

Descent

by Sophia Tutorial



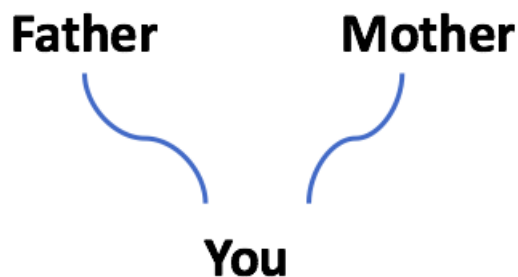
WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover the topic of descent, through the definition and discussion of:

1. Descent
2. Systems of Descent

1. DESCENT

Descent is the system that people use to trace kinship relationships throughout the generations.



In this diagram, you are positioned in the middle. You can trace your descent--your kinship--either through your father, through your mother, or through both as is commonly done today.

IN CONTEXT

In preindustrial societies, people often traced their descent through either the father--the males--or the mother, but not both. The sociologically interesting point about this is that the reason why descent was traced through either the father or the mother related to how resources were produced in that society, and which sex played a more dominant role with resource production.

In those preindustrial societies that were agrarian, in which men produced more of the resources, descent was often traced through the father because it was important for the father to pass on property to his sons. In more horticultural societies, descent was traced through the mother, because the females were the primary resource-producing sex, therefore it was important for property to be passed on from mothers to daughters. The manner of tracing descent wasn't arbitrary; rather, it was connected to the holistic cultural logic of the entire society.



TERM TO KNOW

Descent

The system people use to trace their kinship relationships through generations.

2. SYSTEMS OF DESCENT

There are three systems of descent:

- **Patrilineal descent:** When all of kinship is traced through the males, it is called patrilineal descent.



THINK ABOUT IT

Suppose that none of your mother's relatives--your grandparents, your cousins, your aunts, and uncles on your mother's side--would be considered part of your family. Would this seem odd to you?

In a patrilineal society, this would be normal. Remember that in a patrilineal society, descent is connected with resource production, like in an agrarian society in which men are more valuable in producing resources.

- **Matrilineal descent:** On the other hand, when kinship relationships are traced through females in the society, it is called matrilineal descent. Just as it is important for men to pass on property to sons in societies characterized by patrilineal descent, it is important for women to pass on property to females in societies characterized by matrilineal descent. These societies were primarily preindustrial horticultural societies in which women were the most responsible for producing resources.
- **Bilateral descent:** Today in society, people trace descent both ways, through the mother and the father. This is called bilateral descent, or two-sided descent, which means that both the mother's side and the father's side are considered part of a person's family. Resources can be inherited, and commonly are, from both sides.

There are historical vestiges of patrilineal descent in current American society, but people have largely moved to a bilateral descent system. People still take their father's last name, but as society has moved with industrialization towards greater gender equality, there has been a corresponding move to trace descent bilaterally.



TERM TO KNOW

Patrilineal Descent

Tracing descent through the males in society.

Matrilineal Descent

Tracing descent through the females in society.

Bilateral Descent

Tracing descent through both the males and the females in society.



SUMMARY

Today you learned about a brief introduction to **descent** and **systems of descent**, including patrilineal, matrilineal and bilateral descent.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Zach Lamb.



TERMS TO KNOW

Bilateral Descent

Tracing descent through both the males and the females in society.

Descent

The system people use to trace their kinship relationships through generations.

Matrilineal Descent

Tracing descent through the females in society.

Patrilineal Descent

Tracing descent through the males in society.