

Twins in Society: Parents, Bodies, Space and Talk. Studies in Childhood and Youth Series

Kate Bacon (2010). Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan. 256 pp., US\$90.00. Hard cover. ISBN 13: 9780230580930

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This book poses some very profound questions about twinship and its meaning to twins and others in society. The author, Kate Bacon, has 'always had an academic interest in the topic of identity' (p. 1), and is (less than coincidentally) also a twin. Being a twin does make one more than usually interested in the question of identity, of 'oneness' and 'sameness' (as in Abigail Pogrebin's recent book, reviewed in *Twin and Research and Human Genetics*). Kate and her twin sister Hannah have always been told they were non-identical, although they look very similar. Her querying in the Introduction how others can think twins are so similar when the twins themselves feel they are different will resonate with many twins.

Although the Introduction starts in conversational style, by page 4 Bacon has started to refer to ethnographic accounts of twinship. By page 10, the book is explaining social constructionist perspectives. On page 14 the reader is led into abstract conceptualisations of society and that will lose many general readers. Nevertheless, *Twins in Society* is intended to be an academic text — in style, layout and pricing. It is based on a project 'Twinship and the Negotiation of Social Identity in Britain, which was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. In the project Bacon interviewed 21 twins aged 8 to 36 years and 15 parents of twins.

This review does not provide the theoretical appraisal the book deserves, but is written from the perspective of an interested twin

and non-sociologist twin researcher with some training in the social sciences. This may not do the book justice. Bacon's work is not aimed at the general public, although the educated twin, sibling or parent of twins might find some useful and interesting verbatim quotations, messages and perspectives presented and interpreted in the book. The language is sociological in the vein of the qualitative researcher. Hence chapters have titles such as 'Situating twins in society' and 'Discourses', as well as the chapters whose names are contained in the book's title 'Parents', 'Bodies', 'Space' and 'Talk'. These titles are simple and encapsulate important topics in understanding twins and twinship, as do some of the section titles like 'Closeness' and 'Togetherness'. The final chapter, the conclusion, is 'Moving thorough life as a twin'. Although some subheadings are interesting ('Balancing individuality and twinship'), others of the subheadings do not engage the general reader, for example 'undermining and suspending performances of identity' (p.179), 'authoritative voices and co-construction' (p. 183), 'twinship as an intensification of the symbol of 'the child' (p. 48).

The book does not have a modern aura and is not marketed to appeal to those other than perhaps child or educational psychologists and sociologists. It has a very British feel, which is accentuated by the verbatim quotes from children and parents. There are some figures, largely drawings of young children who are twins. The

drawings are generally interesting although not all are highly engaging. Nonetheless they are clearly related to the verbatim quotations and verbal interactions in the text, and to Bacon's interpretations. There are no photographs. There are extensive quotations from young twins, on which the author makes interpretations and comments. For example, on space and separation, following a quote from Olivia, Bacon states: 'Thus, while Olivia plays up the value of physical togetherness, she has a normative life course timetable in view' (p. 147). No doubt insightful, the interpretations are couched in terms that are not those of the everyday.

The key themes of the book are 'the life course', 'The social construction of childhood and twinship', 'the nature of social identity' and 'structure and agency in the lives of twins'. The latter theme illustrates the fact that the book is sociological and the focus is on discourses of twinship along with discourses of childhood, and how these relate to each other.

The book contains some interesting points about identity that many twins will identify with, for example the need to tell people you are a twin even though your twin is completely removed from your adult life. The chapter entitled 'Parents' also has some themes and points that parents of twins may find interesting, but there is also discussion of conceptual notions of 'habitus' and 'field', which are important to the purpose of the book but may deter

many readers before they reach the interesting snippets. The chapter on 'Bodies' analyses how twins use their physical similarities and differences in their 'identity-work', in determining and negotiating their way through the dominant discourses of childhood and twinship. Similarly in 'Space', issues such as sharing bedrooms, home space and school space are framed in discussion of concepts such as being apart and being together, and holding on to twinship even as twins move and live part. Again in 'Talk' concepts such as sameness

and togetherness are explored as themes, and the chapter develops some interesting analysis of individuality and 'twinness' conveyed through language. The Conclusion makes some important points about the part twins play in 'performing' their twinship and in socially constructing their twinship. It also neatly summarises some key points from the preceding chapters.

There is an Appendix on Methodology of the study that underpins the book, which will interest the academic reader with a

social science perspective. Because of the nature of the book there is an extensive bibliography, which the academic reader will find useful.

The book contains a great deal of interesting material. It may be neither sound nor acceptable from a theoretical perspective to make this suggestion, but material in the book could be transformed into a series of shorter pieces or a less dense book minus the theoretical text, and have considerable public appeal.