Is kinship insignificant in Western societies?

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Abstract. This paper considers an argument for why kinship is not significant in industrialized Western societies. There are various objections to the argument, of which I present one supported by two examples.


All my kin on a ship

Drowning on an April trip

Anthropologists studying other societies tell us about kinship in those societies. Whom do they regard as kin and whom do they not? What are the rules regarding marriage? Which kin, if any, can one marry and which marriages are prohibited? The anthropologist Marilyn Strathern presents an argument for why kinship is unimportant in industrialized Western societies, which she aims to contest:

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

A simplified version of the argument is as follows:

(1) If most rules in a certain society do not feature kinship restrictions (e.g. you can only apply for this job if you are from families A, B, or C), then the significance of kinship in that society is marginal.

(2) In an industrialized Western society, most rules do not feature kinship restrictions.

Therefore:

(3) The significance of kinship in industrialized Western societies is marginal.

There are various ways of contesting this argument. One way is by disputing premise (1) as follows: arguing that the exceptions are more important than they seem. I shall present two fictionalized cases below.

_Dying philosophy professor._ There is a philosophy professor who is famous for his examples and counterexamples. Anyone can read the professor’s books. There is no kinship restriction on who may purchase the book or borrow it from a library, such as only a member of the Poppy-Jones family can do so. But the philosopher falls ill and it is clear that these are his last days alive. There are kinship restrictions on who may visit him in hospital. His family have priority. They bring with them a friend who works in a certain philosophy department. The philosopher agrees to this. In hospital, he continues to present examples. These examples enable that department to get ahead of other departments. In this case, there is a kinship rule on who can visit and the advantage of knowing the philosopher’s kin matters.

_Literary museum._ Problems of inheritance, which involve kinship restrictions, are the stuff of murder novels but I worry their significance goes well beyond fiction. Anyway, here is a
fictional example, I suppose. Imagine that a notable literary figure sets up a little literary museum in his apartment, composed of rare works. His sibling marries into a family who are experts in inheritance. He is thinking to allocate the literary museum to his sibling and some other blood relations in a will. But he realizes that if so, the museum will soon be run by members of the family his sibling has married into. Even if he allocates it entirely to some other blood relation, that is likely to happen. Connected now to such a clever family, he realizes that any allocation to a blood relation will soon be overcome by strategic manoeuvres. Whoever inherits the museum will over time be outwitted by this family. The only solution is to disown his sibling and actually his entire set of blood relations and then allocate the museum to someone else. Anything else is sure to fail.

Reference