

WS 18
Measuring kinship: the end of negotiating relatedness?

30.09.2019, Teil 1: 14:00-15:30 Uhr / Teil 2: 16:00-17:30 Uhr, Raum D433

Organisiert von / organized by:

Tatjana Thelen (University of Vienna)

Christof Lammer (Alpen-Adria-University Klagenfurt)

It has become a truism in anthropology that kinship is negotiated. The idea that kinship is a universal human relation that links people even without their knowledge is nevertheless gaining persuasive power. Based on this assumption, diverse technologies are being developed and applied to measuring kinship in order to achieve closure in negotiations of relatedness. For example, the routine application of paternity tests and genomic testing seems to put an end to insecure identities and ethnic or national belonging. The increasing importance of such ‘proofs’ of kinship to diverse claims to inclusion and entitlement, displays an interesting tension. At a time when the seeming voluntariness of ‘new’ family forms is celebrated as an expression of tolerance and supposedly declining importance of kinship in ‘modern’ societies, the ‘end of negotiation’ could increasingly sustain and consolidate a naturalization of social and political inequalities.

This workshop sets out to interrogate the enduring — or even increasing — importance of kinship, as well as its practical and epistemological consequences. First, we seek to discuss ways in which ideas of kinship evolve and are translated into diverse scientific, bureaucratic and legal technologies for testing, measuring and modelling kin relations. Secondly, we are interested in the consequences of converting degrees of kinship into (at least temporarily) non-negotiable facts: such determinations often entail obligations (e.g., care, knowledge of health risks or financial support) and entitlements (e.g., to inheritance, citizenship, family reunification, affirmative action or insurance and compensation payments). Thus, we invite contributions that examine the development and application of technologies that aim at establishing the truth of kinship and discuss their wider implications.

Vortragende Teil 1/ Speakers part 1:

Tatjana Thelen (University of Vienna) und

Christof Lammer (Alpen-Adria-University Klagenfurt)

Measuring kinship: introduction

It has become a truism in anthropology that kinship is negotiated. The idea that kinship is a universal human relation that links people even without their knowledge is nevertheless gaining persuasive power. Based on this assumption, diverse technologies are being developed and applied to measuring kinship in order to achieve closure in negotiations of relatedness. For example, the routine application of paternity tests and genomic testing seems to put an end to insecure identities and ethnic or national belonging. The increasing importance of such “proofs” of kinship to diverse claims to inclusion and entitlement, displays an interesting tension. At a time when the seeming voluntariness of “new” family forms is celebrated as an expression of tolerance and supposedly declining importance of kinship in ‘modern’ societies, the ‘end of negotiation’ could increasingly sustain and consolidate a naturalization of social and political inequalities.

Susan McKinnon (University of Virginia)

The eugenic record office's trait book and annotated genealogies:

Technologies for the construction of the category 'degenerate families'

This paper examines the technologies used by Eugenic Record Office (ERO) researchers in the US to bring into being the category of so-called "degenerate families." Theoretically, the ERO mixed new ideas of genetic heredity with older humoral concepts of heredity and degeneration. Methodologically, the ERO developed not only a detailed Trait Book that listed the characteristics to be quantified for each individual, but also diagrammatic and narrative conventions for calculating and making visible the intergenerational transmission of what they considered "pathological traits" in the genealogies of the families they documented. The ERO published numerous case studies that became the basis for the eugenic argument for the termination of "degenerate" family lines through the institution of marital prohibitions and sterilization programs. This argument informed the 1927 Supreme Court case, *Buck v. Bell*, which legalized the sterilization of tens of thousands of socially and economically marginalized Americans over subsequent decades.

Rosalie Stolz (Heidelberg University)

Fatherless children and listening spirits:

Gift technologies of revealing kinship among the Khmu of northern Laos

Echoing the earlier conceptual move of taking anthropological kinship studies 'back home' into Euro-American settings, the recent rediscovery of determination at work in kinship in western settings could be fruitfully employed for re-engaging with the ways in which kinship in non-western settings often plays out in dynamics of openness and (claims of) closure. While kinship is ritually recognised and thereby (un)produced, the facts of kinship created therewith are acknowledged by 'listening' spirits and determine personal life trajectories and fates. Based on two examples from ethnographic fieldwork among the Khmu of northern Laos it will be shown how kin relations are effectively concealed in so called 'small marriages' that declare a child 'fatherless' on the one hand, and inadvertently revealed in cases of failed ritualised gift exchange on the other. It will be concluded that 'gift technologies' produce and render visible 'unnegotiable' facts of kinship in similar ways as supposedly 'modern' technologies.

Antonia Modelhart (HafenCity University Hamburg)

The biological truth of kinship:

Egg freezing and the non-negotiable potential of the female oocyte

Egg Freezing can be seen as a technology to ensure proven kinship. Providing an opportunity for women to secure an "own" child, it also opens new negotiations. Essentially the same procedure is categorized as either Medical Egg Freezing or Social Egg Freezing, building upon an implicit nature/culture divide. Whereas the former refers to medically indicated reasons (e.g. cancer and potential loss of fertility) and thus "natural" reasons, Social Egg Freezing points to biographical aspects such as career considerations or not having a partner. In both cases though, the female egg is discussed as a "biological truth" (Franklin 2006: 548) ultimately determining female fertility and thus the chance of being genetically related to a future child. This "genetic imperative" (Martin 2010: 540) is hardly questioned and comes with moral obligations of constructing kinship. Through such processes, female fertility is re-naturalized as potential for creating kinship as a non-negotiable fact.

Katharine Tyler (University of Exeter)

Reflections on genetic ancestry tests and the formation of ethnic and racial identities and ancestries

This paper explores the study of family historians' (referred to as 'genealogists') use of genetic ancestry tests in the course of their family history research in the context of postcolonial Britain. My focus is upon the ways in which the use of these tests shapes the formation of genealogists' ethnic, racial and national identities and ancestries. I argue that while there is some significant and important work on the ways in which white Americans and African Americans deploy these tests to trace their family histories, there is little comparable work in the context of postcolonial Britain. Drawing on sociological, anthropological and geographical research on identity, genetic ancestry testing and genealogy, I set out some of the theoretical issues and detail possible methodologies and methods that will bridge this gap in the current literature on race, ethnicity, identity and genealogy.

Vortragende Teil 2/ Speakers part 2:

Ferenc Dávid Markó (The Graduate Institute Geneva)

Everyone is a cousin? Kinship in the South Sudanese citizenship office

This contribution discusses diverse bureaucratic technologies of proving kinship as means to establish national belonging. Following the declaration of independence, South Sudan reimagined itself as a modern state through the introduction of new identification technologies for the establishment of citizenship. Besides these techniques, every citizen must also prove membership in one of the desirable ethnic groups. As almost nobody in South Sudan possesses birth certificates, ethnic belonging needs to be verified by a next-of-kin, legally defined as an "older blood-relative". This opens up space for negotiations between mostly Nuer and Dinka verification bureaucrats and applicants from different ethnic communities. Building on ethnographic fieldwork inside the South Sudanese citizenship office, the paper elaborates the topic of the negotiated statehood through an analysis of the flexibility and situational nature of kinship. Notwithstanding the actual flexibility of kinship, these situations cannot be understood without the normative basis of kinship – marking a possible limit or even an end to negotiation.

Anna Jabloner (Columbia University)

Ethnicity pending: genetic counselors as brokers of belonging in the U.S.

While genomics as large-scale scientific-industrial enterprise makes universal claims about the potentials of various new tests to settle questions of health risks as well as of ancestral belonging, genetic counseling as a professional field has exploded into new applications across clinics and genomics industry in reproduction, oncology, and other fields. On a small scale, genetic counselors make the promises of genomics applicable to individuals as they combine family histories and genetic test results into personalized future interpretations for patients and consumers. At the core of counseling work yet almost as a corollary, kinship gets folded into counselors' deliberations of population-based risks and potential future outcomes, whether of pregnancies or cancer risks. In the United States, genomics' indisputable focus on race sets up a counseling encounter grounded in the presumption of biological racial/ethnic populations, in which these categories are renegotiated on an interpersonal level. In these negotiations, in a tumultuous political moment, scientific authority (regardless of industrial entanglements or marketing ploys) combines with what Strathern called a European-American "synthetic nostalgia" for culture to frame kinship and belonging as pending their genomic uncovering.

Irene Moretti (Leiden University)

Kin enough! Bureaucratic classifications, kin definitions, and the promise of equality

This paper explores the ways in which bureaucratic classifications are constructed and negotiated to define the moral and political boundaries of family ties. It takes road accidents as a case study and focuses on the establishment and redistribution of fair compensations payed out by welfare state agencies and commercial insurance companies. It is based on a ten-month ethnographic fieldwork in Emilia-Romagna (Italy), where I conducted participant observation and in-depth interviews with victims of road accidents, NGOs, bureaucrats and insurance professionals. Through an analysis of legal documents and these interviews, I show how governmental and private institutions employ exclusive, yet different, classifications as a technology to define the boundaries of family ties. These materialize in the redistribution of economic entitlements as well as moral and economic obligations to those considered to be “kin enough”. By describing the life history of a victim and his intimate network, I explore how these definitions translate into and sometimes clash with everyday representations of ‘kinship’. While unfolding the ways in which classifications and definitions of ‘kin enough’ and ‘kinship’ are constructed, employed and experienced, I highlight the limits of the equalising promise attached to allegedly dehumanized bureaucratic classifications.

Discussant: Staffan Müller-Wille (University of Exeter)

Measuring kinship – A Western obsession?

My comments will draw on the papers presented in the session “Measuring kinship: The end of negotiating relatedness?” to explore the aporias associated with turning kinship into a quantifiable relation. Even biologically, I will argue, there is no straight-forward way to “measure” kinship. Attempts to gauge the “distance” that separates, or connects, two given relatives therefore are not self-explanatory, but need to be analyzed with respect to their social and political functions.

Staffan Müller-Wille is Associate Professor in the History and Philosophy of the Life Sciences and Co-director of Egenis, the Centre for the Study of the Life Sciences, at the University of Exeter. He also holds an Honorary Chair at the Institute for History of Medicine and Science Studies of the University of Lübeck. His interdisciplinary research has a focus on the history of natural history, anthropology, and genetics. He co-authored *A Cultural History of Heredity* (2012) and *The Gene: From Genetics to Postgenomics* (2016).