

SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS – A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND THEIR IMPACT ON INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract:

Sibling relationships are a vital aspect of family dynamics, influencing the development of individuals across the globe. This article explores a theoretical framework that underscores the significance of these relationships within the broader context of family interactions. While many psychological theories emphasize the role of parent-child relationships in individual development, this work shifts the focus to sibling bonds and their unique contribution. By integrating perspectives such as attachment theory, social learning theory, and structural-family approaches, the article highlights how sibling relationships shape personal growth and social functioning.

Keywords: *Siblings, Attachment, Parents, Social Learning, Structural-Familial*

Family relationships are fundamental to human development, shaping individuals' emotional, social, and behavioral trajectories. Among these, sibling relationships occupy a unique position, offering opportunities for learning, emotional support, and socialization that differ from parent-child dynamics. This article explores the theoretical frameworks that underscore the significance of sibling bonds and their profound impact on individual development.

Drawing upon Attachment Theory, Social Learning Theory, and the Structural-Familial Approach, this discussion highlights the multifaceted ways in which sibling interactions influence personal growth, adaptation, and social functioning. Attachment Theory, pioneered by Bowlby, provides insight into the emotional connections that underpin secure relationships and the role of siblings as secondary attachment figures. Social Learning Theory, introduced by Bandura, emphasizes the importance of observation, modeling, and reinforcement in shaping behaviors, with siblings often acting as role models and socialization agents. Finally, the Structural-Familial Approach, developed by Minuchin, frames sibling relationships as part of the family system, emphasizing their unique contributions to social and emotional development.

By examining these theoretical perspectives, this article aims to illuminate the critical role of sibling relationships in fostering individual well-being and resilience. Understanding these dynamics provides a valuable lens for both researchers and practitioners seeking to enhance family functioning and support healthy development across the lifespan.

The Attachment Theory

The Attachment Theory, which was proposed by psychologist John Bowlby in the mid-20th century, has significantly affected and shaped our understanding of human relationships. It delves into the bonds formed between individuals, particularly those of infants and caregivers, and how these early attachments influence emotional development over the course of life. This chapter shall address and explore the key concepts and implications of attachment theory.

Attachment Theory (Bowlby & Ainsworth, 1991; Bowlby, 1953, 1982, 1989) argues that an individual possesses several biological systems, one of which is the attachment mechanism prompting proximity-seeking behaviors toward a significant individual while experiencing anxiety and distress, enabling one to be capable of adapting and coping with the surrounding world, for survival purposes.

Attachment begins in infancy, with the mother, and later on, gradually, with other significant figures such as the father, caregivers, grandparents, and siblings (Colin, 1991).

Attachment to sibling figures in childhood has been explored by laboratory researchers, as well as through observing children in their home settings (Howe & Ross, 1990). The findings of those studies indicated a considerable percentage of children who attempted to ease the distress of their younger siblings while the mothers were not in the room. In addition, it was observed that apparently, the babies were relying upon their older siblings as secondary emotional attachment figures (namely, drew closer to them, maintaining this proximity in the absence of their mothers). This phenomenon occurred only when the babies were cared for by their older siblings. This ability of older siblings to provide care to their distressed younger siblings, as argued by Teti (1992) is associated with their degree of security within their relationships with their mothers.

Delving into the nature of human relationships and the profound impact of early attachment experiences on emotional development is highly significant, as it recognizes the importance of secure attachments and understanding the dynamics of attachment styles. Thus, individuals can form healthier relationships and foster emotional well-being throughout life.

Consequently, the Attachment Theory perceives a secure attachment with siblings as important, which will greatly affect the individual, as aforementioned, during his life (Akhtar & Kramker, 1999; Bank & Kahn, 1982).

Social Learning Theory

This theory emphasizes the significance of early relationships, viewing them as affecting socialization and later relationships. This theory draws concepts and hypotheses from various psychological sources, mainly from the Psychoanalytical Theory (such as identification, aggression, and dependence) as well as from the Behavioral Theory (e.g. reinforcement).

The Social Learning Theory, proposed by psychologist Albert Bandura in the 1960s, prompted a revolution in terms of understanding human behavior, by emphasizing the role of observational learning, imitation, and modeling in affecting individuals' actions, attitudes, and beliefs. This theory suggests that individual learning is not limited to direct experiences, but also occurs through observing others and the consequences of their actions. Through this process, individuals acquire new behaviors and skills and develop cognitive structures influencing their future actions. In this chapter, we are delving into the core principles and applications of the Social Learning Theory.

Plus, Bandura (1977) argues that throughout life, one faces events with which he or she is forced to cope. The meaning one attributes to any given event and the type of response one chooses are directly related to similar responses previously experienced or observed which have been proven to succeed. The ability to learn through observation and modeling allows one to acquire diverse behavioral skills.

The above-described ability is considered to pertain to survival. It facilitates learning from others' mistakes, guides individuals for future goal-oriented behaviors, and prevents unnecessary pain (Bandura, 1977). It is also noteworthy that socialization is another means of social learning. This process aims at facilitating children's growth into adults who are capable of adaptive functioning, namely, avoiding deviant behaviors, being able to support themselves and their families, and forming and maintaining close connections with others (Maccoby & Martin, 1983).

Social Learning Theory is based upon the following core principles:

- Observational Learning;
- Imitation and Modelling;
- Reinforcement and Punishment;

- Self-efficacy.

Furthermore, Bandura (1977) refers to socialization as a process of identification and assimilation, which is related to the child's dependence on relationships with other significant figures. The key assumption states that interaction with other significant figures affects the child's social behavior within other structures, as well as later in life (Maccoby & Martin, 1983). Observing various models and learning from them yields an integration that varies from one child to another within any given family, resulting in a different development of personal qualities, corresponding to each child's inclination (Bank & Kahn, 1982).

Parents serve as a key, but not an exclusive model within children's socialization process. Other adults, grandparents, and siblings also play a significant role. Observation of sibling interactions during early and middle childhood revealed a pattern where older siblings serve as educators, who initiate behaviors, serving as role models for younger siblings, who assume the role of students who depend upon their older siblings and imitate them (Seginer, 1992). The older siblings, serving as "socialization agents" for their younger siblings lead them toward their peer group, particularly during the latency phase and adolescence, guiding them as for socially acceptable behaviors.

This process is highly important during adolescence, when relationships with peers and the opposite sex become more significant, serving as the adolescent's role model in her or his personal and social development (Agger, 1988; Parens, 1988).

The Social Learning Theory has significantly shaped our understanding of human behavior and learning processes. By emphasizing the role of observation, imitation, reinforcement, and self-efficacy, this theory offers valuable insights into how individuals acquire new skills, behaviors, and beliefs. From education and health promotion to organizational behavior and socialization, the principles of social learning continue to enhance research, practice, and policy in a variety of domains. As our understanding of human behavior evolves, the Social Learning Theory remains a fundamental framework for exploring the complexities of social learning and behavior change.

The social learning theory confirms and supports the connection between sibling relationships and their direct influence on a person's learning and imitation abilities and his social adaptation accordingly.

Structural-Familial Approach

The founder of the system approach and family therapy is Salvador Minuchin, a Jewish American-Argentinian psychiatrist. Minuchin's development of the approach relied upon clinical experience in families where children demonstrate psychosomatic symptoms .

According to Minuchin, there are several basic concepts which serve as the foundation for understanding the family system;

First, Family Structure: The family unit, similarly to other units in nature needs an inner organization to facilitate its coping with internal and external changes, as well as to maintain inner balance, which will guarantee a stable, strong and surviving structure. Addressing the structure under the proposed frame of work includes all those values, rules, laws, demands or codes, which organize the way in which interpersonal interaction occurs within the given unit. The frame of work proposes tools for identifying the recurrent, continuous and consistent patterns, upon which a family relies upon to organize in order to preserve inner stability, as well as to modify non-adaptive coping patterns within the family unit, which is characterized by a rigid, or unstable structure .

The second concept is Sub-systems: In order to facilitate analysis and identification of the family unit, along with establishing a common language, the concept of family sub-systems was proposed. Families consist of hierarchical, different and coordinated sub-systems, which facilitate the unit's basic functioning. The common sub-systems include gender, generations and shared interests. Besides that, further inner organizations may be identified (older children vs. younger children; mother and child vs. the father etc.). All families comprise several equivalent sub-systems, which constitute any family's uniqueness, serving to understand the inner set of forces. Thus, any family member may find himself within several sub-systems simultaneously, sharing a domain with other members within those sub-systems, because of the flexibility and versatility characterizing the establishment of sub-system. The number of family sub-system may be infinite, a factor which may distinguish one family from another (Minuchin, 1967).

The influence of this paradigm is apparent within the research field, legitimizing the perceiving of sibling relationship as an independent, significant system. A system family approach views the family as an open socio-cultural system, undergoing a process of change, development and adaptation to ever-changing circumstances, in order to maintain continuity and promote the psych-social growth of each member. Through this process, the family serves two different purposes; an inner purpose, namely, psychologically and socially protecting its

members; and an outer purpose, which involves adaption to the surrounding culture and the teaching thereof. Through socialization, the family establishes and programs the child's behavior and her or his sense of belonging and connection, enhancing her or his emotional security (Minuchin, 1985) .

The family, as a system, fulfills its functions through sub-systems (husband-wife, mother-child, siblings). Each individual belongs to various sub-systems, establishing complementary relationships between them. Each individual possesses different degrees of power, and acquires distinct skills within each sub-system. The sibling sub-system serves as the first social laboratory, where children may experiment with relationships within their peer group. Children support each other, isolate one another, and turn one another into a scapegoat; they learn from one another. Through their interactions, they learn to negotiate, collaborate and compete. They learn how to acquire friends and foes, save face when they submit, and receive acknowledgment for their skills and talents (Minuchin, 1985). In larger families, the sibling sub-system is usually divided into two groups. The younger children, still interact with the family in order to obtain security, care, and guidance, while the older children establish contacts and pacts with the world outside the family. When children come into contact with peer groups outside the home, they attempt to act in correspondence with the sibling world structure (Minuchin et al., 1967) .

Plus, Minuchin emphasizes the concept of boundary vs. permeability within the family structure. Families differ by the flexibility or permeability of those boundaries, as well as the individual's degree of accessibility to the other individuals within that unit. Those, in turn, affect the nature and frequency of interaction among family members.

Another concept addressed by Minuchin is the various boundaries within a family. The two main categories are clearly defined boundaries, which is the ideal setting, that facilitates accessibility, productive discourse, and negotiation between the sub-system whenever necessary, along with maintaining hierarchy and clear boundaries. This type of boundary prompt the individuals within a family to develop independence along with a sense of belonging and caring toward the individuals within the individuals within the whole unit. The other category of boundaries refers to the fluid, too-flexible boundaries. On the one hand, given an unstable, close boundary, that does not maintain a clear hierarchy, will allow the child to experience emotional closeness and development, resulting in a sense of security within the family unit, as well as a positive sense of belonging and connection. On the other hand, this type of boundary may result in individuals' difficulty in defining themselves separately from

the family unit, experiencing no security outside this unit, along with consistent invasiveness, which may pose a threat to personal development, which is essential for adaptive psychological maturation and development. Furthermore, a family characterized by diffusive boundaries will suffer instability while facing changes and adaptation, failing to maintain balance and coherence, which are essential for maintaining the family structure. Another type of boundaries is rigid boundaries. Apparently, in families characterized by rather rigid boundaries, the members will develop a separate identity while understanding the hierarchy and rules at home and in society. Meanwhile, rigid boundaries pose a threat to emotional development, and are likely to cause alienation and draw a gap between the family sub-systems and failure to identify and feel connected to the family unit in general. In this case, any change or crisis may break the unit apart, since this unit fails to demonstrate flexibility and adapt itself to the ever-changing needs of the individual comprising thereof (Minuchin, 1985) .

Minuchin's theory addresses two family patterns, which may be placed on a continuum, between two extremes; First, Enmeshment, which is typical of diffusive boundaries. This concept refers to a form of intense closeness within family interactions, where family members are overly concerned and involved with all that happens within other family members' lives. Such a condition results in a lack of differentiation, a sense of invasiveness and over-reactiveness, which block stability and balance.

Also, in a family which demonstrates such a pattern, the lack of inner organization is apparent. At times, it sometimes even seems as though the children are equal to the parents in terms of responsibilities and rights.

On the other extreme lies Disengagement, which characterizes rigid boundaries. This concept describes the opposite condition, namely, a situation where there is no connection between family members, resulting in members being each on their own, with neither affinity nor connection to the others. Family disengagement results in distancing, avoiding contact, and yielding individuals failing to form close, meaningful relationships, who also avoid asking for help even in times of distress. Contrarily to enmeshment families, who respond immediately and intensely to any family member's distress, families characterized by disengagement will demonstrate no response to another person's distress, nor will the latter be acknowledged

To sum up, the theories presented above may illuminate how parent-child relationships relate to sibling relationships and the influence of those relationships on one's course of life. In some of the theories (Attachment Theory, Social Learning Theory) sibling relationships may be viewed as being of equal importance to a parent-child relationship.

The Systems Theory, however, describes the sibling sub-system as independent, directly affecting children's behavior. Hence the great importance of this relationship may be addressed, as may its ability to grant its members a relationship compensatory to deficient relationships with parents and/or friends.

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