

# CONCLUSION

## Strategies That Work and That Fail to Work

AYSAN SEV'ER  
JAN TROST

As the editors of this unique and fascinating collection, we will try to highlight some patterns in the emergence of conflicts and how different families try to dissipate these conflicts. However, we urge our readers to also draw their own conclusions about the narratives they have read, even if their conclusions are diametrically opposed to ours. As we clearly stated in our introduction, we are not claiming that this book will become the last word in theories and methods of the social analysis of family conflicts. We do not even think that such a lofty goal is attainable, given the existing patchwork knowledge about the area. Instead, we want this collection to bring about insights, through a non-traditional sociological method (autonarration), and to fuel a healthy debate about what family conflict means and how to study it. Like the skeletons our authors have taken out of their own family closets and courageously shared with us, we wanted to rattle sociology's relative silence in the area of family conflict. We hope that our authors and readers will find that the rich narratives in this book help them think outside the box, both theoretically and methodologically.

### Sources of Conflict

Although we do not want to make overgeneralizations, it is clear that most family conflicts are robust and persistent. Moreover, the sources of most conflicts are based on factors with which sociologists are closely familiar. Most of these conflicts are not attributable to simple "personality clashes" and cannot be

explained away through individual traits. So, let us focus on conflicts that seem to arise from gender, age, sexual orientation, class, and cultural differences. Perceptions of equity and distributive justice (again, familiar sociological concepts) are also exceptionally important in engendering family conflicts.

### **Gender**

Families are not egalitarian institutions, and gender is one of the main axes of inequality in most, if not all, family relations. Sometimes it is the gendered distribution of resources, at other times, it is the gendered distribution (and expectation) of power and influence that sets the stage for covert or overt forms of conflict. Although there are many examples to choose from, let us focus on Chapter 9. In the rural family existence of the author's childhood, there is not much space for leisure, since the parents and their growing children are engulfed by the demands of a small farm. Yet the brothers still manage some playtime, with a nod from their parents, while the only daughter is expected to care for the youngest brother. Maybe, it is this gendered inequity that has contributed to the frictions between the author and her parents.

Gender again surfaces in various other chapters. In Chapter 1, the grandmother's relentless guilt about the loss of her tiny granddaughter is gendered. This kind of torturous self-blame is very much a women's domain, especially in male-dominated societies. In Chapter 3, we see a variation of the gendered sacrifice in the mediating role the mother takes on in order to smooth out the rough edges created by the declining mental health of her son. Although the whole family is affected by the son's episodes, the mother is the one who is on call, day in and day out, to patch things up. Moreover, in Chapter 10, the social group scrutinizes and constantly judges the behaviour of the mistress to the degree that she is eventually buried in a pauper's grave. Her lover, a married man who has several children with his legal wife, continues to be mostly respected in his community despite his adulterous status. So, in many cases of conflict, the gender of individuals cannot be dissociated from the type and severity of the conflict they find themselves in.

### **Age**

Like gender, age is also a universal basis of inequality within family relations. Age difference between individuals (brothers, sisters) and generational difference between parents and their children are closely associated with power differences. It is also important to realize that the power that is derived from age shifts across time. In early years, parents hold all resources and all decision-

making power over their children. In their declining years, the same parents may find that their children are making most of their decisions for them. Although we can find many examples for age-based inequalities in the narratives in this book, let us focus on one which clarifies the point: the grandmother in Chapter 4 who lives in South Africa. Although she must have been quite a resourceful woman in her time, running a farm and raising her grandson, the aging process, coupled with a mild form of dementia, prevent her from leading an independent life. In the narrative, her caregivers are her two daughters and a granddaughter. However, the narrative also shows that the caregivers may be too demanding and controlling. Even in relatively minor points, such as when to go to bed, we see that the grandmother is given no choice in the matter: decisions are—sometimes forcefully—made for her. Of course, some of the control in her life could be justified, given the incrementally deteriorating state of her mental capabilities. However, some of the overcontrolling behaviour seems to be more for the benefit of her caregivers. The caregivers are not cognizant of or sensitive to the changes in the grandmother's mental health needs. Instead, even a fleeting request for independence is interpreted as the ramblings of a "difficult" woman.

The situation of the mother in Chapter 5 is not very different. In this case, the increasing frailty of the mother seems to make her more an object that her sons and daughters make decisions about than a person in her own right. Although at least one son claims to be abiding by her wishes, the reader gets the impression that the siblings are more interested in jostling for power than truly listening to their mother's need for some independence.

### ***Sexual Orientation***

Despite the development of human rights legislation that prohibits unequal treatment of individuals based on personal characteristics, many groups still suffer from overt or covert forms of marginalization. Canada is one of the countries at the forefront of human rights legislation, with its Charter of Rights and Freedoms and its championing of UN human rights declarations and conventions. However, at a practical level, some people here may still feel "less equal" than others. Moreover, people who immigrate to Canada from more hierarchical and especially more patriarchal regions of the world may have additional difficulties with concepts of equity, tolerance, or acceptance. Chapter 7 provides a blatant example of intra-familial discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. In this case, the parents and extended kin are the discriminators. The author, a gay man, is one of three children in a

first-generation Chinese-Canadian family. He eloquently narrates the differential treatment he has received and the verbal and physical abuse he has suffered just because he has not been able to fulfill his father's expectation that he would be a heterosexual son. In a way, he has been forced to lead a double life, pretending to be a straight man in his own community but secretly leading a gay life in another. The conflict takes a toll on this family, creating much fragmentation.

### *Class*

Studies of stratification have been the bread and butter of sociology. Social class has a major impact not only at the macro level but also at the level of family interactions. The class-based conflicts in this book are no exception. In Chapter 9, as readers will recall, there is an ideological tension between the highly educated narrator's expectations about child-rearing and what her working-class parents have been able to deliver. The ideological tension is not random, but very much linked to the respective class positions of the family members and how these divisions have led to differential expectations about equity.

An even clearer example of class tensions can be found in Chapter 10, where a well-to-do man is able to establish a long-term extramarital relationship with a poor woman. It is likely that the root of the skeletons in that particular story was the poverty of the young woman versus the relative affluence of her benefactor. Possibly due to the dire socio-economic circumstances of her life, she lives as a mistress of the wealthy man and bears four children in the process. Both she and her children endure many social sanctions and much isolation because of this arrangement. The fact that her lover/benefactor also breaks the rigid rules of "procreation within marriage" does not affect him nearly as much as it does her. In general, prosperous men have significant freedom to break rules or come up with new ones. When class combines with gender, as in the case of the mistress in Chapter 10, women are doubly vulnerable for exploitation.

### *Perceptions of Equity*

Sociologists have been keenly invested in issues regarding equality and equity. Equality implies fair access to resources on the basis of equivalence—that is, identical treatment. Equity, on the other hand, is a concept of fairness that goes beyond treating everyone the same. Equity may involve compensating for existing inequalities by giving a little more to those who need it the most and giving a little less to those who already have a lot. In small groups and fami-

lies, these concepts have been the focus of study under “distributive justice” (Ridgeway, 1983). In distributive justice, not only the actual distribution of resources but also the perceptions of equity are crucial. In different chapters of this book of narratives, we see strong reactions to *perceived* inequalities. For example, the author of Chapter 9 feels that her parents spoiled their youngest son while expecting almost adult-like behaviour from their older children. Moreover, the father is seen to be exceptionally harsh toward his daughter's youthful ideas and ideals. This author has spent most of her adult life expecting some kind of an apology from her parents (especially from her father). But when the apology comes, the author is not only shocked but also suspicious. Even when he apologizes, the father is seen as motivated by the desire to clear his own conscience rather than by the more selfless desire to admit wrongdoing toward his daughter.

### ***Cultural Difference***

In a globalized world, there are endless opportunities for people from different cultures to interact with each other. This does not mean that culture as a factor for “othering” has lost its importance. Many judgments are still made, many opportunities are still differentially appropriated, and many misunderstandings continue to occur because of cultural differences. Cultural tensions can even occur among family members from the same racial, ethnic, religious, and class backgrounds if some members establish new roots elsewhere as emigrants or refugees. The ones who leave develop new ways of seeing the world, views that are different than those of the ones who stay within the original cultures. What is right, what is wrong, what is good, what is bad, what is a responsibility, what is an intrusion—all these may start to have different meanings on the basis of shifting versus stagnant expectations.

In this book, there are many examples of cultural clashes within the same family. In Chapter 4, the treatment of the narrator's South African grandmother by her daughters (his mother and his aunt) appears inadequate to him because he has been exposed to the health care practices of a different culture (Canada). Yet the cultural differences also seem to discourage open communication. As the author laments, North Americans who are not familiar with African family norms can hardly be expected to understand why a fully grown, highly educated man would have so much difficulty discussing issues with his own mother.

In Chapter 6, the agonizing death of a brother due to AIDS seems that much more of a disaster for the Americanized narrator who has learned

about the easily preventable nature of this disease. We also see the impact of culture in Chapter 7, where the parents who are deeply rooted in their Chinese traditions reject the sexual orientation of their son. The ensuing fragmentation, both at the personal and family levels, is severe. In fact, the author invents a different persona for himself, to accommodate his gay and straight selves.

### ***The Responsibility of the State***

As the feminist political economy theorists inform us (Armstrong & Armstrong, 1982; Mandell, 2010), what appears as a private trouble often has public implications. The most crucial factor in failing to resolve family troubles is often a failure of the state. Some states are better than others at ensuring their citizens are protected. Examples of state failures are clear in several chapters of this book. In Chapter 4, the origins of a family trouble (the young mother's inability to care for her infant son because of her poverty) are a direct result of the South African apartheid regime, under which millions of black families lived in abject poverty. Some of the grandmother's troubles in this chapter stem from the lack of easily accessible, publicly funded health care. In Chapter 6, the young author's escape from the place of his birth was precipitated by the corrupt Ugandan state, which at the time not only failed to provide safety but instigated much of the violence perpetrated against its own citizens.

However, we do not need to go to the developing world in order to find an example of state failure to protect its citizens. For example, the author of Chapter 8, who was repeatedly molested by her father, was failed by the school system and by the so-called child-protection agencies of Canada. It is clear that analyses of family conflicts cannot be totally accounted for by the micro variables; they also require macro-level theoretical tools.

### **Common Strategies**

Now that we have had an opportunity to summarize some of the sociologically relevant variables as possible contributors to conflict, it is time to turn our attention to the strategies that members of families in this book have used. As we have seen, some of these strategies did help to diffuse family tensions. Others, however, may have exacerbated the original conflict rather than help solve it. In the worst-case scenario, the strategies themselves may have been poorly chosen, ineffective, or even destructive. At this sociologically embry-

onic stage of studying intense family conflict through narratives, we make no claims about arriving at some “ultimate truth” about which strategies work and which do not. We simply want to summarize some for the intellectual curiosity of our readers.

The literature on small groups shows that people who are caught up in conflict have numerous options (strategies) available to them. For example, they may physically withdraw from the situation or they may use silence to put psychological distance between themselves and what they perceive to be the source of conflict (Folger, Poole, & Stutman, 2009). Given the fact that family relations are complex, intense, often ascribed, and expected to have longevity, physical distancing may not be an easy option for many family members. For example, one may easily stop socializing with a friend or stop interacting with a neighbour or co-worker, but it is much more difficult to sever one's complex ties with a parent, sibling, or grandparent. So, both actual and symbolic distances between family members play important roles in the continuation or escalation of family conflicts. Using silence (that is, maintaining psychological rather than physical distance) may be easier, but it may nevertheless slowly gnaw at feelings of closeness and intimacy. Moreover, silences cannot solve family conflicts; they can only place such conflicts in a closet. In the following pages, we will review numerous strategies and provide examples of how they were used by different families. Again, we urge our readers to draw their own conclusions.

### *Silences*

We discussed the use of silence, as an act, in our introduction. Whether it was self-imposed or imposed by others, what we observed in the previous chapters was a thick layer of silence surrounding the family secrets. Brothers not talking to sisters, parents ignoring their own children, in-laws silently pushing their relatives away from their intimate circles, sons keeping their sexual orientation secret for decades—all are examples of silences in the lives of the contributors to this book. In Chapter 1, we see the silent “blame” for the death of the baby girl. The unspoken blame reverberates in the family, enveloping the grandmother, the father, the sister, and even the niece. We also see an impenetrable silence surrounding the topic of child mortality in general. In that family, these silences reign across decades. Moreover, we also read about the silencing of others, whether they are friends or neighbours. However, rather than providing an opportunity to heal, the silences keep the original pain smouldering.

In Chapter 2, we read about another application of silencing, one that results in the outright rejection of the grandson. After the suicide of her daughter, the grandmother and some of her brothers refuse to talk to the grandson and bar him from attending family functions. Even after another brother (the author) tries to bring an end to this long-term silence and rejection, the opportunity to unify the family is sadly missed. In fact, a larger wall of silence is created when the grandmother stops communicating with two of her own brothers in addition to her grandson.

In Chapter 7, we read about the highly controlling behaviours of the parents, which silence any discussion of the sexual orientation of their son. The controlling behaviour of the father includes physical and psychological abuse. The young author's struggle to find his sexual identity is tantamount to an epic battle. Everyone in his immediate surroundings rejects who he is, relegating him to the status of an outcast because of his appearance and a "deviant" because of his sexual orientation. From an early age, he feels he is being forced to play dramaturgical games rather than being allowed to develop an integrated self. Silences and accusations fragment him and his interpersonal relations. This fragmentation also makes him vulnerable to exploitation by others (particularly by older men, including an older professor). It is a tribute to him that he manages to grow into an insightful, caring individual, despite the hostile silencing he experiences.

In Chapter 8, we see that the mother most likely knew about the sexual molestation of her daughter (the author), yet she chose to remain silent. Even after the daughter has told her about her victimization, her position is "It did not happen, and even if it did, why can't we just go on?" This type of conspiracy of silence is common in families where violence occurs, and it ultimately emboldens the abuser's unacceptable—criminal—behaviour (Sev'er, 1997, 2002).

In Chapter 3, especially during the early stages of their son's bipolar episodes, the parents' socially constructed stories and justifications are attempts to avoid mentioning the illness. The shame that is often attached to mental illness could be seen as one of the culprits that make families turn inward and become increasingly isolated when their loved ones exhibit behaviours that fall outside of the "normal" realm (Goffman, 1963). Unfortunately, silences may shroud troubles but rarely make them go away. In Chapter 9, numerous attempts are made to talk to the youngest brother about his wife's offensive attitudes and behaviour. The brother's response is to prefer silence over communication: he says, "Compost only starts to stink when you turn it over." To



come back to our metaphors, not only what lies inside the closets but the silences required to keep those closet doors closed seem to be common—albeit dysfunctional—strategies. Although one can find many socially desirable reasons motivating the examples of silences in these narratives, the toll on families is nevertheless steep (Perls, 1970).

In some chapters, we also see more benevolent uses of silences. For example, in Chapter 4, the “Canadianized” son goes out of his way to avoid confronting his mother, sister, and aunt on their lack of knowledge about a relatively common disease of the aged (dementia). In this silence, what is preserved is cultural relativity, and what is gained is the continuation of family relations. What is sacrificed is the possibility of a positive change. In Chapter 6, the Ugandan author does not confront the blatant racism he experiences in Kenya or the much more subtle, but just as insidious, forms of racism in the United States. His mild, non-confrontational approach toward his host country helps him when he meets a mentor/benefactor under conditions that can only be described as miraculous. In Chapter 9, the three older siblings do not openly confront their parents about the unequal treatment they received throughout their childhood. In contrast to their experiences, the youngest brother had a much more carefree childhood. These silences, especially for the author, provide the mental space in which to rethink and re-evaluate the past. She comes to realize that, perhaps, after all, her parents did the best they could with the little they had.

### *Cliques and Coalitions*

Cliques and coalitions have a very special function in small group or family interactions. For example, in Chapter 6, a total stranger walks into the life of the author and becomes a source of emotional and economic strength during a time of major transition (from Uganda, to Kenya, to the United States). Cliques and coalitions have many important functions, possibly the most important being the balancing of power for those who have no power in isolation (i.e., children in relation to parents, immigrants in a new country). However, coalitions also have the potential to set groups against groups and to radiate existing conflicts outside of their original source. Therefore, formation of cliques is an important strategy in management of conflict, but the results may not be uniform. In Chapter 7, the author who is struggling with his sexual identity finds a strong ally in his sister. At one point, the sister says, “You don’t need to defend yourself” (meaning that he has nothing to be ashamed of), thereby bestowing—perhaps for the first time in his life—

legitimacy on his gay identity. This alliance is that much more important because the rest of the family members are unrelenting in considering only heterosexuality as the norm. We also find a positive coalition in Chapter 9, where the older children take some solace in establishing close ties among themselves to counterbalance the emotional unavailability of their parents. However, in the same family, there is also a clique formed by the brothers that sometimes excludes the only sister (the author). Even when cliques work in relatively positive ways, by their nature they include some and exclude others.

On the more negative side, the grandmother in Chapter 2 justifies her total rejection of her son-in-law and grandson because a couple of her brothers and their wives go along with her jaundiced view of the son-in-law. Eventually, the grandmother enlarges her targets of rejection by including two of her brothers in the list of outsiders. Again, her exclusionary choices are reinforced because of the clique she has established for herself. The two remaining brothers (one being the author) and the grandson form their own clique, but they are not able to reverse the tide of rejection the grandmother has bestowed on them.

In Chapter 5, we again witness the dysfunctional workings of cliques. On the one side, the four brothers, and on the other side, the two sisters, seem to be fighting over how to provide the best care for their aging mother. However, the reader sometimes gets the impression that, rather than protecting the best interests of the mother, the two sides may be caught up in a struggle for power and dominance. In this family, preconceived notions about what “that sister” or “that brother” is like have also blocked possibilities for clear and candid communication. Some of these stereotypes are heavily gendered.

### *Distances*

Often, not only the level of psychological involvement but also physical distance is a factor in the development of the stories. Sometimes, family distances are artifacts of mostly benign considerations (marriage, jobs, etc.), but at other times, they are used as a strategy to deal with family conflict. For example, shortly after the traumatic death of her baby niece, the author of Chapter 1 immigrated to Canada. This move put thousands of miles between herself and her mother’s and sister’s inferno of pain. The latter two are the main characters in the sad story she narrates, but we see their lives through the eyes of the author, who lives on another continent and in a much different day-to-day reality. As readers, we can never know what would have happened if the author had stayed in Turkey. We will never know if the family fragmentation

would have slowed down or been reversed. Without her aunt's example to follow, would the niece have moved to the United States? This, too, will remain unanswered. More obvious are the deep wounds that were created by the move, because the mother and grandmother, rightly or wrongly, have seen it as an emotional betrayal. Clearly, at least two family members in Chapter 1 made a choice to use distance as a mechanism for coping with ongoing family pressures and control.

In Chapter 9, we meet another author who chose to leave her country of origin and take up residence in Canada. It is possible to see her move as a partial reaction to her father's aloofness and hurtful style of interaction. We also see the disintegration of her bond with her youngest brother. Could she have sustained a better relationship with him if she had not moved so far away? On the other hand, would her relationship with her parents have been even more troubled if she had stayed? Of course, no one can know the answer to these questions. What is clear is that, like cliques, distances can also play sometimes positive and sometimes negative roles in family affairs.

The author of Chapter 4 resides in Canada, while the rest of the members of his family in his narrative live in South Africa. The author is highly cognizant of cultural differences in his interactions with his family. Physical distance is also a factor in these interactions. For example, although he loved his grandmother as his "mother," the great distance prevents him from attending her funeral. A similar process is also true for the author of Chapter 6, whose remaining family members still live in Uganda while he resides in the United States. In this case, the author's move away from Uganda might have been a life-or-death choice, since many of his peers who stayed back lost their lives. However, the distances have had their own costs. For example, the author feels a deep emptiness as he sits beside his dying brother and realizes he knows little of his brother's now-ending life since his own departure. In all of these cases, physical distances between family members have created additional psychological distances. The shared portions of their lives have dwindled; the "lived lives" are no longer shared. These distances, at many levels, undermine a sense of family unity.

We must also keep in mind that distances can be important even when they are relatively short. For example, after being rejected by his grandmother, the grandson in Chapter 2 moves to another town. After the public conflict and humiliation he experiences at a major family reunion, he is not likely to come back to his birthplace. The sisters and brothers in Chapter 5 have, in part, apportioned the care of their mother on the basis of physical proximity. Even

in dimensions where the division of labour is not clear, those who are living closer to the mother seem to be demanding executive privileges on the basis of their proximity. Those who are living at a distance seem to feel that their ideas and concerns are challenged and ignored.

In Chapter 3, we yet again see how distances, either by choice or through necessity, figure in family lives. In this case, the author lives at a distance, and his involvement with the family is erratic. The interaction is mostly confined to times of crisis engendered by the bipolar episodes of the brother. The author admits that his distance may not have allowed him an objective or reliable perspective in the unfolding of his brother's mental illness. Maybe just the opposite is true: due to the distance, the author may have been the most reliable observer of the family conflicts.

In Chapter 7, we see the author's desire to put some distance between his heterosexual family and himself by leaving the family home and renting his own apartment. He feels that this distance is absolutely necessary for him to reconcile his gay identity and the socially constructed heterosexual identity that his family demands. Nevertheless, even such a seemingly minor move within the same city is difficult for the author, because his Chinese culture expects unmarried sons and daughters to remain in the parental home. In a way, a distance necessary to heal his segmented selves can only be accomplished by the creation of additional tensions within the family. As we mention above, his ability to form a clique with his sister helps to smooth some of the ruffled cultural expectations.

### ***Communication***

Although an old English saying declares that sticks and stones may break bones but words can never hurt, there are numerous proverbs in different cultures that liken spoken words to swords. In social analysis, we see that words can and do inflict real injury. In the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), two of the most important and protected rights are those of freedom of speech and expression. It is no wonder that oppressive, dictatorial regimes first do away with freedom of speech. However, although spoken (and written) words have the potential to hurt, they also have the ultimate power to clarify, explain, express, appeal, appease, and even heal.

A most desirable way to deal with conflict is to openly communicate, negotiate, and if need be, engage in bargaining to resolve the conflict (Folger et al., 2009; Ford, 1994). In theory, this strategy has the potential to provide a way out—to use Goffman's (1959) terms, to save face—for all parties. However,

when the emotions that surround a conflict are intense and are knowingly or unknowingly fuelled by the vested interests of other family members, open communication, let alone bargained resolutions, may be hard to reach. Especially in the West, the privatization of the family domain has worked against reaching transparency in family affairs (Eichler, 1997). More often than not, privatization has turned family strife into a closeted problem.

Effective communication requires the dovetailing of at least three components: the sender, the receiver, and the message. At the simplest level, the sender should be perceived as credible and either neutral or well meaning. The receiver is also expected to be neutral or well meaning. Moreover, the message should be clear. If not, the receiver should be able to ask for clarification, and the sender should be able and willing to provide clarification. The trouble is that, in most communications, something that sociologists call "noise" blocks clear and effective communication. The noise can be submersed in any one or all three of the components (sender, receiver, message).

Ineffective communication may create new difficulties rather than resolving existing problems (Folger et al., 2009). The language may become a weapon rather than an ointment to facilitate healing. Since this book is about family conflict, we see more examples of ineffective, rather than effective, communication in the narratives. For example, in Chapter 7, the father calls his young son a "faggot" when the little boy does not even understand the word. At the time, the boy is not clear about his own sexual orientation; however, he senses that the word is meant to degrade and hurt him. It is no wonder that this particular son's relationship with his father, within a milieu of disrespect and fear, is stunted.

In other instances, the noise in communication may be a by-product of cultural differences. In Chapter 4, the Canadianized son reacts negatively to the treatment of his grandmother in South Africa. In contrast, his mother is not able to understand what "dementia" means and how it is different from simple aging and "being difficult." In this case, the fact that the mother and son do not even share the same vocabulary about the grandmother's health is a further impediment to resolving their different views about what type of care she should receive.

The noise in communication can also be due to the interaction of gender and culture. In Chapter 1, both sisters have difficulty with how their respective husbands deal with the family tragedy (the death of the baby girl). Both perceive their husbands as non-caring and emotionally unavailable men. Both marriages end in divorce shortly after. However, the patriarchal culture they

live in (in late-1960s Turkey) is notorious for socializing men to act “strong” and be unemotional. If either of the husbands had openly revealed emotional vulnerability, it is highly likely that they would have again been seen as inadequate, as failing to act like pillars of strength. In the same chapter, the inconsolable guilt and blame that plagues the grandmother is also a product of the interaction of culture and gender. It is no wonder, for whatever happens to their children, society blames women, and women blame themselves. Both communication and perception are overlaid with cultural and gender expectations.

At times, communication breaks down and interaction is no longer possible. Sometimes, the culprit is mental or physical illness. In Chapter 6, due to the sheer exhaustion of the dying man, the author can no longer have a meaningful conversation with his brother. He has so many questions that will never be answered. Likewise, in Chapter 4, the author can no longer converse with his grandmother, whose dementia has robbed her of many of her mental capabilities. In Chapter 3, the author can only carry out a shallow level of interaction with his brother, who is suffering from bipolar disorder. Even these shallow conversations often end in mutual frustration.

In addition to the above examples of communication problems, there is yet another danger of noise in family interactions. This unique noise derives from the intimacy of family members and their absolute certainty that they each know what the others are like. Of course, no person can know another person totally, and even if this were possible, the self is not static. Yet stereotyping family members into rigid categories is common in families, and it is often the culprit in communication breakdown. Statements such as “That’s just typical of him!” or “She always acts that way!” or “What else can you expect!” create a destructive noise in family communication. In Chapter 5, we see one of the brothers classify his sisters as being dominant and wanting things their own way. When people are classified, their legitimate concerns are not likely to be heard. Ironically, the sisters in the same family also classify their brothers as domineering, stating that it’s hard to be “a female” in this family. In this example, there is noise in the communication on both sides, and effective communication is blocked by both parties.

In Chapter 7, we see that the author has classified his father as cold and abusive. Of course, the narrative contains clear examples of how this perception has developed over time. Nevertheless, once the classification is established, it is very hard to break the mould. For example, the author feels suspicious even when his father shows him warmth and affection. In Chapter 1, we see that the

author regards her mother as dependent and childlike. Although there is sympathy and affection, the level of respect the author has for her mother may have been compromised. In Chapter 9, we see that the author classifies her youngest brother as a victim of abuse. That being the case, the brother's own agency in staying in his marriage is not fully explored. Thus, in all these family narratives—as in many other family relations—there are countless pigeonholes and counter-pigeonholes used by the interactants. Although there may be a kernel of truth to each categorization (i.e., the sister may indeed be domineering, or the father may indeed be cruel, or the mother may indeed be childlike, or the brother may indeed be a victim), each categorization will also cloud the possibility of hearing a clear message about or by that person.

If messages are not clear, and if the senders and receivers of the messages do not have at least a neutral expectation from each another, there will be little chance for an effective communication to resolve differences. We see the clearest example of this total failure in communication in Chapter 8, where the author has changed her name, has moved to another province, and has basically cut off all communication with her birth family. It is interesting that her mother has made numerous attempts to rekindle the relationship, by leaving messages on the author's telephone and by making a trip to the author's home. Yet, these attempts have not engendered a better relationship, because the author views her mother as in collusion with her abuser (her father). In a way, both the message and the sender are seen as unreliable and untrustworthy, and the past wrongs of one continue to shadow the present relationships of many.

### ***Impression Management and Face-Saving***

Most family members in the narratives have probably never heard of Erving Goffman, although most of the authors who are sociologists would know Goffman's body of work (1959, 1963, 1967). Some even use Goffmanian concepts such as face-saving, stigma, backstage, and other dramaturgical mechanisms to explain some of the events in their own narratives. In Chapter 7, the author, who is pressured to behave as a heterosexual man, finds a female friend who is willing to pose as his girlfriend at family events. This way, he helps his family to save face in their highly traditional Chinese community by presenting their son as a straight man. These dramaturgical strategies also help the author to establish a life of his own, since the parents stop asking him about his whereabouts all the time. They assume—or at least can pretend they assume—their son is with his girlfriend. The relaxation of family pressures

provides the author some breathing space to explore his true sexual identity. Thus, despite the internal complexities, appearances are maintained and faces are saved.

Goffman's conceptualizations again come alive in explaining family behaviour in Chapter 3. First, the parents of a son suffering from bipolar episodes engage in impression management, and in doing so, they are able to ward off the acknowledgement of their son's illness—for a while. When the manic dimension of the disorder becomes too severe to ignore, we see the family's self-imposed isolation to protect their son from further stigmatization. Moreover, the mother undertakes many ritualized activities to avoid conflict and retain some form of normalcy in the interactions between the father and the son. Until the last stages of her life, the mother defends the family unity by personally, materially, and emotionally sacrificing for her son. Even the much more realistic father seems to refrain from openly challenging these dramaturgical performances.

### ***Confrontation and Violence***

One undesirable strategy in conflict situations is that of escalated confrontation, intimidation, or even violence. Unfortunately, this strategy is not uncommon. Often, the confrontation is gender- and/or age-based. Sociologists have long studied full-blown violence against women and children under the rubric of "domestic conflict" (Gelles, 1972; Straus, 1979). However, there is nothing "domestic" about any conflict when it involves violence (Sev'er, 2002, 2010a). Violence can be physical, psychological, sexual, or economic. In this book, although physical violence is rare, there are still a few examples. For example, as little boys growing up in very different parts of the world, two authors recall being subjected to physical violence by their parents (by a South African mother in Chapter 4, and by a Chinese father in Chapter 7). These early experiences set the stage for the manifestation of other family conflicts in the authors' adult lives. Yet, family violence is not exclusive to the developing world; it can also be found in countries where the general tolerance for violence is low. In Chapter 5, a woman in Canada strikes her sister-in-law in the face, resulting in a police report. In Chapter 9, the wife of the youngest brother threatens the author to the extent that she ends up waiting outside the home for her husband and son to rescue her; the family in this case lives in an affluent European country. In Chapter 3 (again, in Canada), a mentally ill man breaks off a large branch from a tree and physically threatens the brother who is trying to help him. So, although rare, physical violence or threats of violence



can be part and parcel of family conflicts everywhere. The authors of Chapters 4 and 6 (originally from South Africa and Uganda, respectively) also provide us a glimpse of state violence against the citizenry.

Sexual violence, especially when it takes place against an innocent child, is one of the most abhorrent forms of violence. It is estimated that about one in four girls and about one in eight boys are sexually molested, often by someone they know well, before they reach the age of 16. Moreover, sexual violence against children is one of the most under-reported forms of family violence. Child victims are often too afraid to complain, and their adult custodians and/or witnesses are too eager to question the child rather than the perpetrator. In Chapter 8, Si Transken courageously shatters the social silences surrounding this loathsome crime.

Although the issue is contentious, the most common form of family violence is psychological. This type of violence often occurs through acts of domination, degradation, subjugation, and marginalization (Dobash & Dobash, 1979). Ignoring, belittling, embarrassing, and using prolonged silences as a psychological weapon are destructive and hurtful tactics that prolong conflict (Sev'er, 2002, 2010b). In the family narratives of this book, psychological violence is the most common and the most destructive strategy used by many family members. In Chapter 2, the grandmother totally rejects the son-in-law after her daughter commits suicide. She accuses the son-in-law of murdering his wife, despite numerous hospital and police reports that refute the accusation. In Chapter 4, as a little boy, the author is left with his grandmother for many years, then is plucked out of his relatively happy rural life by an emotionally remote set of biological parents. His feelings of uprootedness, rejection, and loss are never taken into account or properly addressed. His acting up against what he sees as abandonment brings him no consolation, but only leads to additional punishment.

In Chapter 7, calling the little boy appalling and disparaging names, rejecting his friends, and pressuring him about his emerging sexual orientation lead to a severe fragmentation of the self. The fragmentation is so intense that the young man actually feels the need to create an alternate identity for himself, with a different first and last name. In a way, he can only be true to himself as a gay man within this alternate identity. In Chapter 5, despite the goodwill and love they share towards their aging mother, brothers and sisters are caught up in their own power battles. They do not seem to be aware of the psychological angst they may be causing their mother—or each other—through psychological games. In Chapter 1, the bereaved mother and the

grandmother bestow infinite love and care on the daughter that follows the one who died as an infant. Yet, there seems to be a psychological price for this endless love: there are expectations of proximity and loyalty. When the daughter moves away and settles in the United States, both the mother and the grandmother feel anger and betrayal.

### ***Belief Systems***

Critical sociology's approach to religion is full of contestation. As Marx once forcefully stated, "Religion ... is the opium of the people" (Marx, 1978). Yet, starting with Durkheim (1912/1976), functionalists have been keenly aware of the positive impact of religion in providing solidarity among believers. In Durkheim, solidarity is seen as a panacea for many social ills (divorce, suicide, crime, alienation, etc.). In his *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904/1958), Weber also acknowledges the importance of belief systems. In the latter, the work ethic and frugality of Protestants are seen as absolutely important prerequisites for the accumulation of capital and the eventual triumph of capitalism. So, social scholars in general, and sociologists in particular, have a long tradition of acknowledging the power of religion, differing only in their opinions as to how that power will affect people. Marx saw religion as a device designed to subjugate the disgruntled masses, whereas both Weber and Durkheim saw religion as a force for collective unity, achievement, and order.

In some of the narratives in this book, we see a reflection of this sociological polarity on religion. On the negative side, we see a working-class mother's inability to understand, accept, and move beyond her daughter's suicide as the result of her very orthodox religious beliefs (Chapter 2). The religion, in that narrative, is Orthodox Catholicism. The believers are socialized into interpreting suicide as a major sin. In that narrative, the mother's intense love for her daughter, and her intense and unquestioning belief in the religious teachings she thought the two of them shared, did not permit her to accept her daughter's suicide. Instead, she chose to accuse, blame, and reject everything and everyone (including her brother, son-in-law, and grandson). In this mother's inability to question the religious teachings she was socialized in, we find reasons for Marx's skepticism about the role of religion.

However, two other narratives attest to either a dual role or a much more constructive role that belief systems can play in family interactions. In Chapter 3, the brother who suffers from a serious bipolar disorder finds an accepting religious community for himself (in this case, Orthodox Judaism). This

community, in the Durkheimian sense, seems to protect the brother from experiencing further bipolar episodes by providing a strong sense of support and solidarity in his life. On the less positive side, his extreme form of religiosity may heap further pressures upon his relationships with his brother and father, who are much more secular in their approach to religion. His rigid rules also inconvenience his mother, who has to prepare his food separately and cover parts of the kitchen with aluminum foil to keep his food uncontaminated. His ultra-orthodox community may also create additional pressures by preaching the necessity of marriage and procreation. Despite much effort and expenditure, the brother's religiously fuelled aspiration for marriage has remained unattainable, due at least in part to the condition of his mental health.

In Chapter 6, we see the purest, and the most positive, workings of a deep-rooted spirituality in the face of conflict. In an incident that can only be seen as miraculous, and after much heartache as a refugee, the author finds a friend and mentor, internal peace, hope, and economic stability—all at the same time. In turn, he learns to bring hope and help to others who are in dire need in his country of birth, Uganda. Even his approach to the wrenching death of his brother appears to be one of internal acceptance and peace. Through this extraordinarily moving story, maybe others will be inspired to find new ways of reducing the impact of their family struggles on their lives and sustaining hope for better outcomes in the midst of adversity.

Conflicts in the family are not unique. What is unusual, and commendable, is the mammoth courage that it has taken for each of the 10 authors in this collection to visit publicly the secrets and skeletons in their family closets. As the editors, we are deeply grateful for their decision to allow all of our readers a glimpse of their family strife. At this point, we no longer want to speak for family skeletons, since they have already spoken so candidly and so eloquently for themselves. It is up to our readers to pick and choose what makes sense for them and what does not, what to keep from these chapters and what to discard. It is up to our readers to decide whether these meaningful visits to other people's closets will help them to garner the courage to revisit some of their own family skeletons, and put some to rest.

## References

- Armstrong, P., & Armstoring, H. (1982). *The double ghetto*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart.
- Dobash, R. E., & Dobash, R. P. (1979). *Violence against wives: A case against patriarchy*. New York: Routledge.
- Durkheim, E. (1976). *The elementary forms of the religious life*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press. (Original work published 1912).
- Eichler, M. (1997). *Family shifts*. Toronto: Oxford.
- Folger, J. P., Poole, M. S., & Stutman, R. K. (2009). *Working through conflict*. Boston: Oxford.
- Ford, R. (1994). Conflict and bargaining. In M. Foschi & E. J. Lawler (Eds.), *Group processes: Sociological analysis* (pp. 231–256). Chicago: Nelson Hall.
- Gelles, R. (1972). *The violent home: A study of physical aggression between husbands and wives*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. New York: Doubleday.
- Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on management of spoiled identity*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Goffman, E. (1967). *Interaction ritual: Essays on face-to-face behavior*. New York: Aldine.
- Mandell, N. (2010). *Feminist issues* (5th ed.). Toronto: Pearson.
- Marx, K. (1978). In R. C. Tucker (Ed.), *The Marx–Engels Reader*. New York: Norton.
- Perls, F. S. (1970). *Gestalt therapy verbatim*. Moab, UT: Bantam.
- Ridgeway, C. L. (1983). *The dynamics of small groups*. New York: St. Martin's.
- Sev'er, A. (1997). Current feminist debates about woman abuse: Some policy implications. ZIF: Sonderbulletin [Special issue], 121–137. Berlin: Humboldt University Press.
- Sev'er, A. (2002). *Fleeing the house of horrors: Women who have left their abusive partners*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Sev'er, A. (2010a). All in the family: Violence against women, children and the aged. In D. Cheal (Ed.), *Canadian families today* (2nd ed.). Toronto: Oxford.
- Sev'er, A. (2010b). Marriage go-around: Divorce and re-marriage in Canada. In N. Mandell & A. Duffy (Eds.), *Canadian families: Diversity, conflict, and change* (4th ed.). Toronto: Nelson.
- Straus, M. (1979). Measuring intrafamily conflict and violence: The conflict tactics scale. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 41, 75–88.
- Weber, M. 1958. The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism (T. Parsons, Trans.) New York: Scribner. (Original work published 1904).