

# *Siblings in South Asia*

*Brothers and Sisters  
in Cultural Context*

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## CHAPTER 1

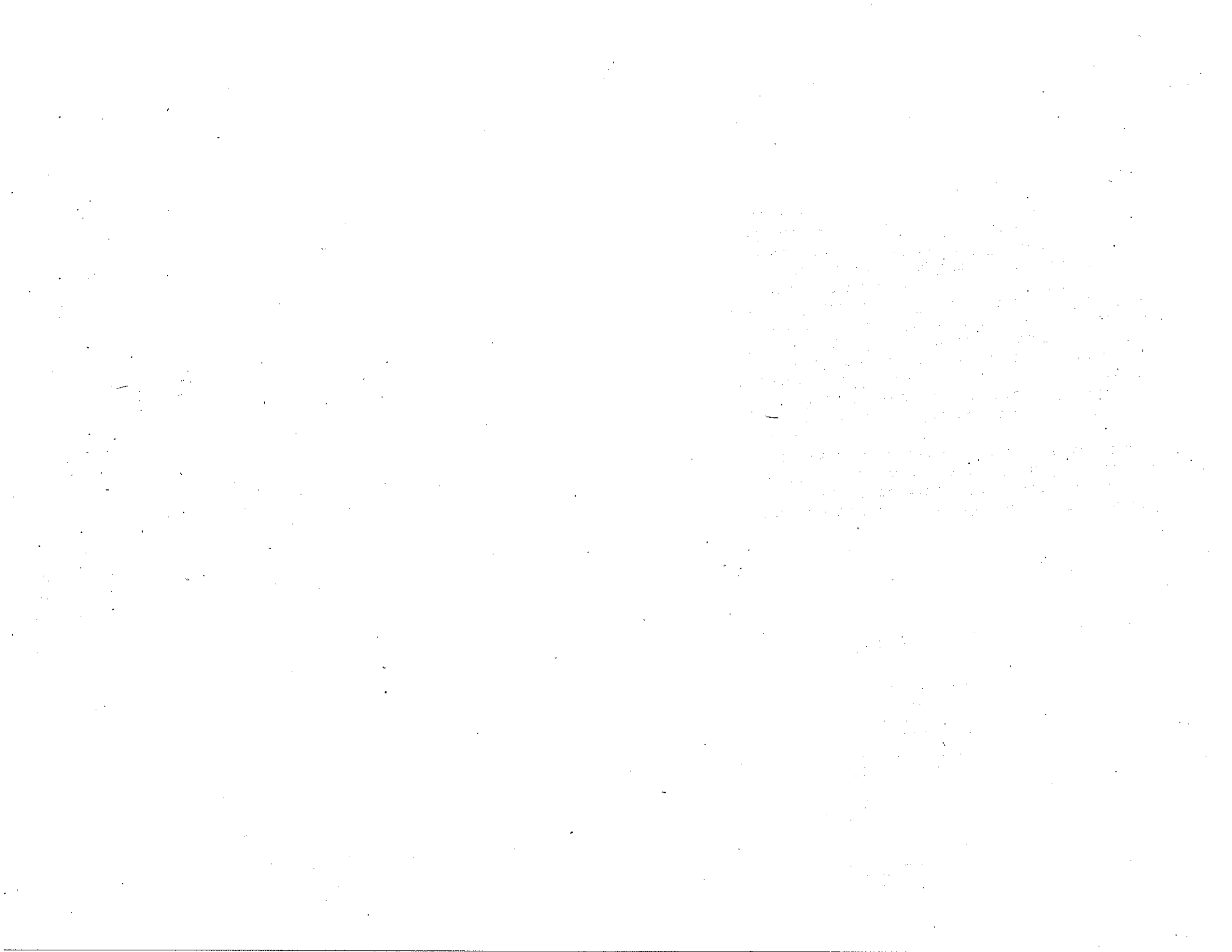
### *Overview Sibling Similarity and Difference in Different Cultures*

Thomas S. Weisner

Imagine three siblings, all under 12 years old. All three are free of any neurological problems or other diseases that could affect their developmental course. What is the single most important thing that you would want to know about these siblings in order to understand their life course together?

In my view, the single most important thing to know is the cultural and ecological setting—the “cultural place”—in which these siblings are growing up. The essays on South Asia in this volume illustrate the power of the South Asian cultures to influence the lives of siblings. The contrast, for instance, between the Euro-American and South Asian cultures of siblingship makes the power of the cultural place strikingly evident. Studies of siblings in South America (Kensinger 1985), Oceania (Marshall 1983), Africa (Weisner 1987), and comparisons across regions (Zukow 1989) have already demonstrated the influence of cultural places around the world. This volume is intended to add to this literature by applying this approach to the study of siblings in South Asia.

The influence of culture is not central to most North American sibling studies (Weisner 1982; Weisner & Gallimore 1977). Most studies of North American families mention features of siblings' roles and relationships that sibling researchers working with Euro-American samples have concentrated on: age and gender composition of the sibling group; family circumstances; socioeconomic status; siblings' and parents' temperaments; shared genetic inheritance; schools and



educational experiences of the siblings; sibling rivalry; "equal" treatment of siblings by parents; home "stimulation" provided for siblings; or discipline and compliance. Each of these features is important and deserving of study, and each contributes something to the understanding of sibling relationships in any society. Yet the diversity of and other influences on siblings around the world remains underappreciated.

### Understanding the Cultural Place: Ecocultural Theory and Activity Settings

There are many useful tools that can assist us in understanding the effects of different cultures on siblings around the world. Nuckolls's introductory chapter to this volume (Chapter 2), provides a useful overview. The additional chapters exemplify a wide range of theoretical approaches—each one of proven value in cross-cultural work. Although choosing which approach to use depends on the questions being asked and the theories and comparative frame of the studies, an *ecocultural* approach, which may be seen as potentially inclusive of the other theoretical approaches has many advantages for doing systematic cultural comparisons (Super & Harkness 1980; Whiting 1980; Weisner 1984).

An ecocultural approach has been applied to cross-cultural studies of siblings (Weisner 1989). It incorporates both the culture (such as beliefs, values, goals, practices, meanings) and the place in which siblings live (including the ecology, subsistence modes and resources, climatic range, threats to mortality and survival, population and demographic characteristics). In any particular cultural place, culture and ecology are interrelated and complementary. Nonetheless, it is analytically useful to distinguish them and compare their relative importance in understanding siblings' lives in that particular environment.

An ecocultural model is comprehensive in that it focuses on a wide range of cultural and ecological conditions that might influence sibling relationships. These ecocultural dimensions include mortality threats to children; demographics of a community; subsistence (work cycles, chores, tasks); personnel around children and the family (division of labor, child caretakers); requirements for the "social replacement" (Goody 1982) of the community through the rearing of children (including family moral and religious training, etiquette and hospitality, social comportment, etc.); roles of women in the community (including support for women and couple relations); and the range of

alternative cultural models for conduct (if indeed there are alternatives known and available in a society) from which parents and children may choose.

An ecocultural analysis situates siblings within their everyday world and the local activities and daily routines of life that they share. The unit of analysis that best captures this everyday world is the "activity setting":

Activity settings are the contexts for action in the everyday routine of life. *Culture is instantiated in local activity settings that shape interaction and thought* (Cole 1985; Super & Harkness 1982; Weisner & Gallimore 1985; Wertsch 1985; B. Whiting 1980; B. Whiting & Edwards 1988).

Activity settings include five components: personnel, tasks, cultural scripts for conduct motives, and goals. To describe activity settings as useful units for comparative analysis, we need data on the *personnel present* in and around sibling groups; information on the kinds of *tasks and social activities* siblings engage in (such as school; home chores; sports and games); the standard *cultural scripts*, or taken-for-granted ways siblings perform tasks and activities (bedtime routines, for example; proper ways of eating meals; rules for going visiting); and the *cultural goals and motives* of children, parents, and significant others in the child's daily life (Weisner 1984; Weisner & Gallimore 1985). (Weisner 1989: 14–5, emphasis in original)

There are other important sources of cultural influence that are more distant from direct participation in whole activity settings (e.g., media exposure). An ecocultural/activity setting theory proposes that children's participation in everyday activities, which are part of a meaningful set of such activities, is the most powerful and important influence in development.

### Siblings in South Asia and North America

The many ways in which sibling life in South Asia differs from that in North America is very evident from the chapters in this volume. For one thing, siblings in South Asia participate in shared activity settings *throughout their lives*. As in many other parts of the world, South Asian siblings are likely to live with or near each other throughout life or if not, to feel compelled to produce culturally acceptable reasons why not. They also are likely to share important subsistence resources and decision-making roles regarding the allocation of these resources. Siblings remain involved in decades-long negotiations and interdependent decisions about marriage, wealth, and residence. In such

societies, the sibling relationship itself represents a powerful cultural image of an ideal social bond for which culture members should strive (Marshall 1983).

South Asian societies also offer rich and varied sibling roles to children as well as adults. These roles significantly shape the life course. Older sibs take care of their younger brothers and sisters, as described by Beals and Eason (Chapter 4) and Seymour (Chapter 3) in this volume. Siblings participate in decisions about whom and when their brothers and sisters are going to marry. Later on they are agents in their nieces' and nephews' lives, just as their uncles and aunts are in their own lives. Resources are made available to siblings by other siblings for housing, life cycle rituals, and subsistence activities. Examples of this phenomenon appear in this volume in the chapters by de Munck (Chapter 6), Nuckolls (Chapter 8), and Kolenda (Chapter 5). De Munck, for example, points out that one expectable pathway in a culturally desirable life in the community he studied involves moving out of one's conjugal household as one ages and moving into the house of a brother or sister. The cultural career (Goldschmidt 1990) of siblings in these South Asian communities involves substantial interdependence.

Euro-American culture, in contrast, simply does not provide a model of a normal cultural career in which siblings will consistently matter in crucial domains of life, particularly after childhood. This does not mean that sibling relationships are not often rich and meaningful for children and adults, only that such economic and social relationships are not culturally elaborated. If such relationships emerge, they do so on the basis of personal circumstances, not as part of the normal cultural life course. Siblings in the Euro-American context are culturally expected to leave home and separate for life. Important decisions about economic and social life are expected to be made along with one's parents, spouse, friends, or work associates, but not primarily with one's siblings. The parent-child relationship and the couple bond, not the relationship between siblings, represent the cultural relationship ideals Euro-American strive for in life and are the ideals presented in myths and in the popular media.

Although compared to Euro-American societies South Asian societies make explicit culturally the importance of sibling roles, brothers and sisters in South Asia are not simply dutifully enacting customary obligations in a climate of positive, reciprocal social solidarity. South Asian siblings are driven by strategic efforts to attain economic, marital, ritual, or other kinds of benefits. Striking evidence of individuals trying to gain personal advantage by *using* their sibling and wider kin groups is vividly illustrated in many of the

chapters in this volume. Although siblings remain in complementary relationships throughout life, sharing many common cultural expectations, they are also clearly different from one another in their personal interests, goals, styles, and life course.

As different chapters in this volume point out, there are many alternative cultural paths that can be followed by siblings in different regions, or within the same community. For instance, de Munck (Chapter 6) describes the strategic manipulation by brothers of senior or junior sibs and in-laws to assist in obtaining housing or providing loans and dowry. Kolenda (Chapter 5) describes the lifelong enmity that results within families when cross-cousin marriage is culturally expected yet not fulfilled because a more financially advantageous marriage is arranged. Nuckolls (Chapter 8) describes the economic situation of brothers in a patrilineal clan: They contribute more and more in the way of material and social resources to their own conjugal families and less and less to the families of their married sisters—eventually leading to patriclan fission. Beals and Eason (Chapter 4) compare sibling solidarity in joint families that are either wealthy or poor; bitterness can accompany economic divisions of the family estate in both situations. The cases in Derné (Chapter 7) and Pugh's (Chapter 9) research frequently include economic conflicts and the attempt to construct a culturally coherent account, a rationale, for family separations that are due to work requirements or economic conflicts among family members. All these chapters suggest common economic and status hierarchy struggles among siblings and in-laws in South Asia—as well as common ideals of sibling solidarity and interdependency throughout life that can aid in the resolution of these struggles.

In this struggle over resources, older sibs in South Asia seem to be favored. They have more dowry available and use authority derived from being at the top of the hierarchy to control wealth. There appears to be both a selective investment effect and an age effect contributing to these widely observed birth-order differences. The selective investment effect is that parents and uncles invest more resources and status in senior siblings, since their marriages and dowry will occur first and thus older siblings are believed to be more appropriate to invest in. The age effect is that seniority itself brings with it deference from others, authority over others, and often enmity as well from childhood on. A number of studies have compared roles of firstborn and later-born siblings across cultures (Fortes 1974; Jackson 1978; Munroe & Munroe 1983, 1988; Sangree 1981; Skinner 1992). These studies have focused on intelligence, personality, mythological representations of siblings, parental relationships, and other topics. Some common patterns based on sibling birth order do appear across a wide range of cultures.

By and large, the siblings presented in this volume stand out clearly as men and women with motives, needs, passions, and desires for wealth and status. It is clear that these South Asian cultures produce bitter personal struggles concerning advantageous marriage alliances, repressed and explicit envy among siblings, jealousy over a sibling's wealth or favored status, and so forth. Both at the level of cultural ideology and rules, and at the level of social interactions in everyday life, sibling conflicts, and struggles over their means for resolution, are continuously problematic. The force of cultural ideology and norms also appears in the shared commitment to cultural customs, categories, schemas, and meanings. The *relative* contributions of cultural ideology, on the one hand, or social interactions, on the other, in resolving individual and family conflicts needs further study, as McGilvray (1988) pointed out with respect to the study of gender in South Asia.

### Sibling Similarity and Difference within Families

The situations of South Asian and Euro-American siblings are similar in a number of ways. In both places, individuals attempt to gain personal strategic advantage in a range of possible life careers that their culture and ecology make possible (Weisner 1989). Like Euro-American siblings, South Asian siblings are portrayed in this volume as frequently having very different and conflicting goals within families. Nuckolls (Chapter 8) also suggests that there are similar psychological processes of projection and denial in the world of myths and dreams in the South Asian community, analogous to those found in Western psychology.

There is another similarity between South Asian and North American siblings, and those everywhere else in the world: Any pair of siblings shares on average 50% of their genes. This genetic similarity is itself a reason to do comparative sibling research. Siblings<sup>1</sup> are at least potentially different from other kinds of co-resident, intimate social units (friends, spouses, neighbors) in that they share a very high genetic inheritance. It is not implausible that siblings struggle over *marriages* and are jealous over *differential investment in offspring* because such reproductive matters are important to people who share genes as well as a common culture. It is also possible that siblings always matter—are everywhere culturally important—in part because they share a common genetic inheritance. Furthermore, the extent and nature of sibling similarity and difference within and among families

may well be due not only to cultural characteristics unique to South Asia but also to universal processes related to the mutual interaction of genetics and environment.

In most cases, siblings also share a common family experience, live close together for all or significant portions of their lives, and share, at least to some degree, a common set of cultural expectations regarding appropriate conduct between siblings. Beyond shared genes, all of these shared family and cultural circumstances may make siblings in the same family more alike and are plausible reasons for common interests in marriage and property in their community.

It is a common assumption in family and cultural research that there is a high proportion of shared cultural knowledge and experience among siblings *because* they are raised in the same family or community. Thus, it is assumed that siblings reared in the same family are more similar to each other than they are to other community members, and that the family members of this community will produce children more similar than those from another community. Such an assumption is basic to any research design that uses interviews or observations of only one family member to infer the characteristics of the whole family and its socialization practices, or uses interviews conducted with different members of a single family group regarding common community experiences. There would have to be substantial effects on each child or adult of *shared* family and community experiences to make such designs powerful.

Yet there is research that challenges this seemingly self-evident assumption. Plomin and Daniels (1987) and Dunn and Plomin (1990) review evidence from behavior genetics research, as well as from studies of social interaction among siblings, that shows a large contribution of “nonshared” environmental influence. Nonshared family environments are the intrafamilial environments that are unique for each sibling living in the same family setting. For example, if parents act differently toward each sibling (which all parents do to some extent), each sibling has lived in a different family environment unique to that sibling. Or, when siblings in a family each have different abilities and temperaments (which each individual does to some extent) and seek out different environments in which to express these abilities and temperaments, then each sibling will have a unique nonshared family environment. (In addition, some of the “nonshared” component is almost certainly also due to measurement error of such traits and abilities.) Plomin and Daniels (1987) argue that in many North American samples, siblings are not much more similar to each other (using standardized cognitive or personality measures as out-

comes for each sibling) than any two individuals picked at random from that culture, even though the siblings grew up in the “same” family environment. A shared family experience, in other words, does not automatically mean siblings share certain abilities or personality traits, as measured by standard assessment scales.

Mechanisms have been proposed that might in fact lead siblings to actively differentiate themselves from their brothers and sisters. Scarr and Grajek (1982), for instance, argue that genetic or temperamental predispositions are expressed partly through a mechanism whereby individuals actively seek out *different* family contexts for the expression of such predispositions. Other individual predispositions remain latent and appear only when particular eliciting situations occur in the family environment. Schachter (1982) describes the processes of sibling deidentification, in which, for example, the second-born child identifies more strongly with the parent with whom the firstborn did not identify most strongly.

It is also known that there are cross-cultural regularities in interaction among siblings and cousins (Whiting & Edwards 1988). These cross-cultural regularities mean that siblings are not equally likely to interact with or become close to one another. For instance, children tend to prefer to interact with other children of the same sex. There are more nurturant and prosocial interactions involving girls and between older and younger children, while children nearer in age are more likely to engage in competitive or aggressive interactions (Weisner 1987).

Due in part to such influences, the “family environment” that is actually experienced by each sibling is inevitably socially constructed at least somewhat differently by each sibling. Further, as siblings get older, they are influenced by nonfamilial environmental influences from peers, voluntary association membership, media exposure, and other sources. These nonshared, extrafamilial experiences also contribute to sibling differences. To the extent that these interactional patterns lead to differential experiences of children in their families, they would encourage nonshared family effects, making each sibling at least somewhat different.

Meanwhile, as noted above, genetics conspire to make siblings similar. However, heritability estimates of personality, cognitive, and physical characteristics in sibling studies vary. The order of magnitude is about 50% or less for the contribution of genetic influence for some personality traits, such as extraversion and for adult IQ (Plomin 1989). Height and weight are about 80% and 60%, respectively, due to genetic influence. Many diseases (heart disease, ulcers, etc.) are around 20% genetic (Dunn & Plomin 1990: 46–54).

Genetic effects do not imply a deterministic or invariant influence. Heritability is “merely a descriptive statistic that indicates for a particular population at a particular time the extent to which genetic differences among individuals can account for observed differences. It is not an immutable constant, nor does it tell us how genes have their effect” (Dunn & Plomin 1990: 33). What Plomin, Dunn, and others suggest is that most of the environmental influence on siblings comes not from shared family effects but from nonshared family influences.

Based on their work, Dunn and Plomin (1990) make some strong statements regarding the influence of family environment that suggest that there is little importance in shared family environments, and that influences on siblings—and on development generally—consist primarily of genetic and *nonshared* (unique to each child) environmental effects:

Experiences within the family do not make siblings similar. The only factors important to children’s development are those that are experienced differently by children in the same family. . . . siblings resemble each other for genetic reasons . . . not for [shared family] environmental reasons. That is, siblings are similar, but they are just as similar if they are adopted apart and reared in different families. Growing up in the same family is not responsible for their resemblance. What runs in families is DNA, not shared experiences in the family. (Dunn & Plomin 1990: 42–3)

Note that this point of view does not mean that “environment” is unimportant. To the contrary, environmental influences are very important in siblings’ development in this approach. But it is the unique-to-each-sibling, nonshared, intrafamilial environment that appears to matter for personality, IQ, and health status—not shared family environment.

The sibling conflicts in South Asia vividly described in this volume could in part be due to such universal developmental mechanisms making siblings different—that is, placing each sibling in nonshared family environments. However, in the chapters in this volume, the authors attribute such conflicts to *cultural* beliefs and practices unique to South Asian culture, and/or to siblings’ competition over material resources. Although there is no question of the power of these cultural and ecological factors in human development (Super & Harkness 1980, 1986; Weisner 1984), there also may be universal developmental processes (e.g., the creation of nonshared family environments, as well as genetic influences) making siblings different or similar within a family. These nonshared environments may in turn place siblings inevitably in some conflict with each other.

Although I believe that both genetics and nonshared family environments are important for understanding the sibling relationships depicted in this volume, I also believe that the influence of the culture in making siblings similar within a shared cultural environment is missing in studies of sibling differences in Western sibling research such as Dunn and Plomin's. Nonshared environments are postulated to explain wide *individual* differences within the sibling group. Yet South Asian siblings do *share* to some considerable extent a world view about siblingship, expressed in myths, beliefs about marriages and family relationships, economic obligations, and so forth. South Asia is very different from North America as a cultural place for siblings. North American siblings do not share these cultural beliefs and practices. In this sense of *cultural* similarity or difference, South Asian siblings are far more culturally similar to each other than siblings would be in any North American family selected at random (even granting the importance of the regional and other variations in both places). Similarity or difference between siblings within a family is an important issue, but it is quite a different matter from similarity or differences in siblings' socialization and cultural understandings across cultures.

This is another way of saying (in the language of behavior genetics) that different family environments in a community in a particular cultural place are "correlated"—that is, families share a common set of cultural beliefs and practices to a significant extent. For instance, imagine if we were to ask siblings in South Asia and North America about Hindu beliefs in reincarnation, about certain food taboos, or about ideas of respect for ones' father and mother. Siblings in South Asian families would be very similar to one another, compared to siblings in North American families. Shweder (1991: 190–91) asked children and adults in Orissa, India, and North America about moral judgments—what is right and wrong—and found that by age 5 the children in each culture had very different conceptions of morality, having learned their morality through participation in routine, everyday activity settings characteristic of their culture:

While there are some areas of agreement between the five-year-olds in the two cultures (for example, that it is wrong to break a promise, destroy a picture drawn by another child, kick a harmless animal), there are just as many areas of disagreement. Oriya (but not American) five-year-olds believe it is wrong to eat beef or address one's father by his first name. American (but not Oriya) five-year-olds believe it is wrong to cane an errant child or to open a letter addressed to one's fourteen-year-old son.

... We assume that moral interpretations of events are expressed through and are discernible in the very organization of routine practices (a separate bed for each child, a communal meal, lining up—first come, first served—to get tickets). (Shweder 1991: 190–91)

Certainly, the families described in this volume, and the authors writing about them, take as a given that brothers and sisters are *culturally* alike in some fundamental ways—that their shared experiences as children and interdependence as adults are real and bind them together, and that this similarity comes from shared family experiences as well as from a common culture. Cultural ideology in South Asia seems to conspire to lead siblings and parents to assert similarities and complementarities among the sibling group, whether or not they are "really" present. And where there are conflicts, South Asian cultural accounts are available in myths, ideology, and beliefs that assert how and why these conflicts arose in the first place. Interestingly, these cultural beliefs basically appeal in turn to the influence of *shared family experiences* among archetypal Indian siblings.

There certainly are cultural and ecological reasons to posit shared experience. In the South Asian cultural setting, as well as in many others around the world, there is a strong emphasis on complementarity of sibling roles in the family, sibling interdependence throughout life, and sibling co-ownership and control of resources crucial for survival and reproduction. It is possible that in such ecological and cultural circumstances, shared family environmental influences *would* be stronger than they appear in studies done in North America. The question is, might the existence of more shared family environmental influence (relative to nonshared environments) within families in cultural places like South Asia be due to the fact that sibling solidarity is more culturally elaborated than it is in North America? This is an interesting and important area for future empirical research.

Taking culture more seriously will also mean measuring sibling characteristics in addition to individual differences on personality and cognitive scales, or standardized measures of psychopathology or health. Most behavioral genetic studies of siblings utilize individual difference measures such as standardized personality inventories or IQ tests. Such measures are important, but they do not capture those aspects of socialization and personality that are embedded in *complementary* sibling and family roles, such as those that exist in South Asia and elsewhere. In fact, Dunn (1985), Mendelson (1990), and others have provided qualitative, self-report, and observational data on such complementary relationships among Euro-American siblings.

This kind of research is embedded in an understanding of family interaction. However, most behavioral genetics research has not used such measures in assessing siblings. Since judgments of sibling similarity are done using individual difference measures such as cognitive tests, rather than more culturally sensitive measures such as customary practices or beliefs, they may have exaggerated differences between siblings within families. This, again, is a question for further empirical research in Euro-American and other cultural places.

### Conclusion

The findings of behavior genetics research are striking and important with regard to individual differences within families. The strong conclusion from this work is, "One thing is clear: Siblings growing up in the same family are very different" (Dunn & Plomin 1990: 151). On many measures of health, personality, and intellectual ability, siblings are nearly as different from each other as they are from any two individuals selected at random. However, a cross-cultural perspective requires further expansion, and modification of the conclusion of behavior genetics research: Siblings growing up in the same family may well be different from one another, but only relative to that particular culture, and on measures based largely on individual difference, rather than on embedded complementarity within relationships.

First, there are shared family (and community) effects of an important kind: Families in a particular culture also transmit shared cultural meanings, beliefs, and practices to their children. Indeed, this is an important function of family socialization altogether. From this comparative view, families do make siblings *culturally* similar to each other, compared to siblings in families in other cultures. Now, the extent to which siblings within a culture share cultural meanings, beliefs, understandings, commitments, and practices may be exaggerated in ethnographic work. It *may* well be that siblings in a family from South Asia (or North America) do not share a particular cultural meaning or commitment to a practice any more than *any* two individuals *from within that culture* would share the meaning system or practice the custom. It certainly is true, as we see amply reflected in this volume, that South Asian siblings can be in violent disagreement and conflict over such matters. However, siblings and nonsiblings within a particular culture do seem to share common understandings regarding sibling roles and obligations different from that in other cultural places.

Second, although relatively low sibling similarity may hold true within Euro-American culture, it remains for future research to show to what extent, for example, Euro-American siblings are "similar" to South Asia or East African siblings on appropriately and comparably collected measures. Behavior genetics research proposes that siblings are not much more similar than any two individuals "selected at random." But what "selected at random" usually refers to is a sample selected within a particular culture, certainly not randomly selected from any culture in the world. My prediction is that cultural differences will be profound for cultural matters, and less so (but still present) for individual difference measures.

Studies of siblings done in North America need to take culture more seriously into account. North American culture encourages sibling independence and culturally elaborates the parent-child and couple relationships more than it does sibling relationships. Partly for this reason, siblings may be less similar to one another in Euro-American culture. Siblings may be more similar to one another in other cultures, especially those like South Asia that elaborate the importance of sibling roles more than Euro-American culture does.

However, judging from the ethnographic evidence in this volume, *complementarity* in sibling roles in South Asia, and perhaps in other cultural settings, may be a more powerful effect than similarity across individuals. That is, siblings in South Asian families are more often in similar *patterns* of relationships with each other, as well as in characteristic patterns of personal and cultural identification with one another (e.g., as a result of coresidence arrangements, marriage alliances, dependence on siblings for inheritance, dowry practices). The chapters in this volume describe both patterns: clear complementarity and (at least idealized) similarities within the sibling group. Dunn (1985) and Dunn and Plomin (1990) have explored the subtleties of complementary relationships in their work in England and in North America. And they point out how such complementarity leads to different experiences for each child in a family, and thus to nonshared family environmental effects. Dunn and Brown (1991), who compared children's early social understandings in England and Pennsylvania, found suggestive evidence for cross-national differences in the two places, as well as substantial within-culture variability. South Asian siblings are in lifelong alliances between groups of siblings and other kin that make them highly complementary. Will this make them at least somewhat more similar to one another than is the case in North American studies, or just as different, or even more different, than North American siblings?

I predict that future studies of siblings in other cultures will find



that siblings are not as different from one another as they have been found to be in Euro-American studies. I also expect that lifelong sibling interdependence will make such similarities extend throughout the life span, rather than decline as siblings get older. But I also predict that the effects of nonshared environments in making siblings different will also be found, and that siblings will be less homogeneous than the cultural-level generalizations of many ethnographic studies might have led us to believe. But these are both expectations that need empirical study in many cultural places. To do this will require the active collaboration of developmentalists and anthropologists.

It will also require the active collaboration of members of those cultures, utilizing an approach that focuses on greater understanding of their family experiences. This is a methodological requirement shared both by students of individual development in nonshared family environments and by students of siblings in different cultures. It is the experience of each sibling, and the whole sibling group, in everyday activity settings provided by a culture that matters most for human development. It is the fact that each sibling *experiences* his or her family circumstances differently that limits shared family influences. As Dunn and Plomin (1990) comment regarding the implications of their work on nonshared environments and genetic influence:

How to make progress towards a more sensitive appreciation of what matters within the family? We will argue . . . for listening to children's and parents' views of what happens with their families—for taking the perceptions of family members very seriously, and also for conducting more naturalistic research. (Dunn & Plomin 1990: 156)

This volume will add to that advice that such research will need to be done in a much wider range of cultural settings than has been done to this point. By focusing on one non-Western culture area, that of South Asia, the chapters in this volume suggest that closely observed studies of social experience and the folk beliefs and perceptions of siblings in the different cultures, using ethnographic and naturalistic research methods, can make a valuable contribution to understanding sibling differences and similarities around the world.

#### Note

1. In South Asia, as elsewhere in the world, the term "sibling" refers not only to those individuals with the same biological mother and father but also to cousins and other kin of various kinds. This reduces the average percentage

of shared genetic inheritance among the group of "siblings" thus identified, but does not change the fact that the group of individuals so classified still disproportionately share a common genetic inheritance, compared to any two individuals selected at random from the wider community.

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