The Anthropology of Sibling Relations
Shared Parentage, Experience, and Exchange

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Contents

List of Figures ix
Acknowledgments xi

1 The Anthropology of Sibling Relations: Explorations in Shared Parentage, Experience, and Exchange 1
   Tatjana Thelen, Cati Coe, and Erdmute Alber

Part 1 Siblingship as Shared Parentage and Experience

2 “Sharing Made Us Sisters”: Sisterhood, Migration, and Household Dynamics in Mexico and Namibia 29
   Julia Pauli

3 Kinship as Friendship: Brothers and Sisters in Kwahu, Ghana 51
   Sjaak van der Geest

Part 2 Siblingship as Life-Long Exchange

4 Within the Thicket of Intergenerational Sibling Relations: A Case Study from Northern Benin 73
   Erdmute Alber

5 When Siblings Determine Your “Fate”: Sibling Support and Educational Mobility in Rural Northwest China 97
   Helena Obendiek

6 Transnational Migration and Changes in Sibling Support in Ghana 123
   Cati Coe

Afterword 147
Janet Carsten

List of Contributors 151
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONTENTS</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Since the 1990s, after a gap following David Schneider’s critique (1984), there has been a remarkable revival of kinship in anthropology. The new kinship studies shifted interest to practices, processes, and meanings in contrast to a previous focus on jural rights and obligations, kin terms, and structures. Within this efflorescence of the literature, certain issues have dominated, while others have been largely overlooked. Exciting issues entailing moral and legal dilemmas or contesting biological notions of kinship dominate the research agenda. These include reproductive technologies (Rapp 1999, Franklin and Ragoné 1998), international adoption and the constructions and surrogates of parenthood (Howell 2006, Leinaweaver 2008, Marre and Briggs 2009, Stryker 2010, Yngvesson 2010), and “new” legally recognised forms of alliance (Smith 2001, Weston 1991). Their common ground is to highlight how kinship is produced through social practices rather than determined by the physical act of birth.

However, the “new” kinship studies have something in common with “classical” anthropological research on kinship: much of the scholarship generated by the new approach has remained within the frame of what was formerly called, in the older kinship literature, alliance and descent. In contrast to the multifaceted discussions around biological as well as social parenting (“descent”) on the one hand, and
marriage and other forms of connecting and disconnecting couples on the other (“alliance”), other relations within the *web of kinship*, as Meyer Fortes (1949) called it, remain largely neglected. One of these neglected themes is the relations between brothers and sisters—the theme of our book. We argue that these relations are as important to the maintenance of families and households as parenthood and marriage. Thus a focus on siblingship, we argue, not only puts a largely neglected relation at the center of attention but allows us to revise the “old” problem of social cohesion.

Linked to this first issue, our second point is that putting sibling relations at the center allows for insights into the making and breaking of kinship ties across the life course. Michael Lambek (2011) and Tatjana Thelen (2010) point out that the recent literature on kinship focuses on the first stages of life rather than other forms of kinship that may be more significant later in life and that involve separation, alliance, and changing forms of exchange and reciprocity. Siblingship gives us an opportunity to explore how relatedness is created, maintained, and broken over the entire life course and even thereafter. It constitutes a unique entry point into questions of flexibility and stability, as people creatively enact their cultural understandings of kinship roles in changing circumstances. This is so, among other reasons, because relations between siblings do not start inevitably at the moment of birth, nor even during childhood. As the papers by Erdmute Alber and Cati Coe in this volume show, people may discover or mobilize sisters or brothers during different phases in their life cycle and for different purposes; moreover, the actual behavior as well as the role expectations of siblings may change over time. And finally, as Lambek (2011) argues, looking at kinship from the perspective of the end of life makes the relations of siblings even more important. Succession frequently depends not only on the parent-child relations but also on the (mutual) acceptance of siblings.

Furthermore, the diversity of sibling relations involving different genders, generations, and norms makes it an extremely fruitful field for looking at how meaningful relations are generated and maintained in various contexts. In the West, with its emphasis on the centrality of parent-child and conjugal relations, “the rules for conducting a sibling relationship have never been established; ambivalence is its keynote, and instability its underlying condition” (Sanders 2002: 1).
Although in other contexts, like in South Asia, sibling relationships across the life course are more strongly defined and articulated (Weisner 1993), even there, there is variability in the emotional intensity and level of conflict that specific siblings experience. Siblingship seems to be established and maintained through diverse means. Brothers and sisters may be defined by their common biological fathers or mothers, such as through being the children of the same sperm donor (Sabean 2009). However, shared childhoods may be as significant as shared parenthood in establishing the feelings associated with siblings—whether warmth and affection, or jealousy and rivalry. Through shared experiences in households where they are fostered, the children of siblings or even nonkin can grow attached to one another and call one another sisters and brothers, as the paper by Julia Pauli shows. Furthermore, as adults, providing economic support can be a significant part of the relation, including raising or supporting siblings’ children, as discussed by Helena Obendiek and Erdmute Alber. These norms can vary during different life phases of siblings and be brought to bear differently at different points in the life course. For example, economic and social support, or a sense of intimacy, between adult siblings may be mobilized on the basis of mutual suffering during a shared childhood (Pauli) or on the basis of shared parentage despite not knowing one another, whether at all or well, in childhood (Alber).

Some of the reason for the diversity of norms, other than that they may change across the life course, is because siblings are constructed simultaneously as equal or similar (as children of the same parents) and as different, because of their differences in birth order, age, and gender status. A. R. Radcliffe-Brown posited that siblings were equivalent to one another generationally (we discuss his ideas further in the next section), and sibling relations do entail relations between people of more or less the same age. However, they also entail relations between older and younger siblings, between sisters and brothers, and between adult siblings with different social class positions, economic and social capital, and connections through marriage. In both their similarity and diversity, sibling relations are modeled on other relations and simultaneously provide models for other kinship relations. For instance, the “motherly care” of an older sister toward her younger sibling builds on conceptions of parenting, but it does not make the relation a parent-child bond, yet the relation is also different.
from a sibling relation that builds on shared suffering in the past. Similarly, “equality” or closeness as a norm in sibling relations might be the basis for the ideal marriage or friendship, as Sjaak van der Geest discusses. We do not fully develop this theme in this volume, but it is important to keep in mind that calling somebody “brother” in order to express solidarity is a very frequent expression of closeness in many regions of the world (Dent 2007; see also Baumann 1995 on “cousins”). Furthermore, imaginaries of brotherhood and sisterhood have been used to mobilize social movements and provide a sense of intimacy to the abstract concept of the nation (Herzfeld 2007) and to community life within religious orders (Hüwelmeier 2009).

The diversity not only of forms but also of norms might be a reason that the analytic exploration of siblingship has been hampered. The contributions in this volume take the opposite perspective, however: they show that it is exactly this variety that provides insights into the creating, maintaining, and breaking of meaningful relations. Because of its inherent variety, siblingship proves to be a privileged entry point to revisit “old” questions regarding the relation between friendship and kinship, intimacies conceptualized as incest, and forms of support across social class, generation, and geographic distance. In the following pages, we give a short overview on the scattered reflections on siblingship within anthropology, followed by a tentative systematization of the three ways siblingship is therein conceived, before proceeding to the contributions of the collected papers.

Siblings: Back to Beginnings

There is a remarkable silence around siblingship in anthropology, not only compared to the amount of literature on other kin relations, but also given the significance placed on sibling relations in many other popular and scientific discourses. Moreover, the existing anthropological literature on the complex relation between brothers and sisters does not form a unified body but seems to be scattered among the literatures on kinship and socialization. Some attention was given to siblingship in classic kinship anthropological works, but there have been different regional traditions in doing so, leading to different insights and gaps. This section does not attempt to give a comprehensive overview of the anthropological literature on siblingship, nor does it deal with the many empirical case studies. Rather, we summarize some
central theoretical arguments about siblingship and their underlying reasoning. As with so many themes in the anthropology of kinship, we return to the structural-functional “classics” as the fathers—not parents, as mothers are largely missing—of anthropological thinking about siblingship. Like Michael Herzfeld (2007) in his discussion of global kinship, we return to these classical works reflexively, in the spirit of mining them for what is useful.

As far as we can see, the first theorem was formulated by Radcliffe-Brown, who already in 1924 was thinking about the prominent position of the mother’s brother in South Africa (Radcliffe-Brown 1924). Interestingly, the debates about the central position of the mother’s brother that started with this essay and continued in the kinship literature rarely examined the cross-gender sibling relation between the “mother” and her “brother.” Rather, a way of thinking about the intergenerational effects of siblingship was invented, without examining the sibling relation itself. An underlying rationale for this thinking was the orientation toward descent theory within structural functionalism and its interest in social cohesion through kinship. A key question has been how far the special position and ambivalent authority of the mother’s brother toward the children of his sister expressed an old and still underlying matrilinearity or whether the extent of the relation between the mother’s brother and the sister’s son confirmed the relations between children and their matrilateral descent group within a general setting of patrilineality (Radcliffe-Brown 1924, Goody 1959; for a review of the debate see Bloch and Sperber 2004). Although structural-functionalist studies aimed at explaining social cohesion, they failed to see the contribution of the interaction between the mother’s brother and his sister, including the role played by the children in creating and sustaining a relation between the adult siblings.

The second contribution of Radcliffe-Brown to the study of siblingship is his notion of the “principle of the unity of the sibling group” (1950), which is connected to what he names the “principle of the equivalence of siblings” (1971). What he meant by this is that siblings are mutually substitutable, because they all hold the same position in the kinship structure. This perspective comes from a way of thinking about kinship that is oriented around descent and descent alone. It tends to oversee the vast differences in the position of siblings—a point to which we return later.
The structural conception of marriage, which soon was to challenge descent as the dominant organizing principle of kinship in anthropological thinking, was characterized by a similar omission in theorizing sibling relations. Claude Lévi-Strauss, for instance, in his work on the structures of kinship (1969) perceived the exchange of women, through marriage, to be a form of communication between two groups of brothers. How these brothers specifically interacted with their sisters who were given in marriage was not considered interesting. One reason for the neglect of the sibling relation was that structuralists saw the core family (and the incest taboo in particular) as the basis of other social relations. Thus, besides marriage, all other kinds of cross-gender relations between women and men were not of particular interest in kinship theory (see Weiner 1992 for a similar argument). Marriage was viewed as the exchange par excellence on which other forms of exchange were modeled, so that women were seen mainly as wives, rather than as sisters, who enabled their brothers’ marriages through the exchange of bride price.

With the symbolic and later postmodern turn, yet another focus on siblings and the basis of their relations became central. Following David Schneider, Mac Marshall was most explicit in emphasizing that siblingship is a cultural category with a specific meaning used for “full” as well as for “half” or “fictive” brothers. In view of the Polynesian material, he rejected descent-oriented thinking, which viewed classificatory naming as first used for “full consanguines” and then extended to other, like relations (Marshall 1983: 2). In contrast, he argued in favor of a notion of siblingship that takes different practices of co-residence or created kinship into account. Thereby he put stress on what Schneider had called “the code of conduct”: “To act like siblings is to become siblings” (1977: 649; emphasis in original). Contributing to more than a sense of diversity, Marshall’s research pointed to the importance of mundane practices of nurturing as well as feelings of closeness in establishing and maintaining meaningful ties. The interest in processes of making kin was later expanded within what became known as “new kinship.” For example, Mary Weisman-tel (1995) in her study on Zumbagua adoption in the highlands of Ecuador showed the importance of feeding practices for establishing parenthood. Similarly, Janet Carsten’s work (1997) on the making of
kinship among the Malay highlights the central role that processes of sharing food play.

Although presented here in chronological order, all three ways of constructing and understanding siblingship are still salient in theory as well as practice. In the next section, we explore these different ways of constructing siblingship, as each highlights different aspects and constraints of a possible relation, before turning to the ways siblings are seen as a model of and for other relations.

**Three Ways of Constructing Siblingship**

In line with the proposition put forward by Mac Marshall in 1977 in relation to kinship in general, we formulate the three different defining criteria of siblingship as different modes of sharing. First, siblingship as shared parenthood focuses attention on the wider ramifications of the sibling relationship, particularly intergenerationally. Second, the construction of siblingship as based in shared experience highlights siblings’ childhoods and similarity. Finally, siblingship through the lens of exchange and care facilitates a longitudinal perspective and highlights the differences between siblings, particularly as adults.

**Siblings through Shared Parentage—Highlighting Intergenerational Significance**

As noted, in the structural-functional paradigm, relations between siblings are perceived as deriving from shared parenthood: Radcliffe-Brown understands a sibling group to be “the body of brothers and sisters of common parentage” (1950: 24). Common descent from the same parents often entails sharing intergenerational obligations such as managing care for aging parents, calling the same people with the same kinship term, and being jointly involved in legal cases of inheritance, among others. These characteristics make the sibling relation unique. Shared parentage could be extended to social siblings; it could be plural or exclusive; but, in any case, it would remain parentage. Sharing parents can give siblings a sense of similarity and connection.

However, that siblings share parents—be it shared mothers, fathers, or both—does not necessarily mean that they experience equivalence in relation to their parents, which is the second part of Radcliffe-Brown’s
Tatjana Thelen, Cati Coe, and Erdmute Alber

formulation. The principle of the unity of the sibling group has been criticized, among other reasons, for not emphasizing the importance of the seniority principle. Seniority can, for example, be expressed by different kinship terms, as it is in the case in many African languages (Van der Geest, this volume). In Baatonum, the language of the Baatombu Alber writes about in this volume, for instance, the older brother or sister is called by a different kinship term than the younger brother or sister. Additionally, sharing parents can result in sibling rivalry or tension, which is a prominent theme in Western culture; the Bible is full of violent sibling rivalry (Schwartz 1997). The psychodynamics within families means that siblings tend to react to one another in responding to situations, such as taking on the roles of “the good child” and “the bad child.” The siblings of a terminally ill child may put on a front that they are fine to prevent a parent from worrying about them, because their ill sibling is causing such anxiety and concern within the family (Bluebond-Langner 1991). The topic is highlighted particularly well in the psychological literature (Adler 1924, Sutton-Smith and Rosenberg 1970, Sanders 2009), and rivalry appears not only in childhood but also later in life, especially in issues around succession, inheritance, and caring for elderly parents (Hohkamp 2011; Lambek 2011; Gluckman, Mitchell, and Barnes 1949; Van Vleet 2008).

Even though it is easy to reject the idea of the unity of the sibling group as well as the principle of equivalence of siblings based on the empirical evidence, nevertheless we think that Radcliffe-Brown’s concept is valuable in grasping at least one aspect of sibling relations. When boys or men call themselves brothers in order to emphasize their mutuality, equality, and closeness, they are mobilizing the concept of sibling unity for social purposes. The same happens, of course, in the case of girls or women who call themselves sisters in order to express their closeness. In addition, closeness and mutuality are also constructed between brothers and their sisters, as various European fairy tales, such as “Hansel and Gretel,” prove. Moreover, the conceptualization of siblingship as shared parenthood by Radcliffe-Brown and others gives us the sense that sibling relations are significant in creating and sustaining ties across the generations. As Igor Kopytoff points out, siblingship is not solely an intragenerational connection.

The early insight gained from the discussion of the role of the mother’s brother toward his nephews and nieces has to be extended,
however, to the relationship between the father’s sister and her respective nieces or nephews, as Alber discusses in her paper, and to the brother’s sister in relation to her brother’s children (Meier 1999). The same holds true for the no-less important relations between children and their father’s brother, who is, especially in settings characterized by patrilineality and patrilocality, frequently named a father himself (see Müller 1997). In patrilineal and patrilocal settings where brothers live together with their wives and their respective children, the children of brothers often call themselves brothers and sisters as well. This fact is nevertheless due to the relationship between brothers, their descent from the same parents, and its effect on the next generation. And of course, the relations between sisters—often overlooked in the literature—are equally essential for their children. Heike Drotbohm (2012), for example, discusses a case of sisters who mutually care for their children in the context of transnational migration.

Furthermore, siblings play a key role in creating kin ties in the next generation when they foster one another’s children or maintain their relationships by giving gifts to one another’s children. In South India, the mother’s brother’s gifts to his sister’s daughters at ritual occasions were viewed as the sister’s share of her parents’ inheritance maintained by her brother (Kapadia 1995). As Obendiek’s paper shows, a wealthier sibling may support a poorer sibling by educating his or her children, so that those children can support their parents in the future. Siblingship can therefore even continue after a sibling’s death, as it constructs aunt/uncle-nephew/niece relations. Sibling relations can also affect the previous generation of parents. For example, Coe found in her research that southern Ghanaians worry that the conflict between step-siblings will cause divorce among new couples, and they therefore prefer to have children from previous marriages live with grandparents, aunts, or uncles.

Shared parentage is one way that siblingship is constructed and understood. As a perspective, it highlights the ways that sibling relations affect relationships across the generations. In contrast, in the second way of conceptualizing siblings—on the basis of shared experience—the emphasis is more on feelings of mutuality.
Sharing parents is not the only way to see oneself as a sibling, nor does it automatically lead to feelings of being close to a sibling. Shared experiences during childhood can also result in people calling themselves brothers or sisters. This point is particularly highlighted in Pauli’s paper, which shows that children related by more distant blood ties may “choose” to become (and stay) siblings because they share distinctive childhood memories. Having experienced a common childhood and shared food, suffering, and joy gives siblings a sense of similarity that, seemingly, reflects the structural equivalence argument. However, the basis of such a relation is not—as Radcliffe-Brown would probably have it—their being born into that position; instead, their shared experience generates feelings of similarity that can be converted into practices of mutuality.

Demographic changes over the last hundred years have resulted in shared childhoods becoming even more important in Western families and elsewhere. In earlier times in Europe, poverty, inheritance rules, and educational rules among peasant and artisan households caused some siblings to leave the house around age fourteen. Younger siblings might be born after an older sibling had departed from the household, and some of the intervening siblings may not have survived their early childhood (on changing demographic and kinship patterns in Europe, see for example the contributions in Grandits and Heady 2003 and Grandits 2010). Similarly, in southern Ghana, where having eight to ten children was normal in the mid-twentieth century, the older siblings were perhaps ten to fifteen years older than their younger siblings and could help raise them, taking some of the burden of the younger siblings’ school tuition from aged parents. Now that parents can usually expect to see all their children grow up, in Ghana and elsewhere, they have fewer children more closely spaced and therefore more similar in age. These fewer children grow up with more shared experiences and can expect more long-lasting relations. This changes the quality, content, and construction of these relations.

However, even when siblings grow up together, they may in fact grow up in different environments because there is different investment in siblings because of their gender, birth order, health, or personality (Johnson and Sabean 2011); families may be at different
Aasgaard, Reidar, 52, 68
adoption
and new kinship studies, 1, 6
and sibling relations, 102, 106
of a sibling’s child, 18
See also fosterage
age
differences in
and demographic changes, 10, 131
and sibling diversity, 3, 10–11, 64, 100, 105, 125
and sibling caregiving, 12, 19, 37, 43–44, 61, 126
similarity in, and sibling closeness, 38, 40–42, 44, 87
alliance. See marriage
amity, 54, 68
See also friendship
apprenticeship
and fosterage, 78, 84–85
kin support for, 77, 79
as providing pathway to adulthood, 79, 88–89, 90, 132

Benedict, Ruth, 14
Bible, the
sibling relations in, 8, 16, 55, 159n7
on siblings, 160n18
birth order
and hierarchy, 12, 60–61, 164n9
and sibling caregiving, 12, 19, 37, 43–44, 61, 126
and sibling diversity, 3, 10, 21, 43, 60–61, 125
and sibling intimacy, 40, 47
and sibling support, 114–15
significance of, in psychological literature, 155n2
terminology for, 8, 164n8

Blackwood, Evelyn, 11, 32
Borneman, John, 24
brothers
in Africanist literature, 14, 16
discourse about, 4, 8, 12, 15, 52
fosterage by, 85, 92, 138, 140
and friendship, 15, 57–61, 66–67, 87
and imaginaries of nationhood, 4, 17, 25
as privileged siblings, 43
sisterly support for, 114, 119
and sisters, 9–17, 62–70, 73–96, 112–15, 124, 140
support from, 62–64, 81–95, 100–20, 133, 139–40
terms for, 8, 37, 162n8, 162n10
See also mother’s brother

Carsten, Janet
on kinship terminology, 148
on the making of kin, 6–7, 31, 55, 69, 127
on the significance of siblings, 15, 24
on the state, 149
Cepaitiene, Auksuole, 52, 68
child care
by siblings, 12, 19, 37, 43–44, 61, 126

childhood
gender socialization during, 58
and the life course, 2, 31–32, 91
shared experiences in, as creating siblings, 10–12, 24–49, 87, 148, 157n13, 162n10
siblings’ lack of shared, 3, 82, 87, 131

children
mobility of, 134
class, social
and differences between siblings, 3, 12, 41, 76–78, 93–94
and elder care, 112–14, 119
and fosterage, 76–78, 86–87, 136, 145
and kinship ideals, 135–36, 144, 145
and sibling support, 76–78, 102–9, 112–15, 128, 134–37
See also education, higher; migration, urban
cohort
definition of, 125, 163n5
siblings as members of a, 77, 97, 125, 126, 144
See also generation
compadrazgo
in field research, 33
as ritualized relation, 30
among siblings, 45
conflicts
avoidance of, 88, 89, 92, 143–44, 162n9
and closeness, 31, 61, 143–44
intergenerational, 73–96
between siblings
in childhood, 84
over economic support, 102, 108–9, 139
See also jealousy; sibling rivalry; witchcraft
demographic changes
in China, 97, 105, 110–11, 163n1, 163n3
in Europe, 10
in Ghana, 10, 131, 162n2, 162n5
and sibling relations, 19, 21, 119
and the state, 19, 110–11, 149, 163n1, 163n3
See also one-child policy
Dent, Alexander, 4, 12
descent. See parentage
domestic service
and child protection organizations, 80
and fosterage, 75–78, 86, 136–37, 161n2
and urban migration, 38, 42, 77, 86
Drotbohm, Heike, 9, 123, 138
dyads
dominant, 14, 124, 126, 144
parent-child, 123
education, higher, 82, 110–19, 121
See also class, social; schooling
der elder care
and conflict between siblings, 8, 20
by educated children, 99, 112–14, 119
gendered differences in providing, 112–15, 119–20, 164n12
and migration, 113, 138
as obligation of sibling set, 20, 98, 103, 108–9, 111, 127
and one-child policy, 19, 99
as reciprocal for parental investments, 18, 19
and sibling relations, 13, 20, 119
and the state, 112, 164n12
equivalence of siblings
as challenged by economic inequality, 77, 94, 105–6
as challenged by sibling diversity, 3, 86, 148
as created by shared experience, 43–44, 47
description of, 5, 94
discourse of, 8, 31, 42, 48
and intimacy, 57–61
See also age; birth order; gender; solidarity
exchange
and adulthood, 13, 25, 134
and emotion, 117–18
as enabled by sibling differences, 13, 124–25
as flowing stepwise through the generations, 126, 133, 140, 144–45
between friends, 69
and household survival, 39, 98, 145
as making kin, 12, 24, 93, 95
marriage as, 6, 12
morality of, 117
between siblings, 41–42, 76–77, 81–82, 97–121, 122–46
See also support, economic
fairy tales
sibling relations in, 8, 55
femifocality
definition of, 32
and female heads of households, 34–35, 38–39
and migration, 34, 38–39, 46, 49
food
not shared, as sign of lack of intimacy, 84, 86, 142
sharing
among adult siblings, 12, 64, 81
in childhood, 10, 39, 40, 47, 162n10
among friends, 67
and the making of kin, 6–7
as sign of making of kin, 38, 40, 60, 140
Fortes, Meyer
on amity, 68
on the importance of lineage among the Akan, 56, 124
on the mother’s brother, 94, 161n3
on siblings, 53–54, 124, 131
on structural functionalism, 53
on the web of kinship, 2, 73, 92
fosterage
by boarding schools, 139
changes in, 75–77, 139
definition of, 162n5
and domestic service, 77, 136, 161n2
as establishing differences between children of the same household, 83–84
as establishing sibling relations between children of the same household, 3, 77–78, 126, 134, 144
and femifocal households, 35, 38–39
grandmother, 35, 127, 138
and immigration restrictions, 20–21, 137–45
and intergenerational effects of sibling relations, 73–96, 103, 126, 133
and maltreatment, 83–84, 86, 136
and mobility of children, 78, 134
fosterage (continued)
by paid caregivers, 139, 142–43
between rural and urban households, 75–77, 82–83, 86–87, 90–91, 136
and schooling, 18–19, 84–85, 131–33
as separating birth siblings, 11, 15, 86, 93–94, 133–34
of siblings, 76–77, 131–33, 140–41, 144
of siblings’ children, 58, 83–85, 133–43
social control over, 86–88, 90–91, 92
as strengthening relations between siblings, 133
and transnational migration, 127–28, 137–44
See also adoption
friendship
as compared to sibling relations, 4, 15, 51–70, 87, 126, 147
and exchange, 69, 103, 113
and fosterage, 143
and gender, 69
in research, 158n3
and sharing of secrets, 57–58, 66–67
as voluntary, 51–52, 67, 158n2
gender
as creating differences between siblings, 3, 11, 43–44, 114, 125, 147
and elder care, 112–15, 119–20, 164n12
and friendship, 69
as ignored in classic kinship studies, 5, 11, 24
socialization, 11, 43–44, 58
See also femifocality
generation
definition of, 163n5
differences in sibling relations by, 97–121
siblings as members of the same, 3, 7–9, 124–25, 144
See also cohort; sibling relations, intergenerational effects of
Gibson, Thomas, 15
Gluckman, Max, 8, 11, 75
Goody, Esther, 76, 126, 135
Goody, Jack, 5, 94, 125, 159n4, 161n3
Guyer, Jane, 35, 39
Herzfeld, Michael, 4, 5, 17
hierarchy
and birth order, 12, 60–61, 164n9
and fosterage, 148–49
and intimacy, 12, 31
and sibling competition, 31, 48–49
and social class, 48–49
Hirsch, Jennifer, 137
household labor
and fosterage, 83, 131–33
gendered socialization in, 43–44, 58
by younger siblings, 60, 131, 133
See also domestic service
houses
inheritance of, 41, 113
and migration, 33, 45–46, 99
Howell, Signe, 13
Hsu, Francis K., 14, 124, 144
immigration law
and siblings, 20–21, 137–45
incest taboo, 4, 6, 16, 37, 161n19
inheritance
as causing sibling conflict, 8, 13, 55, 148
as creating sibling differences, 9, 10, 41, 112, 113
and friendship, 66
by siblings, 17, 53–54, 66
and siblings’ shared parentage, 2, 7
to sibling’s son, 63, 160n15
state regulation of, 17, 20
jealousy
and intimacy, 31, 48, 58, 158n1, 165n7
regarding success, 45–47, 103
See also sibling rivalry; witchcraft
Jordan, David K., 52, 68
kinship
classic study of, 1–2, 4–7, 24–25, 53, 94, 161n4
revival of study of, in anthropology, 1, 6–7, 31, 54, 95
role expectations of, 74–95, 161n4
and social cohesion, 2, 5, 20, 95–96
and social control, 86–88, 90–91, 92
state laws on, 17–20, 164n9, 164n12
terminology, 6, 9, 14, 36–37, 52, 57
web of, 2, 73, 80, 91, 92–93
Kipp, Rita Smith, 11, 12, 15, 22, 52, 68
Kopytoff, Igor, 8, 125, 126
Lambek, Michael, 2, 8, 13, 148
Lévi-Strauss, Claude, 6, 12
life course, the
and sibling differences, 10–11, 77, 125, 144
sibling relations across, 2–3, 13, 29–50, 82, 91, 147
siblings as affecting, of another sibling, 73–146
Lindenbaum, Shirley, 15–16
Mannheim, Karl, 125, 144, 163n5
marriage
as affecting the life prospects of sibling of spouse, 13
as central in the West, 2, 123
compared to friendship, 51–52, 69
compared to siblingship, 4, 11, 12, 15–17
as creating differences between siblings, 3, 44–47, 49
dowry, kin support for, 77, 84–85, 113
and femifocal households, 35
problems, sibling support in, 63–64, 81, 92–93, 95, 124
as prompting fosterage of a sibling, 131
and sibling support, conflicts between, 13, 63–65, 95, 108, 113
and sisters’ separation, 64–65, 112, 114
in the study of kinship, 1–2, 6, 12, 24, 32
Marshall, Mac
on the making of kinship, 6, 7, 12, 31, 68–69
on the significance of sibling relations, 15
matrifocality. See femifocality
matrilineality
and marriage, 56–57
and matrifocality, 32
and mother’s brother, 5
and sibling terminology, 14, 54
matrilineality (continued)
and the significance of siblings, 53–54, 124
and the significance of sisters, 63
Mead, Margaret, 14, 31, 48
Meier, Barbara, 9, 11, 94
migration, transnational
and changes in family life, 137–44
and femifocal households, 34, 46, 49
and fosterage, 127–28, 137–44
in Ghana, 128
and house-building, 33, 45–46
in Mexico, 30, 33–34, 45–46
migration, urban
in Benin, 75–96
in China, 105–6, 108–9, 112–21, 163n2
and femifocal households, 38–39, 46, 49
and fosterage, 75–78, 82–83, 86–87, 90–91, 136
and ideals of nuclear family, 134–37
in Mexico, 30, 33, 42–43
in Namibia, 30, 34, 38–39
and social mobility, 75–78, 97–100, 105–6, 120
motherhood
polyandrous, 35, 39
mother’s brother
in classic kinship studies, 5, 8–9, 74
inheritance from, 63
intergenerational effects of, 9, 73–96
power over sister’s children of, 79, 82, 85, 91, 94–95
See also brothers; sisters

nation-state, the
as based on shared “blood,” 20
sibling relations as metaphor for, 4, 17, 25

one-child policy
and changes in education, 110
and reduction of number of siblings, 19, 163n2
and siblingship, 97, 149

parentage
as central in the West, 2, 123, 135, 155n2
and changes in family life in
Ghana, 135
and fosterage, 75, 85, 126, 131–32, 135–44
in making sibling relations, 1–5, 7–9, 53–54, 94, 156n5
powerful siblings’ effect on, 91, 93–95
as produced by sibling sets, 149
and reciprocity, 18–19, 100, 114, 119
and schooling investments, 18–19, 110–11, 131
siblings’ assumption of
responsibility of, 111, 114, 131–32, 144, 147
state laws concerning, 17, 19–20, 112
in the study of kinship, 1–2, 5–7, 94, 98, 123
See also elder care; mother’s brother
patchwork families, 9, 20, 83, 157n7
patrilineality
and daughter’s role, 112
and mother’s brother, 5
and sibling relations, 9, 14, 74, 124
Pitt-Rivers, Julian, 68
pregnancy, teenage
and kinship relations, 44, 85, 90
psychological literature
on sibling relations, 8, 155n2
Radcliffe-Brown, A. R.
on the equivalence of the sibling
group, 3, 5, 7–8, 10, 94
and male-centered kinship study,
24
on the mother’s brother, 5, 8–9
Reay, Marie, 15
reciprocity. See exchange
religious communities
sibling relations as model for, 4,
25, 52
remittances. See support, economic
reproductive technologies
and making of siblings, 3
and multiple births, 19
in new kinship studies, 1
research
case study method in, 55, 75,
156n3
friendship in, 158n3
reflexivity in, 75
thick participation in, 75, 80–81
reserve
definition of, 98
sibling relations as, 39, 91, 98–
121, 124–27, 127, 134
rivalry, sibling. See sibling rivalry
Robichaux, David, 33–34

safety net, social. See kinship, web
of; reserve
Schneider, David, 1, 6
schooling
and divergences between siblings,
18–19, 41, 48, 81, 97–121
and elder care, 99, 112–14, 119
expansion of, 19, 99–100, 105–6,
109–10, 116
and fosterage, 18–19, 75–78,
83–85, 131–33
parental investment in, 18–19,
110–11, 131
and sibling child care, 19

sibling support for, 18, 60–63,
75–77, 97–121, 131–33, 144
and urban identity, 75–77, 97,
99–100, 105–6, 134–37
See also education, higher
secrets, sharing
as sign of closeness, 57–58,
66–67
seniority. See birth order
sibling relations
in Africanist anthropology, 14–
16 (see also Fortes, Meyer;
Radcliffe-Brown, A. R.)
as becoming more significant,
120–21, 138, 145–46
as building-block of lineage, 124
and compadrazgo, 45
created by fosterage, 3, 77–78,
102, 126, 134, 144
emic definitions of, 14–15, 57,
157n9, 162n7, 162n10
in Europe, 8, 10, 16, 19, 124,
149
idioms of, 4, 14–16, 148
intergenerational effects of, 5,
7–9, 73–96, 97–121, 123–
46, 147–49
in literature, 8, 16, 55, 159n6,
159n7, 159n8, 160n9
as long-lasting, 47, 69–70, 91,
124–25, 144, 147–48
and marriage, 49, 56–57
in the Middle East, 16
as neglected in the
anthropological literature, 2,
6, 16, 53, 123
in Oceania, 15–16, 149
opposite-sex as compared to
same-sex, 11, 15–16, 57–70
and other kin relations, 73–96,
126–27, 144, 148
as social safety net, 39, 91, 98–
121, 124–27, 134, 144
sibling relations *(continued)*

in South Asia, 3, 15, 16
in Southeast Asia, 15–16, 149, 156n6
variability of, 3, 4, 24, 55–70, 147, 149

*See also* brothers; sibling rivalry; sibling separation; siblingship; sisters

sibling rivalry

in adulthood, 8, 30, 44–47, 54, 98, 148
in the Bible, 8
between opposite-sex siblings, 62–63
in the psychological literature, 8, 155n2
between same-sex siblings, 11, 30, 44–47, 58, 60, 62–63
in the West, 8

*See also* jealousy; witchcraft

sibling separation

as adults, 3, 64–65, 123
in childhood, 58, 123, 134

siblingship

as exchange, 6–7, 12–13, 62–64, 76–146
as model for other relations, 3–4, 8, 14–17, 25, 52, 124
as shared experience, 10–12, 29–49, 57–59, 83–87, 148
as shared parentage, 1–5, 7–9, 53–54, 94, 156n5

sisters

and brothers, 9–17, 62–70, 73–96, 112–15, 124, 140
care between, 29–30, 58
casual intensity of relation between, 30
and child care, 12, 19, 37, 43–44, 61, 126
competition between, 31, 44–47, 58, 60–63

fosterage between, 9, 18–19, 58, 132–39, 140–44
ignored in classic kinship studies, 5–6, 8–9, 11, 14, 32
intimacy between, 8, 31, 40, 42, 48, 57–58
making of, 29–49
significance of, 6, 17, 63
witchcraft between, 61

*See also* brothers; femifocality; mother’s brother

sleeping

arrangements and gender differences, 58
together as sign of closeness, 40, 47, 65, 160n16

solidarity

as natural between siblings, 106–7, 115–18, 134
sibling: and emotion, 117–18, 120

as destroyed by conflict, 63–64, 143
as destroyed by negative fosterage experiences, 142
siblings as a model for, 4, 8, 14, 52, 68–69

state, the

and education, 19–20, 97–121
and eldercare, 112, 164n12
and inheritance, 17, 20
and kinship, 17–20, 17, 112, 164n9, 164n12
and migration, 20–21, 97–98, 137–45, 163n2
and population control, 19, 110–11, 149, 163n1, 163n3
siblings’ effect on, 149

*See also* nation-state, the; one-child policy

succession. *See* inheritance

suffering, shared

as creating closeness, 3–4, 10, 29, 43, 87
as destroying sibling unity, 141–42
support, economic
by brother to sister, 62–64, 81, 87–95, 124
as characteristic of adult siblings, 3, 12–13
conflicts over, 108–9
by educated people, 112–14, 119–20
as enabled by differences between siblings, 13, 97–121, 124–25, 131
as establishing sibling relations, 13
and migration, 38–39, 45–46, 75–78, 112–14, 136–45
as normative between siblings, 81, 104–5, 106–7, 124
and patronage, 105, 119
provided diagonally, to sibling’s child, 109, 119, 133, 147
provided stepwise through the generations, 126, 133, 140, 144–45
and reciprocity, 103–4
Thelen, Tatjana, 2, 135, 155n1, 157n10
Trawick, Margaret, 15
Van Velsen, Jaap, 75
Weiner, Annette, 6, 11, 12, 17, 24
Weismantel, Mary, 6
Weisner, Thomas, 3, 11, 32, 37, 124
witchcraft, 55, 61, 158n1