

Twin Studies in Social Science: Review

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“There are two things in life for which we are never prepared: twins.”
(Josh Billings)

It is always a pleasure to see a research group formed around an interesting and current scientific issue, and particularly exciting when the members of this group represent a single discipline, but come from several institutions and belong to different generations. This is also the case with the book entitled *Twin Studies in Social Science* (edited by András Pári, Zsófia Drjenovszky, Rita Hegedűs, and Ágnes Engler). The common discipline in this case is social sciences – and worth highlighting because of the subject matter of the book - while twin research is dominated by biomedical analyses, this volume, published in 2023, approaches twins as social phenomenon from the perspective of sociology. Although some of the editors and authors are experienced researchers, young researchers have also been given the opportunity to present their findings.

The book includes nine studies, the first of which (Drjenovszky & Hegedűs 2023) serves as the unofficial foreword to the book, as it introduces the topic, the research team and briefly outlines each chapter. Already here a motif emerges that runs through all the studies in the book: the problem of stereotyping, prejudice, and social expectations that twins must face starting in childhood.

The second study (Forrási 2023) explores the competition between twin siblings and the resulting conflicts. The author points out that the rivalry between twins starts in the womb in a biological sense, and after birth, the constant comparison can reinforce their conflict later in a

social sense. Twelve semi-structured individual interviews were conducted by the author with six twin pairs aged 18-23 at the time of the interview. An important finding was that of the twins who responded, those who were not so similar in appearance were less compared by their parents, teachers and friends, and their performance was not compared with each other, so these twins were also more likely to spend time together in the same class share hobbies and be in the same group of friends. The twins who are often compared with each other by their peers, in turn, become more competitive and their relationships and self-image deteriorate.

The third study focuses on the socialisation process of twins, and the social expectations placed on them (Fülöp 2023). Through eleven interviews with individual twins, the author explores the socialising effects of family and school, and the stereotypes surrounding twins. Rivalry is also discussed, along with the development of an independent identity and the experience of being twins. Parenting strategies are revealed where parents, for practical reasons, consider the twins as one unit at a young age, therefore the formation of individuality is postponed until the high school years. The research shows that due to their close relationship, the twins are each other's "referent powers", whose influence on them is much stronger than that of similar relationship types like classmates, or friends.

The next study is a literature review that (Pári 2023) could perhaps have been placed earlier

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in the book as the author systematises the most important questions related to twins and previous twin research with a demographic and population focus. The author points out the importance of twin registries, which are more than "simple" birth statistics, as they also contain specific data such as the type of twin relationship (dizygotic/monozygotic), medical information, and different types of sensitive demographic data. The study also emphasises the background of twin births and the role of assisted reproduction techniques such as IVF in the context of the fact that the average age at childbirth is increasing.

The fifth study deals with the issue of stereotypes and adaptation to the (twin) roles as displayed by others in the middle school age group (Tóth 2023). The author could have written more about the concept of social roles in general, but the theoretical part on twins is detailed. The empirical analysis comprises six paired interviews supplemented by sociometry. The interviews conducted with a large age difference in the volume are also interesting, but the strength of this analysis lies in the fact that the interviewees are the same age, and in the same life situation. One of the most interesting findings is that all twins fitted into the class community as a pair (rather than separate individuals), that they had friends in common and played a central role in the class community.

The study by Mór (2023) approaches the topic from the perspective of role sharing between twins. The eight interviewees belong to two generations (those in their early twenties vs over forty-five), which is an interesting approach and offers the possibility of comparison. One of the key findings of the analysis is that, surprisingly, the older generation was less aware of stereotypes and role expectations in relation to twins and could express their individuality more easily than younger generations. Analysis of the background factors was not possible due to

the small number of respondents, perhaps the study remains valuable without this.

The next study (Pataki 2023) analysed social stereotypes about twins using a mixed methods approach. On the one hand, the author conducted quantitative secondary analysis of a survey database of parents of twins, and on the other hand, she conducted interviews within a very interesting subculture with people who are not twins themselves, but who role-play twins. An interesting part of the survey analysis is the question of naming, i.e. how important it is for parents to give their twin children a matching first name. The merit of the qualitative research is that it explored the extent to which respondents had stereotypical thoughts about twins when constructing their role-play character. The comparison with the background variables was not really successful in this study either. Unfortunately, other parts of the role-player interviews were not included.

At first glance, the next chapter resembles "classical" medical twin research, as it deals with the twins' health behaviour, including their smoking and alcohol consumption habits, but at the same time, the approach remains social scientific (Pári & Palagyi 2023). The authors used the data of 101 interviewed twins from the 2021 large sample database of Hungarostudy. Due to the sociological approach, the usual explanatory variables emerge, such as gender, highest level of education, marital status, various satisfaction indicators (with their occupation, life in general, their financial situation, and finally with their jobs), as well as the presence of physical pain, but the most exciting comparisons are based on the type of twin relationship (monozygotic/dizygotic). Unfortunately, in contrast to previous findings, no significant association was found between zygosity and smoking habits, and this was also true for alcohol consumption habits. Two interesting results should be emphasised: Firstly, according to the researchers, twins

who are less satisfied with their lives consume alcohol more frequently, and secondly, twins who do not experience physical pain consume alcohol more frequently, also, male twins smoke more and drink more alcohol than female twins.

The authors of the last study turn again to the parents of the twins and examine how the parents see their children as twins, and whether (and if so, which) stereotypes and expectations can be seen in these characterisations (Hegedűs & Drjenovszky 2023). Their analysis was based on an online survey completed by 135 parents. In this study, an open question of this questionnaire was analysed, in which parents were asked to describe their twins together. The results show that the respondents do not have stereotypical ideas about their twin children, and more educated parents characterise their children in a slightly more nuanced way. Another interesting addition is that those parents who tried to choose a matching first name when naming them are more inclined to see stereotypical twin characteristics in their children.

Overall, the great merit of the book is that it shines spotlight cast on the topic of twins that has only been researched in a narrow circle in Hungary, and does it from a social scientific perspective, as opposed to the usual medical-biological one. The studies in the volume are professional and well-written, even young researchers use the technical terms accurately, yet the texts are readable and easy to follow, which is also helped by the spectacular and polished editing. This is important because the book may be of interest not only to readers interested in the social sciences but to a wider range of audience. This book is highly recommended not only to researchers dealing with twins, but also to twins themselves, their parents, other family members, their teachers, and to all those who do not (yet) have a twin acquaintance, but you can learn a lot about problems that affect not only twins – such as stereotypes, oppressive social

expectations, or prejudices – but about the general nature of these problems. Unfortunately, the weakness of the book can also be linked to these phenomena. As mentioned earlier, the concepts of stereotype and social expectation accompany the studies in this volume, but because of this it is at times somewhat repetitive. This is the case even if each study has a slightly different angle, methodology, and focus. The other problematic area is the methodology and the fact that although there are more and more twins in society, there are still few of them and they are difficult to reach. Conducting interviews is a great way to better understand the impact of stereotypes, prejudices, and social pressures on the lives of twins. However, perhaps it would have been useful to interview many more people for the studies, so that the differences between different types of twins or the demographic differences could also be analysed, or else a much more homogeneous sample should have been taken in a study (for example, only identical twins who are high school students or only fraternal twins who are opposite-sex and middle-aged). Of course, the difficult access to the subjects makes it difficult to take specific samples. In any case, it is a cause for optimism that this is a living, breathing, active research group (a research group in which several young people are starting their scientific careers), because the authors have indicated in several studies that the results presented here are only partial results, or they described their further research plans. As a reviewer, I can only support and encourage further research, and I trust that the twin of this volume will be on the shelves soon.

András Pári – Zsófia Drjenovszky – Rita Hegedűs – Ágnes Engler (Eds) (2023). *Twin Studies in Social Science. A selection of works by the students and researchers of the Twin Research Workshop*. Budapest: Mária Kopp Institute for Demography and Families (KINCS). ISBN 978-615-6447-13-5