

Book Review: Looking at Siblings is Looking Anew at Sex and Violence

Hollway, Wendy

Postprint / Postprint

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with:

www.peerproject.eu

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Hollway, W. (2005). Book Review: Looking at Siblings is Looking Anew at Sex and Violence. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 12(1), 118-121. <https://doi.org/10.1177/135050680501200112>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter dem "PEER Licence Agreement zur Verfügung" gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zum PEER-Projekt finden Sie hier: <http://www.peerproject.eu> Gewährt wird ein nicht exklusives, nicht übertragbares, persönliches und beschränktes Recht auf Nutzung dieses Dokuments. Dieses Dokument ist ausschließlich für den persönlichen, nicht-kommerziellen Gebrauch bestimmt. Auf sämtlichen Kopien dieses Dokuments müssen alle Urheberrechtshinweise und sonstigen Hinweise auf gesetzlichen Schutz beibehalten werden. Sie dürfen dieses Dokument nicht in irgendeiner Weise abändern, noch dürfen Sie dieses Dokument für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, aufführen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.

Mit der Verwendung dieses Dokuments erkennen Sie die Nutzungsbedingungen an.

Terms of use:

This document is made available under the "PEER Licence Agreement". For more information regarding the PEER-project see: <http://www.peerproject.eu> This document is solely intended for your personal, non-commercial use. All of the copies of this documents must retain all copyright information and other information regarding legal protection. You are not allowed to alter this document in any way, to copy it for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the document in public, to perform, distribute or otherwise use the document in public.

By using this particular document, you accept the above-stated conditions of use.

egalitarian spirit of Islam supports both men and women regardless of class and occupation.

To conclude, secular forces, instead of being weakened by Islamic feminists as Shahidian argues, can in fact draw on their arguments to question the absolutist base of religious rulings and to highlight the limitations of a legal system based in religion. They can also point to the factional differences within the Islamic Republic and use these as evidence that political power undermines the authority and legitimacy of religion, thereby strengthening their demands for the separation of religion from the state, and for equal rights for all citizens, regardless of religious belief.

REFERENCES

- Kandiyoti, D. (1991) 'Islam and Patriarchy: A Comparative Perspective', pp. 23–42 in N.R. Keddie and B. Baron (eds) *Women in Middle-Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender*. New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press.
- Keddie, N.R. (1991) 'Introduction: Deciphering Middle Eastern Women's History', pp. 1–22 in N.R. Keddie and B. Baron (eds) *Women in Middle-Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Moghadam, V.M. (1993) *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner.

Fatemeh Ebtehaj
Cambridge University

LOOKING AT SIBLINGS IS LOOKING ANEW AT SEX AND VIOLENCE

Juliet Mitchell

Siblings: Sex and Violence

Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003, 252 pp., ISBN 0-7456-3221-1

Juliet Mitchell's theme is the importance of sibling relationships, not just for social and interpersonal relations but for their influence in the development of our subjectivities, including gendered subjectivities. She is writing against the psychoanalytic perspective in which 'the Oedipus complex and preOedipal mother-infant relationship are presented as the only nexuses that link the internal world of unconscious thought processes and affects with the external social world' (p. 190). The book pursues the argument that sibling relationships are an equally important nexus of linkage between psychic and social worlds and finds a startling and important range of implications. If internalized social relationships are the major elements of the psyche (p. 1), then sibling relationships deserve a central place in our thinking. On the face of it, Mitchell's thesis might not seem as momentous as I believe it is. By the time that she has followed through the implications of her arguments, it looks not only as if psychoanalysis needs as radical an overhaul as it has already undergone (not least through the influence of feminists like Mitchell) but that feminist theory could find insights here that transform its understanding of sexual and gender difference. Her thesis has implications for a broad and politically relevant array of social issues:

Maternal fantasies and enactments with their babies as loved/hated angels or monsters, paternal sexual violence, worldwide wife-beating and the feminization of hysteria, war and peace: these are rooted not only in the interplay of generations but in the dilemmas which jump out at us if we look sideways. (p. 110)

Once I started to 'look sideways', once the significance of sibling relationships started to jump out at me at every turn, I realized how profound is the absence of sustained intellectual thought on this theme. I was reminded how influential gaps in available discourses are. The evidence is there; it is empirically noted (as Mitchell demonstrates in the clinical psychoanalytic literature) but it is not considered theoretically significant and in psychoanalysis it is usually reinterpreted onto the vertical axis of parental relationships, following the orthodox Freudian emphasis that is encapsulated in the idea of the Oedipus complex. One rather crucial effect of this has been that analysts routinely miss the importance of sibling transferences in their own clinical work, as probably happened in their own training, so that they reproduce the sibling blind spot and this has effects on the body of theory that is continually being refined and revised through clinical experience. For Juliet Mitchell, it was only with hindsight, with the incremental effect of her own clinical experience over a long period, that she noticed the significance of sibling relationships. Fortunately she pursued this insight, creatively following its trail in some unlikely places.

Mitchell is not seeking to displace the importance of mothers and fathers, rather to modify how we understand their influence through including the trauma and developmental challenges that are precipitated by having siblings and the meaning of this in the context of the child's relationship with her or his mother (fathers get little attention). Because her argument is based in psychoanalysis and is critical of current orthodoxy about the centrality of the Oedipus complex, she is often engaged in some quite technical arguments internal to psychoanalysis, some of which will be quite hard to follow for social scientists. The first chapter sets the scene by drawing on a wide range of themes from sibling incest taboos in non-western cultures to hysteria (where she reviews her earlier arguments in *Mad Men and Medusas* [2000], the book where she first explored sibling relationships). Her theme leads her to draw on 'all the disciplines that study human society . . . and a range of sources, from anecdote to neuropsychiatry, via politics, gender studies, novels, films, anthropology' (p. x). Among the pages are some striking and thought-provoking visual images that illustrate the ideas.

The central argument, necessarily oversimplified here, is that babies and children are traumatized when a sibling is born. This trauma (on top of separation from the mother) is profound; a threat of annihilation of identity because who am I when I am no longer the baby? The child's experience of the trauma of sibling displacement means that violence is always latent and can be re-enacted in wider sibling-substitute relationships if not with actual siblings. Hate coexists with love, deriving from the fact that 'baby' is expected to be a replica of oneself and therefore loved narcissistically. Sex and violence are expressions of these wishes, when acted out: sibling incest, for example, is fairly common in western cultures, and, unlike in some cultures, less heavily repressed than parental incest. Mitchell uses the idea of seriality to convey that, through sibling relationships, babies learn that they have a place in a series in which, although all are the same as the children of their parents, they are also each different. She introduces 'the law of the mother'. This

. . . operates both vertically between herself and her children and laterally to differentiate her children one from each other. Vertically her law decrees that

children cannot procreate children. . . . By differentiating between her children, the mother and her law allow for the concept of seriality to be inter-nalised . . . there is room for two, three, four or more. . . . The mother has enforced, but the lateral relationship itself instigates its own processes of managing sameness through constructing difference. (pp. 51–2)

The implications of this line of approach could be very significant for feminist theory which is stuck for a way of conceptualizing identification across difference (e.g. Benjamin, 1998: xii–xiii; Hekman, 1999: 91), not least because of the influence of a psychoanalytic theory fixated on intergenerational, or vertical, relations. Here we have a model for the experience of sameness within difference and difference within sameness that is a universal feature of social relationships and therefore necessarily provides major elements of psychic life. The centrality of sex and violence to sibling relations makes this a relevant way of understanding, for example, gangs and bullying and wartime rape: all being lateral relations.

Siblings will be central also for the establishment of gendered identity. For Mitchell, siblings point to 'the engendering of gender as a difference forged out of the matrix of sameness' (p. 225); 'sisters and brothers mark the nuclear point of sameness and difference' (p. 129). To the extent that difference is a vertical construction, it is the absolute sexual difference that is demanded by reproduction. It is because psychoanalysis has concentrated on the parents in this way that it has had difficulty with gender difference, as opposed to sexual difference. Mitchell argues that both terms should be retained because they can be used to refer to very different processes. Gender difference, according to Juliet Mitchell, comes about via lateral relations (always in interaction with vertical ones): 'the perpetuation of the polymorphously perverse, non-reproductive sexuality takes place through lateral, not vertical relationships, starting with siblings in the context always of peers and later of affines' (p. 127). The child is offered two ways to mark the difference between itself and the new sibling; age and gender (p. 19). 'Gender difference comes into being when physical strength and malevolence are used to mark the sister as lesser' (p. 220). Mitchell argues that, because siblings are the same as well as being different, difference is not intrinsic to gender, as it is to sexual difference. Rather it 'indicates the possibility of transformation of what seem, but are not, the binary rigidities that are claimed for gender' (p. 225). Gender is not organized around the absent phallus, as is the sexuality of the Oedipus complex, but around the 'absent self', deriving from displacement and the shared absence that both boys and girls learn, namely that they cannot replicate themselves.

Juliet Mitchell expresses the hope that the ideas in this book will generate a dialogue: they are 'up for grabs'. I found myself wanting to think further about birth order and the different meanings of the threat of a new sibling depending on the age (and therefore dependence on the mother) of the child. I can see that it was traumatic for my older sister at two years old, when I was born. When I was eight, my brother arrived, and by then I had access to a different strategy and became the substitute mother. Along these lines, Mitchell points out that later siblings experience being hated and therefore know what sibling displacement feels like through identification. As regards age, she situates the stage of sibling interaction which is psychically determinant during a narcissistic and phallic period when there is minimal distinction of sameness and difference (p. 21).

The question of birth order is one small example of the lines of enquiry that this book suggests. There are so many novel ideas here that I have only been able to give a preliminary flavour of them. For this journal, I have concentrated on its implications for the concept of gender difference, but Juliet Mitchell's ideas cover psychopathy, women-identified men, bullying, wartime rape, learning to love and hate the same

person, giving up grandiosity, the idea of an 'Antigone' complex and implications for attachment theory. The book deserves to be widely used and debated.

REFERENCES

- Benjamin, J. (1998) *Shadow of the Other: Intersubjectivity and Gender in Psychoanalysis*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Hekman, S. (1999) *The Future of Differences: Truth and Method in Feminist Theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Mitchell, J. (2000) *Mad Men and Medusas: Reclaiming Hysteria and the Effects of Sibling Relationships on the Human Condition*. London: Penguin.

Wendy Hollway
Open University

TESTING GROUND FOR FEMINISM

Judith Ezekiel

Feminism in the Heartland

Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2002, 300 pp., ISBN 0-08142-5098-X

As an average American city, Dayton, Ohio gained fame as a testing ground for new products. Judith Ezekiel uses this typical town, far away from the well-known centres of American second-wave feminism, to test some of our general ideas about the US women's movement. Ezekiel's book makes a fresh and original contribution to the existing literature on US feminism, because it demonstrates that American feminism is more than the New York or East Coast groups, thereby challenging some of the prevailing myths about US feminism. In her reconstruction of the history of Dayton feminism, Ezekiel makes a fascinating counterpoint to 'the assumption that feminist ideas take on the same meaning in different times and places' (p. ix). Feminist ideas and practices that travel across time and space are not simply adopted, but take on a different shape in each context. They are interpreted, adapted and combined with personal experiences and resources. The history of Dayton feminism challenges the idea that away from the progressive centres only some diluted version of liberal feminism that focused on equal rights issues could take hold. Heartland feminism is neither a 'small-scale version of the "national" movement' (p. viii), nor a watered down version where radical ideas are toned down to make them acceptable. Ezekiel's detailed and rich study makes clear that feminism in the Heartland was far more diverse and unique in its own right:

The story of Dayton forcefully cracks open the apparent historiographic consensus around a universal, two-part movement, one in which liberal feminism is the earliest, the most durable and hence for many the most important part of the movement. In contrast to the two branch pattern so often described, a single strand of feminism emerged in Dayton, drawing inspiration from diverse philosophies but most closely resembling in scope and structure what various scholars have called the women's liberation, radical, or collectivist branch. (p. 242)

Ezekiel has gathered a wealth of original primary resources that were not brought together in any archive before: newsletters, minutes from meetings,