

## Sociology: Systems of kinship: 'Lineage' and 'Descent'

A **descent group** is a social group whose members talk about common ancestry. Descent groups help to define the pool of potential mates, the group of people who are obligated to help in economic and political issues, and may even dictate which religion is followed, particularly in unilineal descent groups.

### Different types of descent groups

- ✚ Unilineal: A unilineal society is one in which the descent of an individual is reckoned either from the mother's or the father's line of descent.
- ✚ Matrilineal: With matrilineal descent individuals belong to their mother's descent group. Matrilineal descent includes the mother's brother, who in some societies may pass along inheritance to the sister's children or succession to a sister's son.
- ✚ Patrilineal: With patrilineal descent, individuals belong to their father's descent group.
- ✚ Double descent: Some societies reckon descent patrilineally for some purposes, and matrilineally for others. This arrangement is sometimes called double descent. For instance, certain property and titles may be inherited through the male line, and others through the female line.
- ✚ Cognatic descent: All descendants of an ancestor\ancestress enjoy membership of a common descent group by virtue of any combination of male or female linkages.

A descent group is any social group in which membership depends on a common descent from a real or mythical ancestor.

### **FUNCTIONS OF DESCENT GROUPS**

Coming together for ceremonies promote unity, togetherness and harmony.

Will have a built-in authority structure and may own corporate property.

Individual's economic rights and responsibilities defined by his/her position in the descent group.

Internally decides their own disputes & externally act as a unified group.

### Lineage

The term 'lineage' consists of all descendants in one line of a particular person through determinate number of generations. Where the living members constitute of recognised

social group, it may be called lineage group. The 'clan' is often the combination of a few lineages. Lineages often segment into smaller and economically viable lineage segments.

Lineage refers to the line from which descent is traced. This is done by looking into father's line or mother's line or from both the lines. Descent and lineage work together.

Notionally, lineages are exclusive in their membership. In practice, however, many cultures have methods for bestowing lineage membership on individuals who are not genetically related to the lineage progenitor. The most common of these is adoption, although other forms of fictive kinship are also used. Lineages are normally corporate, meaning that their members exercise rights in common and are subject to obligations collectively.

Lineage structure may be regarded as a branching process, as when two or three founders of small lineages are represented as brothers or sisters. The groups thus constitute a single larger lineage in which the smaller groups are segments. This structure may lend stability to a society; the lineages are considered permanent groups and thus perpetuate concomitant political and religious relationships over time. In societies lacking central political authority, territorial groups often organize themselves around lineages; as these are usually exogamous, or out-marrying, marriage becomes a means of bringing together otherwise unrelated groups.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF LINEAGE GROUPS

Lineages are exclusive in their membership.

All members of a lineage trace their common ancestry to a single person.

Lineages are normally corporate, i.e., members exercise rights in common.

Considered permanent groups & perpetuate concomitant political & religious relations.

In societies lacking central authority, territorial groups organize themselves around lineages.

Usually exogamous, marriage is a means of bringing together otherwise unrelated groups.

## Related concepts

**A phratry** is a grouping of clans which are related by traditions of common descent. Mythical ancestors are thus common in clans and phratries. Totemic clans, in which membership is periodically reinforced by common rituals such as sacred meals, have been of special interest to social anthropologists and sociologists of religion. Where the descent groups of a society are organized into two main divisions, these are known as **moieties** (halves). The analysis of descent groups is crucial for any anthropological study of pre-industrial society, but in most Western industrial societies the principle of descent is not prominent and descent groups are uncommon.



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## Questions

1. Levi Strauss believed that no society was perfectly unilineal. Elaborate.
2. Write short note on: Bilateral descent.
3. How important is lineage and descent in determining the nature and solidarity of kinship? Is social recognition important in determining consanguineous relationship? Elucidate.

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