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## What is a Relationship? Is Kinship Negotiated Experience?

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**Bookmarks**

# What is a Relationship?
# Is Kinship Negotiated Experience?

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Normally, academics simply review books and comment on their merits as the books are published. But taking books in retrospect gives one the opportunity to do something perhaps rather more significant, which is to consider their consequences. So in this case, I want to start with some books for which I have nothing but praise, but then consider the longer term impact of the trends they represent, about which I do have some problems and doubts.

My initial concern is a trend towards viewing relationships as processes exemplified by the writings of Janet Carsten. Carsten's initial monograph was called *The Heat of the Hearth: The Process of Kinship in a Malay Fishing Community* (1997) and this was followed by an edited collection *Cultures of Relatedness: New Approaches to the Study of Kinship* (2000) and then her own *After Kinship* (2004). I will explore the consequences of this idea of relationship as process mainly with respect to the book *Passing on: Kinship and Inheritance in England* (Finch & Mason 2000), and two books by the US-based Filipina anthropologist Parreñas *Servants of Globalization* (2001) and *Children of Global Migration: Transnational Families and Gendered Woes* (2005a). This takes up the first half of this paper.

But my interest in kinship as process is only part of a deeper concern. What I would most like to do is get a better handle on the very word relationship. I have been troubled for some time by the meaning of this word. I have noticed in recent years that my own work seems to be increasingly reliant upon my use of the word relationship, as much when writing about objects as about people. In fact, I could easily summarise much of my current work in the following quite appalling sentence: 'what then is the *relationship* between people's *relationships* to objects and their *relationships* to other persons?' Such

a sentence suggests that some consideration is now well overdue as to quite what it is that I, and others, actually mean by the term. I can hardly bear to think about how much I use and overuse the word relationship. One might think that the question of what we mean by the word relationship would have spawned a very extensive literature. But it is hard to tease out any kind of working definition that we could easily appropriate to answer this simple question of what is usually intended when academics or others use the word relationship. So if the first half of this paper restricts itself to something more concrete, in the second half, I indulge myself in a rather more ambitious attempt to tackle this much wider problem of what a relationship is.

Its not surprising that the first port of call for an anthropologist concerned with the term relationship is studies of kinship. In general, the work of Carsten represents a necessary and welcome development in a long trajectory that is anthropological kinship studies. At a very general level we can characterise the study of kinship since the time of Lewis Henry Morgan as a concern first with structure, then with function and then with culture. This third strand developed as a result of the consideration of US and UK kinship by respectively Schneider (1968) and Strathern (1992). In addition, as Peletz (1995) documented, there are increasing concerns with contexts such as the state and with ambiguities and contradictions as exemplified by Wikan (1990) and Trawick (1990).

It is certainly Strathern who has the largest influence upon what becomes with Carsten another trend, which is to see kinship as a process rather than simply a given set of normative categories. Carsten's contribution is to show how kin relations can form, disperse and develop through everyday experiences, such as those within the home. This allows us to start thinking about kinship more generally as an arena of flexibility, negotiation and experience. As a material culturist, if I had to single out one particular example of Carsten's work for praise it is chapter two of her book *After Kinship,* which takes further the ideas of her initial monograph and creates a marvellous evocation of the hearth and house as a place of memory as well as kinship. There is a welcome sense of kinship as integrated into the much wider and richer texture of ethnography. So there are many fine qualities to this work, and also many consequences beyond those I am examining here. Indeed, the main interest of most of those working on this trajectory these days is a concern with rethinking the link to biological kinship which is not at all my concern here.

Given all the rigidities and formalisms of previous studies of kinship as structure and function this idea of kinship as a locus of flexibility, negotiation

and experience is enormously attractive. It is undoubtedly the case at least to some degree, and it is therefore at first merely an acknowledgement of a neglected presence. For example, the point clearly rings true for Jamaica where I have been conducting fieldwork recently. In Jamaica, it was soon evident that a father is not the person who impregnated your mother, but the person who acts toward you as a father. But I want to suggest in this paper that there is nonetheless a danger, as is so often the case with attractive new ideas, of swinging the pendulum too far in the opposite direction until the other end of the kinship spectrum, that concerned with formalisation, normativity and fixity, in turn disappears below our gaze and we actually lose the appropriate sense of balance represented by this new work. This would be in no sense the fault of anthropologists such as Carsten, rather it would be a result of our over-enthusiasm for such work as a release from its precursors.

## Re-thinking 'Passing-on'

I want to explain and expound my sense of this danger through a review of several books. The first is *Passing On*, by the British sociologists Finch and Mason (2000), who do not cite Carsten directly but are clearly influenced by this larger trajectory in anthropological studies of kinship. In their conclusion, the authors argue that their material has demonstrated that kinship should not be seen primarily as structure or system as it has been traditionally viewed in social sciences and especially anthropology (2000:163). Nor is kinship merely individualised. Instead, kinship operates largely as a form of 'negotiated relationships'(p. 164), which are therefore essentially experiential. They state that relationships 'are created and sustained through contact, conversation and a common life over long periods of time' (p. 164). The emphasis should be on practice (e.g., Morgan 1996), something constituted by the way it is done rather than by a given principle. These conclusions clearly parallel those of Carsten based on her work with Malay families, which also emphasises the experiential sense of closeness through shared lives together rather than given expectations. There are other conclusions by Finch and Mason with regard to genres of inheritance such as memory, or the place of gender, specificity and good parenting, but their general conclusion is that contemporary English kinship expresses flexibility, negotiation and experience.

I strongly concur that in Britain today the emphasis is on relationships, rather than either an overarching social structure or, by contrast, individualism. But I want to argue that their evidence also supports a rather different conclusion, which is that inheritance practices show an almost obsessive

concern with kinship as formal and normative. An often almost desperate desire to repudiate experience in order to remain consistent with the imperatives of that formal order. It depends in part, I suspect, on our expectations of kinship. After all we live in a society where we are well aware that our kin behave in extremely varied ways, a diversity extended by the many possibilities of contemporary relatively affluent lives. They can remain physically close, and in constant contact – or not. Be emotional and sentimental about our relationship – or not. Be generous to us and considerate of us – or not. Partake fully in common family rituals from Christmas to shared holidays – or not. Inheritance could have provided a perfect opportunity to learn from life and to express all those differences in experience through the medium of inheritance itself.

I have worked in places where this is actually what happens. For example, in Trinidad some people I know are constantly writing people in and out of their wills as a direct expression of the current state of their relationships. It's something of a national pastime that was once parodied by the dialect poet Paul Keens-Douglas, 'Marry the wrong person, or even cross me over some minor matter, and you are out of my will'. Given there is the house, money, possessions, and so forth, inheritance provides ever increasing possibilities for expressing the nuances of relationships. As Finch and Mason note in their introduction, inheritance 'allows individuals to use the act of bequeathing property to define the contours of their own kin relationships, to confirm who "counts" and what value is placed on each relationship' (2000:11). So clearly, inheritance could do this very thing. But the evidence provided by Finch and Mason is that this expressive aspect of inheritance is highly constrained and framed. Differentiation is largely limited to very particular dimensions such as heirlooms. Overall, this is really a book about the lengths people go to to avoid the potential of experientially informed and flexible uses of inheritance.

Certainly, this is not kinship structure in the traditional sense. The emphasis is not on the structural network between the different kinship roles, such as mother's brother or matrilineal descent as defining these roles. But it is kinship in that there remain highly explicit formal roles with powerful normative foundations that are largely unresponsive to change and experience. I would call this formal rather than structural kinship.

The evidence for formal kinship then is not whether there is lineage descent, but whether there exists a highly prescriptive set of behaviours that arise from the formal relationships constituted by kinship. In short, an

expectation that we behave in a given way toward a spouse or child, simply because they are a spouse or child, irrespective of the actual experience of the particular relationship we have with them. Finch and Mason provide perhaps the strongest evidence currently available that contemporary English people do retain this highly formal understanding of what kinship is. And furthermore, this is most evident if we follow Finch and Mason in concentrating on the evidence of practice, i.e. what people actually do.

The law in Britain on inheritance is anything but prescriptive. People are free to do more or less exactly what they choose with their assets. If they wish, they can leave all their money to an aged donkey in a donkey home, and sadly they sometimes do. Despite this it seems that inheritances (as also many other expressions of kinship such as gifting – Miller 2001a or birthday parties – Clarke 2007) are almost entirely guided by a generic sense of what socially is considered to be the right thing to do. This may have no legal backing but it can be just as prescriptive as law. In this case doing the right thing consists in being fair, which translates into dividing property equally between the children irrespective of one's personal relationship to them. The abstract and pure principle of equality is generated by formal kinship that is the given relationship to a person, not by negotiation or differences in behaviour or experience. The point is that the bad son and the good son get the same.

The evidence emerges in each of the separate chapters of the book. Chapter two provides many examples of the flexibility and negotiation that Finch and Mason draw on in their conclusion. It focuses on the complexity of families that, following divorce or re-marriage, have multiple sets of potential inheritors that don't therefore meet the simple criterion of the child of a nuclear family. But this negotiation and flexibility is only rarely used to reflect one's life experience of the relationship, to make oneself closer to a good relationship and excise the bad stepchild. On the contrary, the flexibility is almost always used to find ways to make a complex situation, where the rules are unclear, accord with and remain analogous to the basic principles generated by formal kinship. So the evidence is for clear principles, such as the one that states money should remain within the family, but then flexibility in determining who actually is family at this point in time. For example stepchildren are treated the same as full children. Here then, the effect is not to threaten a relation of biology to children but simply to determine where norms should or should not apply. The evidence shows the extraordinary resilience of such concerns as family, and of doing the appropriate, as opposed to merely the

personal, thing in relation to that family. It shows the lengths people will go to to retain the principle of fair treatment even in complex conditions that make this extremely difficult.

Chapter three again shows the dominance of formal and normative kinship. For example, the primary rights of the family over non-kin and the spouse over the next generation. Most important, differential treatment of those inheriting, with regard to the main assets, seems quite rare. Equal treatment of children and grandchildren seems 'almost invariable' (2000:77), which these days means disregarding the various life trajectories and differential wealth of descendents. That is, the main part of inheritance is fixed solely by virtue of the category of kin relationship. Chapter four emphasises moral dilemmas, and the importance of seeing inherited money as having specific properties akin to Zelizer's (1997) point about the differentiation of money according to its source, for example whether a specific pot of money should be seen as a kind of windfall or as an obligation. But the point of the chapter reinforces the centrality of formal order. This is not just money; it is kin money, which makes it what the authors call difficult money, hence the moral dilemmas. As in the previous chapter, what people do is to find a proper category into which to fit their particular experience of inheritance in order again to do the right thing by it. Similarly, in chapter five, just as Strathern (1992) argued that individualism is actually a principle generated by kinship not its other, so here the idea of generational ownership, as opposed say to transgenerational family property, is again a principle, even to the extent that in some cases there is a feeling that the next generation should not inherit too much.

Overall, then, as the authors contend, there is indeed plenty of evidence in this volume for negotiation and flexibility. But this could have two meanings. Negotiation can be the alternative to formality and fixity, which is what the authors emphasise. But I would suggest that flexibility and negotiation are a direct result of the struggle people have in trying to retain clear principles and formal expectations in kinship in the face of the complexity of modern family lives. It is an instrument of conservatism in kinship. I hope it is clear that I am not disputing in any way the evidence presented in this exemplary and scholarly book; it is just that they are surprised and impressed by what people do manage to do with inheritance. I am surprised and impressed by what they could be doing and largely try and prevent themselves doing. Given the complexities of the modern family with multiple forms of parent–child relationship, given the increasing diversity of actual relationships as good and bad, close and far, rewarding and devastating, I choose to emphasise

the degree to which people seem to try and find strategies for making these all equate with a relatively constant norm, based on the differentiation of family from non-family, generation from transgeneration, and the principle of fair and equal division. Kinship lies in that highly formal and normative consistency, as well as in the flexible negotiations people use these days in order to achieve this consistency.

## Filipino Separated Families

While I feel comfortable talking about kinship in England, I do not have any knowledge that would allow me to work directly with Carsten's evidence from Malaysia. In any case, I will assume that Carsten's analysis is entirely correct and reasonable. But once again I want to argue for some caution when embracing the position on relationships it represents even in another part of South-East Asia. For this purpose I want to refer to some preliminary reading I have conducted in preparation for a project I am carrying out with Dr Mirca Madianou of the University of Cambridge. We will study the operation of long-distance relationships, specifically those of separated families and couples, and the ability of particular media to sustain those relationships over time. The core of this study will be a focus on Philippine and Caribbean relationships.

For this purpose I have been looking at the literature on separated Filipino families, of which probably the most extensive study consists of two books and a paper by the anthropologist Parreñas (2001, 2005a, 2005b), as well as an important study by Pingol of husbands left behind in one region of the Philippines (Pingol 2001; see also Pertierra 2005 and Wilding 2006).

In her second book, *Children of Global Migration* (2005a), Parreñas examines a fundamental contradiction in Philippines migration. She notes that there are approximately 9 million Filipino children under 18 with at least one parent abroad as migrant labour (2005a:12). This represents 27 percent of the youth population (2005b:317).

It seems quite clear from Parreñas that she had certain expectations of what she was going to find, or more particularly what she wanted to find. One might think that this situation starts with extraordinary acts of self-sacrifice, particularly when we consider mothers who choose to work abroad. Parreñas shows that in her sample the average mother spent only 23.9 weeks out of the last 11 years with their children. Fathers spent rather more time back at home since their work allowed more time off. That means that the mothers in question basically did not see their children grow up. The mothers give

their reasons for taking up this work largely in terms of the children's welfare, for example, education, medical bills and income generally.

One expectation, which is the subject of my current research, is that the rise of regular and cheap communication would help to ameliorate the nega- tive consequences of this separation, and enable to the children to feel close again to their mothers, and come to a better understanding and appreciation of their condition. She also anticipated that they would be influenced by the more egalitarian and modernist forms of gender relations by which the father would take on more domestic roles in recognition of the mother taking on more of the traditionally male role of the breadwinner. We might expect that this radical change in actual relationships would change the normative formal order of the family.

Most of the detailed description and analysis to be found in Parreñas' book is about how these expectations are not fulfilled. The reason for this becomes much clearer in terms of the same issue of relationships discovered in Finch and Mason. Instead of kinship as a process that modernises with modern experiences, what tends to happen, instead, is that the period of separation simply exacerbates the distinction between the idealized norms represented by mother and child, and their actual relationship, which here is significantly diminished. These norms of mother–child relationships are held both indi- vidually and collectively. As a result, the process, if anything, reinforces the most conservative and traditional gender ideals about relationships and leads many of these children to concentrate less on the material benefits that accrue to them and more on the sense of abandonment by their mothers.

At a collective level, Parreñas shows there is a dismal view taken of the families where mothers have gone to work in other countries and leave their children behind (2005a: chapter two). If anything, these families tend to be stigmatised within the Philippines. It is generally assumed that a child grow- ing up without its mother is more likely to be badly behaved and involved in crime and other misdemeanours than a child with the full support of a conventional family. Parreñas suggests from her evidence that this is not actually the case, but it is quite clear that this is believed to be the case, with much media attention to this as a social problem. Children are often taunted about the behaviour of their mothers. There is a lack of support groups and lack of help from fathers (2005a:139–40). In a similar fashion, Pingol (2001) studied how the husbands who are left behind and who take on female- associated activities of housecare and childrearing are taunted mercilessly

by, for example, female students, for this potential loss of masculinity, and constantly try but fail to persuade their wives to return.

But equally problematic are the views of the children themselves (2005a: chapter six). In almost every case the children concentrate on the sense that they have been abandoned. In response to this the mothers use the increased possibility of the phone more or less as might be expected, to return to what Parreñas refers to as highly intensive mothering; for example, phoning every morning to make sure the children are getting ready for school (2005b:328). Pertierra suggests that these women strive to maintain an 'absent presence' within their home communities (2005:26). For example, Parreñas (2005b) shows how important it is for women working abroad to retain their traditional control over financial matters at home increasingly by using these long-distance communications.

Despite all this, the children regard the separation as irrevocable and say they will never again be really close to their mothers. As one child puts it: '…telephone calls. That's not enough. You cannot hug her, kiss her, feel her, everything. You cannot feel her presence. It's just words you have' (2005a:127). So increasing the frequency of phone calls can have the opposite effect to that intended. To appreciate this failure of increased mobile phone use we have to note that even mothers who return more frequently are not necessarily thereby regarded as better mothers (p. 129). By contrast, it is perfectly possible for absent fathers to be seen as behaving adequately just by keeping in touch by phone, because this more occasional or distant relationship is closer to the normative expectations of fathers.

One of the reasons for this failure is that by going away the mothers also threaten the traditional roles of parents. The fathers feel in danger of being seen as emasculated because their wives are now taking on so much of the traditional male role of bread-winner, which is one of the reasons they often refuse to take over some of the female responsibilities for personal and emotional care of the children or turn to excessive drinking (Pingol 2001). Indeed, there is much evidence that they take on an even more gendered, essentially disciplinary, role with respect to the treatment of their children (Parreñas 2005a: chapter five). The children also tend to see their mothers as behaving inappropriately and therefore not as real mothers. Parreñas (2005a: 112–118) provides considerable evidence that female extended-family relatives who sometimes spend more care and attention on these children than mothers might have done are not seen as true substitutes for actual mothers. This is notwithstanding the fact that the children are well aware of all the

material benefits of their mothers being abroad, including often a better house, better schooling and money for such things as clothes, the cinema and good food. So quite unlike my evidence from Jamaica, the person who acts as mother is not therefore regarded as one's mother.

Parreñas seems often somewhat bewildered by her results and laments the conservatism of Philippine gender distinctions. Her detailed and empathetic account, however, makes clear the contradictions that this situation has given rise to, which often comes across as poignant or indeed tragic. But from a theoretical perspective, what becomes clear is that where relationships in practice tend to be focused on discrepancies between actual and normative models of those relationships, it is perhaps not surprising that a situation such as this, which exacerbates that discrepancy, results largely in increased anxiety about the relationship itself, and an overwhelming emphasis upon formal, that is, normative kinship, rather than the experience of the behaviour of those involved.

In my own study of shopping in north London, similar issues became very evident (Miller 2001b). To my surprise I found that generally speaking mothers didn't like shopping with their children by their side. The reason for this was that shopping was an act of love and care in which women invested considerable time and labour. They naturally justified this in terms of their deserving and beloved children. The trouble was that when the children themselves came shopping they often got bored, behaved badly and demonstrated that they really didn't care very much about the level of choice their mother was making as an expression of her love for them. In other words, it was much easier to fantasise about one's wonderful and fully deserving children when they were not actually with you. You shopped more for the idealised relationship than the actual child. By studying consumption in London it was evident that the relationship between mother and child develops quite slowly in terms of its balance between this projected and actual behaviour, and which ultimately develops into a more mature and reciprocal relationship (Miller 1997). This again shows why in the Philippine situation more frequent contact between mother and child by phone may have quite unexpected effects, for example, making the child seem less worthy as the deserving recipient of this abstract ideal of self-sacrifice. My point is that there seems good evidence that in the Philippines, what is striking is how relationships are not fluid and not responsive to the changing conditions of modernity, which have a tendency to reinforce rather than diminish the discrepancy between the normative and the experienced.

**The Literature on Relationships**

So far I have limited my concern to the discrepancies between formal kinship and kinship as process. I hope with that as my foundation I can then ratchet up the ambition of this review to tackle the larger question of what we mean by the term relationship itself. For this purpose, I will attempt two further brief reviews, both wildly over-ambitious. The first asks what various disciplines mean when they use this word relationship, and the second asks what we mean, colloquially, when we use the word relationship. In the conclusion, I hope to bring all these together to form a more general approach to relationships.

In carrying out this investigation of what the word relationship means, it seemed essential to know if there was some consistency in the way it was used in various literatures. One method would be to trawl through various disciplines that make considerable use of the word relationship to see if one could locate at least some kind of underlying pattern. In practice, this means merely skimming the surface of these vast literatures which tend to be specific to a wide range of academic disciplines. Having discussed anthropology, I now turn to two examples, philosophy and psychology.

To start from the top, as it were, with philosophy. On the one hand, there is a long tradition of structuralist philosophy about the nature of the relation, which is not necessarily about relationships. Essentially, it says in many different ways the same thing, which is that entities do not exist in their own right, but are constituted by the totality of the relationships they possess with other entities. A more useful alternative seemed to be the philosophical literature on specific kinds of relationships, such as lovers, family and friendship. To take the last as an example, Aristotle (1955) makes the issue of friendship central to his *Nichomachean Ethics* referring backwards to some Socratic dialogues, and the issue is taken up later in the classical literature by Cicero (1923). Each classical author has his own specific goals, Socrates gives more time to eros, while Cicero is more interested in the political dimension of friendship. Taken as a group, however, what you find is a philosophical concern emerging during the classical period with friendship as an ideal state, and problems where this ideal state contradicts others, such as the obligations of the individual to the state or to oneself. This is summarised by Pangle (2003, for an anthropological perspective see Bell & Coleman 1999).

Moving to later historical traditions, the same is largely true of the extensive religious literature that concerns itself both with the moral foundation of one's relationship to other persons and thence to the divine. Writers

such as Kierkegaard in the Christian tradition and Buber or Levinas in the Jewish tradition are again largely concerned with the ideals encapsulated by the term relationship. They differ from the classical assumption about the primary good as being that which applies to the self. So, for example, Aristotle is clear that the selflessness of family relationships such as parents to children is based on the perception that they represent another self, or extended self. By contrast, later works influenced by Christianity, such as Kierkegaard, repudiate this in favour of a selfless love of others, found in many more theological works, or as in Montaigne's (1976) essay *Essay on Friendship* a transcendent value in the relationship itself (Pangle 2003:64–79, 140). Friendship is less prominent in more contemporary philosophy, but does feature. Sartre, for example, constructs a Marxist-inspired investigation of how individuals may establish relationships to a larger group. The overriding concern is still however largely with the relationship as embodiment and expression of an ideal. In short, most philosophical writings are basically concerned, not to describe everyday relationships, but to create a normative base for discussing what relationships ideally should be.

The disciplines with the most extensive literatures on relationships are psychology and psychoanalysis. I find both of these problematic, but there is only space here to give a brief illustration of each. The academic psychological literature seems to me dominated by attempts to construct a science of relationships, defining the component parts of a relationship in universalistic terms. To take a paper extracted for nothing more than typicality, Moss and Schwebel (1993) try to locate the meaning of one element, *intimacy,* within a particular category of relationships, the romantic. Searching the psychology literature they find 61 definitions of intimacy as an aspect of relationships which they try and define in multidimensional as opposed to operational genres etc. They then bravely march on to try and define what we mean by romantic, and then indeed love. A typical example of their definitions follows Hinde (1978:378) in defining intimacy as 'the number of different facets of the personality which are revealed to the partner and to what depth' (Moss & Schwebel 1993:32). I would suggest that the only thing to emerge clearly from such studies is a measurement of consistency of terminology as used by psychologists. For myself, as a qualitative and relativist academic, such papers show two things. First, that trying to define relationships by some component aspect such as intimacy will just lead us around in tautological circles, and second that semantic definition with its implied universals is only of limited value.

More generally, though, the concern in psychology and psychoanalysis is not with definition but once again with normative issues. Here is just one example. For other reasons, I have been undertaking a critical analysis of the work and impact of the psychoanalyst John Bowbly (e.g., 2005) who was very influential in Britain because of his emphasis on the need of infants for what he calls 'a secure base' centred on the initial relationship to mothers. Most psychologists and analysts are drawn into the practice of relationships in order to deal with the consequences of failed relationships – usually seen as pathological, inappropriate, or debilitating. This is because their main task is to help address such problems. So it is not surprising that, in general, one tends to find an emphasis again on two ends of the spectrum. On the one hand, an ideal of how relationships ought to be, such as the normative concept of the secure base, and, on the other hand, the pathologies of relationships and how one helps people overcome or extricate themselves from these. There is certainly a strong sense that relationships matter to people but the emphasis tends to be on how they relate to the needs of those people.

In summary, the use of the term relationship in philosophy, psychology and psychoanalysis is by and large not directed to descriptions of relationships as part of day to day life, but is largely normative. Social science used to concentrate more on the descriptive aspects of relationships, but recently they have been transformed by influences that incorporate an explicit moral or judgemental base. For example, it is not surprising that the extensive impact of feminist social science brings such disciplines closer to psychology as the main interest turns towards exposing and addressing what might be called the pathologies of the extant. But there is a further consideration here. My initial concern was with how the word relationship was used. But one cannot examine the work of Bowlby, for example, without starting to become rather more concerned with the influence and consequence of that usage. Bowlby clearly had a considerable impact through various forms of popular media on what mothers thought they were supposed to do as mothers – what a true mother is supposed to be like (Riley 1983). Similarly, with influences such as feminism we start to see that these academic literatures may play a major role in creating the normative formal expectations that people seem to have in their daily lives about how a relationship is supposed to be.

The mediation between the academic literature and the everyday comes increasingly through popular media, which constantly inculcates such moral and idealized models of relationships. Take, for example, television. Many countries relay what have become the classic US sitcoms as part of the daily

fare of television over the last few decades, whether the Cosby Show, Rosanne, Malcolm in the Middle or cartoons such as the Simpsons. All of these are set in family situations. All of them share a basic message which is that although the actual persons may be commonly dysfunctional, difficult and wrong, there is an underlying warmth and compassion that is based around a shared ideology about how, in the end, there is love and support based around the idealized normative roles expected of family relationships. We are used to thinking about the normative as a discipline in Foucault's sense, mostly with respect to more formal institutionalised orders. For example, I might have considered the work of Carol Smart and others (e.g., Smart & Neale 1999) on how law acts as a similar source of normativity. But this idea of discipline is better appreciated through the constant flow between institutionalised orders such as law, popular media such as family sitcoms, and academic fashions such as psychoanalytical views on mothering, all of which seem to constantly influence each other. Taken together it is not at all hard to explain why there remains such a consistent and normative position on formal relationships, in places as diffuse and diverse as contemporary London, not just with respect to kin, but also friendship, with strong normative expectations attached to each category of relationship.

### Colloquial Relationships

Before trying to draw these threads together, however, I feel obliged as an anthropologist to consider one more source of information, which is the colloquial meaning of the term relationship. Not what academics or various disciplines mean by the word, but what it implies in daily usage in a place such as London where I live and work. Although there may be as many colloquial meanings of this term relationship as there are academic meanings, I think there is a dominant usage at present in everyday conversation. Today, the word relationship is used increasingly as a kind of euphemism. If you ask a person whether they are in a relationship, it commonly tends to mean whether or not they are having, at least periodic, sex. As in, 'we are quite close, but we are not actually in a relationship', or 'our relationship is over but we still see each other for a drink'. If this is used as a working definition of the term relationship, then we might ask what might be the consequence of this colloquial definition for what one might call colloquial practice, that is, the actual variety of contemporary relationships. Discussing people's relationships is what I spend a good deal of my time doing when engaged in fieldwork, and, at least in contemporary London, I find that many people

do seem prepared to ditch almost any kind of rule book or traditional ex-pectations in favour of both creative and diverse practices.

To illustrate this I just want to list some of the varieties of relationships that I ended up listening to, sympathising with or gossiping about in the two weeks prior to writing this text. One was a couple who had been together for ten years where the man told his partner the relationship was over, has refused to give any reason except to confirm that he was not in another relationship. But because they have a flat together and both are skint they have continued to co-occupy this flat for six months in this state of non-relationship. In another case, a woman can't decide whether a relationship of four years is actually over even though she has told the man in question that it is, mainly because, as a thirty-year-old, she just can't stand the idea of the sheer effort involved in finding a new relationship. Another woman shares a flat with a man of her age who is a very old friend. They are both straight, but she is quite certain they will never sleep together and claims they don't fancy each other. Yet, she tells me she still feels guilty when she goes out with another man and neither of them tells the other about their, as it were, real relationships. In that same week I also discussed a so-called open relationship, and a largely internet-based relationship.

So on the one hand there is a mindboggling diversity of situations that might or might not be called 'having a relationship' quite beyond the starting definition of active sexual engagement. Yet, there are also generalisations. For example, I seem to talk to countless English men and women who admit to their problems in finding and having relationships, and in particular the problem of telling the potential partners what they are thinking. This may be 2007 and they may be extraordinary liberal at one level, but they remain in these conversations just as incapacitated by a certain English anxiety as in the film *Brief Encounter*. Similarly, the cliché about English women finding attractive the men who treat them badly is something repeated so often in conversation that it's impossible not to take it seriously as an ethnographer. It's not that I was studying relationships per se, all this information came as the by-product of two research projects; one on how material culture helps people deal with the loss of relationships, and another based on new fieldwork on the study of denim blue jeans. The most relevant materials, at least from the first project, seem to amount to an ethnography of dumping and being dumped. So at one level the degree to which the term relationship has become colloquially a referent for sex, is perhaps an understandable simplification at a time when it is really hard to know what consistency the

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semantics of the term relationship might even aspire to given the diversity of practices.

This conclusion seems to hark back to the writings of Finch and Mason who were also evidently impressed by the diversity and complexity of the contemporary family. I am impressed by the even greater complexity and diversity of contemporary relationships. In addition, most observers of London life today emphasise the increasing importance of friendship as well as kinship and relationships defined in terms of sexual activity. The various contributors to Bell and Coleman (1999) show that friendship itself is varied in ethnographic encounters. Most of the contributions contest the basic opposition between a specific Western form based on an autonomous self free to spontaneously gift friendship in an affective bond, as against a much more constrained self within a kinship-dominated society. So, again, we have a similar range of practices. My concern here is with examples taken from specifically English contexts, which seems reasonable in the first instance since it is the English word relationship I am focusing upon. I would need others to comment upon the analogies and levels of generality that apply to other languages.

Finch and Mason used this evidence for diversity and complexity to support and integrate the contemporary anthropological approach to kinship as process. It was never my intention in this paper to repudiate or indeed detract from that contribution. But I want to keep a balance between this consideration of the colloquial use of the term and the academic use of the term which took us in the opposite direction, towards firming up the idea of formal and normative relationships. I would argue that evidence for complexity and diversity does not preclude an equal and abiding emphasis upon normativity and formal ideals. Consider, for example, the case of friendship as discussed by philosophers. When researching friendship in London, there are still clear normative ideals of trust and reciprocity, even if they don't look much like the ideal types of Aristotle or Cicero. Failure to accord with these ideals may sometimes lead to a still greater sense of betrayal than failures of kin or even lovers. Similarly, there are endless repetitions and reflections about whether, for example, one should first find a man who would make a good father and then fall in love with him, or, wait until you fall in love first, as well as the presence of a powerful normative dialogue about the state of being in love itself, which contrary to much modern sociology, seems experienced more as a loss of agency than its expression. So somehow we have to contend with the simultaneous existence, even extension, of both of these trends, towards diversity and towards normative formality.

## Conclusion

When I started this essay, I was concerned with the analogy between the use of the term relationship in talking about social relations and in talking about relationships with things. I can see now that this will have to await another paper. My conclusions here refer only to social relationships. The essay began by welcoming current kinship studies that emphasise flexibility, negotiation and experience; aspects of relationships that had previously been neglected. I then argued for a consequential danger that this could, however, lead to a neglect of an equally important emphasis upon normativity and what I termed formal kinship. The contrast between these two was then opened up still further by a brief summary of some disciplinary approaches to relationships and a brief examination of the colloquial meaning of the term relationship. The disciplinary literature not only theorised the normative in relationships but seems to bear some responsibility for actually constituting this normative aspect as part of our cultural expectations of relationships. By contrast, the colloquial use of the term relationship seems to take us in the opposite direction by showing how extraordinarily flexible, negotiated and experiential some modern relationships turn out to be.

I want to conclude by suggesting that this reinforces what I would call an essential dialectics that needs to remain at the heart of such studies, an approach I previously proposed within a book called *The Dialectics of Shopping* (Miller 2001b). This book was based on a year's study of shopping on a single street in North London. My argument was that we live in a society with clear normative expectations of a series of roles and relationships that continue to matter a great deal to us. Being a parent or sibling or husband includes a whole series of expectations and idealisations of what the person who occupies that role should be like and how they should behave toward us. But it is accompanied today by an ever increasing diversity of actual relationships and behaviour and experiences of the ways we treat each other.

In studying shopping, I was trying to work out why people would buy this or that particular item of clothing or food as opposed to some other. My conclusion was that most often we buy things that in some small measure address the discrepancy between the normative ideal of the recipient and what you now know about what they, the individual, are actually like. A typical gift, for example, is not totally ad hominem to the personality of your father, nor idealised as appropriate for pure fatherhood, but is hoped to help bridge the discrepancy between these two. In other words, typically, we buy, cook and serve the meal that is hoped to make one's actual husband

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through objects a difficult cantankerous grandmother becomes remembered as the beloved gran. I would hope this approach could potentially be just as productive for others as it has been for me. But first we would have to acknowledge the retained importance of normative formal expectations as an integral part of what we mean, and what most people colloquially mean, by the term relationship.

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