From Womb to Laboratories: Siblingship in a Complex Family System

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ABSTRACT

Families are made up of a variety of relationships—parent-child, grandparent-grandchild, in-law relations, intergenerational, marital, among others. With global economic, social, and cultural changes, these relations continuously evolve. This review essay explored how siblingship is examined in the context of an increasingly complex family system. The first section highlighted earlier works on how family cultures and practices continue or transform sibling relations. Works studying the prevalence of having half siblings, step siblings, adoptive siblings, assisted reproductive technology (ART)-produced siblings, and pets as siblings were also examined. The last section suggested approaches to further conduct the study of siblingship. This paper argued that future siblingships can be better understood by reviewing previous analyses of siblingship and looking at siblingship formations and categorizations.

Keywords: family, siblingship, generation, ART, intimate relations

Introduction: Siblingship at a Glance

How is siblingship examined in the context of an increasingly complex family system? To answer, I highlight earlier works on how family cultures and practices continue or transform and, thereafter, influence sibling relations. These include the continuous recognition of reintegrated and fictive siblings. In the second section, the prevalence of having half siblings, step siblings, adoptive siblings, ART-produced siblings, and pets as siblings will be examined. I argue that by reviewing previous analyses of siblingship and by looking at the said siblingship formations and categorizations, contemporary and future siblingships can be better understood. In the last section, I suggest approaches to further the conduct of the study of siblingship outside American and European middle and elite families, beyond physical geographic locations, and outside heteronormative societal expectations.

The study of siblingship continue to branch out from the intersection of different disciplines. The general Euro-American understanding of siblingship employ the following criteria: genealogical or biological, legal, and affectional or behavioral. Genealogical or biological criteria depends on the biological parents, which produce full or half siblings. The legal criteria recognizes the remarriage of parents and adoption of children from the first marriage bringing in the stepsiblings or adoptive siblings. The last criteria, affectional or behavioral, is the basis for the concept of fictive siblingship (Cicirelli 1994, 1995). From this generally Western understanding, newly formed criteria for siblingship have emerged. To illustrate, I provide examples in the following sections.

From Dispersion to Reintegration of Siblings

Key understanding of siblingship in Oceania was covered in an edited volume by Marshall (1983). As a collection of ethnographic works, few of the criticisms received include the lack of native terms for siblings and the assertion of its socio-cultural role in lieu of blood ties and its political significance (Keesing 1984; Nash 1985). These criticisms are based on the models of social structure generally used by anthropologists at the time of

the study, the descent and alliance theories. For the descent theory, blood lines, whether patrilineal or matrilineal, are identified to recognize the rights and responsibilities of the children and siblings (Radcliffe-Brown 1952). Alliance theory, on the other hand, identifies marriages between different family units as structurally and functionally essential for the society (Lévi-Strauss and Needham 1969). Marshall and the authors of the volume challenged the said models as they emphasized the social meaning of siblingship, but at the same time, somehow overlooked the logic of the Pacific Islanders in identifying cousins from the same family line and the prescription of marriage among them.

Marriages between cousins were also examined in neighboring islands. Turner (1991, 190) explained that in Fiji, "the system of kinship and marriage holds within it the possibility of reuniting the blood that has been dispersed ... Brother and sisters go their separate ways but marriages between their descendants can reverse the process." Ottino (1993) observed the same pattern in Indonesia where the integrity and strength of the family line is weakened as siblings form their own individual family units. Hence, reintegration of siblings is done by marrying off cousins who are born from the same sibling set. These marriages "reunite what was divided earlier" (40) and highlights the politics behind the practice.

Sister exchange and marriage is a related practice which can be found in Papua New Guinea (PNG) and the Middle East region (Beer 2015; Conte 2011). The marriage between two sets of siblings justify a stronger relationship between two families. Specifically, responsibility and care for one's wife is conveyed because the same treatment is expected to be given for one's sister who is married to the wife's brother. However, Beer (2015) explains how the authority of brothers over sisters are changing in PNG due to the increase in interethnic marriages, migration, and access to education. Nevertheless, the same authority is still prevalent in the Middle East. Conte (2011) posits that gender and generational hierarchies in relation to exchange marriages remain to be a private matter and a source of honor for both families involved.

Fictive Siblings around the World

Fictive siblingships[1] based on non-blood relations vary across the globe. The specific ones covered in this essay are those involved in sharing of space (house), sharing of birth period (year), sharing of substance (milk), and sharing of ritual responsibilities (baptism). The abovementioned study by Ottino (1993) in Indonesia shed light on the relations of cousins who are treated as siblings by the community by virtue of co-residence. Marriage between cousins who were house siblings, meaning they grew up in the same residence, were not accepted. In rural South China, Santos (2008) proposed to look at how post-Mao China position friendship in "same-year siblingship" relations. Families of same-year brothers and same-year sisters want to develop "good friendship" among same-sex, same-year siblings. Santos called this as the "affinal double" which is comparable to match making for marriage and alliance building. To put into context, such friendship is expected to be a source of assistance and support in the long run, which is quite unconventional from the collective concerns of communism.

The culturally distinct practice of milk siblingship in Islamic societies is also widely studied. Altorki (1980) focused on the rules followed by urban elite families in Saudi Arabia while Carsten (1995, 1997) noted the conception of "relatedness" among Muslims in rural Malaysia. In both works, the sharing of milk from the non-biological mother signify an adoption of the children, which make several children milk siblings. Those who had milk from the same woman are not allowed to be married to each other. Altorki's work provided an interesting and detailed summary of who a man can marry based on his milk relatives. In the same vein, in the Catholic practice, the children of one's godmother or godfather in baptism are considered as godsiblings. The work of Turgo (2016) in a rural fishing village in Philippines reveal how the notion of "forgotten" kinship ties such as godsiblingship can influence community cohesion. Ethics, care, and moral obligations in everyday life are expected of kin, whether related by blood or through rituals. Albeit in a different religious context, Turgo resonated with Carsten's notion of relatedness and argued that maintenance, nurturance, and negotiations are needed to sustain kinship ties.

The works show the developments on the studies on family and siblingship from the early anthropological and sociological traditions. Themes on descent, lineages, alliances, and marriages are all evident because the studies were conducted at the time when anthropologists focus on tribe cultures in Asia and the Pacific. As research on families progressed, specific contexts were identified and fictive relations based on political histories (for China) and religious practices (for Islam and Catholic nations) became more apparent.

Siblingship Formations and Categorizations

Another major framework in analyzing siblingship is through successive life-cycle stages. In the context of the United States, Goetting (1986) reviewed three decades' worth of work on family and stressed the prosocial observed and expected behaviors on siblings (she referred to it as developmental tasks) in three stages: childhood and adolescence, early and middle adulthood, and old age. She posited that taking care of younger siblings can be found during childhood and adolescence. On the other hand, during early and middle adulthood, cooperation in caring for aging parents and the dismantling of the parental home are expected. Finally, shared reminiscence, perpetual validation, and resolution of sibling rivalry are found in old age. Although they come in different forms such as financial and other material supplies, companionship, emotional support, and provision of aid and direct services are present in all stages. The framework is however limited as it is under the assumption of a Western nuclear family, where siblings from divorce and remarriages are not factored in. Another condition different from these regions is that siblings are expected to be apart during early and middle adulthood because elder ones move out and live separately. In the following siblingship formations and categorizations, I will discuss how siblings in different life stages and specific circumstances are understood.

Half Siblings and Step Siblings in the Family

As partnership formations diversify, sibling sets also experience changes and transitions from one family structure to another. I pick up the work of Wentzel-Winther and his colleagues (2015) about siblingship in divorced and re-partnered parents in Danish societies. They refer to the children of such parents as "children on the move" due to the fact that they constantly move from one household to another to accommodate the schedule and demands of their biological and step parents. The method involves 100 key interviews with children, ethnographic observations with 10 of them, and several other interviews with parents, family therapists, and social workers. One of the key findings indicates changes in sibling positions as two families blend and new siblingships are formed. An example is an elder brother becoming a younger brother because a step sibling is older than him (Wentzel-Winther et al. 2015, 98). In addition, decoding and adaptation to new house rules and expectations set by the stepparent appeared to strengthen relationships between full siblings.

The perception of the children's identity in relation to their siblings goes back to Erving Goffman's *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) and to other theories on identity formation. Seeing lifelong relations with new siblings appear to be quite challenging because as children get involved in their parents' multiple divorces and remarriages which introduce more than one set of new siblings, they become "selective in terms of which relations they hope to maintain in the future … it left other children skeptical about placing any faith in the longevity of sibling relations in general" (122). Notably, most of the works on children's siblingship ties are conducted in Europe. Also, the analytical points cover frictions in everyday life (Gulløv, Palludan, and Winther 2015), social capital (Gillies and Lucey 2006), and educational institutions (Davies 2019).

On top of the changing partnership formations, migration is also impacting the way families expand and get spread out around the world. Works on migration and siblingship are in a spectrum. One side challenges the western notion on the nuclear family who are together in one household

(Aguilar 2013; Cruz 2019) and another side reveals migration as a sibling generation or cohort (Gregorio 2020a, 2020b). Using life story interviews with three generations of Caribbean families with members based in the UK, Chamberlain (2004) demonstrates the importance of half and step sibling linkages in establishing social behavior and family culture. The cases show how early pregnancies and single parenthood in early adulthood followed by marriage and another pregnancy later create half and step sibling relations. When the members of these Caribbean communities migrate to Europe, remittances signify their long term reciprocal support for their full, half, and step siblings. The study also features relations between two generations—uncles and aunts taking care of their niece and nephew. Chamberlain asserts that while migration has altered or adapted the role of siblings and collaterals (aunts and uncles), family culture remains influential in establishing sibling bonds to those who are left behind. This culture of care and support will continue as the younger generation experience how their uncles, aunties, and parents continue to rely and work with each other.

Formation of Adoptive Siblings and Reunion of Birth Siblings

Previously, I mentioned house siblingship referring to the socially accepted but not legally binding adoption practices among cousins and relatives. In this subsection, I focus on adoption, an arrangement recognized by law between parents and children who are not related by blood. In 2009, the United Nations (2009) released a report citing that reasons for adopting have changed from the lineage preservation and political alliances towards child-centered provision of care and couple satisfaction for raising a child. Adoption, may it be local or international, is not a new phenomenon.

I argue that major factors involved in intercountry adoptions are race and gender and sexual orientation of children and parents. Literature shows that the perspective of adoptive parents from Western countries, particularly the US and Australia, are still shaped by their understanding of racial and cultural differences. Unfortunately, these differences emphasize the racial stereotypes among whites and non-whites and can even go closer

to cultural tourism (for more details, see Kubo 2010; Riggs and Due 2015). In the same vein, studies on gender and sexuality of children and adoptive parents prove that (1) despite the recognition of LGBT parents, notions of heteronormative parenthood is still dominant; at the same time, (2) adoptive homosexual couples experience the same child behavioral problems as adoptive heterosexual parents (Averett, Nalavany, and Ryan 2009; Gato and Fontaine 2016).[2]

Studies on the experiences of searching for birth siblings are present but currently popular in the social work and psychology fields, and geographically more focused in Europe. Literature suggests that as adoption institutions change their policies toward providing information about the adoptees' birth kin, reunions between birth siblings are becoming an important life event during late adulthood or even in old age. In terms of policies particularly in the UK, there are strong propositions for the adoption of large sibling groups in one family and for stronger state support for adopting parents (Jones 2012; Le Pere 1986; Smith and Logan 2004). The results of a 1986 nationwide descriptive survey by Boer, Versluis-den Bieman, and Verhulst's (1994) further strengthens these policy propositions. Dutch couples with internationally adopted children were surveyed to compare problem behaviors between adopted sibling groups and adopted solo children which showed that adoption of birth siblings to one family is relatively better.

Despite the rich literature, minimal attention has been paid to adoptive siblings in families where: (1) both adopted children and biological children are present, and (2) multiple adoptions are done in sequence, which means adopting children from different birth mothers. I hypothesize that such selectivity on research focus is due to the global decline in adoptions (Selman 2012) and to the rise of assisted reproductive technologies (Fasouliotis and Schenker 1999).

Who Are the Donors, Batch, and Genetic Siblings?

The introduction of assisted reproduction technologies (ART) has prompted questions on the value of genetic ties for both donor and recipient parents. Based on the people involved, ART can be divided into two. First is with third party individuals (surrogates, sperm or egg donors, can be anonymous or not) and second is between the couple themselves who are having problems with conception (VARTA 2020). More recently, when governments and fertility clinics started allowing the identification of donors, the donor and recipient parents started meeting up and introducing their children to one another. This phenomenon gave way to the recognition of donor siblings (children who share the same donor) and the questioning of obligations between donor parents and conceived children (Hertz 2009; Hertz and Mattes 2011). Moreover, the formation and exploration of new sibling relations and friendship between families were advanced (Edwards 2015) and the families brought about by the combination of different parents and children tied by genetics and medical technology were referred to as "random families" (Hertz and Nelson 2019).

The study by Collard and Kashmeri (2011) on what they call as "batch and genetic siblingship" prove that the complexity does not end with two or more "random" families coming together. Briefly, batch siblings refer to children conceived from the same egg and sperm cells at the same time. They can be born together as twins or triplets but also in succession through freezing (called cryopreservation). Genetic siblings, on the other hand, are those children with the same genetic material. They can be given birth by their own genetic mother or by other women as a result of adoption. The authors examined the Snowflake embryo adoption program[3] in California and interviewed 14 genetic (donor) parents and 17 adoptive (recipient) parents using a qualitative approach. They found that adoption history and sibling relations are influenced by the age and birth order of the children. To illustrate, one case is about two Snowflake sons who were considered as batch siblings but were born 30 months apart (315). In the conclusion, Collard and Kashmeri presented similar patterns on the life

stages of Snowflake children and legally adopted children. Some recipient families keep contact with the donor families and others delay it until later in life. Although it was not the focus of the study, other challenges to the understanding of adoptive parents on siblingship mentioned were twinship and the disappearances of embryos in the womb. Should the disappearance be treated as death of a child? Should it be explained to a Snowflake child that a sibling died in the womb? These are possible questions to be explored in future studies.

The origins and progress in ART are usually linked to Western countries. However, the Middle East region has also strongly embraced it. This accommodation is attributed to the desire for parenthood and continuity of the family lineage as culturally practiced. The importance of blood ties for Muslim families and their future heirs is re-echoed by their view on legal adoption as *haram* (forbidden and illegal) (Sonbol 1995). In the same way, although varying restrictions on third party donors can be found, the practice is considered as adultery in Islam and thus is also *haram*. Restrictions and permissions related to ART depend on the adherence to the religious decrees of each specific country (Inhorn 1996, 2006; Inhorn et al. 2017). Nevertheless, scholarships on ART and family formation in the region show that laws and health benefits are increasingly being made more friendly and accessible to single women, LGBT couples, and infertile couples.

Siblingship with Cats and Dogs

From the recognition of siblingship between embryos, I will discuss how the boundaries of siblingship beyond humans is being pushed. Several literature have focused on how middle class childless couples treat their pets, particularly cats and dogs, as children and semi-children (Shir-Vertesh 2012) while others explain how actual children consider them not just as animals but as siblings (Cassels et al. 2017; Franklin 2007; Power 2008). This more-than-human perspective was comprehensively elaborated by Irvine

and Cilia (2017, 8) in a review article where they concluded that "more-than-human families represent a hybrid that includes multiple relations of human and animal and social and natural, rather than an entirely new way of doing family."

Children's perspectives about their family pets were examined closely by Tipper (2011) in an extension of a larger project on children creating kinship. The study included almost 50 children (aged seven to 12) from urban and suburban communities in England. Using mixed qualitative methods, Tipper asked children to draw a concentric circle map of relations and to take photos of "who mattered" to them (using disposable cameras). In analyzing the results, she found that children consider pets, both currently alive and those who died before they were born, as significant members of the family. In relation to their pets, the children also recognized the issues of age and generational position. Being born before the family got the pet puts the children in the older brother or sister status while being born after means otherwise. As children convey authority or egalitarian relations with their pet siblings, embodiment and familiarity are highlighted. They can touch or tickle or wrestle the pet sibling which is different from their relations with adult family members. Overall, Tipper emphasized the importance of relationality and embeddedness between animals and children in looking at posthuman social life.

Throughout this section, I discussed how siblingships are formed in various ways and can be examined in life stages. Beginning with step and half siblingships, this is commonly experienced during childhood and adolescence due to their parents' divorce and remarriage. Similarly, legal adoptions can happen during infancy until adolescence, but reunions of birth siblings most likely occur in late adulthood and old age. Interestingly, siblingships brought by ART can also be observed even before the actual birth stage. Genetic ties form new siblingship and bind random families together and its occurrence is not limited to only one life stage. For both legal and embryo adoptions, the recognition of sibling ties can be done in early childhood or be delayed until adulthood. Finally, siblingship with pets

is particular to childhood but can still be explored in terms of transition to adolescence and to adulthood. Whether "pets as siblings" cover other life stages can be revealed through longitudinal research.

Beyond the Western and Middle or Elite Families, Physical Geographies, and Heteronormative Siblingship

The linear perspective on siblingship based on life stages appear to be messier and more complicated than it was before. As parents and institutions acknowledge embryos as humans and pets as members of the household, the entanglements within family relations continue. Based on the above review of literature, I suggest three approaches in the study of siblingship.

First is to look beyond Western middle class and elite families. While the works based on United States, Europe, and Australia can be a resource for family scholars from other regions, the context specific climates cannot be ignored. For example, studies and discourses on family relations in Africa that cover siblingship are almost always related to HIV/AIDS and are within population and development studies (Abubakar and van de Vijver 2017; Helleringer et al. 2014; Kravdal, Kodzi, and Sigle-Rushton 2013; Masquelier, Reniers, and Pison 2014). Studying the refugee crisis in Africa (or elsewhere for that matter) in the lens of siblingship will bring to light more sociological and anthropological concerns that are being overlooked as scholars tend to focus on the need for settlement, border policies, and human rights concerns (Betts 2013; Nindi 1987). By looking at the family level, and narrowing down to siblingship, questions can be answered: How do refugee sibling groups cope with the traumatic loss of parents and other adult relatives? How does the constant moving from one border to another affect sibling relations? How does the transition from childhood to adolescence get influenced by the uncertainty of the family's movement?

The second approach is inspired by two works namely: (a) *Connecting Families*, an edited volume by Neves and Casimiro (2018), which examines how families are being connected by Information and Communication

Technologies (ICTs) and (b) *Kinship Reconsidered*, a review article by Furstenberg (2020). In the former, one chapter highlights the use of ICTs by different generations in the family to connect with each other through the sharing of photographs and other forms of media. This is combined with one of the key points of Furstenberg's work that is the neglect of cultural sociologists in understanding the duties played by each member in family rituals and events such as "holiday celebrations, weddings, funerals, reunions, and the like" (Furstenberg 2020, 376). I therefore suggest the study of how virtual siblingship exist in contemporary families. Although it is known that children use ICTs to communicate with their parents, is the degree of connection between siblings residing in different regions or countries the same? In making decisions regarding family rituals and events, how do siblings divide tasks if they only communicate virtually? Another related aspect is the formation of online family group chats and having a separate "only siblings" group chat. What does these group chats mean for siblings?

Finally, in response to the literature focusing on parents' reactions to the coming out of their LGBT children, the last approach that I forward is to probe LGBT siblingship using sociological tools—methodological, theoretical, and conceptual. To date, systematic studies on the experiences of siblings with LGBT brothers or sisters are found in psychology (Gamboni 2019; Gottlieb 2005; Hilton and Szymanski 2011; Huang, Chen, and Ponterotto 2016; Barrow and Allen 2020). The approaches are behavioral and tend to emphasize on the reactions after the disclosure of the siblings' sexual orientation. I intend to answer the following using the sociological tools: How do strong or weak religious stances of heterosexual siblings play a role in the coming out of the homosexual sibling? How do protective roles change or persist when elder siblings come out as gay and get bullied in school or community? How does having more than one homosexual sibling influence sibling dynamics?

Conclusion:
Siblingship in a Complex Yet Fluid Family System

From the Western societies to the Pacific islands, from the Arab world and to the subregions of Asia, the study of siblingship is notable. The increasing complexity of family systems is seen through the prevalence of divorce and remarriages (serial monogamy), and multiple-partnered relationships vis-à-vis family migration, legal adoptions, and assisted reproductive technology (ART). Earlier limits on kinship and family definitions are being pushed as beyond human households have become institutionally accepted. Moreover, studies on children are undeniably increasing as their autonomy and perspectives are being given more priority as compared to previous decades. Furthermore, dynamics in the family are dissected and the roles of step and donor parents are also incorporated.

In terms of frameworks and methodology, framing using life cycles, life courses, and transitions remain to be useful along with approaches on identity formations in relation to siblings. Life and family history narration is still dominant and recommended particularly on studies concerning two to three generations. Qualitative approaches are improving, especially in doing research with children. The drawing methods are borrowed in psychology while the taking of photographs has been present in anthropological works. In the more recent trends, the use of ethnography is called for to guide in the making of harmonized tools for regional or cross-country comparative surveys.

With much optimism in the future of family scholarship, the three approaches to the study of siblingship—covering refugee siblings, virtually connected siblings, and LGBT siblings—could be a useful guide to family scholars. The changes that bring complexity in families can indeed be overwhelming but the pronounced fluidity of intimate relationships, such as between siblings, in the context of uncertain social and political conditions warrants our attention.

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Veronica L. Gregorio is a Lecturer (Social Sciences) at the College of Humanities and Sciences, National University of Singapore. Her thematic research interests include gender and sexuality, family sociology, and youth studies, with a regional focus on Southeast Asia. She has conducted fieldwork in the Philippines, Malaysia, and Singapore, utilizing ethnographic, visual, and digital methodologies. Her research has been published in academic journals, including *Current Sociology*, *Review of Women's Studies*, P*hilippine Sociological Review*, and *Simulacra Jurnal Sosiologi*. Her latest work is the co-edited volume, *Resilience and Familism: The Dynamic Nature of Families in the Philippines* published by Emerald Publishing in 2023.

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Endnotes

[1] Fictive siblingship is a particular type of fictive kinship that entails relationships mirroring sibling bonds, yet without biological or legal foundations. Similar to fictive kinship overall, fictive siblingship emerges through social and cultural customs rather than official systems or organizations.

[2] For a comprehensive review of works related to stigma on adoptive same-sex partners, see Fisher (2003).

[3] The program use the term embryo adoption (instead of donation) and consequently use genetic parents (instead of donor) and adoptive parents (instead of recipient). The program is tied with evangelical Christian belief that life begins on conception and that frozen embryos (hence Snowflakes) should be treated as humans. This is the logic behind the use of the terms mentioned.

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