

Multiple Relations: Towards an Anthropology of Parenting

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Zusammenfassung

Multiple Beziehungen: Auf dem Weg zu einer Anthropologie der Elternschaft

Trotz der großen Bedeutung von Eltern-Kind-Beziehungen in der Verwandtschaft ist Elternschaft in der Anthropologie der Verwandtschaft ein bislang untertheoretisiertes Thema. Der Beitrag skizziert eine Anthropologie der Elternschaft, die diese Zentralität anerkennt. Ihre Theorie wird zunächst anhand eines Fallbeispiels entwickelt, im Anschluss werden Debatten aufgezeigt, die für eine Anthropologie von Elternschaft wichtig sind. Hierbei werden die problematische Gegenüberstellung von biologisch versus sozial in der Geschichte der Sozialanthropologie verortet und im Anschluss Debatten skizziert, die für eine Anthropologie von Elternschaft wichtig sind. Diese wird schließlich als relationales Konzept definiert, das durch multiple Beziehungen emergiert.

Introduction

In September of 2022, I spoke with a young man from the Republic of Benin whom I will call Issaka. He was trained as a social geographer in Germany and works for an internationally financed environmental project. Three years ago, he married Yamila, a young woman from his home region in northern Benin, who is trained as a primary school teacher. The family is seeking to establish a middle-class life in northern Benin and by October 2022 were expecting their second child. I have known Issaka since he was a child, so we are close enough to talk about personal affairs and emotions.

Reflecting on his personal situation, Issaka told me how happy it makes him that he and his wife agree about his rural home region's established (and apparently centuries-old) practice of sending some children away for foster care¹. He explained that, especially among couples seeking to live an urban professional life, the value of this practice was no longer self-evident. Many parents today want to bring up their biological children (his term) themselves, according to a European »nuclear family« model they consider superior to the practices Issaka and his wife grew up with.

Issaka explained that when he got married, he had not yet been sure how Yamila would react if he asked her to give one of their children to other parents. When he talked about her, he cited their agreement that children could also

Summary

Despite the importance of parent-child relationships in kinship, parenthood is an under-theorized topic in kinship anthropology. The paper outlines an anthropology of parenting that recognizes this centrality. Its theory is first developed on the basis of a case study, followed by debates that are important for an anthropology of parenthood. The problematic juxtaposition of biological versus social is located in the history of social anthropology and debates that are important for an anthropology of parenthood are then outlined. This is finally defined as a relational concept that emerges through multiple relationships.

be raised by others as evidence that he had chosen the right woman to marry.

We also discussed the new house that he was spending every centime he had on completing. This building in the style favoured by members of the new middle classes was being built on land they had purchased in the city neighbourhood, where every urban academic aspired to build and live.

Issaka was hoping to move the whole family there before October, when his second child was due, if it was at all possible. In my own view, the house was quite far from being in a state to move into: the floors and walls were still bare cement, there was no electricity or running water, and only two of the five rooms even had windows. However, among the reasons given by Issaka as to why he had to leave his rented apartment as soon as possible were the birth rituals for his second child. Those of the first child had been held in the household of his foster parents, where he had lived while attending secondary school, and he was eager to maintain those rituals for the second under his own roof. According to local beliefs, rituals require a place of land that is the property of the person who performs them, so living in a rented apartment he would not be allowed to carry them out.

For all these reasons, Issaka told me, he was delighted that his wife shared his eagerness to take full possession of their own place. He had feared that she might feel uncomfortable moving into what could better be described as a

¹ See, among others, Martin 2013; Alber 2018.

construction site than a home. But she too wanted to move as soon as possible. Their shared desire to establish their own home was, not least, in order to become more independent from their kin, especially their parents.

This conversation with Issaka is related to parenting in four meaningful ways. Most importantly, it demonstrates the importance of parenting in his reflections on his current living situation and starting his new family. Parenting is relevant to all aspects of family life, including building a family home, organising rituals, reflecting on how and where to raise the children, and, last but not least, a peaceful conjugal life.

Second, Issaka reflected on parenting as a field of insecurity and possible conflict between spouses but one that is at the same time essential to a healthy marriage. This insecurity derives from the profound changes taking place in parental practices and a corresponding diversity of norms and ideas that, as Issaka observed, are not always shared between spouses. These relate to questions about how children should be raised, under whose roof they should grow up, and who has the right and duty to educate them. Our conversation also drew attention to the materialities and ritual aspects of parenting, such as the house and birth rituals.

Although Issaka and Yamila come from similar family backgrounds – both were born in remote villages and raised in urban households where they could attend school; however, these situational similarities were not enough to guarantee a shared understanding on parenting. Issaka's happiness about his wife's opinions demonstrated how this was not at all self-evident. In a rapidly changing society like Benin, norms and ideas about childhood and proper parenting, including changing needs and requirements for education, as well as divergent generational experiences and expectations, constitute a heterogeneous and sometimes contested field of ideas. Among the causes of these changes are influences from Europe and the Global North spread in the media. These favour, among other things, the model of a nuclear family with exclusive responsibility for raising children. Spouses often disagree, even when they share similar family backgrounds. This causes a sense of insecurity that troubled Issaka and, as I know from other conversations, troubles many of his contemporaries in Benin.

Third, Issaka related parenting to many other themes, such as a young middle-class family's upward social mobility, relations with his parents' generation, and building a house. Apparently, parenting is key to understanding many other aspects of the changing societal field.

Finally, Issaka does not see biological or birth parents as the only or most appropriate persons to fulfil the tasks of parenting according to the Euro-North American ideal of the nuclear family – which is also the ideal implied in national family law in Benin (African Charter 1999; République du Bénin 2002). Instead, he holds to the norms that he grew up with: it can be desirable for children to be raised by someone other than their birth parents. Part of the reason for his insecurity was not having known whether his wife, who shared his experience of having grown up as a foster child, still felt that parenting by foster parents was easy and normal. It would really be a pleasure for Issaka, he told me, to give some of his children to persons to whom he felt

attached and indebted. The reverse was also true: even though he was still living in a small apartment, he had already taken in one foster child, a nephew from his village who was studying in town.

As this conversation with Issaka demonstrates, the ideal that children should be raised by their birth parents in a nuclear family is not even self-evident to emerging middle-class families in northern Benin who aspire to a lifestyle that includes many elements of the Euro-North American conjugal or nuclear model.

Biological and social kinship

The conversation with Issaka shows that practices and reflections on appropriate parenting in a middle-class setting in the Republic of Benin at the beginning of the 21st century do not easily match the widespread Euro-North American understanding of parenting as a social practice that is grounded in biological ties. However, this distinction between biological and social kinship should also not be understood as a timeless analytical category but as an assumption dating to the 19th-century foundation of the modern discipline of social anthropology. In particular, L. H. Morgan sought to »carve out certain aspects of human behaviour, isolating them for study«, as T. Trautmann's (1987, 4) account of the process of the »invention of kinship« as an object of anthropological research puts it. To make kinship an object of inquiry – and thus a universal human category – it was necessary to produce evidence by inventing methods of describing, comparing, measuring, and classifying complex social relationships all over the world. This process was accompanied by the establishment of a distinction between »modern« societies and the proper field of the new discipline of anthropology, the so-called »primitive societies«.

Morgan himself contributed to this important boundary-making between »modern« and »primitive« societies with his famous distinction between classificatory kinship systems, attributed to primitive societies and grounded in social classification, and descriptive kinship systems, which he saw as following biological distinctions (Morgan 1870). In the latter, kinship was seen to be founded on clear genealogical or biological relationships based on sexual activities, and to be researched with the genealogical method and its objectifying visual representation (Bouquet 1996). These relationships were seen to be translated into various meanings and practices through social activity. Kinship as a field of anthropological inquiry thus concerned social practices that were based on indubitable biological processes of sexuality and procreation. This meant studying topics like rules and prohibitions concerning marriage partners, kinship terminologies and their classification, and the rules and regulations of property, inheritance, and succession.

In this sense, kinship in itself was not only constituted by an epistemological nature/culture divide, but also as constituting and substantiating this divide through anthropological knowledge production. It was only decades later that anthropologists and others started to reflect critically on the history of the idea that kinship was a universal category

shared by all societies over the world and how it could even be understood as an imaginary means to make anthropological methods seem objective (Thelen/Alber 2018).

Of course, anthropology was not the only discipline where this process of inventing and establishing kinship took place: it was embedded in and related to specific epistemological processes during the 19th century. M. Hohkamp (2023) has called this period the »century of kinship« during which both natural sciences and the newly emerging humanities were fascinated by sexuality and procreation, genealogy, breeding, and the development of new methods to describe and objectify these processes.

This nature-culture divide – based on the idea of an objective »nature« or biology, but also researching heterogeneous and culture-specific practices of kinship with positivist and objectifying methods – characterised the anthropology of kinship until the second half of the 20th century, when it was re-evaluated and became understood as foundational for western or Euro-North American ideas about kinship. Here, especially, the notion that »nature« or »biology« was stable and the clear basis of social relatedness was itself destabilised (Strathern 1992).

Again, this destabilisation was embedded in knowledge processes that were not restricted to anthropology alone. Among these were the development of, and anthropological reflection on, so-called »artificial reproductive technologies« like surrogate motherhood, which destabilised the idea of a »natural« unity of conception, pregnancy, and birth (Franklin/Ragoné 1998; Ragoné 2006). Who should be seen as the biological mother – the donor of the egg, or the woman who carried the pregnancy? What could be seen as nature if the beginning of human life was produced and possibly designed in the laboratory? And how could kinship be conceptualised on the basis of an idea about nature if same-sex parenting was allowed by, and established in, modern family law (Weston 1997)?

Besides challenging the biology/society and nature/culture divides, these approaches of researching kinship or more specifically, parenting, were no longer realised in societies outside the West: they brought anthropological kinship research »back« to Euro-North America and closed the former spatial divide as well. This move was possible not only because kinship as a universal category had been destabilised, but also because it had been argued that while the biology/culture, or biology/society divide was not essential for distinguishing the West from the rest, it had been deeply impressed on the North American understanding of kinship (Schneider 1968).

In parallel to this destabilisation of the biology/society divide by looking at kinship and reproductive technologies in Euro-North American societies, another strand of kinship literature destabilised the idea of true biological kinship by looking at societies outside the West. Again, parenting was key.

Studies of motherhood and breastfeeding, for instance, argued that the former is often less grounded in the mother having given birth to a child than having given milk to it (Thorley 2014). If nursing seems to be more important in constituting the bond between mother and child in some societies, which should we understand as biological?

Research on foster parenting in Africa (Notermans 2004), Latin America (Weismantel 1995), or Oceania (Brady 1976; Modell 1998) has demonstrated, among other things, the importance of sharing time, food, beds, and homes to the constitution of parenthood and its acknowledgement by society. In a detailed case study in Ecuador, M. Weismantel (1995) observed that if a grandmother took care of a grandchild for an extended period they came to be seen as mother and child by not only each other but also others, who started to address her as the mother of the child based on the fact that she and the child had shared the same food over time and thus become bodily similar.

In fact, the bodily process of sharing food and bed eventually started to overwrite the now-partially fading bodily experience of giving birth and providing closeness and food that had previously established the parental relation between the birth mother and the child. Following anthropologist J. Carsten's metaphor of the »thickening« and »thinning« of kinship (Carsten 2013), here, the parental relationship with the grandmother »thickened« even as the parental relationship with the mother »thinned«, with both being imagined as physical, bodily processes that were, if you will, similarly grounded in biological substances.

Another anthropological critique that questioned the notion of a stable »biology« and a related but clearly separated practice of social relatedness started with the idea that the biological basis of fatherhood is itself a process of knowing: if not all of society is aware of the relationship between sexuality and fatherhood, what is fatherhood based on? M. Strathern (2011) took up this line of argument by looking at it in the context of artificial reproductive technologies. She argued that parenting is constituted by a fundamental asymmetry where the child is a fact in itself, a given, a phenomenon, while the parent, as the other part of the relation that constitutes parenting, is always a construct, a product of processes of knowing and stabilising knowledge that can never be completely stable.

In short, the assumption of a nature/culture, or biology/society divide in the understanding of kinship has been challenged from different perspectives of anthropological research in both the West and the Rest with increasing awareness that this divide is not universal, but rather is a foundational element of Euro-North American epistemologies of kinship.

Parenting

Parenting in its multiple forms stands at the centre of these debates: breastfeeding and the notion of shared milk, the conception of a child through a sexual or through artificial processes of uniting eggs and sperm, and living together and sharing food, all constitute parent-child relationships. All these activities relate the »parent« (whoever that may be) and the »child« (again, whoever *that* may be) to the larger society. They are restricted neither to the private realm nor to the period of childhood but take place over the whole life course.

What, then, is parenting? The examples I have presented – giving birth or food, performing rituals and having the

right to raise a particular child – are quite heterogenous, and position parents in different times and roles towards not only their children but also the state and larger society.

I define parenting as a relational concept, which encompasses multiplicities of gendered moralities, actions, care activities, knowledge transmissions and feelings between parents and children in specific historical moments and over parents and children's life courses. These contribute to the making of future, of individuals as well as of the society. It is through these multiplicities that the inter-generational relations are emerging. The categories of »parent« and »child« are, of course, not restricted to birth parents and birth children. These are themselves largely shaped by changing societal understandings of who is a parent and who a child. Parent-child relationships are often seen as symmetric, as for instance expressed in the idea of an inter-generational contract that places emphasis on balance and equalness over time. However, I would argue that these are principally asymmetrical, because due to temporal and societal change, the way in which children would one day parent with their own children might be largely different from how their parents acted as such.

In using the term »parenting« here, I follow a recent trend in social anthropology of emphasising the processual and relational character of concepts: here, more concretely, practices of parenting constitute what is understood as »parenthood«. Following H. Haukanes and T. Thelen (2010, 11), parenthood can, in short, be understood as the »socially constructed notions linked to the status of being a parent«. Parenting, in contrast, is a more dynamic concept and refers to »actual practices of parents with regard to their children« (Haukanes/Thelen 2010, 11), which – here I add to Haukanes and Thelen's definition – produce what is then understood as parenthood.

In any case, neither parenthood nor parenting has received much theoretical attention in anthropological debates. This is surprising, considering their centrality to kinship, which again demonstrates how the concrete practices that make, shape and result in alliance and descent – like practices of parenting – long remained less theorised in debates that treated kinship as constituted by alliance and descent. E. Goody's (1982) book on *parenthood and social reproduction* is one of the very few that have made this point for the field of reproduction and argues that parenthood can be understood as the most concrete activity of organising reproduction over time.

In fact, the first anthropological publications specifically on parenting or parenthood only date to the late 1970s. In the next section, I shall very briefly mention five fields of interest and their contribution to theorising parenting.

Five fields of interest in parenting

First, in the second half of the 20th century, feminist and gender studies investigated and challenged the gendered

division of labour and fixed gender roles. Due to their specific interests, however, their treatment of parenthood largely reduced it to motherhood. In *Birth in Four Cultures*, B. Jordan (1978) challenged facile assumptions that assumed that the moment of birth was more »natural« in non-European societies' and about the specific ways women were supported in different states. Another important publication on motherhood was S. Hay's (1996) monograph, *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*, which discusses the contradiction of intense, loving motherhood in a highly competitive North American society that asks women to realise themselves through professional advancement. Feminist studies also helped to critique the private/public divide, to reveal the political dimension of apparently private activities such as motherhood, and of course, most importantly, to stress the gendered aspects of parenthood.

Second, anthropological and (still more) sociological studies of the gendered dimension of care and global care chains (Ehrenreich/Hochschild 2003) have helped to reveal the often-transnational dimensions of childcare along with the gendered and unequal distribution and valorisation of care work. These brought attention to the consequences of attributing domestic labour to women (while often rendering it invisible) and paid labour to men (Colen 1995; Parreñas 2000; Ehrenreich/Hochschild 2003).

At the same time, through their reflections on the transfer of the work of domestic care from kin to paid workers, studies on care and parenting have brought a new level of attention to the co-production of kinship and institutional care in settings like kindergartens and organised childcare centres (Ellmer 2020). On the one hand, they opened a perspective on how parenting is only realised in the private context, but also connects households to institutions and the societal context. On the other hand, they opened a window to grasp forms of inclusion and exclusion and of possibilities and impossibilities: in fact, they again brought up the political dimension of parenting. Finally, such studies revealed the role of work in parenting – work that could be commodified, or seen as kinship and a moral obligation (Drotbohm/Alber 2015), while also demonstrating the affective and emotional side of care (here, parental care).

A third field of interest in parenthood and parental activities can be seen in the rising interest in childhood in anthropological and sociological debates since the last decade of the 20th century². However, as Haukanes and Thelen (2010) have convincingly argued, they remained mainly focussed on children and childhood and often overlooked how children's rights, spaces and agencies, all of which have been intensively discussed in the so-called new childhood studies, could not be separated from parents' rights and duties and how these were situated in specific societal times and places.

Haukanes and Thelen (2010) further argued that ideas about good parenting have been overshadowed by notions of proper childhood, which they see as travelling globally in the late 20th century. One good example of this can be seen

2 James/Prout 1990; Caputo 1995; De Boek/Honwana 2005; Boyden 2006; Christensen/James 2008.

in how Issaka feared that his wife might have adopted the European idea that children should grow up with their birth parents. Debates on childhood also revealed the legal dimension of parenting. Of course, protecting children's rights requires a legal framework that obliges parents to protect their children, but this also implies the need to define who is the legal parent.

Fourth, studies of child fostering in Africa³ and Oceania (Modell 1998; Collard 2004) have challenged Euro-North American assumptions that children are usually raised by their birth parents. I have already mentioned Goody's (1982) pioneering work on child fostering in Ghana, which substantially contributed to theorising parenthood. Her key argument is that the multiple parental roles there are key for societal reproduction. Goody defines five roles of parenting: the processes of bearing and begetting, status entitlement, further nurturing, teaching, and sponsoring children. Importantly, she argues that these tasks of parenthood can be distributed among several persons rather than being limited to the birth parents alone.

This perspective was followed and complemented by a literature on adoption and the transnational circulation of children, which demonstrated that processes of transferring parental belonging were deeply related and reproduced global political and economic inequalities. Moreover, they were linked with legal and political transformations (Bowie 2004; Howell 2006; Yngvesson 2007).

Fifth, an important strand of literature raises the topic of parenting in the context of artificial reproductive technologies that create constellations of new roles, like surrogate mothers or sperm donors, which complicate categories such as mother or father. These debates have contributed, as already mentioned, to denaturalising both motherhood and fatherhood. Later literature on »rainbow families« and queer parenting has not only deconstructed the idea of parenting as an activity organised in »normative« nuclear families with clear gender roles, but also raised awareness of questions about legally and practically defining a parent and their related rights (Greenhalgh 1995; Franklin/Ragoné 1998; Strathern 2005).

Building on Goody and Haukanes and Thelen's critiques of the concepts of parenting that are often too closely linked to discussions around childhood and child welfare, I suggest that parenting should be defined as a dynamic – and, of course, gendered – processual activity that is related to, but also constitutes, parents and children through actions of exchange, care, property transmissions and law. As such, parenting gives rise to processes that shape children's individual and (especially) societal futures. It is therefore not a dyadic relationship but a process of relating that co-constitutes parents, children, and society through the institutions involved, over time and with changing roles and meanings. This process does not end when children become adults: it continues over the life course and binds together multiple generations.

Parenting is a key activity in building new generations, making it an engine of societal change. It is therefore inher-

ently embedded in political processes of changing societal formations. At the same time, it has the potential to reproduce or overturn social, economic and gender inequalities and is, of course, deeply shaped by legal processes.

Two temporal dimensions of parenting have not yet been adequately conceptualised. First, the inter-generational dimension cannot be reduced to a dyadic relationship between parents and their children, but often involves the grandparents as well. Second, parenting encompasses activities over the life course and cannot be limited to the period of childhood. Moreover, parenting cannot be reduced to the realm of kinship and the household. It relates institutions, households and the state in multiple ways and is key to almost all processes of belonging, including civic, religious and class belonging, but especially to stabilising and transforming gendered belonging over time.

Conclusion

I started with Issaka's reflections on his new family, and his plans for a new middle-class household that will be very different from the rural peasant household of peasants into which he was born.

That conversation touched on many of the dimensions of parenting I defined. It began as one about future-building and how Issaka imagined his family developing. Then, parenting as gendered activity came up, but not, as one might expect, because Issaka and his wife divided parental labour strictly along gender lines. It only emerged indirectly later in the conversation that Issaka, as the male head of the household, must earn money to provide for his family (including any foster children), organising physical accommodations, and materially maintain the household while his wife will have the main responsibility for everyday cleaning, feeding, dressing and supervising the children. But these highly gendered activities of parenting were less prominent in the conversation than Issaka's fear that his wife would want to follow norms closer to the idea of the nuclear family.

Parenting appeared alongside future-building and gendered labour and norms as a contested space that, as I have shown, mirrored societal frictions and transformations like the controversial shift towards the global travelling image of the nuclear family. In addition, parenting mirrors the rising inequality in Beninese society, in which middle-class urban children are educated differently from rural ones. Here, as I have argued, questions of belonging are also concerned.

Actions and activities of parenting, even those as seemingly private as those of Issaka and his wife, are contributing to the contested political arena of changing family forms and children's rights in Benin and are related to processes of class building and class differentiation. In sum, parenting relates Issaka, his wife, and their children (and those they will have in the future) to the political arena where important societal changes are made, the transmis-

³ Goody 1982; Bledsoe 1990; Lallemand 1983; Alber et al. 2013.

sion of property is organised, and future generations are shaped.

Since parenting is about belonging, not only in the sense of kinship, but to a religion, ethnicity and class, the question of where the birth rituals of the children should take place also influenced how far the children, as well as Issaka himself, would be seen as belonging to his foster parents. Negotiating whether the second child's birth ritual should be held in the house of Issaka's foster parents or his own demonstrated the importance of intergenerational entanglements. The involvement of both Issaka and his parents demonstrates how parenting relates several generations over time and how it does not end when children become adults. Like other parents, Issaka's foster father remains

very present in his reflections on his future. Parenting is not limited to a short, specific, and closed phase of life, but includes multiple processes extending over one's whole lifespan that constantly relate to other activities.

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