Some Overstatements in “The Fall of Kinship”

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Sousa is basically correct in associating the decline of kinship studies with changes in anthropological epistemology and the historical grounding of kinship in the so-called hard sciences, particularly in human biogenetic reality. He has done his homework and understands the positions of Schneider and Needham better than most commentators on their work. I also agree with his critique of the logical sleight-of-hand in Schneider’s deconstruction of American kinship as a cultural category; in fact, I have advanced essentially the same arguments (see Feinberg 1979, 2001). I believe, however, that Sousa has exaggerated the difference between

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anthropologists’ approaches to kinship and to other cultural categories, and he overestimates the degree of change in anthropological epistemology.

With respect to epistemology, particularism and relativism in anthropology go back at least to Boas and Kroeber a century ago (see, for example, Boas 1896; Kroeber 1973[1915]). Sousa correctly notes, of course, that there were contradictory strains. Boas was interested in generalization and the formulation of scientific laws, although as his career went on he became increasingly skeptical about the empirical likelihood of finding any. And despite Kroeber’s proclamation that “causality of history is as completely unknown and unused as chemical causality was a thousand and physical causality three thousand years ago” (1973[1915]:106), his Configurations of Culture Growth (1944) was as much an exercise in nomothetic anthropology as any contribution to the discipline’s literary corpus. But one also finds inconsistencies in Schneider, Geertz, and other recent “interpretive” anthropologists. Sousa acknowledges Schneider’s declaration that cultures can be compared as readily as systems of agriculture or biological reproduction. In addition, Schneider was the driving intellectual force behind the formation of the Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania, whose explicit purpose was to promote fine-grained comparative ethnographic discussion and cross-cultural generalization at least within a restricted geographical region. Furthermore, Schneider’s autobiographical interviews (1995:8-10) contain some extraordinarily harsh words for post-modern deconstructionists.

Sousa also exaggerates the dominance of interpretivism and deconstructionism in contemporary anthropology. Cultural ecology, cultural materialism, human ecology, cultural evolutionism, cognitive science, and even sociobiology are very much alive within the discipline. In the current climate, it is hard to identify any one paradigm as dominant, and many anthropologists lean toward one or another version of eclecticism.

Sousa is largely correct in attributing to kinship a special status, both because of its historical importance in the development of anthropological theory and its presumed grounding in human biological reality. As Schneider himself makes clear, he chose kinship as the domain to which he would apply his version of the culture concept precisely because Americans view it as an inescapable biogenetic fact of life, making it harder for them to accept kinship than other more abstract domains such as religion as a sym-