sexual intercourse (a “fact of nature”) in the thinking of Americans, as a symbol “in terms of which members of the family are defined and differentiated and in terms of which each member of the family’s proper mode of conduct is defined.”

(Schneider 1968: 33, cited in Strathern 2016: 23)

She went on to quote from *American Kinship*:

It will be helpful to begin with a few simple distinctions. First, sexual intercourse can be seen as a set of *biological facts*. These are part of the world. They exist, and they have effects. Second, there are certain cultural notions and constructs *about* biological facts. The example *par excellence* in American culture is the life-sciences – biology, zoology, biochemistry, and so on. This is a cultural system explicitly attuned to those biological facts as such. It discovers them, studies them, organizes what it regards as facts into a system. But it remains a system of cultural constructs which should not be confused with the biological facts themselves.

(Schneider 1968: 114, cited in Strathern 2016: 23)

Later in the book Strathern returned to Schneider’s description of sexual intercourse, quoting it at length in the context of analyzing Euro-American understandings of sexual mythology (extracts from pp. 33–52 and 116–117

of Schneider's book are quoted over three pages of Strathern's book, from pp. 239 to 242). But her immediate interpretation of his example added another dimension to it: "Schneider takes sexual intercourse as ultimately providing a model for commitment," she noted, agreeing that this was indeed "one of the uses" to which it could be put. "But," she added,

[It] may also stand for the opposite: for exploitation, not solidarity ... Males dominate women through sex ... [T]here is more [at stake] here than vagaries in conjugal arrangements ... Over the last hundred years, a very explicit equation has been made between female bondage and (first) woman's deprived marital status, and (then) her mutilated sexuality.

(Strathern 2016: 242-243)

This was not a point Schneider chose to pursue, and as Strathern noted, the fact of female subordination complicated his argument. She agreed with him that sexual intercourse was a *model*, but she added that *so is sexual difference*. By this insistence, moreover, she was not simply adding that nature and biology are *also* symbols for sex difference. Strathern's addition to Schneider was to complicate his interpretation of both symbols and sexuality. "Sex is an extremely powerful source of symbolism," she argued, "so powerful it can symbolize quite contrary notions and still lend weight to each."

Although he had not criticized gender models as sources of inequality, and nor had he analyzed the overlapping-but-contrary uses of biological "symbols" in the contexts of gender and kinship, these had nonetheless featured quite prominently in Schneider's account of American kinship, where, to a feminist eye, they also stood out. "In American culture, the definition of what makes a person male or female is the kind of sexual organs he has," Schneider noted, adding that "[A] male or female is established at birth by its genitals" (1968: 41). It is a little unclear in his account how biology is functioning as an explanation system when he describes what might otherwise have been called sexual stereotypes:

Temperamental differences are held to correlate with the differences in sexual organs. Men have an active, women a passive quality, it is said. Men have greater physical strength and stamina than women. Men are said to have mechanical aptitudes that women lack. Men tend toward an aggressive disposition said to be absent in women.

(1968: 41)

It is similarly unclear how exactly the cultural logic of American kinship explained the sexual division of labor, except that in the context of the nuclear family there were clear roles for men and women corresponding to perceived differences between maleness and femaleness:

The different qualities of maleness and femaleness are said by informants to fit men and women for different kinds of activities

and occupations. Men's active, aggressive qualities, their strength and stamina, are said to make them particularly good hunters and soldiers and to fit them for positions of authority, especially where women and children are concerned. Women are presumed to be nurturant and passive in ways that make them particularly good at teaching school, nursing, food preparation, and homemaking. Men's mechanical aptitudes are said to make them good at working with machines - at designing, building and repairing them - in ways which women cannot match.

(1968: 41)

Reverting to a more Parsonian mode, Schneider's account of the fit between sex roles, the sexual division of labor, and the nuclear family was a neat one. Indeed they made up a nearly seamless whole. Thus,

In American culture, sex role occurs in a context which further selects, modifies, or emphasizes some of its special aspects. A man is a policeman, a repairman, a clerk or a soldier. A woman may be a nurse, a school teacher, a cook, or a chambermaid. The attributes of the sex-role have different values in each of these cases. Not only is the policeman a man, but he is a man relying on his strength and fortitude in a context of maintaining law and order and preventing crime. The same qualities of maleness in a soldier are not matters of law and order at all, but are defined by the nature of war. And the repairman using the qualities of his masculinity to tend machines finds his sex-role spelled out in a context of machinery and mechanical aptitudes which may or may not have anything to do with law and order or war, but which focus instead on the efficient operation of machinery ... The same is true for the family. Wife, mother, daughter and sister are female; husband, father, son, and brother are male. It is often said that wives and mothers are the proper members of the family to cook, keep house, and care for children, and husbands and fathers are the proper members of the family to go out to work, earn a living, be in charge of the family, and have authority.

(1968: 41-42)

Informants offered "a very fundamental and important piece of evidence," Schneider added, when they stipulated the clarification that:

[I]f wives and mothers are the proper members of the family to cook and keep house, this is *not* because they are wives and mothers but because they are *women*. And if husbands and fathers are the members of the family who should go out and earn a living, who should be in charge of the family, this is because they are *men* and *not* because they are husbands and fathers.

(1968: 42, original emphasis)

However, his account of the means by which especially good informants distinguished between orders of cultural logic – between, in his words, a “defining element,” such as being a man or a woman, and a “role definition,” such as cleaning the house (1968: 43) – did not explain how biological sex difference came to be a defining element to begin with.

## 5.5 Circulating Conundrums?

The task of asking whether the displacement of one binary opposition onto another could serve as an “explanation” – even of a symbolic system – was not only undertaken by feminists in the 1970s and 1980s. Other critics of both structuralism and structural functionalism made similar points about the somewhat circular arguments that resulted from what Carol MacCormack described as “stark categories standing in wooden opposition” (1980). However, feminist anthropologists working on sex and gender in this period (and there were a lot of them) repeatedly pushed their boats quite far out into the uncharted territory described by Yanagisako and Collier in the effort to question the relationship of “biological” reproduction to the perceived differences between women and men.

This task required a conversion of Schneider’s observation that biology serves as a core symbol for the nuclear family into a question about how sex comes to be seen as biological to begin with?

Having recognised our model of biological difference as a particular mode of thinking about relations between people, we should be able to question “the biological facts” of sex themselves. We expect that our questioning of the presumably biological core of gender will eventually lead to the rejection of any dichotomy between sex and gender as biological and cultural facts and will open up the way for an analysis of the symbolic and social processes by which both are constructed in relation to each other.

*(Yanagisako and Collier 1987: 42)*

Wisely, Yanagisako and Collier placed the analysis of the cultural habit of “continually rediscovering gendered categories” (1987: 49) central to their prescription for the reinvention of both kinship and gender studies. Their call to reject the cycle of presuming a binary form of gender, and then rediscovering gender in every binary form, advocated a form of analytical prophylaxis that required a cull of established interpretive devices, including Schneider’s neat divisions and alignments.

Both gender and kinship studies, we suggest, have foundered on the unquestioned assumption that the biologically given difference in the roles of men and women in sexual reproduction lies at the

core of the cultural organization of gender even as it constitutes the genealogical grid at the core of kinship studies. Only by calling this assumption into question can we begin to ask how other cultures might understand the difference between women and men, and simultaneously make possible studies of how our own culture comes to focus on coitus and parturition as the moments constituting masculinity and femininity.

*(Yanagisako and Collier 1987: 49)*

Increasingly in the decades since Collier and Yanagisako, among many others, called for a questioning of the binary form of sexual difference, and the focus on heterosexual intercourse as the defining element of kinship and gender, all of these elements have begun to disaggregate. In a kind of reverse proof of how tightly bound together it is possible for kinship, gender, sexuality, and parenting to be, the formerly presumed unities and dependencies among them have been exposed as forced contingencies. Schneider was prescient in arguing that sexual intercourse is the core symbol of American kinship because it offers a folk model of human reproduction. History has shown him to have been very accurate on this point. But it is feminist anthropology, and feminist scholarship more widely, that has revealed why sexual difference is inextricable from what Kate Millett famously named sexual politics – and why this connection matters.

## 5.6 Conclusion

As anthropology moves forward in what has been called the “Century of Biology” it will be important to remember that both the politics of sexuality and gender and the politics of biology continue to diversify in both their content and their form. And while many of the post-Foucauldian projects dedicated to the changing life of biopower will become even more important in the context of increasing biological surveillance, complex biosocialities, and new molecular identities, there will also be the not-so-new bio-logics of racism, sexism, and xenophobia to contend with. So much is already clear from the undisguised Malthusianism of current debates about migration, the intractable hold of a highly iniquitous sexual division of labor, and the flight from the STEM subjects of young women and girls. The complicated politics of fertility remain dominated by “the biological facts of sexual reproduction” in the new form of the ticking biological clock, and women continue to be blamed for “post-poning” pregnancies, when they pursue higher education and for having too many children too early when they don’t.

It is ironically a symptom of these same sexist reproductive patterns that within the academy much of the important feminist literature from

the 1970s and 1980s is no longer taught, and no longer appears on syllabi. Despite having been one of the most intellectually powerful influences on twentieth-century anthropology, the feminist debates over gender, reproduction, and kinship are rarely brought into conversations about, for example, egg freezing or IVF. Both the anthropology of reproduction and the new kinship studies have fortunately continued to thrive, alongside queer anthropology and the anthropology of the biosciences. These are crucial resources in the effort to address climate change, migration, and the food supply as the century progresses. And if an anthropology of biology is to take its place alongside these closely related subdisciplines, it will be as well if it remembers its origins in the feminist writings where the politics of biology have received one of their most thorough critical assessments to date.

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## Notes

1. See Franklin and Lock 2003; Gibbon and Novas 2007; Good 1995, 2001; and Lock and Nguyen 2010.
2. Although the anthropology of biology is overdue for a synthetic assessment and meta-review, this chapter takes a different approach, by moving back in time to examine some of the important origins of this field. I am grateful to Sandra Bamford for the invitation to contribute to this volume with a chapter linking the new kinship studies to feminist anthropology and the politics of biology and it is my hope this intersectional genealogy will continue to inspire critical scholarship interrogating the complex role of biological knowledges and idioms in contemporary society.
3. Herschberger's text was written between 1941 and 1946, while de Beauvoir's account was written slightly later, and published in 1949. These two mid-century feminist texts significantly preceded, and presciently anticipated, the period of widespread feminist activism that took hold in the 1960s. They thus form a bridge of sorts between the popular and successful feminist movements of the early and late twentieth century, and what is notable about these two key transitional texts is their primary emphasis on reproductive biology.

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