Worlds of Sleep

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WORLDS OF SLEEP IS A BOOK THAT ORIGINATED FROM THE WORKSHOP, "NEW DIRECTIONS IN THE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL STUDY OF SLEEP," HELD IN VIENNA during June 2007. The editors, Brunt and Steger, comment in the introduction on how the workshop and subsequent book reflect the very recent attention towards sleep in the humanities and social sciences that parallel both the growing public interest in sleep and also the "medicalising" of sleep. Although the book is acknowledged not to be a comprehensive overview of the new field of what the editors term "dormatology," they state their belief that the book includes "exciting chapters, which offer fresh new insights into a rapidly growing field." I share this positive assessment of the book. The chapter by B. Steger, "'Early to rise': making the Japanese healthy, wealthy, wise, virtuous, and beautiful" is notable for its scholarship, insights, and fascinating content. The chapter by L. Brunt, "*Sote hue log*: In and out of sleep in India" contains provocative observations with accompanying photographs of public sleep in India. And the chapter by G. Klug, "Dangerous doze: sleep and vulnerability in medieval German literature" allows us to consider sleep in the context of the prevailing socio-religious influences on the individual during the Middle Ages. Sleep is also noted to have a universal presence in medieval German literature.

The introduction by Brunt and Steger is wide-ranging and probing, as it describes the 10 chapters in the book, each written by separate authors, and also discusses various other important issues in the new field of the sociology of sleep. For example, in Spain and Japan, sleep has been subjected to direct government control, in regards to the abolition of the siesta for government workers in Spain, and the strong encouragement of early wake-up times in Japan sponsored by various government-approved social groups and other interventions. Moreover, early-morning awakenings for prayer have been part of the daily routine of most of the world's major religions. A major theme in the book concerns vulnerability and safety during sleep, not just in regards to the physical safety of the sleeper, but also in regards to "the threat sleep poses to the fulfillment of social obligations." In the examples presented, the perceived greater good of society outweighs what is good for the health of the individual,

with disregard of individual eveningness-morningness tendencies and shift work schedules.

In medieval times, the human soul was considered to be extremely vulnerable during sleep, and sleep always carried the potential for being a "sinful kind of sluggishness. Especially daytime sleep was likely to bereave people of their chance for salvation" (pg 37). Vulnerability was considered to be an inherent part of sleep, spanning the physical, psychological, spiritual and social dimensions.

Seven of the 10 chapters encompass the sociology of sleep, two on the historical aspects of sleep, and one focuses on an interpersonal aspect of sleep, viz. pair-sleep. The chapters on the sociology of sleep encompass the "early to rise" movement in Japan; refugee camp sleep in Thailand; bedtime issues related to children and families in urban middle classes across the world; public and semi-public sleep in India; the sleep of Italian women as influenced by their caregiving roles; the conflicting sleep demands of parents and adolescents in United Kingdom households; and the sociology of sleep furniture in Dutch bedrooms. The level of scientific rigor varies across chapters. The chapter on public and semi-public sleep in India, for example, is acknowledged to be an observational report rather than a systematic study. Nevertheless, the observations are provocative: "What strikes me most about Indian sleep...is the absence of a clear boundary between sleeping and waking...People fall in and out of sleep just like they fall in and out of conversation" (pg 156). Also, "in Indian cities one sees people asleep almost everywhere in the public domain: pavements, seaside, walls, parking lots, stairs, squares, parks, benches, cars, bikes" (pg 167).

The book offers an interesting though small sampling of an evolving field that has led to an awareness that sleep is not only dynamic in terms of physiological processes, but also in terms of social processes, especially in households with children. Furthermore, "the complexity of everyday household living arrangements influences how and when we sleep, and even where we sleep" (pg. 107). The contemporary use of mobile phones, texting friends, and otherwise maintaining social contacts at night in the bedroom and the impact on sleep is addressed in this book.

This book could be read in series with the book, *At Day's Close: Night in Times Past*,¹ which describes the norm of fragmented (or "segmented") sleep in Europe during pre-industrial times that can be contrasted with our modern-day norm of consolidated nocturnal sleep in the industrialized Western world.

A sleep clinician who reads this book could apply the findings and principles of the sociology of sleep to the clinical set-

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ting, beginning with the history-taking process. An expanded context for assessing sleep complaints in adults and children will thereby become available to the clinician. This is a refreshing and informative book for sleep clinicians to read, as we are forced to think “outside the box” of our usual clinical conceptualizations and formulations of therapeutic strategies for sleep problems. Also, since transcontinental migrations are becoming more commonplace, the sleep-related sociocultural and religious contexts and attitudes towards sleep in the countries of origin for our immigrant patients need to be better appreciated in the clinical setting: “Sleeping customs seem to be consonant with major interpersonal and emotional patterns of family life

in a culture” (pg 175). Co-sleeping is an important example in this regard. In conclusion, this book covers topics and raises issues that merit careful consideration for anyone interested in sleep and its social and clinical ramifications.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The author has indicated no financial conflicts of interest.

REFERENCES

1. Ekind AR. *At day's close: night in times past*. WW Norton, 2005.