

# Can the patriarchy be matrilineal? An anthropologist calls for clarity

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For over a century, anthropologists have attempted to describe human societies as "matrilineal" or "patrilineal"—emphasizing relatedness among women or men, respectively. A new paper by Laura Fortunato, an

anthropologist at the University of Oxford and External Professor at the Santa Fe Institute, argues that it is time to confront the ambiguity at the heart of these terms.

When it comes to kinship, societies universally consider children to be related to both parents. However, societies have varying systems for reckoning descent, or membership in a kinship group, and for determining other elements of social organization, including inheritance of property, succession to office, and where couples live following marriage. For example, in just under 10% of [human societies](#), a child inherits property through the female line, meaning that when it comes time for a son to pass it on, it would go not to his own children, but to his sister's. This is a form of matrilineal inheritance. Yet the son might maintain close links with his father and his kin. For instance, succession to office may be transmitted from father to son, and thus through the male line. In other words, succession to office is patrilineal. Is this society, then, "matrilineal" or "patrilineal"?

As it turns out, these words are used across anthropology "to mean a vague combination of things," says Fortunato.

"Matriliney" has become, in many cases, a shorthand for matrilineal descent, a problematic conflation that disregards the complexities of intergenerational transmission.

"In actuality," Fortunato says, "the bias towards females, towards males, may apply to one domain of societal organization and not [another]."

Based on the results of an independent 1972 study analyzing 186 societies, Fortunato observes that the majority (74%) of societies that do not reckon descent at all still show a bias towards residence with relatives through either the female or male line. Yet to call an entire society "matrilineal" or "patrilineal" is misleading.

What's more, "the moment we imply descent, then you can't extend the framework to other [animal species](#) because they don't have language—culture that allows humans to trace relatedness beyond immediate kin." Take an animal species, for example, in which females teach their offspring foraging skills. Lineal kinship organization—in this case, matrilineal—is still at play even in the absence of culturally-recognized descent groups.

Fortunato suggests that we should reframe lineal kinship organization in terms of biases in investment: a matrilineal bias in a certain area, for instance, corresponds to investment in the offspring of "the women of the group." A single [society](#) might have both matrilineal and patrilineal elements, allowing the framework to accommodate much more complex scenarios.

Crucially, Fortunato's framework also does not imply greater women's empowerment—the bias is understood to be in favor of daughters' offspring, potentially at the expense of the daughters themselves. Such clarity is essential especially in light of larger discussions about women's political influence and anthropology's problematic history in the area.

"The early theorists linked [matriliny] to matriarchy," says Fortunato. "Matriarchy was seen as the 'primitive' form, and then eventually there's a transition to the 'advanced' form which is the patriarchy." Fortunato suggests terminological specificity as a first step in overcoming such problematic conclusions.

The paper appears in the theme issue of *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B*, "The evolution of female-biased kinship in humans and other mammals," for which Fortunato was a co-editor along with Siobhán M. Mattison, Mary K. Shenk, Melissa Emery Thompson, and Monique Borgerhoff Mulder. Fortunato pushes even farther than the theme, arguing that even "female-biased kinship" does not provide the

specificity needed to robustly understand these issues; rather, a full reframing is needed to untangle matriliney from descent and open the discussion to other species.

Ultimately, ambiguous terminology is not simply a matter of semantics, but of [scientific understanding](#)—and more clarity can revamp our understanding of how power and resources move through generational time.

"Lineal kinship organization in cross-specific perspective" is published in in *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B*.

**More information:** Laura Fortunato. Lineal kinship organization in cross-specific perspective, *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* (2019). [DOI: 10.1098/rstb.2019.0005](https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2019.0005)

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