

THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF
SIBLING RELATIONS

This page intentionally left blank

THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF
SIBLING RELATIONS

SHARED PARENTAGE, EXPERIENCE, AND EXCHANGE

Edited by Erdmute Alber, Cati Coe, and Tatjana Thelen

palgrave
macmillan



THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF SIBLING RELATIONS

Copyright © Erdmute Alber, Cati Coe, and Tatjana Thelen, 2013.

Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2013 978-1-137-33122-9

All rights reserved.

First published in 2013 by PALGRAVE MACMILLAN® in the United States—a division of St. Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Where this book is distributed in the UK, Europe and the rest of the world, this is by Palgrave Macmillan, a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

Palgrave® and Macmillan® are registered trademarks in the United States, the United Kingdom, Europe and other countries.

ISBN 978-1-349-46130-1 ISBN 978-1-137-33123-6 (eBook)
DOI 10.1057/9781137331236

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The anthropology of sibling relations: shared parentage, experience, and exchange / edited by Erdmute Alber, Cati Coe and Tatjana Thelen.

pages cm

1. Brothers and sisters. 2. Brothers and sisters—Family relationships. 3. Social adjustment in children. 4. Ethnology. I. Alber, Erdmute.

HQ759.96.A57 2013

306.875'3—dc23

2013002339

A catalogue record of the book is available from the British Library.

Design by Scribe Inc.

First edition: July 2013

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To Claudia Roth, our colleague and friend,
who passed away much too early in July 2012.

This page intentionally left blank

CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----|
| List of Figures | ix |
| Acknowledgments | xi |
| 1 The Anthropology of Sibling Relations: Explorations in Shared Parentage, Experience, and Exchange <i>Tatjana Thelen, Cati Coe, and Erdmute Alber</i> | 1 |
| Part 1 Siblingship as Shared Parentage and Experience | |
| 2 “Sharing Made Us Sisters”: Sisterhood, Migration, and Household Dynamics in Mexico and Namibia <i>Julia Pauli</i> | 29 |
| 3 Kinship as Friendship: Brothers and Sisters in Kwahu, Ghana <i>Sjaak van der Geest</i> | 51 |
| Part 2 Siblingship as Life-Long Exchange | |
| 4 Within the Thicket of Intergenerational Sibling Relations: A Case Study from Northern Benin <i>Erdmute Alber</i> | 73 |
| 5 When Siblings Determine Your “Fate”: Sibling Support and Educational Mobility in Rural Northwest China <i>Helena Obendiek</i> | 97 |
| 6 Transnational Migration and Changes in Sibling Support in Ghana <i>Cati Coe</i> | 123 |
| Afterword <i>Janet Carsten</i> | 147 |
| List of Contributors | 151 |

| | |
|------------|-----|
| Notes | 155 |
| References | 167 |
| Index | 187 |

FIGURES

| | | |
|-----|---|-----|
| 2.1 | Children Sharing Food by Julia Pauli | 40 |
| 3.1 | Sisters Doing the Dishes by Sjaak van der Geest | 59 |
| 3.2 | Two Brothers, Senior and Junior, Carrying Garbage to the Dunghill by Sjaak van der Geest | 59 |
| 3.3 | Brothers or Friends? By Sjaak van der Geest | 67 |
| 5.1 | The Zhao Family Genealogy | 101 |
| 5.2 | The Fourth Zhao Brother Toasting His Brothers by Helena Obendiek | 104 |
| 5.3 | Connected through Shared Substance: Five Sisters by Helena Obendiek | 107 |
| 5.4 | Preparing for the National College Entrance Exam in Huining County by Helena Obendiek | 111 |

This page intentionally left blank

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

How a book comes into existence is always a long story to tell. The initial conception of this volume happened in a conversation between Erdmute Alber and Sjaak van der Geest in 2007, when we realized how important sibling relations were for understanding social relations and talked about their neglect in social anthropology. This led to the organization of two workshops: one at the biannual conference of the European Association of Social Anthropologists in 2008 in Ljubljana and a second one in 2009 at Thurnau castle, near Bayreuth, financed by the Bayreuth International Graduate School of African Studies (BIGSAS) of Bayreuth University. The first meeting served as a kind of brainstorming about siblingship in light of new kinship studies; first drafts of all the chapters in our book were presented at the second. We give thanks to BIGSAS and its coordinator, Christine Scherer, for funding, as well as to Julia Brix for organisational support of the second workshop. Furthermore, we thank all the participants of the workshop for their intellectual spirit in discussing the drafts of the papers, particularly Janet Carsten and David Sabean. During the Thurnau meeting, Cati Coe and Tatjana Thelen joined Erdmute Alber in the project, but our special thanks go to Sjaak for having put the idea of a new book on sibling relations on the agenda.

The editing process of this book would have been much more complicated without the technical support of Jakob Treige and Heike Schwankl. Thanks to both!

We note with sadness that one of the participants, our dear colleague Claudia Roth from the University of Luzerne, passed away in July 2012. Like the siblings introduced in the following pages, she shared in our key (intellectual) experiences and provided social support in times of uncertainty. Her research on gender, intergenerational

relations, age, and social security in Burkina Faso added greatly to our discussions around siblingship, kinship, and intergenerational care over the years. We wish we could have continued this exchange over many more years, perhaps even by reading her review of this book, rather than dedicating it to her memory.

CHAPTER 1

THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF SIBLING RELATIONS

EXPLORATIONS IN SHARED PARENTAGE,
EXPERIENCE, AND EXCHANGE

Tatjana Thelen, Cati Coe, and Erdmute Alber

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.¹ 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 (Sabeen 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.² 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.³ 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 matrilineal 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 Weismantel (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 parentage: Radcliffe-Brown understands a sibling group to be “the body of brothers and sisters of common parentage” (1950: 24).⁴ 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.⁵ 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

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,