Pearson New International Edition

The Expanded Family Life Cycle
Individual, Family, Social Perspectives

McGoldrick Carter Garcia-Preto

Fourth Edition

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dysfunctional, suffering from autism, mental illness, or addiction.

Sibling Relationships in Young Adulthood

Closeness to siblings has been found to be strong just before they leave their parental home (Bowerman & Dobash, 1974; Troll, 1994). This closeness is followed by a distancing during the early and middle years of adulthood, but at later life cycle phases people rate affectional closeness with siblings higher and conflict lower than do middle-aged siblings (Brady & Noberini, 1987). As they reach young adulthood, sisters often grow farther apart, each focusing on her own friends, work, and relationships and on developing her own family. Siblings may get together during holidays at the parental home, but often the focus is primarily on the relationship of each to the parents or spouses rather than on their relationships with each other. Support may be weakest at this phase, and competition may be strongest: Who went to the better school? Whose husband or children are more successful? Whose life is happier? The images that each develops of the other are often colored less by their personal interchanges than by the rivalries carried over from childhood or the parental images, which get transmitted to each other as they each hear from parents about the other's life. A younger sister who felt dominated or abused by her older brother may feel uncomfortable even sitting at the same table with him. All the unpleasant memories flood back. Two brothers who spent their childhoods competing in sports, in school, and for parental attention may find themselves subtly competing in the holiday dinner table conversation. Even if there are no major flare-ups, family members may leave the dinner feeling bored or vaguely dissatisfied, glad that such occasions occur only a few times a year.

Whether deliberately or inadvertently, parents can perpetuate such old sibling patterns. A mother may compare one child with another, perhaps chiding one for not calling as often as another does. A father might talk repeatedly about how proud he is of his son, not realizing that he is ignoring his daughter. A parent may elicit the support of one sibling in an effort to "shape up" another. Clinically, therapists can do much to challenge such values on behalf of all siblings.

It is at this phase also that sisters may move into different social classes as they marry and move, according to the culture's expectations, to adapt to their husband's socioeconomic context. They themselves are often not able to define this context, which has traditionally been defined by the husband's education, work, and financial status. Although some cultures, such as African American and Irish, emphasize friendship between siblings more than other groups, such as Scandinavian or Jewish culture (Woehrer, 1982), the sister bond is generally continued through a mutual sense of shared understanding and responsibility for the family, more than through common interests, especially when class differences between the siblings have developed.

Sibling Positions and Marital Relationships

Sibling relationships can often pave the way for couple relationships—for sharing, interdependence, and mutuality—just as they can predispose partners to jealousy, power struggles, and rivalry. Since siblings are generally our earliest peer relationships, we are likely to be most comfortable in other relationships that reproduce the familiar sibling patterns of birth order and gender. Generally speaking, marriage seems easiest for partners who fit their original sibling pattern, for example, if an oldest marries a youngest, rather than two oldests marrying each other. If a wife has grown up as the oldest of many siblings and the caretaker, she might be attracted to a dominant oldest, who offers to take over management of responsibilities. But as time goes along, she may come to resent his assertion of authority, because, by experience, she is more comfortable making decisions for herself.

All things being equal (and they seldom are in life!), the ideal marriage based on sibling position would be a complementary one in which, for example, the husband was the older brother of a younger sister and the wife was the younger sister of an older brother. However, the complementarity of caretaker and someone who needs caretaking or leader and follower does not guarantee intimacy or a happy marriage.

In addition to complementary birth order, it seems to help in marriage if one has had siblings of the opposite sex. The most difficult pairing might be that of the youngest sister of many sisters who marries the youngest brother of many brothers, since neither would have much experience of the opposite sex in a close way, and they might both play the spoiled child waiting for a caretaker.

There are, of course, many other possible sibling pairings in marriage. The marriage of two only children might be particularly difficult, because neither has the experience of the intimate sharing that one does with a brother or sister. Middle children may be the most flexible, since they have experiences with a number of different roles.

Coupling and marriage tend to increase the distance between siblings. Sisters may be pressured by their spouses to decrease their intimacy with each other, and that pressure may create sibling distance that lasts until later life. Maya Angelou (1981) has described the efforts siblings must make to remain connected in spite of spousal pressure:

> *I don't believe that the accident of birth makes people sisters and brothers. It makes them siblings. Gives them mutuality of parentage. Sisterhood and brotherhood are conditions people have to work at. It's a serious matter. You compromise, you give, you take, you stand firm, and you're relentless. . . . And it is an investment. Sisterhood means if you happen to be in Burma and I happen to be in San Diego and I'm married to someone who's very jealous and you're married to somebody who's very possessive, if you call me in the middle of the night, I have to come. (p. 62)*

In-Laws, Step- and Half-Siblings

The relationship of half- and stepsiblings through life depends on many factors including the distance in age, gender, presence of full siblings in the household, gender of stepparent and continuity of stepparent experience, length of time living together during childhood, marital status, race, social class, religion, parental divorce, proximity and emotional closeness to parents and to each other, and the overall cultural values of family connectedness (White & Riedman, 1992b). Generally speaking they are not as close as full siblings except where circumstances have drawn them into special connection as where a parent or another sibling has been impaired or lost. Nevertheless, the interesting point is that people generally define step- and half-siblings as "real" kin, even though the connections are overall weaker than for full siblings.

In similar ways, sister-in-law and brother-in-law relationships can have some of the positives of sibling relationships without the tensions, but things only sometimes work out this way. Sisters-in-law share a future but not a biological or childhood history. As Bernikow (1980) put it:

> *At the border of family and friends stands my sister-in-law Marlene. We do not share a mother, do not worry about the pull of likeness and the need for separation. Much of the conflict and tension between sisters is missing for us. Still, as sister-in-law, it is possible that she might be my sister in spirit. The things that arise between us are things that arise between other women, touched by our family affiliation. (p. 105)*

The interesting aspect of in-law patterns is the extent to which the structure of the family tends to determine in-law relationships in a family, even though family members are sure that it is just personality characteristics that they are reacting against in rejecting an in-law.

Sisters-in-law who marry into families that have only brothers probably have the greatest likelihood of developing positive connections to the new family. The wife of a youngest brother of older sisters is probably in the most difficult position, since this brother may have been treated like a prince. He may be resented though protected by his sisters, whom he probably tried to avoid for their "bossiness." When he finds a wife, his choice is likely to reflect in part his need for some protection against other powerful females, and his wife may then become the villain, supposedly keeping him from having a closer relationship with his sisters. Nevertheless, family relationships of those who have been raised as kin

and peers, such as half- or step-siblings, and often also cousins or those who live through adulthood as kin and peers such as sisters- and brothers-in-law have real clinical importance. They may be significant resources and supports to family connectedness. On the other hand, when their connections are negative, they can be a source of great difficulty.

Sibling Relationships in Midlife

Often, it is not until midlife that siblings reconnect with each other, through the shared experiences of caring for a failing or dying parent, a divorce in the family, or perhaps a personal health problem, which inspires them to clarify their priorities and to redefine which relationships in life really matter to them. Sometimes, at this point, relationships that have been maintained at a superficial level may break under the strain of caretaking or under the pain of the distance that has grown between them. On the other hand, siblings may now be brought closer to each other. Their relationships may solidify through the realization that their parents will not always be there and that they themselves must begin to put the effort into maintaining their own relationship.

In our culture, sisters are generally the caretakers of parents and other unattached older relatives or the managers who have responsibility to arrange for their caretaking. In other cultures, such as in Japan, this role goes to the wife of the oldest son. In our culture, if sisters do not do the primary caretaking, they often feel guilty about it because the cultural pressure is so strong and they are often held responsible by others.

Sibling relationships can be a most important connection in adult life, especially in the later years. However, if negative feelings persist, the care of an aging parent may bring on particular difficulty. At such a time, siblings may have been apart for years. They may have to work together in new and unfamiliar ways. The child who has remained closest to the parents, usually a daughter, often gets most of these caretaking responsibilities, which may cause long-buried jealousies and resentments to surface.

While the final caretaking of parents may increase a child's commitment and closeness to them (Bass & Bowman, 1990), it may either draw siblings together or arouse conflicts over who did more and who felt loved less. It is at the death of the last parent that sibling relationships become voluntary for the first time in life. While parents are alive, siblings may have contact with and hear news about each other primarily as a function of their relationships with their parents. If there are unresolved problematic issues in a family, they are likely to surface at this time in conflicts over the final caretaking, the funeral, or the will. Once the parents die, siblings must decide for the first time whether to maintain contact with each other.

Because it is women who tend to be central in maintaining the emotional relationships in a family, sisters may focus their disappointments on each other or on their sisters-in-law more than on their brothers, who are often treated with kid gloves and not expected to give much in the way of emotional or physical support when caretaking is required. Brothers may provide financial support, but the usual excuse for their lack of involvement is that they don't have the time—they are busy with their work—as if sisters were not equally busy with their own work.

Sibling Relationships After the Death of Parents

Once both parents have died, sibling relationships become truly independent for the first time. From here on, whether they see each other will be their own choice. This is the time when estrangement can become complete, particularly if old rivalries continue. The focus may be on concrete disagreements: Who should have helped in the care of their ailing parent? Who took all the responsibility? Who was more loved? Strong feelings can be fueled by old unresolved issues. In general, the better relationships siblings have, the less likely it is that later traumatic family events will lead to a parting of the ways.

At the end of the life cycle, sisters are especially likely to be a major support for each other or even to live together. Older women are especially likely to rely on their sisters, as well as their daughters and even their nieces for support (Anderson, 1984; Lopata, 1979; Townsend, 1957). Anderson (1984) found that sisters were the ones to whom older widows most often turned, more often than to children, even though they were not more available geographically.

She speculated that the reasons might include sisters' shared history of experiences and life transitions. She concludes that siblings, especially sisters, take on added significance as confidants and emotional resources for women after they have been widowed.

Because siblings share a unique history, reminiscing about earlier times together is an activity in which they engage at many points in the life cycle. Such reminiscing tends to become even more important late in life. It helps all siblings to validate and clarify events and relationships that took place in earlier years and to place them in mature perspective, and it can become an important source of pride and comfort (Cicirelli, 1985). This seems especially meaningful for sisters who tend anyway to define themselves more in terms of context and to place a high value on the quality of human relationships. Cicirelli (1982) found that having a relationship with a sister stimulates elderly women to remain socially engaged with others as well. Although the relationships of sisters, like all female relationships, tend to be invisible in the value structure of the culture at large, sisters tend to sustain one another in time of need throughout life. In old age, they become indispensable. As Margaret Mead (1972) described it:

> *Sisters draw closer together and often, in old age, they become each other's chosen and most happy companions. In addition to their shared memories of childhood and their relationships to each other's children, they share memories of the same house, the same homemaking style, and the same small prejudices about housekeeping.*

Mead's comment is interesting in its focus on the details of life. Especially as we grow older, it is the details—of our memories, or of our housekeeping, or of our relationships with each other's children—that may hold us together.

We are coming to appreciate more the importance of adult sibling relationships as researchers have observed that family support for caregivers correlates with the presence of siblings (Bedford, 1989). As we age, some sibling relationships lose the competitive quality of childhood and become more like friendships (McGhee, 1985; Norris & Tindale, 1994). As personal resources may become overtaxed by the demands of frail or demented aging parents, sibling bonds may either become overtaxed or provide the extra energy for caretaking. Sibling relationships may also become closer with aging, as activities and preoccupations of earlier life cycle phases diminish. The loss of a spouse who may have interfered with sibling closeness leaves siblings with more time and need for the comfort and sharing of the sibling bond. Cicirelli (1989) found that attachment is more likely to characterize sibling ties when sisters are involved. It does appear that sibling rivalries generally diminish in later life. Generational solidarity increases and sibling bonds appear to have greater salience for siblings as they age (Norris & Tindale, 1994).

Other Factors That Intersect With Sibling Patterns: Culture, Class, and Race

In addition to early parental loss, temperament, the child's physical attributes, family traumas, and major life changes related to politics, economics, and emotional factors affecting families, class, culture, and race also powerfully influence sibling patterns. Cultures and classes differ in the expected roles and relationships of siblings (Leder, 1991; McGoldrick et al., 2005; Nuckolls, 1993; Sandmeier, 1994; Sulloway, 1996; Zukow, 1989).

A family's ethnic identity may determine whether siblings are close, distant, or created equal (Leder, 1991) and the meaning of the siblinghood. Some ethnic groups, such as Asians, may show a greater preference for male children; some, such as African Americans, value the family unit over individual members; others, such as Anglos, give priority to autonomy and self-reliance. Even the concept of sibling rivalry is culture-bound, being largely a Western phenomenon that stems from a focus on individual achievement, competition, and status. In contrast, a huge segment of the world's population dissuades children from assuming the stance of sibling-as-rival by instilling in them a sense of "we-ness" rather than "I" (Sandmeier, 1994). In cultures that train their children to view each other as necessary, siblings are more likely to have lifelong, enduring ties.

In some oppressed cultures, the closely knit sibling bond is also influenced by historical needs

for survival. Family members rely on mutual support and aid to fulfill basic material and emotional needs. In African American families, the tradition of tightly woven sibships that was passed down from African culture is combined with the family's need to function as a unit to deal with the forces of racism (Watson, 1998). Thus, strong sibling bonds may be more necessary for African Americans than for people in cultures that are not affected by oppression and in which siblings can live independently of each other. In cultures in which sibling caretaking is a major form of caretaking, as it is for African Americans, strong emotional attachment, positive or negative, may have a profound effect on siblinghood throughout the life cycle (Watson, 1998). Although large sibships such as those that may be found in Irish Catholic families may also produce older sibling caretakers, this role will probably end with childhood. Among African Americans, however, sibling caretakers tend to continue their role into adulthood. Childhood sibling caretaking helps to prepare them for their lifelong role as each other's keeper (Watson, 1998). Hence, the expectations of African American siblings have implications for individual and family development throughout the life cycle.

Some cultures use the term "brother" or "sister" to convey the depth of a cherished relationship. The Vietnamese, for example, address lovers and spouses as "big brother" or "little sister," and African Americans may greet one another with the term "Brother" or "Sister" to convey their sense of kinship (Sandmaier, 1994). Such terms of endearment express the particular culture's valuing of sibling relationships.

The family's emotional map is governed by its cultural roots. Families of Northern European and Anglo backgrounds may discourage strong displays of feeling or affection and will probably view themselves, their siblings, and their parents as a related collection of individuals. German brothers and sisters would also be likely to refrain from showing strong or open affection toward one another because of the cultural prescription to maintain a stiff upper lip (Sandmaier, 1994). In Italian culture, in which the family supercedes the individual, sibling relationships tend to be close, especially between same-sex pairs. In a study conducted by Colleen Leahy Johnson (1982), 63 percent of middle-aged Italian women saw a sibling daily, in contrast to 12 percent of their Anglo counterparts. Among college-educated older Americans, African American siblings were three times as likely as Whites to focus on themes of loyalty, solidarity, and enduring affection. Hence, the cultural message that African Americans receive to stay together and help each other does not disappear as family members move up the class ladder or move toward old age.

In Greek and Jewish cultures, conflicting messages about family loyalty and individual success and competition may add to sibling tensions. Siblings may be fierce rivals at the same time that family cohesion is expected (Sandmaier, 1994). Irish siblings also seem to have ambivalent feelings toward one another. Irish culture's emphasis on dichotomies and labels may spark sibling rivalry while simultaneously inducing guilt in the sibling for having bad thoughts. Thus, buried resentments that enable siblings to appear connected while the parents are alive may lead to sibling cut offs in the wake of parental death.

Culturally influenced family rules and scripts set the stage for sibling relationships (Sandmaier, 1994; Watson, 1998). As more Americans face longer lives without partners or children, sibling relationships must be revisited. Our brothers and sisters are potentially emotional and physical resources at all points of the life cycle, but individual needs for attachment and belonging are apt to be more critical at later junctures of the life cycle.

In cultures that prize individuality over family unity, siblings' life cycle patterns may remain distinct and separate as brothers and sisters keep their families of procreation apart. In cultures that demand family cohesion or enmeshment, siblings' life cycle patterns may become fused, making it difficult for families of procreation to establish their own traditions and ways of relating.

Understanding the cultural context of sibling relationships provides a larger framework for addressing individual issues of self-esteem and identity, unresolved issues of childhood, and sibling relationships through the life cycle. A sister from a culture that prefers sons may stop blaming her brother and have greater compassion for her parents once she realizes the cultural script in which they all played a part.

Class differences are likely to have a major impact on adult siblings from oppressed cultures or poor families. Unacknowledged or overt resentments may characterize adult sibling relationships for siblings who end up in different socioeconomic groups. Lower-class African American siblings may hold their resentment of middle-class or professional brothers and sisters in check because of cultural expectations of familyhood and their need for physical support. Middle-class brothers and sisters may resent lower-class siblings for relying on them but not feel free to express such resentment because of the sense of family obligation.

In Jewish families, sibling resentment or cut offs may result from intense feelings around the success or lack of success of one's brother or sister. Parental reactions to successful and non-successful children may exacerbate sibling fissures related to class differences. The need to prove oneself intellectually superior and successful for Jewish siblings may be related to their cultural history and oppression. Class differences between Jewish siblings might adversely affect their relationship, especially if one perceives the other as having had an unfair advantage.

Class differences in Anglo families may result in sibling antagonism, but the cultural pattern of individuality and autonomy may obscure such resentments or conflicts. Since these siblings tend not to mingle except for formal family occasions, sibling tensions would go virtually unnoticed and probably would not be dealt with by the siblings themselves. Lower-class family members at family events may be treated like poor relations, or they may be closed out of family events altogether. Although lower-class family members could be treated negatively by middle-class African Americans, it would not go unnoticed, and the mother would probably intervene on behalf of the lower-class sibling. Regardless of the ethnic or cultural group, class tensions are likely to surface when aging or ill parents require care from children.

Class may influence the way rebellion intersects with sibling position. Just as oldest sisters may be more rebellious than oldest brothers because the gender inequities impinge on an oldest sister's "right" to be the leader, oldest siblings in minority families may become more rebellious than oldest siblings from the dominant groups because of the interaction of social privilege and status with sibling status. Sibling position may exaggerate the class effects of oppression, which lead people to resist the status quo (for example, making a younger sibling of a poor family even more rebellious), Sulloway (1996) found that, as with the interaction of gender and birth order, the oldest child in a poor family may use a strategy of rebellion against the status quo as the best way to achieve eminence. Radical reformers have tended to come from racial minorities and lower classes, and to be later-borns. In Sulloway's research, abolitionism attracted the highest proportion of later-borns of any reform movement he surveyed. Still, because Sulloway's research focused primarily on Europeans who became involved in scientific revolutions, we need further research on culture, class, gender, and sibling patterns from other countries where lives include other spheres of activity and interest. Sulloway suggests that the early parental loss in the upper classes diminishes sibling differences based on birth order, as nannies and other caretakers come in to replace the lost parent, and siblings become more supportive of each other as they share their loss. In middle- and lower-class families, the opposite may happen. The oldest child is drawn into the burden of parenting younger siblings and becomes even more conservative, leading the younger siblings to become even more rebellious than otherwise. Large sibships reinforce the first-born's duties as surrogate parent.

Rules of Thumb for Sibling Relationships Through the Life Cycle

1. Take a proactive stance about including siblings in assessment, whatever the presenting problem. Say to yourself, "Why not have a sibling session?" rather than thinking of including a sibling only when the client presents a sibling problem directly.
2. When one sibling is bearing the weight of sibling caretaking for a parent or a disabled sibling, work to improve the balance of sibling relationships so that the siblings can be more collaborative.
3. Assess and carefully challenge inequities in family roles and emotional and caretaking