SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS:

Their Nature and Significance Across the Lifespan

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13 Sibling Interdependence and Child Caretaking: A Cross-Cultural View

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INTRODUCTION

Some peculiar preoccupations characterize sibling research in the United States and Western Europe. Western views of siblings are limited—one might even say scientifically ethnocentric—because the preoccupations of Western sibling research are by and large the preoccupations of Western society: achievement; status and hierarchy; conformity and dependency; intelligence; rivalry and competition. Now siblings are indeed rivalrous; they often compete fiercely with each other, and age and ordinal position are important for understanding sibling relationships. But these are far from the only important topics. A cross-cultural view suggests a number of aspects seldom considered. Siblings conjointly perform important, responsible domestic tasks and chores essential to the subsistence and survival of the family; they are involved in cooperative child rearing; in defense, warfare, and protection; in arranging marriages and providing marriage payments. Siblings in most of the world strongly influence much of the life course of their brothers and sisters by what they do. They share life crisis and rite of passage ceremonies essential to their cultural and social identity; they take on ritual and ceremonial responsibilities for each other essential to community spiritual ideals. *The sibling group in most societies around the world participates jointly throughout the life span in activities essential to survival, reproduction, and the transmission of cultural and social values.*

One goal of this chapter is to contrast Western and American sibling studies in light of the unique "ecocultural niche" of post-industrial modern society (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Super & Harkness, 1980). The ecological context has powerful effects on sibling relations around the world. Cross-cultural and comparative material is not qualitatively different from that needed for

understanding Western sibling data. On the contrary, the same general principles and antecedent structural variables are relevant in Western studies. The use of cross-cultural material simply brings these variables to our attention. To illustrate this, I focus on data concerning siblings not usually considered in Western family studies: sibling caretaking, marriage, and inheritance. Ones' brothers and sisters play central roles in each of these domains in most of the world.

Cross-Cultural Data

Cross-cultural material directly focused on brothers and sisters—how they relate to one another, how they feel about one another, their relationships as these change throughout the life span, and the causes and correlates of systematic differences in cultural patterns in sibling relationships—is relatively scarce. Why is there so little under the *category* "sibling" in most ethnography? Discovering where material on siblings *is* to be found in ethnographic research suggests part of the answer. Data on sibs are interspersed in sections on kinship studies, studies of family, discussions of bridewealth, bridewealth negotiations, rules of descent, rules regarding the inheritance of property, and occasionally under work and task roles. There might be material under child rearing, child development, or children's play focused on the sibling group; or under initiation ceremonies or other rites of passage, or religious rituals that involve the family group, corporate group, or domestic compound. One might also find material under witchcraft or sorcery, because kinship relationships are often heavily involved in how witchcraft powers are perceived and used in society. Data on siblings also appears in sections describing other social statuses such as age, stage in the life cycle, or sex role differentiation. In short, material on sibling relations per se is to be found throughout cross-cultural research in anthropology, but under topics related to how siblings function in the context of or service of other institutions.

Sibling relations are a somewhat neglected topic also because of the excessive concern in kinship theory with formally recognized, jurally bounded, named groups—corporate kin groups; time-limited ceremonial groups such as initiation groups; age grades; and so forth. Sibling groups usually are influential as a part of the informal flow and routine of the domestic group, not as a formally defined group.

Which Kin Are Classified as "Siblings"?

English-speaking boys and girls call all their brothers by the same term, regardless of age. The same system of classification holds for sisters. Murdock (1980) makes the comparative point:

> To Europeans, terms meaning "brother" and "sister" seem somehow "natural." The foregoing classification, however, reveals that only societies with Type E, comprising fewer than 20 percent of all the world's peoples, actually have

> terms that can be glossed as "brother" and "sister"—one more example of anthropology's destruction of ethnocentric illusions! [p. 368]

Now, the importance of sibling terminologies can be seen from several points of view. Terms can produce behavioral differences. The fact that we call our brothers and sisters by only two terms can produce consequences for our behavior towards them. For example, English speakers may emphasize gender in how sibs are treated, and we may relatively neglect age and hierarchy, partly because of how we classify sibs. For example, what if English had only two terms—"older sib" and "younger sib"? (Indeed, some 11 percent of societies have that type of system.) In that case, we might attend more to seniority in sibling relationships, and less to gender.

But sibling terms are more commonly seen as the *outcomes* of cognitive features of mental life, or of social structure, ecology, and environment. Thus, one reason English has the same term for both older and younger brothers is the bilateral nature of descent and inheritance in our society. The relatively egalitarian treatment at marriage for all members of the sibling group, regardless of age, might have a similar effect. These factors, of course, influence how we treat our brothers and sisters quite apart from terminology. Terminology is a reflection of important behavioral, cognitive, and sentimental/affective principles structuring relationships between brothers and sisters.

Sib terms usually also include some kin we call cousins or nephews and nieces. Consideration of this question of "cousin terminology" is beyond the scope of this discussion. Suffice it to say here that the same principles that contribute to differences in sibling terminology—namely age, sex, sex of speaker, cognitive and linguistic principles, and social/structural factors (Kronenfeld, 1974; Nerlove & Romney, 1967)—also contribute to theories of cousin terminology. In most societies, cousins and other kin frequently are grouped in the same categories as are some siblings.

Sibling terms can also be viewed from the point of view of their symbolic or affective meaning, and their extended use in other contexts. The terms brother and sister in English have many such connotations and extended uses, and so does sibling terminology in other societies. In addition, some sibling terms can imply kinds of kin avoidance or intimacy. But these issues take us beyond the sibling group per se.

SIBLING CARETAKING DURING CHILDHOOD: HAWAIIAN AND POLYNESIAN EXAMPLES

Introduction

In much of the world, children spend most of their time after infancy cared for by their older brothers and sisters, not primarily their mothers (Barry & Paxson, 1971; Whiting, 1963; Whiting & Whiting, 1975). The organization of

sibling relations, given these kinds of tasks and family responsiblities, differs dramatically from those of urban and industrial societies. In this section, I review a number of themes relevant to sibling care during childhood that illustrate the influence of the ecological niche and the local community on sibling roles and duties. The examples come primarily from Hawaii and Polynesia, and East Africa but the basic patterns apply broadly elsewhere.

Antecedents of Sibling Caretaking: Interdependence

Gallimore, Boggs, and Jordan (1974) developed a series of generalizations based on work with Hawaiian-Americans that synthesize material on the role of the sibling caretaking system in the larger context of shared family obligations:

> "Responsibility is shared and contingencies are placed on groups rather than individuals. The goals involve immediate assistance to others, as opposed to personal development and achievement, and it is assumed that the individual can rely heavily on the group for help in learning new skills and carrying out tasks. [p. 67]."

Interdependence includes household work and chores as well as wages when children reach adolescence and join the work force. Older children contribute more, and girls steadily contribute more than boys.

> For children and adolescents the principal role in the family is defined in terms of material contribution, cooperation, and helpfulness here and now. They are not regarded as trainees for life in another time and place; chore assignments are not designed to foster independence. The work contributed and the wages shared are needed by the family in the present, and young people are expected to do their part. Learning to contribute to the family is preparation for making more not less contributions in the future, with no expectation of a break in the continuity of living arrangements between adolescence and adulthood [p. 81].

Most sibling groups have a "shared-function" rather than a "fixed-role" organizational style [p. 84]. Sharing work and responsibility extends to relationships with parents, peers, and neighbors. Taking turns, substituting, and being interdependent characterizes most sibling groups of this kind. There is also a hierarchy of respect and authority for adults. Obedience to senior siblings, or parents, is extremely important. Successful shared sibling group functioning means that there is no trouble; the system works most smoothly when it goes *un*noticed by adults. Gallimore, Boggs, and Jordan describe this as "benevolent authoritarianism".

These three features of Hawaiian-American families (interdependence, shared functioning, and benevolent authoritarianism) characterize many sibling groups throughout the world. Such systems emphasize cooperation and the flexible allocation of scarce resources. Sibling cooperation, solidarity, and authority of older over younger all flow from this kind of family system.

One of the things about sib care that is most important but least well understood ethnographically is that it is a preeminently shared activity. Sib care nearly always occurs in the context of other activities; it is happening when other people are around, and when other work tasks or chores, games, play, lounging, etc. are going on at the same time. In these contexts sib care is often subsumed under an indirect caretaking hierarchy. The mother may be nearby and apparently not involved in childcare, yet children are watching out for one another knowing that their mother is within shouting distance. Children often play with, help, and discipline one another in the home when the parents are around. The parents seem overtly uninvolved under such circumstances. But their involvement is covert and indirect. This kind of subtle attentiveness to other family members is an integral part of sib care (Ritchie & Ritchie, 1979).

Teaching and learning are often accomplished by graduated stages of participation, and through modeling and imitation of others (Jordan, 1977).[1] Teachers and models are often older children, not parents. Indirect, frequently nonverbal styles of requesting and managing are common.

As infants, children in most Hawaiian and Polynesian families are largely under the direct care of adults (Jordan, 1981; Jordan & Tharp, 1979). Babies receive a good deal of attention from older children also, but do spend most of their time with adults. However, a Hawaiian child as young as one or two may begin to spend a high proportion of time in the company of other children, as the charge of an older child. Most children will be full-fledged members of such a group by age three or four.

Thus, after infancy many Polynesian children are accustomed to spending most of their time with other children rather than with adults or in solitary activity (e.g. Levy, 1968; 1973). They are accustomed to working in a group context with siblings, without immediate adult direction. Although under the supervision of adults, children are expected to be able to carry out their responsibilities without intruding upon adults for help or direction. The group of children is expected to have within itself resources sufficient to carry out tasks that are assigned to it. Adults may relate to the teenage "top sergeant" of a group directly, or just address the group as a whole, rather than talk one-to-one with each individual child.

Hawaiian children acquire skills and knowledge in nonschool settings by participating in activities and tasks with the more competent children of their sibling or companion group (and, to a lesser extent, with adults). This means that they come to learn from a variety of people and that one of their main sources of help, skills, and information is other children. Moreover, they are accustomed to changing roles from that of "learner" to that of "teacher," depending on their competence for a particular function relative to others in the group.

As a consequence, children tend to be highly peer-oriented, and uncomfortable in intensive one-to-one interaction with adults. One would expect that they

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[1] Portions of this section are drawn from Weisner, Jordan, Gallimore, and Tharp, n.d.

would also have in their repertoire of behaviors well-developed strategies for teaching and learning from peers and near-peers and to be skilled in utilizing a variety of persons as sources of information and help.

Structural Antecedents of Sib Care: Ecology and Demography

What more general conditions tend to promote the occurrence of sibling caretaking? The evidence indicates that factors related to sheer availability and propinquity of family members, as well as a number of institutional pressures, influence the occurrence of sib care at the cultural level. Conditions associated with sibling caretaking include: larger family size; lineal descent and residence patterns; and a daily routine that makes personnel available for sibling care (that is, where older children are available for sibling care during most parts of the day, and there is a heavy, persistent, routinized workload, some of which can be done in or near the home). Societies emphasizing kin and community cooperation in the performance of tasks and chores also tend to be societies that utilize sib care (see Leiderman & Leiderman, 1973; Whiting & Whiting, 1975).

Sib care often functions as a relief and support system for parents and is used as such in order to free parents to perform important subsistence chores or to engage in adult community involvements away from the home. Sib care also provides a training ground for parenting. Girls in particular learn very early the roles required to be an effective caretaker. Girls learn to differentiate different types of infants—their temperaments, cries, maturational stages, and so forth. They have had wide experience with childcare before they become parents themselves. They also have dealt with their brothers and sisters in both a superordinate and subordinate role, a flexible status they will have to carry on throughout life in many other functional areas (marriage arrangements, bridewealth, inheritance, protection for their own children, and so forth). These are all consequences of a "polymatric" caretaking system (Leiderman & Leiderman, 1977; Fox, 1967).

Infancy, early toddlerhood, and later childhood are clearly quite different stages in caretaking style in general and sib care in particular (Barry, Josephson, Lauer, & Marshall, 1980). During infancy mothers are usually involved in infant care and do not often delegate responsibility. If work roles take the mother fairly far from the home, the infant goes with the mother. A mother who works in or near the home can carry her baby on her back. Infant care is delegated more often when women have a moderate distance to travel, allowing a return for feeding. In early toddlerhood, children are more often left with sibs, and are gradually pushed out of the nest, away from the mother's direct involvement. Older children will carry these toddlers, ages 12 months to 3 years old, on their hip or back, often staggering slightly under the weight.

Sibling caretaking, then, is part of a larger childhood experience that stresses interdependence. It is also a form of childcare that is reflected in other institu-

tions in adult life that involve sibling roles—that is, it is not an institution that begins and ends in childhood and exists solely as an aid to parental care or as a means of defense and survival in childhood only. It is also a means to train children to behave in ways and to have expectations and responsibilities towards their siblings that will stand them in good stead throughout life. Sib care provides analogues to patterns of adult life.

Some Social and Personality Correlates of Sib Care

Weisner and Gallimore (1977) have suggested a number of characteristics of child caretakers that might be related to participation in a sibling caretaking system. Children in such a system may show a more diffuse affective style and a diffuse pattern of attachment to adults and other children (but cf. Munroe & Munroe, 1980). The social role responsibilities of older siblings should produce increased social responsibility, increased nurturance toward appropriate targets, earlier and stronger sex role identification, and a more task-specific division of labor (Whiting & Whiting, 1975). These patterns should result from early training for and participation in caretaking hierarchies and family work.

Children gradually are initiated into both charge and caretaker roles, sometimes at the same time. A six-year-old boy may be watched over by his older sister, but also occasionally may be given responsibility for getting his three-year-old brother around the neighborhood. Children learn early both sides of caretaking activities. They learn to take the role of others in the sense of appropriately and responsibly performing caretaking tasks and to respond to others doing the same to them. They learn context-specific, role-appropriate behavior in these ways.

Sib care appears to decrease orientation and involvement with adults, and increases orientation toward a multiage, multisex group of peers and playmates. Along with this decreased orientation toward adults, children do not appear to receive the same "negotiated rationalizations" and adult understandings of norms that they would receive if involved in compliance or behavior change with their parents or other adults on a routine basis. Sib care is not usually found along with the elaborate rehearsal of the rules, reasons, rationales, exceptions, and adult understandings Western middle class children acquire in the company of their parents. Children in sib care settings learn through observation in natural contexts. They learn by imitation and mimicry, and through sharing and cooperation, rather than through highly verbal modes.

Qualitative Styles of Sib Care

What is it like to be part of a sibling caretaking hierarchy? It is not possible in this presentation to provide detailed ethnographic, qualitative data, but there are some characteristic patterns presented in the literature.

One finds reports of mimicry by children of adult caretaking patterns. For example, if a mother in the household is stern or talks in a certain way toward a toddler or young child, then the older sister will talk or shout in the same way, usually in the mother's absence. This pattern of sibling care perpetuates parental personality characteristics and individual differences in parenting styles. One also often finds reports of "overmimicry": if the mother talks a lot, the older sib will babble at a younger child; if the mother tends to shout, the child will scream at the younger child on occasion. Thus children will overplay the caretaking role and exaggerate parental styles.

There are also reports of indulgence of the younger sib so as not to incur the wrath of the parent. Indeed, one of the definitions of effective family functioning in a sib care context is that the adults do not notice what is going on and do not need to become involved in child care. Overindulgence can escalate into another pattern: the younger child as "tyrant." The tyranny of younger children over older children—that is younger children making constant demands, generally making life miserable for the older child—has been reported occasionally in the literature. However, the reverse is also reported and appears more common: older children will dominate, tyrannize, harrass, threaten, tease, and neglect to attend to younger children. Older children are more likely to get younger ones to do their work for them than the other way around. They also can be persistently unresponsive or inattentive.

It would be inaccurate to characterize sibling care or the other cooperative responsibilities and involvements of the sibling group as always "happy", or at least beneficent, with a universally shared and collaborative atmosphere. Things are often rough and unpleasant for both older or younger sibs. There are fights, rivalries, and conflicts widely reported. What needs to be kept in mind, however, is that there is an established hierarchy of authority and control, which depends on the daily routine of the family group, the jobs that need to be done, or the times that parents need to be absent or engaged in other activities. These provide constraints on the variations in styles of sib care.

Parents' Views of Sibling Caretaking

How do parents feel about and perceive the functions and meaning of sib care? There has been less research on this area than even that for behavioral outcomes or cross-cultural variability. Weisner, Gallimore, and Tharp (1977) analyzed Hawaiian mothers' reports concerning the importance of children's household chores and tasks, including sib care, and their more general views concerning the values, beliefs, and traits that should be inculcated during childhood. Two dimensions were generated in a factor analysis of the parent reports. The first is a general *child responsibility* dimension. The high end of this dimension included beliefs that it was important for children to be responsible for and care for other

children in the family circle. A second dimension clustered together items related to *specific task obligations*—for example, who washes or bathes a child; who feeds it; who gets it up in the morning and ready for school; who takes care of it after school, and makes sure it does not go too far from home, etc. For these specific task dimensions, parents' reports on how often they gave children responsibilities depended more on the specific demographic characteristics of the homes than on a general felt value concerning tasks. General values and specific practices appeared as orthogonal factors in the analysis of the parent interview data.

A sample of urban and rural African mothers in Kenya were asked similar questions concerning how and why they allocate tasks and chores in their family, what they believe the consequences of sib care are, and the extent to which they think such care should be an important part of their family routine (Weisner, n.d.). As in the Hawaiian study, specific task obligations were largely idiosyncratic to the vagaries of birth order and domestic group arrangements for each mother. Unlike the Hawaiian data, however, there was very little diversity in the beliefs concerning responsibility. The African data indicated two different dimensions: a) *maternal control* and authority; and b) *responsibility* for caretaking and its importance. The African mothers, regardless of the general pattern of sib care characterizing their households, believed that they were "in charge" and in control. These mothers believed that sib care functioned in their family circle as an adjunct to their own control and regulation of domestic life. There is a strong cultural belief that sib care is not the transfer of authority to children, but merely the transfer of specific responsibility, under the direction of the mother. The mother's perceptions of sib care in this African sample were not that important family decisions were "shared", but merely that certain tasks and activities were being appropriately delegated to older brothers and sisters.

Mothers differed more on their beliefs concerning the importance of sib care. Mothers who had experienced sib care in their own childhood tended to attach more importance to sib care compared to mothers who had participated very little in sib care activities as children.

In addition, the perception of sib care among these African mothers depends to some extent on the context in which it occurred. Some mothers participated in the Abaluyia custom of child lending; they went to live for a year or more with a grandparent, a mother's sister, or father's sister, in order to help with domestic tasks (usually including child care tasks). For example, a girl often might go to her mother's sister's home when the sister is about to give birth, in order to help her out for awhile. Girls who did child care under these circumstances emphasized it more often and practiced it more often themselves, and also had a strong view that it was a positive and valued activity. On the other hand, mothers who participated in sib care simply as part of the domestic routine in their own households as children gave it somewhat less importance and emphasized the general obligation to be obedient to one's parents.

Children's Perceptions of Sib Care

What of children's perceptions of their child caretaking roles? On this question, the comparative literature is nearly silent. Weisner, Gallimore, and Tharp (in press) report data on a small sample of Hawaiian children's perceptions that they are performing the child caretaking role. The children's reports were compared to a field observer's assessment that sib care was or was not occurring. How does observational evidence for the performance of child caretaking tasks and role behaviors correspond to the child's *felt* role performance? In general, there was a significant relationship between observer judgments and child reports of caretaking; however, disagreement often occurred in situationally ambiguous situations—near home; with the mother; with very few other children around; and for younger children. This result suggests that children clearly do perceive and experience sib care roles between the ages of five and nine, both as charges and as caretakers. However, their understandings are highly situationally specific, and are not dependent simply on the performance of specific caretaking behaviors out of a social context.

Intracultural Variability and Heterogeneity in Sib Care

Much of the material presented so far has been at the cultural level, focused on general patterns of family expectations within a community or tribe or cultural group. How much heterogeneity is there within and between cultures? What is the appropriate level of inference for generalizing about sibling relations?

A study done in Honolulu, Hawaii among Hawaiian-American families practicing sib care clearly shows cultural *homogeneity* in the custom of sib care—yet also finds familial and individual *heterogeneity* in the practice and the experience of sib care.[1] Eight children were selected for intensive study, one boy and one girl from each of the four classrooms at the Kamehameha Early Education Program in Honolulu, Hawaii (Tharp & Gallimore, 1979). Boys and girls were randomly selected from those living in or near a low-income housing area from which many of the children in the school come.

Each child was observed at home 20 times, during the after-school afternoon period. Nearly all children did go home or to their neighborhood setting during this time of day, and observations were less likely to interfere with family meals or activities in the home. Visits to the eight households were done early in the afternoon after the end of school (about 3:00 to 3:45) and later in the afternoon (about 3:45 to 4:30). The 20 visits made to each family were randomized and counterbalanced by household, time of visit (early or late afternoon), and observer.

Some results of this study include:

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[1] Portions of this section are drawn from Weisner, Jordan, Gallimore, and Tharp, n.d.

1. Sibling caretaking is fairly frequent among urban Hawaiian children; it was observed about a third of the time during the mid-afternoon period, and in those settings where two or more siblings were present together, observers judged that caretaking and responsibility occurred over three-fourths of the time.

2. These estimates are conservative, since shared caretaking with mothers present is underrepresented; these children are not at the ages when most sib care occurs. Infant and toddler care is underrepresented.

3. There is a gradual shift from children being cared for by other children, but not being a caretaker themselves (ages 5-7), to a period when many children experience *both* roles (8-9 and older).

4. Older children are farther from their homes and away from their mothers more often, and thus are recorded as involved in sib care more often.

5. Individual differences in exposure to these facilitative conditions varied widely across our sample of eight children and 20 visits per child; individual differences in the child's direct exposure to sib care were substantial.

6. Although individual children may vary widely in their direct exposure to sib care, either as caretaker or charge, all children are clearly likely to be around peer groups where sib care occurs, and to have friends or cousins who are involved in sib care. It is a familiar pattern to all children.

7. Do children tend to have a homogeneous experience of child caretaking during their afternoons? For instance, are children who are frequently involved in sib care also *regularly* involved in it across our 20 repeated afternoon visits; and are children who are seldom involved in sib care consistently not involved? This level of inference asks about the homogeneity of *intraindividual* experience of sib care by children. Strong cultural consistency could produce homogeneity of experience. To test this, the variance across the 20 observations for each child was computed, and the ratio of the largest to the smallest (Fmax) was calculated. Every one of these F values was significant beyond the $p = .001$ level! Thus, just as for the analysis of variance across families, the children varied significantly in their own experiences across our repeated visits. Culturally homogeneous patterning does not extend to the intraindividual level.

Sibling caretaking is a kind of family and child rearing institution that is very likely to show just this variable pattern as we move from cultural level, community customs, to family-level differences, and finally to individual differences. It is a caretaking style contingent on situational factors (availability of mother and other children; mother's routine and role in the home; sex role training; age and maturation of children, etc.). It depends on a combination of generalized responsibility expectations, as well as the opportunity to have children do specific tasks. This heterogeneity is not due to culture change or the urban milieu; clearly, social changes have an enormous impact on the circumstances that produce sib care, but this impact is on its frequency and style.

FUNCTIONAL ALLEGIANCES OF THE ADULT SIBLING GROUP: MARRIAGE AND PROPERTY

Introduction

Sibling caretaking is not an isolated and specialized institution that merely aids and supplements adult maternal care. It comes into being because it assists families in functioning in the wider community. It is adaptive not only in the sense of producing a more efficient family labor pool. It also encourages the sibling group towards the often tense and strained interdependence I have described; it is part of a shared functioning family system and an affiliative rather than egoistic/individualistic style of achievement and competence. There is also an implicit model of status, hierarchy and sex role obligations that will be continued in later adolescent and adult life. Under some of the same or similar conditions that sustain it in the non-Western world, this kind of sibling group can be found in the West as well—among minority populations; farm families; larger working class families; or in historical accounts of European and early American family and child care arrangements. The institution is a part of a family circle that is perhaps less intensely sentimental than our own, but one that also isolates children less from the worlds of community and work and integrates them into the rhythms of an annual work cycle and a defined life-course. These characteristics of sibling groups do not stop at the end of childhood. On the contrary, they are intensified as children pass into adolescence and adulthood. Sib care mirrors adult sibling group interdependence in matters of marriage and the property needed for survival.

It is difficult for us to imagine the extent to which this is true, given the privacy and even isolation that surrounds our own marriage and family lives, and the relatively minor extent of involvement of brothers and sisters in these events. Marriage decisions, the economic negotiations required for marriages, and the inheritance of property needed for survival are all points in life when one's siblings play a major role, if not a decisive one, in much of the world.

This section illustrates marriage and bridewealth customs that show these kinds of sibling involvements in East Africa and South India. These materials bring home the power of the sibling group throughout the life course—an interdependence that is institutionalized in the rules and regulations concerning marriages, inheritance, and residence, and aided by the patterns of shared functioning learned in childhood through family tasks and chores, and through sibling caretaking.

Marriage Alliances and Siblings: The Case of South Asia

Although brothers and sisters are heavily involved in each other's marriage plans in most cultures of the world, nowhere is this better illustrated than in India and

other societies of South Asia. The elaborations of marriage rules and payments of dowry are especially striking, and the theoretical debates about what all this means for society are complex and sharply drawn. The core of this debate starts with the result of every system of prescribed or permitted marriage and descent reckoning that uses siblings and cousins to divide the kindred: some of one's own children and the children of one's brothers and sisters are going to marry each other. At least some of these children are going to marry some other class of cousin. Brothers and sisters live their adult lives arranging and negotiating such marriages. From the point of view of one's descendants, brothers and sisters create alliances between their family group and their brother's or sister's new affinal family group. Another way to express this sibling relationship system is that brothers and sisters retain influence on their descent through marriages between their nieces and nephews. One's mother's brother often is a kinsman subject to special feelings of affection, who receives gifts and has duties and obligations in these systems. Ideology and ritual recognition of these customs elaborate on the rules of alliances and descent.

One consequence of marriage in wide areas of Northern India is the status inequality that immediately attaches to the wife's brother, at least as viewed by the wife's husband and his kin. Mandelbaum (1970) summarizes this contrast in status due to caste differences:

> Over much of northern India he [a brother of a married sister] becomes inferior to his sister's new family. To her he remains one of the closest of the dearly beloved in her childhood home. To her new family he becomes one who, by definition, is to be taken lightly. As she is subordinate to her husband, so is her whole natal family in some degree subordinate to that of her husband. A family that takes in a girl as bride considers itself superior to the family that gives her in marriage [p. 69].

Mandelbaum characterizes the relations between brother and sister in this kind of setting as a "durable bond"—stable, affectionate, open-handed, "without normal reserve or inward calculation [p. 67]."

> In acting as brother to his sister a man also assumes the duties of brother-in-law and of mother's brother . . .

> Rivalry figures little in the brother-sister bond, nor is there rivalry between mother and daughter for the affection of son and brother. Because the daughter must soon leave her natal home, her mother is eager that the girl's brother be fond of her. . . . A girl's brother is often the mother's emissary to her [p. 67].

There is an intricacy of strategy and social bonds between siblings involved in such relationships that is not immediately apparent. This is so because the brothers play an important role in accumulating the dowry that their sisters then use in order to marry. This means that men often must defer their own marriage

plans in order to save funds for their sisters' marriages. Children are expected to marry in order of birth, but brothers are expected to defer their own marriages in order to assist their elder and younger sisters in getting appropriate husbands. In Tamil parts of Sri Lanka, the traditional expectation is that a brother works to contribute to the dowry fund for his sisters, e.g. contributes part of his earnings, or his labor, to cultivate the family's lands. At some point, of course, the duty of an elder brother has to cease and a younger brother or brothers must take over the responsibility for the remaining sisters (see McGilvray, 1980; 1982).

In systems like these, brothers manage joint property partly in their own interests and partly in order to marry off their sisters. If sisters are married "well", they are more likely to attract large dowries for their brothers' marriages. The husband eventually acts as manager of his wife's dowry brought into his family at the time of marriage, as well as the dwindling inheritance received from the father (in a patrilineal system) or the mother's brother (in a matrilineal one). Accidents of birth order and the sex of one's siblings can make dramatic differences in one's entire life-course due to this interdepencence of brothers and sisters. An oldest son in a bridewealth-paying, patrilineal *African* horticultural society is fortunate indeed if he has several younger sisters following him. He is likely to obtain brideprice payments for himself or from his father to allow him to marry. That same older brother in South India may well be doomed to years of work accumulating wealth that will go to his younger sisters' dowries. Having located a wife, this brother may quietly begin trying to arrange things in his prospective wife's family so that *her* brothers will be sure to contribute towards his future dowry, and try to arrange things so that his future wife's older sisters will marry early and well, to hasten the day when he himself can marry and turn over some of his obligations to his younger brothers and his newly-acquired brothers-in-law.

Mandelbaum (1970) generalizes for much of India that relations between brothers depend on the struggle for property from one's father and/or older brother; on the negotiated intrigues over marriages; and on the accidents of rank and birth order of brothers in the joint family.

> The bond between brothers is taken ideally as a durable and cohesive relationship for cooperative action, second only to the tie between father and son. In actuality the fraternal bond tends to become unstable in time. Brothers of a poor family of low jati [caste] may have little to quarrel about. If they are all laborers or heavily dependent on an overlord, they have little cooperative enterprise of their own. But those brothers who together manage and work the land or jointly provide goods and services are likely sooner or later to fall out [p. 66].

Bridewealth Negotiations and Inheritance in East Africa

Indian marriage customs encourage the children of brothers and sisters to marry each other; dowry payments to daughters are managed by sons-in-law; and marriage is endogamous within castes and occurs within the context of Hindu or

Moslem customs that are a part of world religious traditions. In East Africa by contrast, marriage negotiations just as heavily involve brothers and sisters, but in very different ways. Here, pastoralism and horticulture are practiced by strictly exogamous patrilineal clans; bridewealth is given by the lineage to the wife's husband's lineage at the time of marriage.

Arrangements for marriage in patrilineal, patrilocal, exogamous lineage groups depend on siblings perhaps more than any other category of kin. Sangree (1966) describes the relationships between sibling ties, bridewealth, and marriage among the Tiriki of Western Kenya. Among this group (and many others throughout Eastern and Central Africa) bridewealth is paid by the husband's clan to the wife's, and legitimizes a husband's right to claim the children resulting from the marriage. Bride payment drags over years and years and indeed may never be fully completed. Final payments often are not made until the wife has borne several children, particularly sons to carry on the lineage of the husband. The wife's brother therefore may actually receive the final payments, since the wife's father will often have already died. Sangree (1966) continues:

> Within the homestead the custom of bridewealth fosters a somewhat strained formalistic relationship between a father and his dependent sons while at the same time serving to intensify the brother/sister bond. With cattle received from a sister's marriage a man will generally do one or another of three things, depending on the circumstances: (1) He may use the cattle to pay the bridewealth of an older son; (2) if his father has died, and he is now the head of the homestead, and acting *in loco parentis*, he may use the cattle to pay the bridewealth of a younger brother; (3) if no younger brothers can lay claim to the cattle, and his sons are still young, he may use the cattle to acquire an additional wife for himself. . . . Installments received may be immediately disposed to pay debts contracted in one or even all of the three areas mentioned . . . . The ideal persists in Tiriki that the homestead head will *arrange* things so that an elder son of his may look primarily to the father's younger sisters (to the cattle that their marriage brings into the family homestead) for his bridewealth, and that a younger son may look primarily to his own sisters [pp. 14–15].

Goldschmidt (1976) has published data on the actual participants in brideprice negotiations among pastoral and horticultural Sebei of Uganda. The bride's father's brother(s) were present 92 percent of the time—more often than the bride's father himself (80 percent)! The groom's father's brothers were less often present (25 percent). Fathers usually came along with their brothers to represent their daughter's interests. The groom's own brothers appear 30 percent of the time; neighbors, 35 percent; and the groom himself was present 55 percent of the time. The groom is able to represent himself and to be with brothers, fathers, or neighbors, whereas the bride to be is represented by close male kin, nearly always including her father's brothers and her own brothers.

Sangree (1966) also illustrates the characteristic custom in agnatic lineage systems of delaying finalizing a marriage: "The marriage in Tiriki is only con-

sidered truly consummated by the birth of at least three children [pp. 16-17]. If a woman is barren she can be sent back with the demand that bride price be returned. If she has not borne enough children her husband can send her back to her homestead and lengthy negotiations (involving her brothers and her father) would begin concerning why she is not bearing more children, or more sons; whether sorcery is involved; whether more brideprice might need to be paid, and so forth. Thus, "Each sister's child brings a tangible material increase to the homestead of the (mother's brother) [p. 16-17]." Sibling relationships are characterized by such continual small exchanges, requests, and the freedom between siblings of both the same and opposite sex to make such demands of one another. The special bond between brothers and sisters persists throughout life. Brother's children or sister's children are treated warmly, given special hospitality, may visit for long periods of time, expect special gifts, and are called by special terms. These relationships provide social recognition of the profound economic interdependence of brother and sister.

Tiriki agnatic lineage and property relations also illustrate the powerful role that brothers have over one another in the matter of land inheritance (Sangree, 1966);

> At the large post-funeral meeting . . . the grants of land made to mature sons by the father before his death are reviewed and accepted, or contested and revised. The eldest son is generally recognized as the spokesman for those sons not yet matured, and he is usually given the responsibility of distributing the remaining land to the younger sons as they reach maturity, providing the mother or mothers of these immature sons . . . are past childbearing age [p. 24-25].

Clan brothers will also inherit a man's widow. Widow inheritance is a way to care for the widow and children, and increase the size of the clan. Analogous patterns occur for the inheritance of livestock and other property vital to the survival of a sibling, his wife or wives, and children. Sexual access to brothers' wives other than after the death of one's brother occurs in many parts of the world. Wagner (1970) describes such a custom among the Maragoli, close neighbors of the Tiriki.

> Before the birth of the first child the brother of the husband may have occasional sex relations with his wife, which the husband is expected to tolerate. Even after he has children the husband cannot legally accuse his brother of adultery with his wife, but must try to secure his rights by the less drastic means of persuasion or by asking his father to intervene on the strength of his paternal authority [p. 43-44].

East African sibling patterns also illustrate some of the consequences of polygyny and the inclusive classification of "siblings" and "cousins". Most "sibling" groups are not limited to the surviving biological offspring of one couple; "siblings" include cousins, step-siblings, and sometimes other

categories of kin. In addition, age and parity make a difference in the conception of the sibling role (see Fortes 1974). Wagner (1970) describes the special role of the eldest son (still more pre-eminently the eldest son of a first wife in a polygynous homestead) as regards his other brothers and his sisters: "The eldest son . . . is entitled to marry first, i.e. he has a preferential claim to the father's cattle for the purpose of paying bridewealth. When he establishes his own household, he usually settles near the parental homestead and becomes 'like a brother to the father', especially as regards his relations with his younger siblings [p. 48-49]."

The eldest son's privileged position becomes effective after he marries and inherits property, and particularly after his father dies, when he may continue to hold property in trust for his younger brothers. As this property is given away by the eldest brother, his position of authority, seniority, and dominance wanes and a greater equality begins to prevail. The elder brother also continues a formal relationship with his sisters, since his and his younger brothers' marriage depend on the bride price they will receive from the marriages of these sisters. He thus retains a closer relationship with these sisters, and with their children, than do other brothers.

Last born children, especially sons, also frequently have unique culturally-defined status. Sangree (1981) has characterized the named, last born son role among the Tiriki: relative indifference to commands of peers and authorities; generosity to others and improvidence in ones own dealings; and a propensity to expect special favors and become enraged when these are not forthcoming (p. 197). Last borns are expected to remain with the parents to help them in old age, and are thought to be "mother's children" more than other children.

Brothers and sisters live under conditions of relative equality when still young. But their daily activities begin to separate when they begin to sleep in different huts in the compound. Both boys and girls sleep in their parents' home until they are about six years old. After that period, boys and girls may sleep in the hut of a widowed grandparent, and a year or two later the boys move into a special bachelor hut vacated by an older brother or friend. The girls go to a special hut for unmarried girls. This usually is a house of an elderly woman, aunt, or grandmother, who is supposed to control moral conduct and assist in the arrangement of marriages. Thus by age eight or so the sibling group is segregated, as are boys' and girls' work roles. Although brothers and sisters do sleep separately and have different work to do, they still eat together frequently with their parents and spend a substantial amount of time together.

In most polygynous societies half-siblings (that is, children of different wives of the same man) live in different huts until they begin to be segregated by sex and they are involved in domestic and garden tasks on the land worked by their own mother (not their stepmothers). At the same time, however, the half-siblings interact constantly around the homestead. Certain formal claims over bridewealth, brideprice, and marriage differentiate these half-siblings. The first wife's first son, for example, occupies a preferential position over other sons.

Similarly, the eldest son of a senior wife may marry a junior wife after the father is dead and might even marry more than one if the father had two wives (Wagner, 1970).

Final Comments

Although very different in culture and in specific customs regarding sibling obligations, marriage, and inheritance, India, Africa, and Polynesia share certain common patterns. There are obligations binding siblings throughout life—but there are emotional tensions, conflicts, and ambivalence built into these shared responsibilities at nearly every point. How are these inherent tensions and ambivalences managed in societies around the world? The cultural defenses and elaborations of sibling hostilities and rivalries attest to the pervasiveness of the problems—and the often dubious efficacy of the solutions within the family circle.

Edgerton (1971) suggests a general hypothesis differentiating horticultural and pastoral societies' modes of conflict resolution within the lineage and domestic group. Pastoralists rely on *spatial* mechanisms for avoiding and resolving conflicts. They and their cattle can move away for lengthy periods. They can take their resource base with them, and can find other groups of kin or age-mates to live with them. Horticulturalists, in contrast, although living in similar agnatic lineage groups, typically cannot do this. They are tied to their land. In previous generations, where land was widely available and cattle were a more important part of a mixed economy, spatial dispute settlements at certain points in the life cycle may have been more readily available. Wage labor migration often provides a modern substitute for this earlier pattern.

In societies where the sibling group will remain in lifelong, face-to-face coresidential community membership groups (whether through marriage, inheritance, or residence rules), conflict control mechanisms will take a different form than in communities where sibs have the option or are compelled to move—that is, where avoidance is compatible with subsistence survival. Strong aggression training, and control of aggression in extended family households is characteristic of many horticultural communities. More frequent use of physical punishment; an emphasis on authority of older over younger members; ritualized avoidances; and projections of witchcraft and sorcery are also common in horticultural communities.

The inevitable conflict between seniors and juniors in the sibling hierarchy is also reflected in social ideology. Jackson (1978) has commented perceptively on the contrast between the social dogma concerning elder and younger siblings, and its common reversal in myth and fiction. The rules of descent and inheritance will place the elder sibling in a position of authority; the elder will be expected to exercise intelligent regulation of the family and the social order, to be socially conservative, restrained, and distant. The younger son has little authority, is formally ineffectual, expected to be self-motivated, irresponsible, foolish. But in

myth, fiction, and joking relationships, these dogmas often are reversed: the younger son is brighter, cleverer and triumphant over the older, who is portrayed as bumbling, in a position of influence "only" because of his sibling status. Jackson points to the role of such oppositions in bridging the inevitable gap between social form and variations in individual traits and talents. In this sense, the "real" privilege attached to early birth is as "nonrational" as the "fictional" stories and jokes and myths about the smart younger son outwitting the older. Birth-order position is transformed by cultural rules of inheritance just as it is by mythic inversions of those rules. Such ideologies are not only wish-fulfillment projections of younger sibs deprived of formal power; they are also solutions to the continuing social problem of matching individual talents to socially-prescribed statuses.

In spite of every continuing obligation, however, the full sibling group as a part of the family of origin *does break up*. Sibling relations are increasingly mediated by other relationships (marriage, new parenthood, new economic roles, etc.), and the old ties are diffused by the new family of procreation. Certain unusual exceptions to this (such as the age-villages of the Nyakyusa; see Wilson, 1970) in practice prove the general rule. And most reports of situations where some of the sibling group (both brothers and sisters) continues to live together in the same domestic group, prove to be the result of an excessive "familism," a response to unusual and destructive cultural stress. In such cases, many adults never marry, remain celibate and sexually repressed, and become lonely spinsters and bachelors sharing their aged or dead parents' rooms (e.g. Scheper-Hughes, 1979). Siblings do remain interdependent—but never *exclusively* so; the boundaries of the sibling group are highly permeable.

The passage through adolescence to marriage and parenthood is usually viewed in Western eyes primarily as a separation of children from their parents. Parent-child tension is the central theme of psychodynamic models of family change, and of "new household formation." The sibling care system, and its continuities in the social and affective character of adult roles, suggests another view. It is the transformation of the sibling group, which nurtures and teaches many children in childhood, into the active support adults need as parents and providers, which is the more appropriate and longer-sustained theme.

CONCLUSION

Why Are Sibs Important?

The examples from these Abaluyia subtribes, and from Polynesia and South Asia, illustrate what is the norm throughout most of the cultures of the world: brothers and sisters are decisive participants in each other's fate concerning sexual access, marriage, or property. The same examples could be adduced for work sharing and work groups, ritual obligations, initiation rites, death and

mortuary customs, and other domains. The purpose of these examples is not to present an ethnography of sibling involvements in the life span, but rather to illustrate some of the important practical consequences of such involvements in one domain of life. These examples also suggest some of the ways in which childhood roles in the sibling group continue throughout adult life.

Siblings are not the only kin involved in these domains, nor are consanguineal kin the only relatives involved, since neighbors and affines can also participate. But why are sibs so prominent? Why not a random assortment of community members? Why are sibs, who share many highly tension-filled and ambivalent relations (e.g. brothers in Abaluyia lineages), and who struggle in many cases for control of resources, nonetheless so heavily involved in crucial life-course events, especially those involving reproduction?

The sociobiological hypothesis is that those who share their genes are more likely to be involved in relationships of all kinds that promote the survival of close relatives and their offspring. Full siblings share an average of 50 percent of their genes. Is this why island peoples and those living in communities with higher degrees of homozygosity seem so often to engage in especially prominent interdependent relationships with sibs and others (e.g. Freedman, 1979)? The near universality of heavy sib involvements leads one to such speculation, in spite of the high variability in the ways sibling attachments are expressed throughout the lifespan in different cultures. However, homozygosity is everywhere confounded with coresidence, cosleeping, and shared functioning, and these factors are difficult to separate. But there is little doubt that some combination of shared ancestry and social and physical propinquity is involved in the close interdependence of siblings observed throughout the world.

The constant of shared genes cannot explain the variability in the extent of sibling involvement at different points in the lifespan, nor can it easily account for *which* siblings (brothers or sisters, older or younger, cousins or half-sibs, etc.) are the ones with whom one is especially close, or ritually avoids, or inherits wealth from. Most accounts of the cross-cultural diversity in the expression of sibling ties are closely linked to theories of descent and residence patterns around the world, as well as the influence of world religions. Any analysis of these patterns also includes the level of subsistence complexity and the mode of inheriting wealth. These latter factors are not necessarily prior to other influences, but they are everywhere of serious import.

Siblings and the Wider Content

Jack Goody's contrast between "diverging devolution" and "homogeneous inheritance" illustrates the interaction of these social and ecological conditions (1976). Goody distinguishes between inheritance systems where parents' property goes to both sons and daughters (diverging or bilateral systems) and those in which property goes to sons only or to daughters only (homogeneous systems).

The East African examples show the operation of unilineal, homogeneous descent and inheritance; the South Asian examples illustrate devolution; many Pacific/Polynesian societies practice bilateral descent and inheritance. The essence of Goody's hypothesis is that diverging devolution and bilateral inheritance tend to occur in societies with more complex economies, ones that take greater capital investment, have more intensive resource use, and involve the management of relatively scarcer resources. The bilateral/diverging devolution system encourages the preservation of differences in caste, class, and economic status by retaining wealth within the family circle; the unilineal system with partible inheritance tends to equally distribute wealth and resources across the generations and between exogamous clans. Endogamy and the perpetuation of the nuclear family group changes the relationships between siblings, since both brothers and sisters need the valuable resources retained within the family circle. Monogamy, increasing controls over marriage, elaborations on marriage regulations, and intensified investment in the sibling group often are the result. Greater investment in both boys and girls within the family circle is associated in this model with increasing societal *in*equality.

From this point of view, marriage is the institution that reproduces a certain kind of sibling relationship! This connection between marriage and sibs is usually reversed—marriage rules are the phenomenon to be accounted for, along with descent and inheritance, and sibling relations are the result. But it might be fruitful to see this in a more balanced way: the characteristics of sibling roles during childhood, and the functional interdependence of sibs in adult life, are each closely tied to patterns of economic and community survival. These in turn favor certain kinds of descent and marriage rules over others.

These same features of community life are relevant in understanding American family and sibling relations; they are not quaint factors relevant only in the nonindustrial world. The decline in the need for interdependence and shared functioning, and in the maintenance of a single family estate, is the primary underlying feature allowing for the remarkable mobility in the American sibling group. Bilateral inheritance has a great deal to do with the relatively equal investment in boys and girls in our society. The replacement of parents' material wealth with other forms of parental investment early in life, and the lessened importance of having parents' skills transferred to sons, are both of enormous importance for the freedom and egalitarian treatment within the Western sibling group. In subcultural communities or minority groups within the United States that *do* have stronger task pressures, and where the family requires children's shared involvement as part of a sibling group, interdependence often increases. At points in the adult lifespan where questions of inheritance need to be resolved, siblings nearly always *do* reappear. The chronic rivalry and personal possessiveness of middle-class American siblings are not inherent in developmental stages; they are induced by unusually egoistic family pressures that permit us the perhaps unfortunate luxury of letting brothers and sisters go their own ways.