Book Review


The increasing cultural diversity of our society necessitates that mental health professionals become aware of the influence of cultural factors on family dynamics. In a sense, one might find it beneficial to develop the skills of an anthropologist in order to better understand cross-cultural clients. Many clients are from cultures very different from the Western culture which has been the context for most of our models of family dynamics. This interdisciplinary volume, with contributions from several different authors, examines various aspects of sibling relationships in childhood and adulthood in South Asian Hindu and Muslim cultures. These aspects include the family socialization of dependency, sibling rivalry and hierarchy, cooperation, equality among brothers and sisters, family organization after marriage, and the relationship between values and local regional norms.

The beginning of this book lays a foundation for the importance of reevaluating the traditional manner in which sibling studies are conducted. The authors are convincing in their interpretations of Euro-American studies that grossly underappreciate the role of culture on siblings around the world. They quickly assert that in order to broaden our understanding of sibling relationships, there will have to be a greater emphasis placed on taking a look beyond Western cultural settings, where almost all of sibling research has been focused thus far. This emphasis involves incorporating the cultural beliefs, values, goals, and practices with the place in which the siblings live. The authors suggest that incorporating both the cultural and ecological conditions will make a valuable contribution to understanding sibling differences and similarities around the world.

The first few chapters discuss the differences between siblings in North America and South Asia. Much information is given to raise doubts about the universality of sibling relationships. For example, the authors
point out that in North America it is "natural" for younger siblings to quarrel frequently while older siblings get along. But in South Asia the circumstances are reversed with older siblings quarreling and younger siblings getting along. So which behavior is natural and which behavior is unnatural? Most effective are the authors' ability to make the reader think more critically about North American assumptions of "normalcy" and the value of current sibling studies that consider the behaviors contrary to Western norms as abnormal.

Chapter three discusses kinship and family relations in South Asia. Family structure and inheritance rights have many implications for sibling relationships in that region. This chapter describes in great detail the cultural expectations for male and female siblings and how marriage effects the family composition. The author of this chapter shares some insights gained from her socialization research in India. The setting for this research takes place in Bhubaneswar, a state in eastern India that is divided into two sections, "Old Town" and "New Capitol." The author discusses how the newer section of the city has enticed family members to delay marriage in order to achieve goals that run counter to their culture, such as educational and occupational goals.

Chapter four describes sibling behavior as observed in different settings: the south Indian Village of Gopalpur in Karnatak and the Canadian city of Mississauga. Before moving forward with the study, the author makes sure the reader has an understanding of the prevailing cultural ideologies concerning sibling characteristics in the two regions. The author tries to find a definitive source in each culture that will articulate what expected norms are in each region for siblings. For the South Asian culture, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana are pointed to as literary materials that define those norms. These works are believed to provide a historical and scriptural basis for Hindu society. Unable to find a comparable source in North America that would define sibling roles, the author uses an article from Psychology Today that he thinks adequately describes sibling relationships. Those readers from a Western culture may be interested in taking a look at why the author selected such a source to define that region's ideology. It seems like the author tended to underestimate the folk wisdom that many westerners derive from their religious beliefs. It may even be fair to say that a good percentage of North Americans base their vision of family life heavily upon some sort of religious principles and narratives.

Chapter five gives an interesting account of sibling relationships in three different regions of India and their marriage practices. The author offers stories from actual families to illustrate the differences in sibling roles after marriage in north, south and central India.