

What do we need to remember from this again too brief overview of systems of descent and filiation? Here are a few guidelines to help in the recording of data.

1. Any social, ethnic, tribal etc. group shares at least three things: a spatial location (even if it is a virtual one as with internet communities), a way of identifying and recruiting its members, and a shared history or memory. Terminologies, as we have seen, structure the social field within the group from an egocentric (a speaker's) point of view. They reflect certain aspects of organization, role distribution, and the circulation of people. Descent and filiation, on the other hand, touch upon the three above-mentioned conditions of social being. They answer questions on how spatial organization is reproduced over generations. They answer questions on how people become and are members of the group and its subgroups, and they are associated to the group's collective history and memory. Very often, patrilineal descent is linked to the existence of clans who each have their own myth of origins.
2. Some aspects of descent and filiation are visible and straightforward; others are hidden, unconscious, and only identifiable through the careful analysis of discourses, symbolism, and ideology with regard to the constitution and composition of the human and the social body.
3. Human beings and, by extension, social groups are made up of substances, be they material or immaterial. The genealogy of these substances, the way they circulate among human beings and groups, the way they are transmitted from one generation to the next or are destroyed, constitute important aspects in the understanding of the system of descent and filiation in particular, and of the entire group's organization and structure in general. These substances' existence is most often limited to the domain of language and speech, and only rarely and sporadically surfaces in the domain of actual practice.

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9.3.3 Alliance and marriage

At the height of descent theory and the interest in descent systems as the constituents of social groups during the first half of the twentieth century, with Lévi-Strauss' work (1967[1947]) a new and complementary investigation into the complexities of human kinship emerged: alliance theory. According to this structuralist theory, society is not (or not solely) made up of principles of belonging (descent and groups), but primarily of principles of exchange. Lévi-Strauss claimed that three types of exchanges characterize the human social realm: exchange of words (language), exchange of goods (the economic domain), and exchange of human beings (marriage). It is only when these three principles of exchange are systematized and functional in a group of human beings that the latter actually constitutes a society with its shared cultural codes. Alliance theorists, as the name indicates, and with them Lévi-Strauss and many other anthropologists, concentrated their research efforts on the domain of the exchange of human beings: marriage. And marriage becomes a system of exchange if it is associated with the obligation of exogamy, i.e. marrying someone from 'outside' your family or group. Brothers and sisters who over generations marry each other will not constitute a society. To do so, Lévi-Strauss explains, we need an incest prohibition which forces people to obtain their spouses from other families.

Before going further, it is necessary to explain the distinction between 'alliance' and 'marriage'. Dumont (1957), another alliance theorist albeit in some respects in disagreement with Lévi-Strauss, has conceptualized the difference in the most systematic way. He talks of alliance (or 'alliance of marriage') when he observes and analyses the repetition of identical marriage types over generations or among co-generational. Thus marriage is the individual event that happens in a particular place with particular people in a particular context, bringing two people (and families) together with the aim of joining them as spouses and usually future parents. Alliance is the system which reflects a certain regularity in the choice of suitable spouses and describes repetitions of identical marriage types.