In this chapter, I present a second example of how realism has informed my approach to a qualitative study. This example differs from the previous one in a number of important ways:

1. Rather than depending entirely on written sources, this research was a year-long ethnographic study, conducted in an Inuit community in northern Canada, which was the basis for my doctoral dissertation.

2. The focus of the study was primarily on the meaning that the Inuit in this community attached to social relations, particularly to kinship, rather than on explaining patterns of meaning and social structure across different cultural groups.

3. Because I was able to collect data on individuals’ conceptualizations of kinship and social relations, I was particularly interested in the diversity of meanings within this community, an issue (addressed in Chapters 2 and 4) for which the data sources used in the first study were rarely applicable.

4. The major focus of Chapter 9 was on my development of a realist understanding of causation in social processes, although a realist approach to meaning and diversity played significant secondary roles in my account. In contrast, this chapter is mainly concerned with a realist understanding of meaning, culture, and diversity, although I connect these to possible causal processes that may have been involved.

5. In contrast to the first study, in which a realist approach only emerged toward the end of the research and was somewhat implicit even then, a realist perspective was present at the beginning of this study, although not well developed, and had an increasingly important influence on my analysis of the data as I completed my dissertation.
One goal of this chapter is to show how a realist approach to qualitative research is compatible with an interpretive understanding of meaning. A second goal is to show how the nature of, and reasons for, significant diversity in the conceptions of kinship held by these Inuit support a realist understanding of meaning and diversity.

My original plan when I entered graduate school had been to study Inuit adaptations to the Arctic environment. This was an outgrowth of my undergraduate interest in cultural ecology, an interest that also informed my study of Plains Indian social organization. Although my theoretical focus shifted to kinship and cultural theory, I had by then invested considerable time in learning about Inuit society and culture, and I was able to build on previous dissertation research on Inuit kinship conducted by several students at Chicago. As I described in Chapter 9, in preparing for my dissertation I did extensive library research on the philosophy of mind and on the theory of culture; this was my first encounter with explicitly realist ideas, and these helped shape my conception of culture.

This exposure to realist work in philosophy was strongly reinforced after I returned to Chicago from my field research, when I became acquainted with the philosopher William Wimsatt, with whom I had many discussions on the philosophy of the social sciences. In particular, Wimsatt introduced me to the work of Donald Campbell, whose advocacy of critical realism I discussed in Chapter 1.

My fieldwork situation in the community I studied was not ideal. I made a number of mistakes in my initial establishment of relations with the inhabitants of this community, and the resulting relationships both constrained and facilitated my data collection, in ways similar to those described by Briggs (1970) and Abu-Lughod (1986); I addressed this issue in general terms in Chapter 6. An additional factor was my own personality. I am basically shy, and do not interact easily with strangers. Since these traits are described in the literature as characteristic of Inuit as well, I had thought that I might fit in better in this culture than in others that emphasized a more outgoing and talkative norm of interaction. This proved not to be the case.

My first explicit recognition of this was about three months after I arrived, when the man in whose house I was living at the time (who spoke fairly good English) asked me if I knew why people don’t like someone. When I said I didn’t understand, he said, “You! Do you know why people don’t like you?” He explained that Inuit like people who are cheerful and talkative, make jokes, and kid around a lot; I don’t do this, and therefore people are uncomfortable around me. He also said that people don’t like someone who’s unhappy, and that people think I’m unhappy. This attitude was confirmed by others; someone who is uqadluriktuq, “he speaks easily and well,” tends to be well liked. I was repeatedly chided for not being talkative and outgoing, but was only
partly successful in trying to correct this. Briggs, who conducted her research in a nearby region (and one from which many Inuit in my community had immigrated) quoted one of her informants as saying, “People who joke are not frightening,” and went on to explain that

the feeling [he] was expressing is one that is very characteristic of Eskimos: a fear of people who do not openly demonstrate their good-will by happy (quvia) behavior, by smiling, laughing, and joking. Unhappiness is often equated with hostility. . . . A happy person, on the other hand, is a safe person. (1970, pp. 47–48)

Later in my stay, the man who had explained to me why people didn’t like me commented that people seemed to want me to live with them, that I was happier now than before.

This incident was significant for my development of a theory of community that challenged the traditional view that solidarity and community are necessarily based on similarities, as discussed in Chapter 4. As I argue there, the actual processes of interaction, and the relationships created by these, are also important, and these relationships may be based on complementarity rather than similarity. I was told by several Inuit that they generally liked Whites who were talkative and outgoing, because they removed the burden of sustaining conversation from the Inuit themselves.

This theory also informed my conceptualization of research relationships as a key component of research design, described in Chapter 6. Key factors in my establishing relationships with members of this community were based on complementarity rather than similarity: playing my banjo, giving guitar lessons to many younger Inuit, teaching classes in English, and the additional income that I provided for the families with whom I stayed.

My methods were the usual anthropological strategies of participant observation and interviewing. I lived with a series of different families while I was there, paying for room and board on a monthly basis, so I had many opportunities to observe interactions among kin and relations between parents and children. My proficiency in Inuktitut was not particularly good when I arrived, due mainly to the absence of available tapes for learning the language. However, as a result of some tapes and workbooks given to me by a linguist with the government of the Northwest Territories whom I met on my way to this community, and my immersion in Inuktitut-speaking families, I eventually became proficient enough to carry on a conversation in Inuktitut with someone who was willing to speak somewhat more slowly than was typical and to repeat words that I missed. I was also able, toward the end of my stay, to follow a good part of everyday conversation between Inuit when situational cues were available. I ended up doing virtually all of my interviewing in Inuktitut.

(For details on my situation and methods, see Maxwell, 1986.)
My investigation of Inuit kin terminology was based on Schneider’s approach, focusing primarily on their understanding of kinship, and not on their attitudes and behavior toward kin. My goal was to elucidate the conceptual system underlying behavior (“underlying” in the sense that the immediate cause of all behavior is the system of concepts, beliefs, values, intentions, and perceptions held by the actor), which had been much less adequately studied than behavioral norms and attitudes.

This investigation was strongly influenced by a major controversy in the theory of kinship at the time of my study, a dispute between two groups of anthropologists with conflicting views on the nature of kinship. One group, prominently represented by Harold Scheffler (e.g., 1972), held that kin terms in all societies fundamentally referred to biological relationships (as these were understood by the members of the society in question), and that other, nonbiological meanings of these terms were a metaphoric extension of the biological meanings. The other group, mainly consisting of David Schneider (e.g., 1968) and his former students, argued that biological meanings were only one possible meaning of kin terms, and that other meanings could be equally, if not more, fundamental.

My research questions for this study were the following:

1. What are the meanings of the terms that these Inuit use for relatives?
2. How are these meanings related to one another?
3. What roles do these meanings play in the social life of the community?

The term “relatives” is critical here, since many anthropological studies of kinship have used the researcher’s prior, etic definition of “relative” (usually based on biological relationship) as a starting point for the investigation. In contrast, following Schneider (1968), I sought to discover how these Inuit themselves conceptualize “relatives,” and to gain an emic understanding not only of particular terms, but of their entire conceptualization of relatedness.

For this reason, a key focus of my investigation was the concept of ila, the term regularly used for relatives. Although the meaning of this term substantially overlaps with the English term “relative,” it has a wider range of meanings (Example 10.1), and this full set of meanings is important for understanding the ways in which these Inuit think about relationship. My definition of “kin term,” therefore, was not based on my own prior theory, but was drawn from the answers I received to the question qanuaq ilagiviuk, “How do you have him/her as an ila?” This approach was based on my premise that meaning is a real phenomenon that is not definable in terms of, or reducible to, behavior, as explained in Chapter 2, and that requires an investigative strategy that does not impose the researcher’s own assumptions and definitions.
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The Meanings of Ila

The central term in the Inuit conception of kinship is *ila*. It has a range of meanings that are not confined to kinship, and an understanding of the significance and implications of the term in the area of kinship requires an analysis of both the kinship and nonkinship meanings that it possesses.

In its most general sense, *ila* means “part” or “piece.” It is most commonly used, not for a part of a homogeneous mass or for one of a number of objects that simply happen to be together, but for something that has a separable identity yet is a necessary or functioning part of a larger whole, such as a part of a motor or harpoon. *Ila* forms the base for numerous words such as *ilaku*, “something with a part missing,” *ilaqtuq*, “he repairs (something with a piece missing),” and *ilaksaq*, “potential *ila*,” used for material for mending or for a new part to repair something.

When used to refer to persons, *ila* has the general meaning of “partner” or “companion.” It is the standard term for someone who accompanies one on a trip; one of the two verbs regularly used to mean “he accompanies,” *ilauvuq*, means literally “he is an *ila*,” and *ila* in this sense is synonymous with *piqati*, “companion.” It also is used for any coparticipant in some activity, in particular for persons on the same side in a fight or in a game involving two teams, who are termed *ilagiit*. In these contexts, this meaning of *ila* takes precedence over the use of *ila* to mean “relative.” One woman, referring to her former companions in an English class that I conducted during part of my stay in this community, used the term *ilaviniit*, “former *ilait*”; her husband laughed, because *ilaviniit* is commonly used in Christian hymns to refer to deceased relatives.

When talking about the uses of the term in this broader sense, informants emphasized not the physical proximity of the individuals classed as *ilagiit*, but the cooperation and assistance involved. For example, one informant gave *ikajuqtigiit*, “those who help one another,” as synonymous with *ilagiit*, in the sense of people on one side in a game. Informants often gave as examples of ilagiit situations in which one person was more capable than another, and thus able to help the other.

Example 10.1

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*Continued*
Thus, one informant, discussing religion with me, said, “Jesus has me as an ila,” elaborating on how God will take care of him.

The use of ila to designate genealogical relatives shares much of the meaning of these more general uses of the term. In kinship contexts, ila often is opposed to adlaq, “stranger, nonrelative.” In discussing these two terms, informants emphasized the importance of helping, love, being “mindful” and concerned, and not being afraid or uneasy as distinguishing ilait from adlait.

However, the meaning of ila also involves the concept of genealogical connection. Informants would discuss in abstract genealogical terms which kinsmen were one’s ilait and which were not. One informant, speaking of a third person who was present and participating in the conversation, said, “Although I love him, he’s not my ila, but my adlaq,” explaining that his (the speaker’s) relatives were here, while the other person’s relatives were in another settlement.

The salience of both genealogical connection and social relationship for whether someone is considered a relative is exemplified by an incident that occurred when I was collecting genealogies. The informant had been adopted when he was an infant, and had “biological” brothers in another settlement whom he had never seen, but with whom he corresponded, sent pictures, and kept up a connection. When I asked how he was related to his brothers’ wives (whom he also had never seen), he immediately and unequivocally replied that he wasn’t related to them; then, after thinking about this, he retracted his statement and gave an “in-law” term.

Source: Adapted from Maxwell (1986).

However, I was also interested in understanding the relationship between conceptualization and behavior, and how behavior (including the use of kin terms) is influenced by the actual context in which it occurs, as well as by the conceptual model held by the person. This issue was important in my development of a theory of the changes that occurred in Plains Indian kinship, as described in Chapter 9, but here, in contrast, I was more concerned with the diversity of meanings and uses, and how meaning and use were interrelated. I also paid attention to behavior insofar as it constituted evidence regarding the conceptual system(s) held by these Inuit. This was most directly employed in one chapter of my dissertation, in which I provided an analysis of my observations on the treatment (and
mistratment) of children, and how these supported my theory of these Inuit’s conceptualization of social relationship.

**The Meaning of Kinship**

As Example 10.1 illustrates, the term *ila* has multiple meanings. Is it plausible to argue, as some kinship theorists claimed, that biological relationship is the primary, “real” meaning of *ila* in a kinship context, and that other meanings are secondary and metaphorical? This was the central theoretical issue that my study was intended to address. A key type of evidence for answering this question is the meaning of the suffixes *dlataaq* and *mmarik*, which are generally translated as “real” and “really.” Like the English terms, these suffixes can mean both “truly” and “very.” Thus, *inummarik*, “a real Eskimo,” can mean both a true Eskimo, biologically, or a person who is very Eskimo either in physical features or in maintaining a traditional way of life.

When used with kin terms, *dlataaq* and *mmarik* have a number of different meanings. They are most commonly used to distinguish natal relatives (members of the family into which one was born) from adoptive or step relationships. For example, one’s natal father is one’s *ataatadlataaq*, while one’s stepfather is not one’s *ataatadlataaq*, but one’s *ataataksaq*. However, the former is not the same as biological relationship. In cases of spouse-exchange, *ataatadlataaq* is used for the speaker’s natal father (one’s mother’s husband), rather than for the speaker’s mother’s exchange-partner (and one’s presumed biological father), who is one’s *ataataksaq*. In contrast, in a polyandrous marriage, both husbands of one’s mother are one’s *ataatadlataaq*.

However, *dlataaq* and *mmarik* can mean other things besides natal relationship. These meanings are much less common in normal conversation, but many informants readily used them in explaining particular terms to me. For example, they can be used for close rather than distant genealogical relatives denoted by the same term (e.g., first rather than second cousins), for relationships based on a first marriage as opposed to those resulting from remarriage, and to distinguish biological relationships from purely social ones. The last of these is uncommon, and was limited to a few informants. Most people would accept my use of the terms in this sense, but did not spontaneously use *dlataaq* to refer to a person’s biological father in discussing situations in which the person’s biological father and social father were different, such as having a White biological father.

Which of these different meanings of *dlataaq* is intended by the speaker, and understood by the hearer, depends on the speech context, and the term is therefore a “shifter” (Silverstein, 1976), indexing features of the speech situation as well as communicating situation-independent referential meanings.
This point was also made by Kelley (1982, p. 74) with respect to the English term “real”; he stated that “real” does not in itself designate a particular sufficiency condition for the use of a kin term, but simply denotes the sufficiency condition that is considered to be critical to a given conversation. He argued that the statistical predominance of references to biological ties for American kin terms is a result of Americans’ belief that the social order derives from the natural order rather than vice versa. This belief is not present to the same extent in Inuit culture.

If *dlataaq* derives part of its meaning in a specific use from the context of that use, different persons would be expected to interpret these meanings differently when these terms are used without any particular context, as in abstract discussion of the meaning of terms. This is in fact what happens. For example, I asked a number of people if one’s cousin of the opposite sex (*ani* or *najak*, the same term as is used for brother or sister) is one’s *anidlataaq* or *najadlataaq*. Most of them replied that these cousins would be *dlataaq*, as long as they were not adopted or step relatives, although several said that if asked about the relationship they would explain that they had different parents. A minority of my informants, however, employed the criterion of genealogical distance rather than natal relationship; they denied that opposite-sex cousins are *dlataaq*, saying that *dlataaq* refers only to *nangminiik* (one’s own siblings).

As was often the case in my investigation of alternative cognitive models, informants would usually give only one interpretation, without recognizing that there were other possibilities; only if I raised these other possibilities would they become aware of them. Some informants used different models at different times without being aware of the discrepancy, but when I pointed out the difference they would agree that there were different “correct” ways of answering the question. Other informants maintained that their model was the “correct” one, and that others were incorrect.

When used with *ila* rather than with particular kin terms, informants would often use *dlattaq* and *mmarik* to distinguish narrower and more focal meanings from peripheral and more inclusive ones. Two criteria can be identified in these “focal” meanings marked by *dlataaq* and *mmarik*: genealogical closeness and social closeness. There is a term, *ilammarigiit,* “those who are real relatives to one another,” that is used for one’s genealogically closest kin. Whenever I was given a genealogical definition of this term, it was limited to the children and grandchildren of a single couple.

However, informants also used *iladlattaq* and *ilammarik,* usually the latter, to mark social rather than genealogical closeness. The explanations of social closeness given for this term invoked the concepts of love, concern, “proper” attitude, and assistance mentioned previously as part of the meaning of *ila*. One informant defined *ilammarigiit* as *ikajuqpaktut,* “those who frequently help (one another),” explaining that if your relatives treated you
well and loved you, they would be *ilammariit*, while if they didn’t they would be *adlait*. When I asked about the relative importance of genealogical connection and proper behavior for the meaning of *ilammarigiit*, he replied that one’s attitude and behavior were most important, that in principle anyone in the world could be one’s *ilammarik* if that person acted and thought in the right way (*pitsiaqpat, isumatiaqpat*) toward one.

The conclusion that I drew from this analysis of the meanings of *dlataaq* and *mmarik* in kinship contexts is that these suffixes can be used to convey a variety of distinctions, and that these distinctions fall into two categories, genealogical and social. This supports the earlier analysis of the term *ila* itself, which concluded that the term has two central meanings, genealogical connection and social relatedness.

### The Treatment of Children

This conclusion is supported by my investigation of the treatment of children in this community. The central concept pertaining to the relationship between parents and children is *nagli*, which was translated by my English-speaking informants as “love.” The term appears frequently in my interviews regarding proper behavior, not only between parents and children, but also between relatives in general. It is also frequently used in everyday conversation to and about children; the expression *naglingnaqtuq*, “causes one to feel *nagli*,” is particularly common (see Briggs, 1970). The affection that Inuit show to small children is legendary, and although there are exceptions to the rule that children are always deeply loved (to be discussed shortly), this affection is a striking feature of Inuit family life (Briggs, 1970).

However, for these Inuit, the bond between parent and child is not felt to be something that exists, even in potential form, at birth, but something that develops as a result of the love and affection that the child is given by its parents. A child’s mind (*isuma*) is believed to be unformed at birth, and develops gradually during the first few years of life, as a result of the care and attention that it is given by its parents. It is one of the reasons given by Inuit for their indulgence of children and their extreme reluctance to directly thwart their wishes or interfere with their actions; because small children lack *isuma*, they say, it is no use trying to get them to conform to socially acceptable behavior. The relationship between parent and child is not felt to be the result of any biological connection between them but develops from their interaction.

This belief is consistent with the high rate of adoption of children in this community. The relationship that exists between a child adopted as an infant and its adoptive parents not only is stronger, but is felt naturally to be stronger, than that with its natal parents. (The terms *tiguaq*, “adopted child,” and
tiguaqsi, “adoptive parent,” are kin terms in the strict sense; that is, they are accepted answers to the question qanuq ilagiviuk?, “How are you related to him or her?”) The child’s relationship to its natal parents, in contrast, involves a considerable degree of optionality on the part of both the parents and child, ranging from a close and friendly relationship, almost a “second family,” to a nearly complete lack of contact or concern. (This possibility was not present for the relationship of illegitimate children with their fathers, where the relationship was not natal, but only biological; in no case that I know of did the father attempt to maintain a relationship with the child.) This predominance of adoptive over natal ties was also reflected in the genealogical information I collected. In listing their children, informants frequently forgot to mention natal children who had been given away in adoption, while this never occurred for children whom they had adopted. I knew of several families who had adopted children but also given away natal children of their own. It seems likely that one reason why an adopted child’s relationship to its natal parents is frankly and openly accepted by Inuit, in comparison to the views of many Americans, is that the natal relationship is not seen as a serious threat to the child’s ties to its adoptive parents.

It is, however, well established that some Inuit children are mistreated—in particular, orphans (iliarjuk), that is, children whose parents die after they are past infancy. The nature of the mistreatment varies, ranging from ridicule, teasing, and lack of affection to serious beating. Several children in this community, during or shortly before my fieldwork there, were injured seriously enough that the nurse took official action to have them removed from the families they were living with.

The most striking thing, to me, about such mistreatment was the almost complete absence of any attempt to conceal it from me (at least initially) or from other Inuit, and the extent to which others accepted and even participated in it. This was not universally the case for all children; some children were mistreated by their parents, but were treated normally by at least some other people. However, in at least one case (the one I happen to be most familiar with) the child was teased and tormented by virtually everyone in the settlement. Furthermore, the child’s siblings were encouraged to do this. This was admittedly an extreme case, a child who was mentally challenged and had severe behavior problems. However, the pattern was repeated to a lesser degree with other children.

When I asked, in general terms, about the treatment of children, the explanations that I was given were in terms of the characteristics of the parents; some people do not love their children as much as others. This clearly is not an adequate account; parents who mistreated one child invariably were indulgent and affectionate toward their other children. In fact, one man who was extremely caring and protective toward his children, and forthright in his
disapproval of the father of the child just mentioned, was the head of a family from whom one child was removed by Social Services because of beatings and neglect. While it is true that Inuit parents vary in their treatment of children, this cannot account for the instances of mistreatment that I documented.

Rousseau (1970, pp. 106–107) gave as the explanation for this treatment the fact that an orphan has become attached to its own parents, and thus cannot be assimilated into the family as a child adopted as an infant could. It is the care given to the child, he argues, rather than the biological relationship, that is the determining factor. His informants said that for orphans, and other stepchildren, there has been no opportunity to become attached to the child. The data I collected on specific cases of mistreatment support this interpretation. In all instances but two, the mistreated child was adopted, and the exceptions are the classic ones that prove the rule: children who had a serious illness during infancy, and had been out of the community in a hospital for a good part of the first several years of life. These children never established a normal bond with their parents on their return, and were treated similarly to children who are adopted after infancy.

The normal treatment of children thus depends on the establishment of a relationship of love, affection, and caring between parent and child, and not primarily on community norms or a definition of biological relatedness. When this relationship between parent and child fails to establish itself, either because of innate characteristics of the child or of contingencies affecting contact between parent and child during childhood, the treatment of the child suffers. Children are treated well if they are loved; if they are not loved, there is little to enjoin their care beyond the provision of physical needs, and equally little to prevent their abuse.

A number of features of the meaning and use of kin terms can be seen as consequences of this understanding of the parent-child bond. First, it explains why adoptive relatives are considered genealogically related; that is, these kin are considered ilait in abstraction, to the same extent as natal kin, regardless of their actual social relationship to the speaker. It also explains why the “adoptive” terms are not used for orphans and other children adopted later in life. In such cases the normal bond between parent and child has not been established, and the relationship usually lacks the closeness and affection that typically exist when the child is born into the family or adopted at birth.

Thus, the conceptualization of the parent-child bond parallels my analysis of kin terms in its emphasis on love rather than putative biological connection as the basis for the relationship between parents and children. Although natal ties (but not biological relationships in the strict sense) are recognized as socially significant, they are often overridden by social relationship as a determinant of behavior. Along with other evidence, this explanation supports the fundamental importance of nagli (love) in the Inuit worldview, and thus
makes more plausible my analysis of Inuit kin terminology, in which *nagli* is of at least equal importance to biology in the meaning of the kin terms and of the term *ila*.

### A Realist Theory of Inuit Kinship

The central issue that I sought to resolve was the relative importance of biological and nonbiological criteria in the meaning and use of kin terms in this community. I concluded that my analysis did not support Scheffler’s claim (1972) that “most, perhaps all” systems of social classification that have been considered kin terminologies are based on presumed connection through procreation and birth, with other meanings being secondary. I argued that *both* natal relationship and the concept of *nagli*, which is similar to what Schneider (1968) called “diffuse, enduring solidarity,” are centrally involved in the meaning of kin terms in this community.

In order to test this theory, I constructed the strongest “Schefflerian” alternative explanation for my data that I could, one that treated all nonbiological meanings as metaphorical and not part of the signification of the term (Maxwell, 1986, pp. 197–198). As a result, I accepted some aspects of Scheffler’s analysis, in particular that many of the meanings of kin terms are genealogical extensions from a “primary” meaning. However, I found several types of evidence that were not compatible with this analysis as a general characterization of kinship in this community. As described earlier, some meanings of the term *ataata*, “father,” emphasize natal rather than procreational relationship—a person’s mother’s husband, not the presumed biological father, is the person’s *ataatatdataaq*, “real father.” In addition, my analysis of the term *ila* showed that many people held that the classification of individuals as *ilaamarit*, “real relatives,” was determined as much by the social relationship one had with them as by any biological or natal connection.

I also argued, similarly to my account of Plains Indian kinship described in Chapter 9, that this emphasis on attitudinal and behavioral criteria in the definition of relatives, rather than a strictly genealogical definition, would have been of considerable adaptive value in the Arctic environment, providing wide-ranging ties and considerable flexibility in social organization. The ecological reasons for the value of this extended support network and flexibility cannot be discussed in detail here, but are connected to the uncertainty of resources, the consequent frequent need to move to new locations, and the importance of sharing. (I was told repeatedly that the difference between Whites and Inuit was that Inuit share everything and Whites don’t.) These Inuit place considerable importance on creating and extending kin ties, and the “negotiability” of Inuit social organization has been noted by many researchers. In contrast,
for the Inuit of Northwest Alaska, where environmental resources were more stable, settlements were larger, and social organization more complex and formalized, a “Schlefflerian” analysis of the kin terminology seems more valid (Burch, 1975, pp. 9–26).

This analysis was informed by a realist perspective in several ways. First, I treated the meanings of kin terms, and of terms such as *ila* and *dlataaq*, as real phenomena that are causally related to behavior, and I saw both meaning and behavior as influenced by the particular context in which these occurred, as well as by the abstract meanings of the terms. The meanings held by the members of this community form a cultural system, but one that is deeply interconnected with behavioral and physical phenomena, rather than constituting a separate and independent realm. Second, I argued that these Inuit have what Guemple (1972) called a “social metaphysic” that emphasizes locality and actual participation as the primary bases for social connection, rather than virtual relationships such as shared biological substance (see Chapter 4), and that this metaphysic is intrinsic to the meaning of kinship, which is the main form of relationship in these communities. (This is an example of what I called, in Chapter 4, a contiguity-based, rather than a similarity-based, ideology for solidarity.) This metaphysic is embodied in the general meaning of the term *ila*, described earlier, as well as in Inuit values regarding sharing and cooperation.

The other issue that I sought to investigate was the nature and extent of intracultural diversity in the meanings attached to kinship, and I now turn to this issue.

**Diversity of Meanings in Inuit Culture**

As I argued in Chapters 2 and 4, diversity of meaning within a culture is an almost unavoidable implication of a realist concept of culture, an implication that sharply contrasts with the traditional view of culture, which has taken sharing and social transmission as the defining features of culture. I therefore set out to deliberately look for individual differences in meanings, and not to assume commonality. This did not entail any differences from normal qualitative data collection procedures (primarily interviewing and observation), but it required a different approach to analysis, by not prioritizing a search for, and categorizing of, similar statements or behaviors in my data, and by paying equal attention to differences and to the particular contexts in which these occurred (Chapter 8).

A striking example of the kind of diversity that I was looking for emerged entirely by accident. I had been interested in Berlin and Kay’s cross-cultural analysis of color terms (e.g., 1991), and conducted some
preliminary investigation of the meanings of color terms with a few Inuit in this community. Berlin and Kay argued that the meaning of color terms in most languages involves a specific “focal” color that is seen as the best exemplar of each term, and a much broader region of the color spectrum for which the term is seen as appropriate. I cut out a large number of different-colored squares of construction paper (that I got from the community school), and sat down one evening with two Inuit (an older man who spoke no English, and his son), to see how they would classify these.

The Inuit language has five basic color terms, for black, white, red, yellow, and a term that includes both blue and green (tungujuktuq), plus other terms that are modifications of these. After a few minutes of sorting my paper squares by terms, the son said that there were really only five colors, picking a square for each term. For red and yellow, he picked what we would call a fairly “pure” example. For the term tungujuktuq, he picked up a blue square. His father looked at him with surprise and said, “No, this is tungujuktuq,” picking up a bright green square. The son, looking equally surprised, replied, “No, this is tungujuktuq,” pointing to the blue square. This exchange continued a few more times, and then the father said, “Huh, we disagree,” and the topic was completely dropped.

This example illustrates several key points. First, diversity of conceptualizations may be largely invisible when this diversity pertains to the focal meaning of a term, rather than to the range of things to which it may appropriately be applied. Second, these Inuit do not see diversity as inherently problematic, something that needs to be “resolved” in order to maintain a relationship.

The latter point was reinforced in numerous ways during my research. These Inuit did not assume shared meanings or consensus among themselves, or even presume to know what another person thought about some issue. When I asked one man, whom I had been talking with (in Inuktitut) about kinship, whether other people held the same view that he had expressed, he replied that he didn’t know; pointing to his wife, who was sitting nearby, he said, “I’ve been married to her for 20 years, and I have no idea what she thinks.” Often, when I asked about the meaning of a term, the person would reply, “To me, it means. . . .”

Diverse responses to my questions about the meaning of kin terms, and diverse uses of these terms in people’s genealogies, were frequent. Some of this diversity was due to the fact that the inhabitants of this community consisted of people from two different locations, with slight dialectal differences. However, other differences were not associated with this division, and some were idiosyncratic. In some cases, informants differed on the precise genealogical meaning of a term, but said that it could be used for a wider range of relatives; this is similar to the situation for tungujuktuq described earlier. For example, one woman, who had denied that a particular usage was correct,
backtracked when I pointed out just such a usage in her own genealogy, saying that such terms could be used to make the relationship clearer to someone. This is reinforced by the high degree of optionality that exists in the use of many kin terms.

The way in which the meaning of kin terms (and of words in general) is learned in this community suggests a plausible process for the development of such diversity. Terms are not learned through abstract definition, but through observing usage. Since usage doesn’t specify the core meaning of a term, it is understandable that individuals would construct different understandings of this, which would not always affect their use of the terms. For example, there are two sets of grandparental terms in use in this community, which most people considered to be alternate, synonymous terms. However, one woman held that one set correctly referred only to one’s mother’s parents, while the other referred to one’s father’s parents. An examination of this woman’s genealogy showed that she in fact used the terms consistently with this distinction. In her case, an accidental difference in usage in her family became incorporated in her cognitive model of the terminology.

In this model, the meanings of terms are not “transmitted” in any direct sense, but are constructed by individuals based on their observation of usage. There is no necessity that there be agreement among the meanings held by individuals, only that these meanings result in congruent usage, as I argued in Chapter 2. To the extent that terminological usage is contextually variable, it is not only possible, but likely, that different individuals will develop different meanings for these terms.

The extended example presented in this chapter illustrates several important aspects and implications of a realist approach to qualitative research. First, such an approach is completely compatible with an interpretive perspective on the understanding and analysis of meaning. Interpretive analysis is in fact necessitated, and supported, by a view of meanings as real phenomena, separate from behavior or social structure. Meaning is not reducible to, definable in terms of, or based in an ontological sense on, observations of people’s actions, although the latter actions (including people’s verbal statements) constitute the evidence for any inferences about meaning. This approach contrasts sharply with Geertz’s (1973) concept of “thick description,” which essentially takes statements about meaning to ultimately refer to observable action (Maxwell & Mittapalli, 2008), and denies that in cultural analysis we are making inferences to anything unobservable.

Second, a realist approach to meaning problematizes the traditional definition of culture as inherently shared, as argued in Chapter 2, and directs attention to the ways in which meaning may be distributed rather than shared (Atran & Medin, 2008; Hannerz, 1992; Kronenfeld, 2008; Maxwell, 1999; Wallace, 1970). An understanding of meaning as distributed and diverse also
connects to a key premise of postmodernism: the danger of ignoring diversity and creating “totalizing metanarratives” that impose uniformity on the phenomena we study. A realist understanding of meaning entails that the methods of data collection and analysis that we use must be able to discover potentially hidden forms of diversity, and to adequately characterize these, as argued in Chapter 4.

Third, a realist perspective emphasizes the pervasive interconnectedness of meaning, social action, and the physical world, and the influence that each of these has on the others. This influence is in principle two-directional, although the actual degree of influence in each direction depends on the particular situation. This perspective thus leads to a focus on the actual processes of mutual influence. One instance of this, described earlier, is the argument that these Inuit construct the meanings they attach to terms on the basis of the actual uses of the terms to which they are exposed, rather than having these meanings somehow immaculately transmitted, individually or socially.

Finally, critical realism incorporates a constructivist epistemology, as described in Chapter 1, in the sense that the understandings and theories we create, although they pertain to a reality outside of our constructions, are never a reflection or “objective” rendition of the phenomena we study. For this reason, our data collection and analysis should be guided by the need not only to make theoretical sense of our data, but also to test our own theories against the most plausible alternative theories and the entire range of data we collect, as argued in Chapter 8. My construction of a “Schefflerian” alternative theory of kinship for this community, and testing my theory against this alternative, is an example of the kind of systematic assessment that a realist approach to qualitative research requires. However, unlike in many of the physical sciences, the outcome will usually not be a clear determination of a single “best” theory. As was the case for my evaluation of Scheffler’s and Schneider’s theories of the meaning of kinship, it will often be the case that each theory captures some aspect of the reality we are studying, and that a more complex understanding, drawing from multiple theories, is required (Maxwell, 2010a).