Siblings, Aggression, and Sexuality: Adding the Lateral

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Abstract

This article focuses on the importance of sibling relations in the development of script and in the evolution of erotic and sexual sensibilities. Freud's original view on the early development of sexuality and aggression was focused on the vertical, in particular, on the dynamics of the father-son relationship as highlighted by the Oedipus complex. It took almost a century to raise awareness about the importance of the lateral, that is, sibling dynamics. In family therapy and in psychoanalysis, this is increasingly discussed. Script theory can adapt the sibling dimension conceptually, but a change in attitude is needed to view sibling dynamics as an important force for differentiation in developing identity. This differentiation is not from parents, but from siblings, although dynamics with parents continue to play a central role.

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A Memory

I grew up as the fifth child in a family of nine, a busy and dynamic bunch. My favorite sister was one year older than me. We were blessed with a large garden and a summerhouse as well as space in the parks and the school gardens in our neighborhood. The long days of summer, with the endless light and the earthy smell of grass and soil, are still with me. We spent many hours and days among ourselves and with friends, boys and girls mixed, in all sorts of play combinations. We were young, not even teenagers. I can barely recall the presence of parents; they popped up only for tea breaks or for the inevitable ending of the day at bedtime.

Lemonade and cake, lying on the grass, with my head on my sister's shoulder, her head on my shoulder, our young skin sometimes touching cheek to cheek. Talking while feeling her voice resonating in my chest, the tickling of her hair against my sensitive skin. My cheeks as

erogenous zones, filling me with warmth and erotic sensations. It was a bit disturbing, but enjoyable through its gentle, beautiful, and exciting nature. We used to giggle about the tickling, but we did not talk about the experience until later in life. It was my earliest conscious experience of sexuality and eroticism. The sensation was such a powerful force that I sometimes think that I have not experienced that later in life in such unspoiled intensity.

Freud and the Oedipal

In the context of Vienna a century ago, Freud (1916/1973) wrote:

> To suppose that children have no sexual life—sexual excitations and needs and a kind of satisfaction—but suddenly acquire it between the ages of twelve and fourteen, would . . . be as improbable and indeed senseless, biologically as to suppose that they brought no genitals with them into the world and only grew up at the time of puberty. (p. 353)

Freud was a great advocate for the case of children having sexual feelings and sensations of satisfaction. He introduced the concept of libido as an analogy to hunger. He distinguished between sexual feelings themselves, their function in reproduction, and the perversities of adults in their sexual lives. Freud did acknowledge the importance of sibling relationships but had a certain reluctance to study how early sibling relationships affect later relationships. This reluctance was, no doubt, related to his own complex family background (see Coles, 2003) and, as a result, sibling relationships have barely been studied.

In the oedipal conflict, more or less the center of Freud's development of the superego, the young boy's triangular relationship with his parents comes to an end in a painful separation. The outcome of the oedipal conflict is that sexual and aggressive feelings are repressed and

transformed into more socially acceptable forms, such as competition, guilt, and other defensive reactions. In the most classic readings of this conflict in psychoanalysis, guilt replaces the fear of the father. And in that process, the omnipotent father and the archaic primitive mother are lost as a sort of collateral damage.

With his emphasis on the oedipal, Freud became a bit lost in boys and fathers, and there is now some literature on the missing equivalent for girls (Benjamin, 1988; Chodorow, 1978; Jung, 1970; Schwarz, 1999). Freud also got lost in the vertical orientation between child and parent, as did many analysts after him. He considered cooperative and loving feelings between siblings to be a defensive mechanism, as deflections from the competitive feelings experienced for one's parents' love and as a displacement from the oedipal conflict. In a wider context, Freud, psychoanalysis, and modern psychology are, of course, heavily biased by a culture that values the individual over the collective. Collectivistic cultures and societies—with their greater emphasis on extended family, community, and tribal loyalties—form 75% of the world's population (Hofstede, 1991). With regard to sibling dynamics, insights from these societies are only slowly being integrated into our understanding of sexual development.

Individual psychoanalysis, with its emphasis on child/parent therapy, and group analysis, with its emphasis on sibling therapy, have become polarities expressing the different values placed on each (van Beekum, 2008). Ironically, Melanie Klein supposedly advised Wilfried Bion "to abandon his concern with group analysis, as it was leading him away from psychoanalysis" (Klein as cited in Mitchell, 2003 p. 119). In more colloquial language, the father-kids issues are more important than the kids-among-themselves issues.

The primacy of the oedipal is even visible in the landmark born-to-rebel studies on birth order and family dynamics by Sulloway (1997). He sees families as ecosystems and focuses on the children competing for their parents' attention, not for their mutual differentiation and identity. After going through thousands of biographies in science, politics, and religion, Sulloway makes the case that firstborn children are more likely to identify with authority, whereas younger siblings are predisposed to rise against it.

Beyond the Oedipal

The role and importance of siblings and sibling relationships has evolved in the literature in the past 25 years (Lamb & Sutton-Smith, 1982, Solnit, 1983). Albert Solnit, who died in 2002, was one of the first to challenge the centrality of Freud's Oedipus complex in relation to siblings in the famous Yale volumes on the *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*. He argued that the effect of siblings on emotional development is the result of, and should be conceptualized as, a developmental sequence in its own right. These are not mere second editions of the original oedipal complex but relationships creating their own moments of ego developments and adaptations of a nature and quality quite different from those promoted by parental oedipal conflict.

Sexuality and aggression, as biological forces, emerge in a relational context and are conditioned by the specific context of attachment. Traditionally, in psychoanalysis, the arrival of a younger child has been viewed as traumatic to an older sibling. This emphasis on the impact of the younger on the older mirrors the attention in psychoanalysis on the child and the parent (father/mother). Most reports regarding siblings, especially psychoanalytic clinical studies, have placed the main emphasis on sibling rivalry and on the burden on a first child when a second child enters the family. The birth of a sibling increases the aggressive drive and/or the envy of an older child. This is especially true for the firstborn, who felt he or she was mother's favorite and consequently felt shattered when the next sibling came along (Winnicott, 1931/1996).

A neglected view is that a second or third (and so on) child coming into a family is born into a more complex mixture of already existing multiangular relationships in which she or he has to find his or her own place. There is already an alive pattern and network of relationships, including love and hate, preferred children, power, and physical differences. The space that was still open for a firstborn is no longer available for a second born, let alone a fifth born, not to mention a ninth born. Each new

sibling enters a minefield in which she or he has to survive and find his or her own identity.

There seems to be enough attention in the literature on the envy of the firstborn when he or she observes the rival new baby taking the breast that was once exclusively his or hers. But what happens to this new baby, who is on the receiving end of this envy? While enjoying the breast and the mother object with it, she or he will surely pick up on the rage and envy around and will feel anxious. The child is likely to store these reactions somatically, reactions that are toward the other sibling, not the mother. The sibling is another object in the child's life. These types of early sibling experiences form templates for relationships—carried from infancy through childhood and adolescence into adulthood—that potentially turn out to be painful, blissful, eroticized, nurturing, disappointing, and/or shocking. The effect of this reaches into adult life. Ogden (1989) argued that "there is for the individual no reason to believe or expect that the relationships he is about to enter now [as an adult], will be any different [from previous ones]" (p. 181). This is all about script: Relational responses, including erotic and aggressive responses, should be understood in the context of the individual's early childhood experiences, which have taught the child how to be and behave in early object relations.

Siblings and Script

Although Berne's (1972) concept of script implicitly allows for recognition of the influence of siblings, the direction of his thinking was primarily on the parent-child unit and parental messages. The script apparatus (p. 110) points to the parents, and sometimes to grandparents, extended family, and the wider cultural context. When siblings do show up in early transactional analysis literature, it is in their roles in loco parentis or as significant other parent figures (James, 1998) or in one breath as parents or older siblings (Goulding & Goulding, 1976), as if they are the same. Siblings are barely mentioned in Berne's work, not even in his chapters on sex education in *Sex and Human Loving* (Berne, 1970).

Berne (1963) did consider the impact of siblings and nonparent figures on personality and social relations in his material on group imagoes. Massey, who has published regularly on systemic family dynamics, including siblings, has written with his colleagues that "although [Berne] described scripts and group imagoes as going through similar adjustments and noted their impact on each other, he did not elaborate on these ideas in his later writings or in discussing script matrices" (Massey, Comey, & Lust, 1988, pp. 325-326). Peer and sibling influences as dynamics in their own right were off the radar in Berne's days, which can, in part, be understood in relation to his own youth, in which Eric and his sister Clare did not often mingle with other children. He described himself as being often on his own and was perceived by others as lonely (Jorgensen & Jorgensen, 1984).

Later, as the founder of transactional analysis, Berne was still, despite his rebellion, a child of the psychoanalytic training and thinking of his time. He was, in fact, the psychoanalyst that he did not want to be, caught in a split between separating himself from psychoanalysis and still seeking links and relations with it (and approval, I believe). Indicative of this is Berne's (1972) footnote when elaborating on injunctions:

> The fairy godmother and witch-mother, "electrode-like" introjects, derived from transactions and introspective observations, will be easily recognized as allied to the good and bad introjected objects of Melanie Klein, postulated on psychoanalytic grounds and to the elaborations of her concepts by Fairbairn. In fact, Fairbairn is one of the best heuristic bridges between transactional analysis and psychoanalysis. (p. 134)

I find this of interest because Klein and Fairbairn can be linked with the object relations school, which moved away from analytic drive theory and from being motivated by pleasure to seeking relationships. For Fairbairn and also Winnicott, a desired relationship between self and other has its basis in the child developing a sense of self by playing alone in the presence of an unobtrusive mother. When the mother is either too much or unavailable, the child is forced to think about the mother and is thus not

able to remember himself. "The balance suggested by Winnicott is analogous to the balance between exploration and contact maintenance within the attachment paradigm" (Fonagy, 2001, p. 99). This is an accurate picture for a single child, but what happens to that balance between exploration and maintaining contact when siblings are around who interfere by claiming their time and territory or when the child is engaging with numerous other children in day care? The unobtrusive mother is replaced with many very obtrusive siblings, who may be willing to kill to get their needs met. Power struggles are foreground, with messages attached not from parents, but from siblings.

Adding the Lateral

Mitchell (2003), Coles (2003, 2006), and Sanders (2004) argue that sexuality and aggression are in our lives as part of the whole family, not just the part that is directed at the parents but also in sibling dynamics. Coles argues that sibling relationships are a long-neglected subject in psychoanalytic thinking. Young (2007) even talks about "the forgotten siblings" (p. 21).The consequence of Freud's obsession with the oedipal was that sibling relationships have languished in virtual oblivion (Coles, 2006). Mitchell (2003) makes a case for changing the paradigm in psychoanalysis "from near exclusive dominance of vertical comprehension to the interaction of the horizontal and the vertical in our social and psychological understanding" (p. 1). We are born not just to parents, but, in most cases, also to siblings. And when we extend these dynamics into the lateral, this does not stop at envy, hate, and competition among siblings; it includes love and eroticism as well.

This goes beyond the level of the individual. Emotional development, sexuality, aggression, and erotic transference are played out in families, teams, and even organizations (van Beekum, 2008). Understanding these dynamics requires thinking about lateral relationships. According to Mitchell (2003), because classical psychoanalysis keeps the onus on the parental (father/mother) relationship, investigation of transference is usually focused primarily on the early child-parent relationship. However, transference occurring between members of a team

or colleagues at work is often based in early sibling relationships.

The lateral dimension is part of a distinct developmental challenge: to find one's unique place in a world of similar others. Like the challenge that builds the vertical parent-child dimension, the lateral challenge is also filled with love, conflict, and ambivalence. The lateral pushes for resolution through a process of differentiation. For example, in my teen years, I developed the wish to study medicine, but once my oldest sister took that space, I felt I needed to choose a different field. In my family of nine siblings, each of the children had to find and create a space of difference from the other eight. This translated into the outcome that all nine of us have chosen different professional paths. Our parents did not impose this; it was a sibling dynamic that would not allow us to compete in the same field. These sorts of script influences are as unique as any other and do not translate from one family (or one set of siblings) to another. As a student of social science (that field was still free), I was surprised to find families of friends in which all the siblings studied the same subject and ended up in the same profession. They worked out their need for differentiation in other areas, such as their political views or choice of partners.

Other Contributions

There have been others who have offered important reflections on the lifelong impact of erotic, aggressive, and sensual/sexual relationships among siblings. In his biological, Darwinian approach to personality, Sulloway (2001) describes the different strategies siblings employ in their relationships.

> Because firstborns are bigger than their siblings, they are more likely to employ intimidation and physical aggression; and in general they are more inclined to boss and dominate their brothers and sisters. Laterborns tend to use low-power strategies, such as whining, pleading, humor, social intelligence, offers of reciprocal altruism, and, whenever expedient, appealing to parents for help. Two or more laterborns may also join forces against the firstborn, or laterborns may team up with their elder

siblings in an effort to dominate their jun-iors. (p. 65)

Sociology and social psychology make valu-able contributions in this area. Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory focuses on the com-parisons siblings make with others with whom they have no direct social interaction, such as groups that are out there but influence their sense of self in relationships. This moves into the fields of idealization and rejection of com-parable others in fashion, sexual behavior, and music. Modern television feeds this with gusto: *Project Runway, Gossip Girl,* the *Idol* programs, *Survivor,* and *Next Top Model* are follow-ups for the increasingly disgraced Big Brother houses.

Leventhal (1970) argues that siblings become opposite to prevent comparison, and Schachter (1982) confirms this with a rivalry-defense hypothesis that includes the idea that siblings develop deidentification as a defense against sibling rivalry. Rivalry seems to consist on a con-tinuum with two basis components: "competi-tion, looking outward to winning a desired ob-ject or goal . . . and comparison, looking inward toward subjective satisfaction, ego-enhancement or self esteem" (p. 132). The process of differ-entiation and identification takes place within that continuum.

Vivona (2007) offers three examples to illus-trate the operation of sibling differentiation and its costs, particularly in terms of constricted identity and transformed relationships with sib-lings and peers.

It seems that in an unconscious process of seeking identity, a child amplifies differences with siblings and minimizes similarities. Differ-entiation from, identifying with, submission to, fusion with, and cutting off from siblings can all serve to mellow interpersonal rivalry and ease intersibling conflict.

Parents are mainly important in the way they are able to contain this process, one in which they do not take part. The parental role of contain-ment includes relational and emotional presence through discussion and dialogue, boundary test-ing, humor, giving in, letting go, and holding on to children lovingly. When such containment is missing, siblings will do what they need to do anyway, although in a less safe environment.

The Lateral and the Vertical

Clearly, parents are not the only influences on a child's development. Although they set the tone for the manner in which all other influen-ces are navigated, the impact of siblings is not to be ignored.

To understand sibling relationships is to ap-preciate their determining psychic and social impact and their unique contributions to mak-ing sense of loyalties and betrayals, intense sen-sual and sexual feelings, and the control of vio-lent impulses. Mitchell (2003) highlights the constant dynamic and reciprocal relationship between vertical and lateral relationships and how we should not exclude one or the other but rather focus at the points where these meet. Lateral relationships are crucial in the structur-ing of a person's growing awareness of his or her similarities and differences with others, most notably in the areas of gender and sexual differences. These differences are structured along both lateral (gender and sexuality) and vertical (reproduction) lines, coming together most momentously in adolescence when fertili-ty becomes an actuality. When the balance is right and the unobtrusive mother can be experi-enced by the child as a whole object and as a container for his or her own learning process, then sibling relationships with their own dy-namics of fear, envy, rage, and love can come into the picture (Harley, 2006).

From a transactional analysis perspective, it seems obvious to add sibling relationships and sibling influences to our understanding of script development and script dynamics. But it also highlights the choices we make as psychothera-pists in how we work. Individual psychothera-py unavoidably accents the vertical, the trans-ferences and dynamics in the room representing parental influences and relationships. We may thus, unintentionally, reinforce the dominance of the vertical over the lateral. Group therapy, on the other hand, allows many more sibling themes to emerge.

The dominant view of scripts today, which suggests that they derive primarily from parent-child dynamics, needs reconsideration. Sum-mers and Tudor (2000) have elaborated on Cor-nell's (1988) critical review of life script theory by developing a cocreative script matrix, which

they call a script-helix, based on a more balanced display of the influences in a child's life. These influences include any polarity "that is significant to the subject based on his or her own construction of reality" (Summers & Tudor, 2000, p. 33). They work this out in influencing areas such as social class, age, race, gender, and sexual orientation. The relationship with "males" can then be filled with real male figures from a person's life: a father, an older brother, a younger brother, a school friend, a teacher, a next-door neighbor, an uncle, or the President of the United States.

Spotting Lateral Issues

Once we allow ourselves to recognize them, there are many lateral issues to observe and take into account. During the social dreaming matrix (a lateral, nonhierarchical event) at the 2008 World TA Conference in Johannesburg, many of the dreams and associations that arose could be related to sibling issues: arguments between a brother and sister, play of children, lovemaking, dancing with someone of a different race, fighting between men, men working together, women watching men, working with my sister, children learning together, speaking with a peer, sexual encounters, being part of a generation, children dying, being on a journey, sharing a burden, being familiar or at odds, dangerous siblings, all sitting in a room and being handed a stick, sharing unbearable experiences with someone, traveling together, feeling curious or frustrated with another, jointly pushing a shopping trolley to make something move, surviving a dangerous ride, having to make choices, relating in a debate, being left out from fun, having a forbidden love, sitting next to someone, and so on. How we process and deal with such issues is probably more informed by our sibling-related history than our parent-related history.

The social dreaming matrix in Johannesburg also offered many dreams and associations that could be related to parent issues. However, when we are trained to look vertically at what is important in therapy, the sibling issues can easily be taken over by the parent issues. But they are there, nevertheless.

Epilogue

My journeys in psychotherapy and psychoanalysis, as well as my travel in training and learning, have allowed me time to discover and accept the power of the relationships with my siblings. In my life, and for that matter in my therapy, my siblings have played a much more important role than my parents. The focus of most of my trainers and some of my therapists on the vertical was at some stages a hindrance. And Sulloway would probably argue that writing this article is true to form for someone who grew up as a younger sibling, willing to rise against the authority of given conceptions.

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