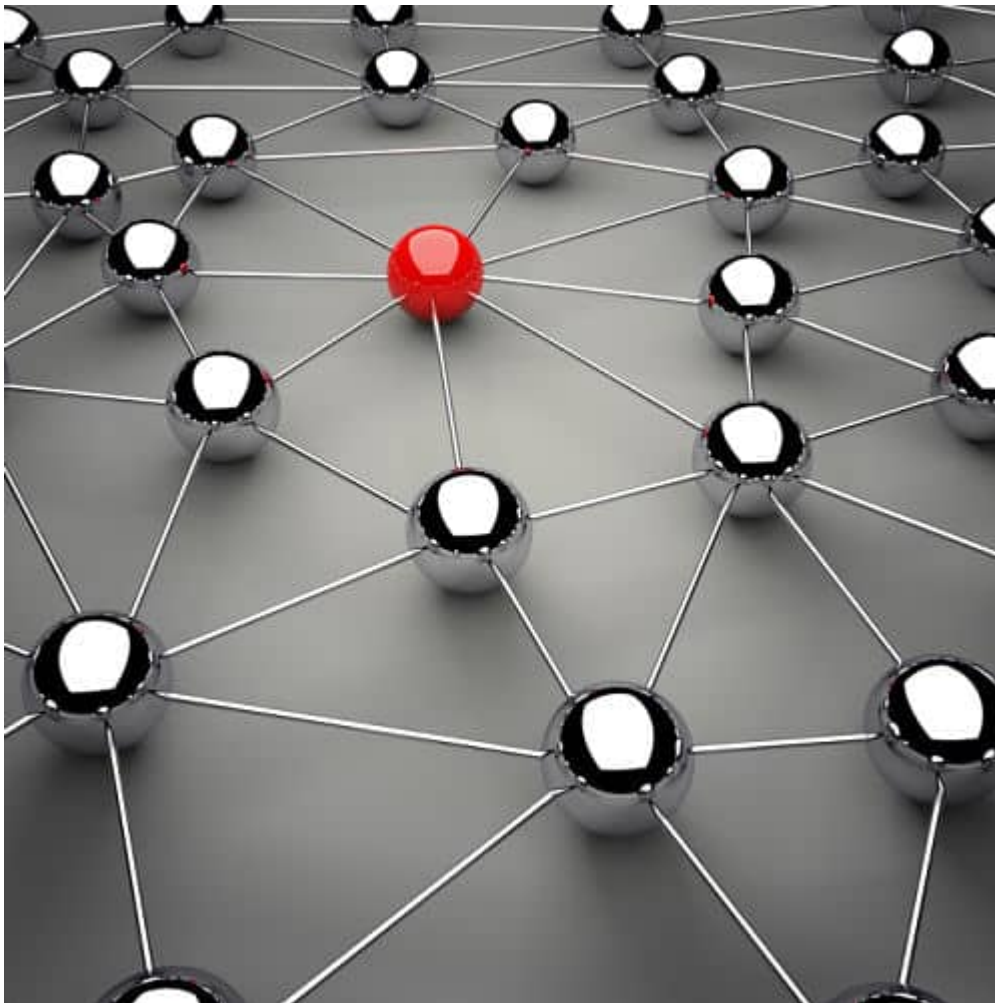




Insiders, Outsiders, and Intellectual Kinship

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Marshall Sahlins once dismissed the possibility that teacher-student relationships might be a kind of kinship. 'Persons may have various relational attributes and thus be *linked* to diverse others - *the way I am related to my students as a teacher* and to the Chicago Cubs as a fan - without being united in being with them', he says (2013: 25, emphases added). Nevertheless, many intellectuals and academics sometimes describe, understand, or act upon their relationships with other scholars in terms of kinship to such an extent that, while often taken for



granted, kinship may in fact be the central to the analysis of academic life.

We can all recognize one form of this *intellectual kinship* in the practice of asking who a scholar works with. Asking about a scholar's teacher is a common way of trying to place them not only in an academic genealogy, but also intellectually, socially, and often politically, it is an attempt to find out *who* a scholar comes from. I encountered these and other ways scholars think about or act upon academic generational relationships during my three years of ethnographic fieldwork and archival research with three North Indian departments of anthropology and sociology since independence (in 1947).

Many scholars I encountered discussed their relationships and community in kinship terms.

One alumnus of the Delhi School of Economics' ("D School") Sociology Department asked me who else I had talked to, and I found him somewhat appalled by the several names I listed in response. Apparently, most of the names that had immediately come to mind belonged to students of A.M. Shah and perhaps a couple of André Beteille and Veena Das. He suggested in no uncertain terms that my research would be incomplete, if not meaningless, were I not to speak with J.P.S. Uberoi's students as well – the people I had been speaking with thus far belonged to completely 'different families,' different 'species', he said.

Another D School sociology alumni – who had risen through the ranks from a research associate to a full professor – more directly addressed the fact that the department had historically hired its own graduates as faculty. While recognizing that this was considered 'incestuous' and 'inbreeding' in 'the West', she argued that it was in fact 'productive' to have, along with some 'outsiders', a 'group that has studied here and is working here' to give the institution a 'sense of continuity'. She described this continuity in terms of 'intellectual pedigree', 'genealogy', and 'intellectual tradition' being 'carried forward'. Although students did not simply replicate their teachers' ideas and approaches, she said, 'there's a sense in which you cut your teeth on the ideas of your teachers, and sometimes,



when you're writing something... You hear the echoes. You hear the reverberations. You hear the resistances as well. But you get the resonances and the resistances'. Even if not through any simple process of transmission, this professor found that a shared experience of training over multiple generations, at least in subtle ways, connected the intellectual character or thinking of academics.



Photo by Ralf Geithe (fotolia.com)

In addition to their intellectual significance, as with 'kinning and dekinning (as moral-political-economic processes)' (Feeley-Harnik 2013: 212) generally, these forms of relatedness (Carsten 2000), also produce political asymmetries. For example, after an anthropology professor spoke as part of a panel in a plenary session at a 2012 national conference of the Indian Sociological Society, an audience member questioned the appropriateness of his discussion of kinship in the disciplinary context of sociology, saying 'kinship anthropologizes sociology', implying that kinship and/or anthropology are bad and inappropriate in a sociology of contemporary India. One of the professor's main defenses was to refer to his degree in sociology as well as anthropology, and allude to his relation to important anthropologists and sociologists. In other words, his responses justified his right to speak (and speak on kinship) in sociology based not only on intellectual grounds, but also on his training in multiple disciplines, one of which gives him membership in a prominent sociological intellectual genealogy. At another point, he also made passing reference to a prominent scholar, who was a



student of the same professor, as his '*guru bhai*' (literally: a brother from the same *guru*).

In contrast to that professor's 'insider' status, 'outsider'-ness was a term that I heard often, though not always identically applied. It is a relative term and, as I have alluded, can exist within a single department. It may diminish somewhat over time. But even professors who have spent decades, most of their adult lives, in one department may permanently feel as relative outsiders if, say, their only degree from the department in which they teach is their PhD.

These ideas came up, for example, in an interview with a senior professor who explained to me that, in order to understand his department, I would need to pay attention to people's 'migratory patterns'. He pointed out how two professors who had studied in another university tended to stick together. On a piece of paper, he drew me a table listing three types of faculty, the 'indigenous' (who all received their degrees from the department), those who received some or all their degrees in the department but had some experience teaching or studying outside before returning, and the very few total 'outsiders' who had not been students of the department in which they teach. He explained that these outsiders almost never fully 'integrate'. Expanding on this point, he said outsiders may think they or their previous institutions are better, or may not 'belong' or show proper respect to the retired teachers of this department. However, another professor had a different perspective on outsider-hood. He suggested the connection between the outsider-professors was at least as much out of sympathy for the difficulty of entering a new department as an outsider as it was out of any regional solidarity. He also suggested that migratory patterns was a poor conceptualization; and proposed instead the importance of paying attention to 'umbilical cords' - subsequently naming all the professors in the department along with their students who were now junior faculty, of which there were several.

There is not one singular view of the workings of these generational relationships.



They might be seen as multiple “genealogical imagination[s]” (Shryock 1997) that must be created, maintained, and are often contested. Yet these stories are suggestive of conditions discussed in literature on how kinship is made. For example, many theorists have argued that kinship is created through shared substances (e.g., Carsten 1995), the identity of which may vary cross-culturally. As in the *guru bhai* reference, I often heard scholars describe their academic relationships and genealogies in terms of *guru-shishya* relationships and genealogies. To cover large ground very briefly, in a discussion of *guru-shishya* relationships, Barth has gone so far as to argue that knowledge is ‘the essence of generative substance’ in ‘Indian concepts of personhood’ (1993: 648), thus, providing grounds for an argument that the sharing of such a substance is a source of kinship.

Even though academic genealogical imaginations can be found in many places, as one would expect, meanings vary, and cultural, historical, and religious contexts matter.

We might consider again the audience member who was sufficiently offended by a discussion of the continuing relevance of kinship to Indian life – even in urban settings and under the influence of globalization – that he dismissed it as anthropologizing sociology. Depictions of kinship as influencing aspects of social life outside some narrowly defined domain can evoke loaded associations with ideas like ‘tradition’ and ‘nepotism’. A parallel discomfort was visible in the reference one professor made to the idea of academic incest, simultaneously recognizing the existence of academic kin ties while stigmatizing them and demonstrating the awkwardness some kinds of generational relations can generate for scholars.

That awkwardness represents an ambivalence also found among some of the academics in ‘the West’, viewed by the professor as looking down on intellectual genealogy. [Some studies](#) have pointed out how, even if they are not hiring their own alumni, relatively small groups of elite universities (or [anthropology](#)



[departments](#)) are much more likely to hire each other's graduates. These studies commonly raise reactions of alarm about nepotism versus arguments about the relative quality of work coming out of different institutions, but little discussion of how such a phenomenon may be socially produced regardless. At the same time, scholars in disciplines like [mathematics](#) and [physical anthropology](#) have been building large academic genealogical databases. This genealogical interest reflects the importance of these relationships and a recognition that the educational enterprise would be meaningless without them. A recognition of the [centrality of genealogical relationships](#) to academic life is also often a basis for critiques of audit cultures (Strathern 2000) and efforts to 'corporatize' higher education. This ambivalence indicates a difficulty in reconciling ideas about the nature of academic life—the challenges and necessity of its human dimensions—that an understanding of academia as intellectual kinship might aid scholars to come to grips with.

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