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Scheffler at the 2008 Yale graduation (courtesy of Mary Smith)

Harold W. Scheffler (1932–2015)

Harold W. Scheffler, one of modern anthropology's most important scholars of kinship and descent theory, died in New Haven, Connecticut, on July 24, 2015. He was Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at Yale University, where he had served on the faculty for 45 years (1963–2008), the longest period of faculty service in the department's history.

The first in his family to go to college, Scheffler enrolled at Southeast Missouri State College in 1952 and transferred to the University of Missouri the following year. His studies were interrupted by military service with the United States Army in 1954–1955, after which he returned to the University of Missouri. He received a BA degree in anthropology and sociology in 1956.

Scheffler then went on to the University of Chicago for graduate work in anthropology. After receiving an MA in 1957, he continued in the doctoral program. With fellowships from the Carnegie Corporation and the Fulbright program, he conducted 18 months of fieldwork (1958–1961) on the island of Choiseul in what was then called the British Solomon Islands Protectorate. Under Fred Eggan and David M. Schneider, he completed his PhD dissertation on "Kindred and Kin Groups in Choiseul Island Social Structure" in 1963 and soon published a revised version as *Choiseul Island Social Structure* (1965). Scheffler later donated his field research notes and papers, correspondence, photographs, and sound recordings to the Library of the University of

California–San Diego. They are catalogued and accessible to scholars at http://libraries.ucsd.edu/speccoll/findingaids/mss0481.html.

Scheffler taught at the University of Connecticut (1961–1962) and Bryn Mawr College (1962–1963) before joining Yale, where he remained until his retirement in 2008. His courses on kinship, on human rationality and modes of thought, and on sexual meanings reached generations of Yale undergraduates, and for many years he trained entering doctoral students in the department's first-year pro-seminar. Many PhD students writing their dissertations were attracted to studying with him because of his generosity with supportive advice and his unerring eye (and sharp red pencil) for jargon. He was particularly proud to have been an early and steadfast advocate for the growth of Women and Gender Studies at Yale and served on its council for many years. Over the years, he was also a research fellow at a number of universities and was a Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst (DAAD, or German Academic Exchange Service) Visiting Professor at the Free University of Berlin.[1]

Kinship and descent have always been at the core of anthropological knowledge, and Scheffler was one of the progenitors of its theory, in a distinguished line of scholars from Lewis Henry Morgan, W. H. R. Rivers, Meyer Fortes, and others. Choiseul, the location of his dissertation research, was a society with ambilineal descent groups, not uncommon in Oceania. Scheffler selected it as his research site to address what was then a heated debate in kinship studies, which was dominated at the time by a structural-functionalism of unilineal descent cases. Was cognatic descent really a social structuring of descent because such societies needed other criteria in addition to descent principles to bring into being enduring, corporate descent groups? Scheffler's analysis turned on distinctions between descent as a genealogical construct, rules that were phrased with descent criteria, and social processes and groups that deployed such constructs and rules. He showed that a descent construct and ambilineal principles were indeed structuring forces. Inspired both by Edmund Leach's study of Pul Eliya and by Erving Goffman, he argued forcefully for the reciprocal conditioning of social norms and social situations in group formation and patterned behaviors. As he was readying his dissertation for publication, he elaborated its conclusions into a general argument about constructs, rules, and groups in an influential *Current Anthropology* essay (1966).

Coming to Yale in the 1960s, Scheffler was much stimulated by Floyd Lounsbury, already a major figure in directing linguistic anthropology from the historical and the phonological toward formal semantic analysis. Lounsbury had taken up kinship terminologies as an especially fruitful classificatory domain. Semantic analysis conceived of lexical items as having a focal meaning and extensible referents, and the genealogical grid of kin terms seemed to offer an exemplary paradigm for such analysis. Scheffler's collaboration with Lounsbury in their case study of the kinship terminology of the Siriono Indians of Bolivia (Scheffler and Lounsbury 1971) remains the most detailed explication of structural semantic analysis in our discipline.

This was a decisive turning point in Scheffler's work. By the 1960s, there were several radical challenges to kinship and descent theory in anthropology—particularly in France by Claude Lévi-Strauss but also in England by Rodney Needham and in the United States by David Schneider. Lévi-Strauss effectively reversed the analytical priority of kinship–descent and marriage, arguing that for a vast range of societies the regulation of marriage through various patterns of affinal alliances was more structurally consequential than the management of descent through kinship classification systems. The English translation of Lévi-Strauss's *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* appeared in 1969, and Scheffler's long review essay (1970) was both a judicious appraisal and a respectful but trenchant critique. Rodney Needham (who coordinated the translation of *Elementary Structures* and endorsed much of alliance theory in his 1962 *Structure and Sentiment*) was another strong skeptic of kinship as a domain of analysis. In part to respond to this skepticism and in part to confront one of the knottiest problems for earlier anthropologists, Scheffler undertook a massive and highly technical investigation of Australian aboriginal systems of kin classification (1978). Attacking the view that Australian kin terminologies were derived from membership in clans, moieties, and other groups, he explicated their logic in terms of equivalence-rule analysis, which seeks to stipulate a small set of rules by which all terms may be related in an array of equivalencies.

Even more widely known than these debates, however, Scheffler's assertions about the analytical utility of formal categories, the widespread if not universal awareness of procreative ties, and the deployment of genealogical connections as the basis of kinship drew him into sharp disputes with David M. Schneider and others that continued for decades. Schneider used a "cultural" analysis of U.S. kinship to argue not only that genealogical relations cannot be presumed to constitute kinship categories and relationships but also that kinship itself cannot be defined as an a priori domain of analysis (compare, for instance, Scheffler 1976 and Schneider 1984:113–126).

Their differences, especially as Schneider's position was articulated in the later work of his students and supporters, tended to elide two important issues at stake. One was the nature of systems of social classification, a root problem in anthropology and social theory. On this, the disagreement has always been one of irreconcilable differences of first principles—in particular, on how we are to analyze the semantics of polysemic words (as in the debate about so-called extensionism) and on the need to separate distinctive and nondistinctive features (compare, e.g., Scheffler 1976:87–88 and Sousa 2003:274–276). The other issue was how to interpret the evidence for a genealogical basis of kinship in particular instances. For Scheffler, this was always a matter of the ethnographic record and not a universal, a priori

claim, although his critics charged that his was a de facto universalism because in every case he found evidence of a genealogical ground for kinship and descent reckoning.

Scheffler remained a staunch advocate for the formal features and ethnographic varieties of what we might call ethnogenealogy. He drew on his erudition and wide reading to provide the broadest statement of his position in his final book, *Filiation and Affiliation* (2000), which he himself pithily summarized in a 2001 lecture delivered at a symposium in Germany as "Remuddling Kinship" (2001; see also Scheffler 2003).

It would seem that, for many in our discipline, kinship and descent have become anachronistic topics in the 21st century, and the controversies of the past are intellectual curiosities at best. Such an assessment may be premature. The debates that Scheffler did so much to invigorate continue today (e.g., Kronenfeld 2012; Sahlins 2013; Shapiro 2012), and kinship has re-emerged as a subject of intense concern among anthropologists. There are several reasons for this. There is renewed attention to the nature of classification in light of advances in cognition research (e.g., Chit-Hlaing 2011), and more importantly, the salience of family and kinship in the real world has been heightened by radical changes in legal rights and family law, struggles to redefine nation-state citizenship, and new reproductive technologies that are creating ethnobiologies of procreation that neither Scheffler nor Schneider could have imagined 40 years ago.

Equally urgent is the continuing role of kinship and descent for Third and Fourth World peoples seeking to define and defend cultural heritage, indigenous social forms, and individual and collective rights under assault from multiple forces. This is certainly true in the Solomon Islands and elsewhere in Melanesia; indigenous interest in kinship and descent has undergone a renaissance since the 1980s because the increasing intrusion of logging and mining has brought matters of land rights and thus kinship to the fore. In an unpublished interview with Niko Besnier in 2015, Edvard Hviding of the University of Bergen related that Scheffler's *Choiseul Island Social Structure* has been cherished in Choiseul, where photocopied and spiral-bound copies circulate to this day as a vital reference for self-definition and protective claims. Local elders remember "Sefla" as someone who "understood how we work," and they told Hviding that his book could have been written by a Melanesian. Scheffler would have been gratified to know of the book's continuing value as a repository of local knowledge and a basis for local collective action. That was what he always saw the role of kinship and descent to be.

Hal Scheffler is also remembered for an incident in disciplinary history. As is well known, Bronislaw Malinowski died in New Haven in 1942. He had been a visiting professor at Yale for several years and was about to assume a permanent professorship. When Hal came to Yale in the 1960s and inquired of his colleagues, no one knew where Malinowski was actually buried among the city's many graveyards, nor were there family or university records. Hal did some sleuthing in city records and eventually discovered the unmarked site. He gathered contributions and arranged for a proper stone marker. For many years, he led the first-year doctoral students in his introductory pro-seminar in an annual gravesite commemoration of Malinowski and his work, a tradition that Hal continued even into his retirement years.

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