

Abstract

Violence and Domination in Sibling Relationships: An Ethnography of the

Unacknowledged “Business As Usual” of Childhood

by

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Stories and studies of childhood sibling violence are rare in scholarly literature, yet the actual relationships of siblings with one another are commonly filled with moments of physical and psychological domination and abuse, ranging from ongoing verbal humiliation to nonconsensual tickling to slapping, punching, kicking, and choking. To address this research void I conducted lengthy, unstructured interviews with 14 adults from my extended acquaintanceship network who characterized their childhood sibling relationships as having included such acts of violence.

One of the aims of this research has been to present the experience of childhood sibling violence in the words of those who have lived it; accordingly, large portions of the participants’ stories are presented verbatim. Through a close textual reading of these narratives, I trace how worldviews and hegemonic notions about self and others are derived from the direct experience of violence but most especially from the reactions of surrounding parents and adults.

Using respected quantitative studies that draw on a representative national sampling to establish the astonishing frequency of childhood sibling violence, I theorize that the lack of scholarly attention to this widespread phenomenon simultaneously mirrors and reproduces the reactions of both society at large and childhood parental figures who have often dismissed such violence as “just child’s play,” “boys will be boys,” or “sibling rivalry.” The collective and individual judging of childhood sibling violence as some pastiche of natural, essential, inevitable, unavoidable, normal, and/or nonexistent has enduring repercussions for individuals and societies.

I maintain that the normalization of childhood sibling violence is a crucial teaching mechanism for the normalization of violence everywhere; through this experience we begin to be trained for our revolving and overlapping adult roles as enactors, targets and witnesses in the continuum of violences, a conceptual model I have developed to illustrate the interdynamic complex of structural, strategic, institutionalized, systemic, and everyday violences. I theorize that childhood sibling violence is a singularly potent experience because it is our first encounter with civil society as oppressive hierarchy, the dashing of our dreams of a just authority, and the betrayal of the hope of fraternité and sororité.