

VAL PARKER

The background of the cover features several grey paper-cut silhouettes of human figures in various dynamic poses, scattered across the surface. Some figures appear to be holding objects or interacting with each other, creating a sense of movement and social interaction.

# A GROUP-ANALYTIC EXPLORATION OF THE SIBLING MATRIX

How Siblings Shape our Lives

ROUTLEDGE

The Routledge logo, which consists of a stylized yellow 'R' shape.

# A GROUP-ANALYTIC EXPLORATION OF THE SIBLING MATRIX

*A Group-Analytic Exploration of the Sibling Matrix: How Siblings Shape our Lives* offers a fresh approach to siblings, recognising how these relationships are embedded in the framework of the family and how sibling experiences shape our lives, influencing relationships with partners, friends and colleagues, and affecting how we take our place in groups and in society.

The book is divided into three parts. Part One focuses on the sibling life cycle, exploring how these relationships shift and change throughout life according to context and circumstances. In Part Two, Parker uses clinical examples to consider how therapists working with individuals and groups might expand their thinking to incorporate the sibling matrix. The final part investigates how the sibling matrix manifests in organisational life and considers how we might develop mutuality and cooperation in our universal sibling matrix.

Drawing on the author's wealth of experience as a clinician, the book incorporates compelling personal stories and clinical examples to bring to life the realities and nuances, the good and bad, the healthy and supportive, and also the potentially damaging aspects of sibling relationships. Accessibly written, this is a rich and rewarding invitation to reflect on our own experience, whether as clinicians, researchers or as members of our own sibling matrix.

**Val Parker** is a psychotherapist and group analyst working in private practice in West Oxfordshire. She is a tutor on the Psychodynamics Programme at the University of Oxford and a member of the staff team on the Qualifying Course in Group Analysis in Tirana, Albania. More information about Val can be found at [www.valparkerpsychotherapy.com](http://www.valparkerpsychotherapy.com).

“Parker’s book explores an important and too often neglected area in family psychodynamics.”

*Salley Vickers, former psychotherapist and best-selling novelist*

“This book fills a gap in group analytic thinking, which people have intermittently looked at and then ignored again: sibling relationships and their role in psychotherapy, group analysis, and in life. Practitioners have perhaps ignored siblings because they have shied away from acknowledging that these relationships are often more powerful than parent-child dynamics. It is Val Parker’s achievement not to blink, and look at the powerful importance of sibling relationships within the family and in therapy groups. I recommend this book to anyone who works with groups.”

*Gerhard Wilke, group analyst, author of The Art of Group Analysis in Organisations*

“The essential thesis of this book is that our sibling relationships help to organise our social selves and humanise us. Within this matrix we learn about competition and co-operation and the way our social selves are mutually constructed. With a wide range of clinical material, the author highlights the way sibling dynamics are played out within the group. This is a book for all those who are becoming increasingly aware that the need to co-operate with others is essential for our survival. They will find a powerful argument that we should begin by nurturing our sibling social selves.”

*Prophecy Coles, psychotherapist, author of The Importance of Sibling Relationships in Psychoanalysis, The Uninvited Guest from the Unremembered Past, and The Shadow of the Second Mother*

“This is a timely and important book addressing the neglected field of sibling dynamics from a group analytic perspective. The author views the sibling matrix from developmental, analytic and socio-cultural vantage points – and brings her ideas to life with illuminating examples from her clinical practice. I wholeheartedly recommend this book to all clinicians wanting to deepen their understanding of family dynamics.”

*Sylvia Hutchinson, group analyst*

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*Val Parker*

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**To Emily, Sam and Lucy, with my love.**



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This book is enriched by numerous examples of personal experiences. Some of these have arisen in conversations with friends, some in work with clients, and some with people who have been specifically interviewed for this book. These stories are all deeply personal. The details have been changed to protect anonymity, but the essence of the material has been retained. I am deeply touched by everyone who has given their permission for me to share their story.

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# PREFACE

As babies, we enter a world which is innately and fundamentally social. Whether we are born into the context of a nuclear family or a more extended familial structure, we immediately take our place in a complex group of several generations. Those who most closely share this experience will be our siblings. These may include not only biological brothers and sisters, but also step- and half-siblings, close cousins, or others who share our upbringing in any way.

Siblings are by their very nature embedded in the matrix of the family. The bonds they make, the attitudes they hold towards one another and the position they take in their sibling group are inextricably linked to the circumstances in which they are raised and the beliefs and expectations of those who care for them. How they are treated will seminally impact on their relationships with one another and in the wider world.

The concept of the 'matrix' is fundamental to group-analytic thinking and describes the shared links that are created within specific groups. This book will examine the nature of the *sibling* matrix and explore how it shapes our lives and the ways we relate with others. Our sibling matrix will significantly influence our friendships, partnerships and marriages. It will also colour and shape our attitudes as parents and carers, as employers and employees, and as citizens.

In an age of acquisition and consumption, where the goal is ever greater power and wealth, we seem to have lost touch with our innate 'siblinghood' – our sense of sharing the world with others – which starts from the moment we are born. Yet we descend from a race of hunter-gatherers who survived not because of physical or mental prowess, but because of an innate ability to cooperate and communicate. Our strength lies in the bonds we create, but we are in danger of losing our greatest asset through a misguided and unnatural focus on striving and competing and winning. The sibling matrix is also part of the human matrix. We need to rekindle its significance.



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# INTRODUCTION

## The sibling matrix

There is an air of magic and mystery about the word *matrix*. It conjures up images of disturbing science fiction, the murky underworld, or complex mathematical puzzles. The word matrix stems from the Old French word *matrice*, meaning womb or uterus, itself originating from the Late Latin for mother – *mater*. The word matrix has since taken on many related usages, referring to a place where something rests or can be formed or developed – a supporting or enclosing structure, an embedding or enclosing mass, a mould, a printing block, a bed hollowed out in a slab (Oxford English Dictionary, 2018).

S.H. Foulkes (1898–1976), the founder of group-analytic psychotherapy, adopted the word matrix as a group-analytic term, using it to describe the profound and enigmatic connections which link us together in specific groups. The concept has itself become a crucible for the development of group-analytic ideas about group and relational life.

### The concept of the matrix in group analysis

Group-analytic ideas are founded on the premise that the human mind is a ‘social phenomenon’ (E. Foulkes, 1990, p. 14). Foulkes believed that our internal worlds – our thoughts, feelings, and emotional responses – are intertwined with the internal worlds of those who surround us. ‘What is inside is outside, the “social” is not external but very much internal too and penetrates the innermost being of the individual personality’ (S. Foulkes, 1990b, p. 227). He regarded all groups as systems bound by networks of ‘transpersonal processes’ (S. Foulkes, 1990d, p. 253), believing that there is a continual flow between internal and external worlds – between our minds and the minds of those around us. These connections bind us together, and are the essence of our sense of belonging:

## 2 Introduction

Such communications can be acts, active messages, verbal behaviour, actions, movements, expressions, in the sense of expressions of mood and various emotions, silent transmissions of mood, they could even be telepathic.

(E. Foulkes, 1990, p. 14)

Every group creates distinctive ways of interconnecting. It is these intersecting links which form the matrix:

*The Matrix* is the hypothetical web of communication and relationship in a given group. It is the common shared ground which ultimately determines the meaning and significance of all events and upon which all communications and interpretations, verbal and non-verbal, rest.

(S. Foulkes, 1964, p. 292)

### The sibling matrix

The matrix is often referred to by group analysts as 'the mother-soil' (S. Foulkes, 1990a, p. 212) and this is particularly apt for describing the world of siblings. As they grow up together siblings develop distinctive and intimate modes of communication. They share secrets, jokes and stories. They invent special games and private languages. They share assumptions and attitudes about one another, about the family and about the world. These deep connections and mutual understandings bind them together. They are the essence of the sibling matrix.

Siblings can be a vital source of nurture and sustenance. Brothers or sisters may be the only constant in our lives; the only ones who stand by us; the only ones who look out for us and offer comfort and support. Siblings can be a vital link to our sense of home and belonging – even to our homeland. Siblings can also be cruel and bitter enemies, carried around in our psyches as pernicious objects, reminders of embattlement, strife and hatred. We take all these experiences with us into our adult lives. They shape the way we feel about ourselves in the world and how we relate to others. The sibling matrix is fundamental and intrinsic to our sense of self.

### The matrix as a transitional object

Glenn (Glenn, 1987) suggests that the matrix is essentially about belonging: 'I came to understand the matrix as being, quite simply, about a kind of belonging, a secret awareness hardly expressible in words' (Glenn, 1987, p. 109). It is something not only mutually constructed by members of a group, but also sustained in the form of thoughts, feelings or sensations which link members to one another when they are apart. Powell writes:

The matrix belongs to nobody and yet to everybody, a space in which phantasy can be projected at will and which can then be carried around as needed by the group member between groups, a prized possession not unlike a toddler's bit of blanket.

(Powell, 2000, p. 15)

A member of a therapy group envisaged carrying his fellow members with him in his backpack during the week. This gave him comfort and sustained him during the gaps. This idea of the matrix being something ‘carried around’ links us to the concept of ‘transitional phenomena’ (Winnicott, 1971) – objects or aspects of experience through which an infant can sustain its connection with its absent mother – ‘a bridge between inner and outer worlds’ (Phillips, 2007, p. 114).

The *sibling matrix* could then be conceived as a transitional space between brothers and sisters, sustained through time in mutual memories, emotions, thoughts, phantasies or dreams – internal threads linking them to their shared roots and their sense of connectedness and belonging.

### The wider implications of the sibling matrix

The sibling matrix is a universal psychic area which is continually shifting and mutating like a kaleidoscope. It exists before we are born in the minds of our parents, uncles and aunts, grandparents and older siblings, and in the expectations of our surrounding community and society. When we enter the world, it changes and reforms, influenced and modified by our personal experiences.

Our siblings are with us throughout our lives. Even if we sever links and never speak, we will continue to inform one another’s thoughts and actions. We cannot ever *divorce* siblings. However, although we may not necessarily be able to repair damaged or severed sibling relationships, we don’t have to continue *re-living* them. We can learn to shift our gaze, freeing ourselves from the temptation of responding similarly with others when the sibling matrix is activated. The more conscious we become of the presence of our siblings in our inner worlds the more we can do to shift entrenched assumptions and patterns and re-connect to the potential love and warmth siblings can offer one another.

The sibling matrix seeps into every corner of our lives. It influences the way we deal with our friends, partners and colleagues; it impacts on organisations, communities and our culture and society. Siblinghood is universal and deeply significant. It needs to be given more attention.

The book is divided into three parts. Part One focuses on sibling life, charting how sibling relationships shift and change through the life cycle and exploring the vital role that parents play. Part Two concentrates on clinical work, exploring how greater awareness of the sibling matrix might inform therapeutic work with individuals and groups. Part Three will consider the wider context of the sibling matrix and how it is expressed in organisations, in society and in our world today.

The aim of this book is to raise questions, not necessarily to find answers. I’m interested in how a deeper regard for the unconscious impact of sibling issues may influence our relationships with others and our understanding of ourselves. This is not only a book for group analysts. It is a book about how group-analytic ideas might inform psychological and psychotherapeutic practice; it is a book for counsellors, psychotherapists, psychologists, psychoanalysts. It is also a book for anyone who wishes to understand themselves more fully.