SIBLING ABUSE:
UNDERSTANDING DEVELOPMENTAL CONSEQUENCES THROUGH OBJECT RELATIONS, FAMILY SYSTEMS, AND RESILIENCY THEORIES

by

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Abstract

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by

Amy Meyers

Adviser: Professor Harriet Goodman

This phenomenological qualitative study explored childhood and adolescent sibling abuse among adult survivors. The original intent was to explore informant's perceptions of the effects of sibling abuse on their adult relationships. However, the study revealed significant findings beyond adult informant's relatedness. Although some claim sibling abuse occurs more frequently than parent-child or spousal abuse, data tracking its incidence is unavailable. Therefore, it remains overlooked as normative sibling rivalry. Based on informants' descriptions of their abuse, I distinguished sibling abuse as a distinct phenomenon with devastating childhood consequences and repercussions in self-concept and relatedness which extend into adulthood. In addition, this study provides rich description of the phenomenon of sibling abuse. Because no theoretically driven research about sibling relationships and object relations, family systems, and emerging theories of risk and resilience exist, this study incorporated sibling abuse into a developmental understanding of personality using these theoretical lenses.

Methods included recruitment of through flyers posted in colleges, graduate schools, local Y's, and churches in addition to an advertisement in a professional social work newsletter. This yielded a sample of 19 self-identified survivors of sibling abuse, 15 female and four male. All subjects were over age 21 and once screened for a history of

childhood or adolescent sibling abuse, participated in in-person in-depth interviews. I constructed an original interview guide informed by sensitizing concepts from the work of Weihe (1997).

Findings indicated sibling abuse put children at grave risk for physical and psychological injury. Additionally, the abusive sibling relationship affected perception of self and others into adulthood. Informants expressed problems establishing relationships both as children and as adults. Parent-child abuse was present many cases and modeled detrimental methods of communication. Informants expressed resilience through establishing relationships outside the home as children and through successful career achievement as adults.

Implications for this study include the need for child welfare workers to identify children at risk for sibling abuse. Mental health practitioners need heightened awareness of risk factors, symptoms, and devastating repercussions of sibling abuse. Limitations of the study include a homogeneous sample. This suggests the need for similar research with more demographically diverse samples.

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I sincerely wish to thank the participants in this study who risked the unknown and allowed themselves to explore painful aspects of their lives. I hope that their participation in this research provided at least a small restorative experience: to be heard, to have childhoods legitimized, or even to help others who have had similar experiences. It is my hope that their voices will facilitate the recognition of sibling abuse as a real and distinct phenomenon deemed critical to address.

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Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM FORMULATION

Background

The purpose of this dissertation was to learn how adult survivors of child and adolescent physical and/or emotional sibling abuse made meaning of their experiences. The study sought to explore the effects the abuse had on survivors' development and quality of intimate relationships in adulthood. It explored how earlier relationships with an abusive sibling influenced specific aspects of adult intimacy such as trust, mistrust, loneliness, satisfaction, dependence and independence, communication, and conflict.

Sibling abuse is the most common form of family violence (Reid & Donovan, 1990). Although it may occur more frequently than parent-child abuse or spousal abuse (Graham-Bermann, Cutler, Litzenberger, & Schwartz, 1994), it remains overlooked as normal, aggressive behavior among siblings (Wiehe, 1997). Consequently, cases of sibling abuse go unreported by professionals mandated to report abuse. Child welfare workers may not make complete assessments of violence in investigations into allegations of parent-child abuse or neglect, and clinical practitioners may not make appropriate treatment interventions if they are unaware of a history of sibling abuse (Meyers, 2009). In addition, parents may not be privy to its implications. Experiencing sibling abuse in childhood may lead to the development of problems in childhood or repercussions in adulthood. Practitioners who treat the survivors of sibling abuse should identify a history of sibling abuse in order to address its potential ramifications effectively.

The overarching definition of physical or emotional abuse used this study was insistent, consistent and persistent charges of inadequacy, intimidation or control through

physical force and/or emotional denigration (Wiehe, 1997). Past research indicated that siblings, potentially important peers, had an important influence on development and self-perception in adult life (Graham-Bermann et al., 1994**;** Reid & Donovan, 1990**).** Although sibling rivalry is a normative part of development and can foster competition, cooperation, and negotiation, previous studies have found sibling abuse may lower self-esteem and elicit problems in interpersonal relationships (Wiehe, 1997).

The widespread ramifications of parental childhood abuse are well known. These include delays in development, family dysfunction, social problems, and emotional distress, specifically depression, anxiety, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (Wiehe, 1997; Farber & Joseph, 1985; Toro, 1982; Rohner & Rohner, 1980). Although parallel consequences for the victim of childhood sibling abuse have been identified (Wiehe, 1997), sibling abuse is a distinct phenomenon with its own lasting and varied effects. Because few researchers have studied sibling abuse or its effects on adult relationships, this study attempted to reveal more about its nature, particularly ways in which it might affect interpersonal relationships later in life. Repetition of the victim role (Linares, 2006; McLaurin, 2005; Simonelli, Mullis, Elliott, & Pierce, 2002; Wiehe, 1997) and being distrustful (Wiehe, 1997) were the primary interpersonal difficulties previous researchers have identified. Other possible manifestations of sibling abuse concerning intimate relationships remain unexplored. Although research on sibling abuse is limited, there is a total absence of research on sibling abuse symptoms when it occurs during adolescence.

Sibling Violence in Adolescence

Initially, the researcher intended to focus on experiences of adolescent sibling abuse because of the lack of attention paid to its occurrence during this phase of development. Awareness of intensifying demands during adolescence is critical when contemplating the effects of abusive sibling relationships. Erikson (1968) described adolescence as a period marked by physiological changes and high vulnerability when fears of inadequacy and failure prevail. As important agents of socialization, siblings have the potential to provide reliable and consistent support (Lamb & Sutton-Smith, 1982). However, adolescent victims of sibling abuse may be particularly susceptible to insults and degradation as they attempt to develop their ego identity and meet the challenge of managing the dissonance between what they appear to be in the eyes of others and what they feel they are themselves.

Although the experience of sibling abuse during adolescence uncovered heightened feelings of vulnerability, this research revealed that subjects endured sibling abuse beginning in childhood and continuing throughout adolescence. As a result, it proved difficult to differentiate the effects of childhood abuse from adolescent abuse. However, as the young victims grew older, their abusing siblings often committed increasingly violent acts, which intensified the abusive experience. Another area of interest was whether victims of sibling abuse internalized feelings of inadequacy and how these self-perceptions affect their capacity to engage in quality intimate relationships as adults.

Object relations theory suggests that the residue of past relationships influences self-image and present functioning including interpersonal relationships (Greenberg &

Mitchell, 1983). As an outgrowth of object relations theory, attachment theory explores long-term developmental issues of relatedness. However, the effects of sibling relations on development are absent from psychodynamic theory, and there is very little psychoanalytic literature on the role siblings play during adolescence. Historically, the existing literature addresses the adolescent sibling relationship in the context of the parents and neglects the sibling relationship as significant in its own right (Colonna & Newman, 1983). More recently, there has been attention paid to the profound influence siblings may have on emotional development and adult relationships (Coles, 2003; Mitchell, 2003).

Self-psychology theory emphasizes the significance of infant-mother attunement on personality development; it proposes that the mother's level of attunement determines the infant's sense of safety and protection and sets the stage for how the developing child will relate to others (Mahler, 2001). Building on Mahler's infant studies (1968), Blos presented adolescence as a second phase of separation and individuation when the individual strives to achieve a balance between dependence and autonomy (1979). The need for security reawakens as the transition from dependence on caregivers shifts to peers in an attempt to achieve a newfound identity (Erikson, 1968). The healthy adolescent internalizes a differentiation of self and others. However, when physical force or emotional withdrawal in an abusive relationship threatens a sense of safety, the adolescent may be unable to develop a more realistic sense of self and object representations (Ausubel, 1996).

Attachment theory suggests that issues of trust, conflict, communication, and self-esteem are critical aspects of connectedness (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978).

When children enter adolescence, object relations issues are especially salient as increased involvement with peers challenges self-definition, intimacy, and perspective-taking abilities (Sperling & Berman, 1994). The defining aspects of connectedness presented in attachment theory, along with the significant role siblings play in the development of self-perception and relatedness (Cicerelli, 1995; Lamb & Sutton-Smith, 1992), became sensitizing concepts (Patton, 2002) in this current study which explored how sibling abuse affected attachment patterns of the individual arising from the crisis of adolescent adjustment. Therefore, this study began with an exploration of the extent to which concepts from object relations and attachment theory were evident or absent in the narratives of people who self-reported sibling abuse during adolescence.

Study of the Effects of Sibling Violence

Researchers, theorists, and clinicians have paid little attention to the long-term effects of sibling abuse on the survivor, particularly in the areas of ego development, object relations, attachment, and the capacity for intimacy. Wiehe's unique study (1990) on sibling abuse proposed explanations for the existence of an abusive sibling relationship in addition to its long-term ramifications. However, he did not explore communication patterns and styles of relatedness in the intimate relationships of adult survivors of sibling abuse.

There has been a growing trend in empirical research to study the nature of sibling relationships. Steinmetz (1977) examined the causes, frequency, and patterns of sibling violence, and several others have studied sibling violence and sibling aggression (Goodwin & Roscoe, 1990; Graham-Bermann, et al., 1994; Straus, Gelles & Steinmetz, 1980). However, the literature does not clearly differentiate sibling aggression and

violence from sibling rivalry, which may contribute to the lack of recognition of sibling abuse as a significant and distinct phenomenon. Consequently, this study differentiated sibling abuse as the perpetual violation of one sibling's well-being by another. Although a single incident of imposing behavior may also be termed abuse, the study focused on ongoing abusive relationships and distinguished sibling abuse as a phenomenon unto itself.

The culmination of evidence of siblings as an environmental force; research findings on the detrimental impact of parent-child abuse on intimate relationships; and the indications of long-term implications of sibling abuse set the precedent to explore ways in which disturbed sibling bonds affected the quality of survivors' relationships. Inquiry focused on communication patterns, expressions of conflict, demonstrations of affection, feelings about dependence, comfort with alone and shared time, assessments of self-perception, and perceptions about the impact of the abusive experience on partner relationships in adulthood.

Relevance to Social Work

Child Welfare

Identifying sibling abuse is critical to the field of child welfare. Parent-child abuse and neglect are the focus of child protection services, but child protective service workers continue to overlook sibling abuse. Many states do not have statutes that distinguish sibling abuse as separate from incest, and child protection service caseworkers have limited guidance on how to interpret child abuse statutes (Kominkiewicz, 2004). Workers may neutralize abusive behavior between siblings as sibling rivalry, and mandated reporters are not required to report rivalrous behavior (Haskins, 2003). Events considered

assault outside of the family may appear normal when they occur within the family and between siblings. If child welfare workers and others responsible for the well-being of children do not have training, experience, and education to identify sibling abuse, they may not detect, investigate, or report it (Kominkiewicz, 2004). Assessment tools should include elements to detect sibling abuse, which is not currently integral to the assessment process in child protection service investigations (Kominkiewiwcz, 2004). The co-occurrence of parent-child abuse in many of the cases reported in the present study attests to the need for child welfare workers to learn to conduct sibling abuse risk assessments when investigating allegations of parent-child abuse.

Mandated reporters need to be attentive to all types of violence that occur in the home. The passive acceptance of the sibling abusive relationship, collusion with the perpetrator, or ineffective parental intervention implies parental neglect and has important implications for reporting. Practitioners working in social services, mental health, child and family services, school social work, and pediatric social work are all mandated reporters. They need to be cognizant of the risk factors, symptoms, and consequences of sibling abuse. The findings of this study have the potential to facilitate early detection and prevention and to influence best practices across disciplines by increasing awareness of the repercussions of sibling abuse.

A general focus on parent-child relationships in mental health and social services often overshadows the significance of sibling relationships. Although sibling abuse is receiving increasing attention (Caffaro & Conn-Caffaro, 1998; Garey 1998; Linares, 2006; McLaurin, 2005), its effects on development are a neglected area of exploration. The findings of this dissertation point to the need for service providers to recognize how

to help each sibling involved in the abusive relationship and the family system. Practitioners who work with children should explore the nature and quality of sibling relationships so that the victimized child avoids further harm, the perpetrator receives help, and parents develop appropriate parenting skills. Informed practitioners and mandated reporters can provide parents with psycho-education. They can help foster positive sibling relationships through the practice of effective communication and disciplinary measures that parents can utilize to prevent the escalation of sibling conflict into sibling abuse.

When at-risk children have support from people outside of the home, they are more likely to prosper (Gitterman & Germain, 2008). Therefore, when counselors and educators identify violence in the home, they must help children establish connections with mentors and promote participation in outside activities in an effort to foster nurturing environments. The ability to assess sibling dynamics, conduct risk assessments, and address interpersonal relatedness is significant although often missing in child welfare investigations. However, they are important to their responsibilities to protect children.

Clinical Practice

Clinical practitioners generally focus on parent-child relationships, not sibling relationships. The significance of sibling relationships needs consideration when clinicians conduct assessments and determine treatment modalities. Clinicians who have knowledge about sibling abuse and its consequences can empower family members to address the behavior. It is important for the clinician to be aware of the functioning of the family system so as not to neglect or label the victimized child as the “identified patient.”

Sibling abuse indicates problems for both the abusive child and the victim. This study pointed to the importance of awareness of multiple individual and family factors that contributed to the existence and perpetration of sibling abuse.

Many survivors in this study reported that they desired intimate relationships; however, they guarded against vulnerability and ended up with limited social capital, alone, or in unsatisfying relationships. Additionally, some survivors' current strained relations with their families of origin represented an unmet need for validation of earlier experiences. Both left survivors with an enduring sense of loss, anxiety, and depression. However, those with successful careers demonstrated the ability to compartmentalize the sibling abusive experience and redirect energies to areas other than intimacy. These findings have implications for protective factors and aspects of resiliency relevant to successful survivorship. For many of these informants, psychotherapy provided a route to a productive adulthood and ultimately supported viable interpersonal relationships.

Consequently, the role of counselors is important in promoting positive integration of the damage of sibling abuse. Lack of awareness of an adult client's sibling abuse history has implications for the planning and discourse of treatment. Failure to recognize when sibling relationships threaten how sibling transference shapes a client's interpersonal life may disrupt this process. In addition, re-traumatization may occur because a clinician is unable to validate the meaning sibling abuse has for a client; an inability to identify the abuse or its correlates may interfere with the clinician's capacity to accurately interpret transference projected from the client onto the clinician.

This study suggested that clinicians would benefit from a historical and theoretical understanding of the client in order to address the manifestation of intimacy

problems and appropriately facilitate change. Knowledge of risk and resiliency factors that pertain to sibling abuse arms the clinician with the ability to understand a range of family dynamics, their effect on interpersonal relationships, and the externalization of these experiences in the therapeutic dyad.

Theory Building

Although this researcher anticipated that exposing the emotional effects of sibling abuse on the survivor might contribute to the development of principles of prevention and intervention, the primary objective of this research was to advance knowledge. Without developing awareness of the phenomenon of sibling abuse, little could advance techniques to address its existence and interrupt its perpetuation. The study focus on the critical incidents of sibling abuse, the dynamics relevant to its escalation, and the family environment may help raise awareness of the potential precipitants of the phenomenon. It aspired to create an avenue for the development of theoretical constructs regarding abusive contexts and their potential manifestations.

Statement of the Research

This dissertation explored childhood and adolescent experiences of emotional or physical sibling abuse and their manifestations in the realm of adult intimate relationships. The research sought to advance understanding of the phenomenon of sibling abuse, its emotional resonance, and its lasting consequences in the area of relatedness. It grew out of my clinical observation of adult clients who presented with relationship difficulties and a history of sibling abuse. Additionally, although there are state mandates to protect children from parent-child abuse nationwide, there are not often assessment practices in place to protect children from abusive siblings in their home. The

literature on sibling abuse is sparse. However, studies do indicate that it has long-lasting and devastating consequences (Wiehe, 1990,1997). Although difficulty in relationships was one area of distress identified, specific aspects of intimacy were unexplored. Studies suggest that critical aspects of connectedness include the capacity for trust, conflict, and communication (Ainsworth, (1978, 1989). I was particularly interested in survivors' overall sense of satisfaction in their relationships as adults.

Exploring critical incidents of sibling abuse, the internalization of the abusive experience, and manifestations concerning the capacity for emotional attachment provided insight into the manner in which the abusive sibling experience became internalized and subsequently externalized. The study, conducted in the phenomenological and grounded theory traditions of qualitative research, used in-depth interviews. The informants for the study were adults over the age of 21 who self-identified with a history of childhood and adolescent sibling abuse. The inquiry sought details and dynamics of the abusive experience, probing for critical incidents, their context, and the nature and quality of adult relationships. A phenomenological lens allowed me to pay thorough attention to how informants experienced sibling abuse and how they perceived, described, made sense of, and remembered it (Patton, 2002). The grounded theory approach abstracted subjective experiences into theoretical statements regarding relationships between historical experiences and current functioning. After uncovering the various elements of the phenomenon, grounded theory helped develop patterns and themes about sibling abuse victimization and its manifestations for survivors in the realm of self-perception and intimate relatedness.

Sensitizing concepts from family systems theory, object relations theory, and trauma theory were the starting point for an interview guide that appeared likely to inform the phenomenon of sibling abuse. Operationalized notions such as victim, trauma, abuse, family system, critical aspects of connectedness, and projection provided initial direction to broadening understanding as to how survivors in this study gave meaning to these concepts (Patton, 2002). The following chapter reviews a range of theories from psychology that the researcher drew on in the design of the interview guide. They also provided a foil for interpreting informants' narrative reports to determine where they assisted or departed from standing theoretical constructs.

Chapter 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Introduction

Several theories provided sensitizing concepts for this study of sibling abuse survivors' quality of intimate relations. These included family systems theory, psychodynamic theories of object relations and ego psychology, trauma theory, and resiliency theory. The basic human needs for nurturance, support, and protection are implicit in all these theories and express themselves through an interactive and interpersonal lens. They guided the initial inquiry and provided concepts that informants either confirmed or disconfirmed in the narratives of their lived experiences. Consequently, they provided a basis for analysis of thematic material that emerged from the data. Although these theories developed from the effects of family systems and parent-child interactions on the developing child, I anticipated they might also guide an understanding of sibling abuse.

Family systems theory acknowledges the powerful effects of parent-parent and parent-child relationships on various members of the family; it also speaks to the influence of each family member, including siblings, on other members. However, family systems theory as well as the theoretical literature about family relations, the impact of trauma, and discussion of object relatedness fails to address the significance of sibling relationships on adult outcomes. Yet, they had promise for this research and facilitated a conceptual understanding of sibling dynamics and the potential influence of sibling abuse on self-perception and relatedness. Object relations theory provided the clearest lens through which to explore the meaning making and internalization of the sibling abuse experience and the externalized manifestation of it in intimate relatedness. Ultimately,

this study expanded these theoretical frameworks to incorporate the neglected area of sibling abuse.

Psychoanalytic theories use the term “parent” to describe parent-parent and parent-child relationships and generally refer to the mother or father who rears children. In this dissertation, “parent” included birth and step-parents; I used it interchangeably with the term “caregiver” to include extended family members who may have had primary responsibility for the custody and care of children in a family.

Family Systems Theory

Family systems theory focuses on the interrelatedness among members of the family system and the processes between the family and its environment. It takes into account the parts of the system and the ways in which these parts influence each other and the whole system. It focuses on emotional processes and contends that family members are interdependent, so that a change in one member of the family affects the entire family system (Chibucos & Leite, 2005; Minuchin, 1985).

Family systems theory originated with the work of Bowen in the late 1970’s. He asserted that family members have intense emotional connections to each other and influence each other’s thoughts, feelings, and actions (Bowen, 1978). All children become involved in the emotional process of their parents to some extent (Bowen, 1978). Although each parent relates differently to children, the embodiment of emotionality is expressed in their response to the child.

Differentiation requires the ability to maintain separate emotional and intellectual functioning while maintaining a sense of connectedness. The level of differentiation achieved influences the ability of the individual to manage tension within or outside of

the family. Haskins (2003) found that abusive families who contended with personal, social and economic stress and substance abuse had older children assume parenting roles for younger children. This was an attempt to compensate for an unavailable parent. The authoritative and disciplinarian role given to a child created boundary confusion and the potential abuse of power. The stress of caretaking and resentment created aggressive relations between siblings (Haskins, 2003).

Structural family theory (Minuchin, 1985) asserts that an individual has simultaneous membership in various subsystems within a family: the parent-child subsystem, the sibling subsystem, the spousal subsystem, or the parent-child subsystem. Structural family theory attends to the boundaries within these various subsystems, the roles ascribed to family members, and hierarchical relations that reflect the family system's accepted and unaccepted behavior and communication (Chibucos & Leite, 2005; Minuchin, 1985). Depending on the type of boundaries that exist within a family, it may operate according to typical, expected, or hierarchical rules or function with inconsistent and unexpected rules. Generally, there is a hierarchy of power with the parental system at the top. A "healthy" family has clear and semi-diffuse boundaries with the parents interacting with some degree of authority (Minuchin, 1985)

The context of family processes may inform sibling relationships and developmental outcomes. Family systems theory has primarily addressed parent-child abuse and father-daughter incest (Caffaro & Conn-Caffaro, 1998), but not sibling abuse. Its discontinuity from empirical research and sociological concepts challenges its usefulness (L'Abate & Colondier, 1987). In addition, some view it as insufficient to account for all of the behavior in a family. The constructivist and social-constructionist

aspects of family systems theories whereby clinicians and researchers co-construct the "pathologies" they discover in families (Walsh, 1993) measured against "normal" families may be subjective. Clinicians with a psychodynamic orientation identify "healthy" family functioning as the ability to empathize and establish mutual trust. Despite such criticisms, a study seeking to understand the processes and relationships of family members as influential to the existence of the sibling abusive relationship might benefit from a lens that emphasizes family processes and the significant influence of the family environment.

Psychodynamic Theories

All psychodynamic theories build on Freud's drive theory demarcating the significance of the id, ego, and superego, repressed memories, and conscious thought as sources of difficulties. Initially, psychodynamic theories viewed behavior solely as the result of biological drives. However, over time they viewed behavior in relation to an individual's relationship with the world as they matured and developed (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983). Object relations theory recognizes that human behavior and relationships have conscious and unconscious influences; they are contextual and based on the internalization of external experiences. Understanding these transferences, the projection of aspects of earlier relationship or experiences onto current relationships is imperative to research seeking to explore the effect and emotional resonance of prior history on current functioning. Ego psychology also serves as a framework to understand defenses and an individual's adaptive capabilities that environmental forces may or may facilitate.

Object Relations Theory

Although Freud (1923) contended that human relatedness was biologically driven, it was Fairbairn (1952), an object relations theorist, who broke with earlier psychoanalysts and proposed that people's primary motivation was not biological, but instead a relationship or attachment to another human being. Although this theory highlights parents as a child's most significant interpersonal relationship, it also recognizes that siblings play a major role in the development of self. Siblings spend considerable time with each other and their relationships may be highly influential (Dunn & Kendrick, 1982).

Object relations theory focuses on current interpersonal relations as representations of reactivated internalized interpersonal relations from the past (Kernberg, 1984), emphasizing the lasting impression of early life relationships (St. Clair, 2004). The concept of transference (Freud, 1923) is a cornerstone of this theory. Real or perceived experiences may modulate an individual's fantasies and subjective perceptions of others (Goldstein, 2001). Prior experiences serve as a lens through which people view subsequent relationships. Transference involves the integration of early experiences, an internalization of emotions from those experiences, and a projection of internalized and unconscious manifestations of experience onto another person. Through this unconscious process of projection, figures of attachment in adulthood become substitutes for earlier relationships. The theory of transference was a sensitizing concept for this study concerning the abuse survivor's capacity for, and quality of intimate relatedness.

Fairbairn's (1952) work with abused children illustrates the concept of transference. He found children had an intense connection and loyalty to abusive parents

(Mitchell & Black, 1995). Although the pleasurable parent-child bond led to a "healthy" and pleasure-seeking relationship with others, when parents provided mostly painful experiences, children learned to seek pain as a form of connection rather than avoidance of pain. Because of negative interactions with key figures and early caregivers, children built subsequent relationships that mirrored these early interactions.

According to object relations theory, victims of child abuse still need attachment to their caregiver, and this need dictates the preservation of the image of the "good" parent; otherwise, the child may feel alone in the world. However, the cost of preserving this positive image of the parent is to sacrifice the self, resulting in "splitting." Victims of abuse develop a sense of inner "badness." This identification with the abuser's badness and even the abuser's possible perception of the victim as bad causes the victim to develop a belief they caused the abuse. The survivor's adaptation involves an ability to placate abusers, and the child develops into someone whose aim is to please others. Notably, object relations theory focused on the parent-child relationship and not the relationship between siblings when one assumed the care-giving role for another.

Trauma Theory

Trauma theory also emphasizes the important of earlier experiences on current relatedness and functioning. In particular, it highlights the aspect of acquiescence and accommodation that results from conditions of terror. In cases of child abuse, the home environment becomes fraught with terror and as a result, adaptation is required. Adaptation can take the form of hyper-vigilance to one's surroundings (Herman, 1992). One study of child abuse found that in conditions where the family environment was laden with pervasive terror, children developed pathological connections to the abuser

even at the cost of their own welfare (Herman, 1992). Subjected to unpredictable violence and dominant and controlling attackers, thrust the victim into a position of complete surrender. As a result, survivors often became intensely attuned to the emotional states of others (Herman, 1992).

The literature on traumatic family abuse focuses on the impact of parent-child abuse; in this context, victims of child abuse experience their most powerful adult as dangerous. Emotional abandonment results when caregivers fail to protect children who then experience a sense of betrayal, abandonment, and the perception that others are indifferent to their well-being. Ultimately, children become vulnerable, distrustful and feel unworthy (Herman, 1992; Krugman, 1987). Victims of childhood trauma often avoid intimate relationship in an attempt to ward of repeating the familiar but uncomfortable and often intolerable feelings. Trauma theory highlights the impairment of ego functioning that result from traumatic events. This includes a compromised ability to connect; poor interpersonal skills; and difficulty modulating affect (Van der Kolk, 1987). Similar to object relations theory, trauma theory identifies the internalization process as a key element of interpersonal relatedness.

Ego Psychology

Ego psychology builds on Freud's topographic theory of the layers of the mind. Building on the premise of a conscious, preconscious, and unconscious structure, ego psychology embraced Freud's tripartite theory of the id, ego, and superego. Identifying the id as unconscious and the ego and superego as part conscious (Blanck & Blanck, 1994), ego psychology introduced the adaptive function of the ego. Ego psychology made

it possible to consider how the individual learns to deal with external reality under usual circumstances, void of danger or threat (Goldstein, 1995).

Ego functions provide an individual with the ability to adapt to the external world. Although Freud contended that the ego derived its power from the id, Hartmann (1958) proposed that some ego functions were independent of the id and had autonomous functioning. Certain ego functions, such as memory, perception, learning, and motor functions have primary autonomy from the drives (Goldstein, 1995). In this sense, they are conflict-free because they do not arise only in response to frustrations and conflict. They are separate from the drives and develop according to the average expectable environment (Goldstein, 1995). However, when associated with conflict during early childhood development, these ego functions may lose their autonomy. For example, trauma may adversely affect memory, perception, or learning.

In secondary autonomy, behaviors and attitudes, which are initially associated with a conflict between drives and defenses, can become detached from their sources (Goldstein, 1995). An individual's capacities that developed from frustration and conflict undergo a change and acquire autonomy from the conflict from which they underwent. As a result, certain skills, strengths, interests, or ego functions such as relationships with others are separate from the stress-inducing event (Goldstein, 1995).

When people are well-adapted, productive, enjoy life, and have undisturbed equilibrium, there is a reciprocal relationship between the individual and its environment (Hartmann, 1958). Ego psychology theory contends that both mother and father (Hartman, 1958) play a dominant role in the child's perception of reality (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983).

The ego allows the capacity for adaptation, which occurs though activity that directly changes the environment (alloplastic) or the individual (autoplastic). The individual's state of adaptation to the environment is distinguished from the developmental process, which brings that state about (Hartmann, 1958). Alloplastic adaptation refers to the individual's capacity to elicit responses from the environment or relate to the environment primarily according to internal needs (Blank & Blank, 1994). Autoplastic adaptation is the ability to make inner modifications in response to perception of the environment and requires reality testing. Adaptation does not guarantee successful relationships and environmental mastery. However, the combination of instinctual drives, ego functions, and regulation contributes to survival means.

When a disturbance in the relationship between the individual and the environment disrupts adaptation, people develop defense mechanisms. These generally unconscious, intra-psychic processes help a person seek relief from anxiety (Polansky, 1991). Identification with the aggressor is one such defense.

Resiliency Theory

Resiliency is how people successfully meet life challenges in the face of stress or trauma. Resiliency theory builds on the strengths perspective and addresses the notion of adaptive behavior by acknowledging the capability of people to cope with adversity or risk (Gitterman& Germain, 2008). It considers a person's strengths, adaptation, healing and wellness, self-efficacy, and competence (Greene, 1999). Finding meaning and purpose in one's life helps to pave the road towards resiliency (Richardson, 2002). The cognitive and affective processing of experiences influences whether or not resilience develops (Rutter, 1999).

Resilience appears in the face of demonstrable risk or threat to development (Masten, 2001). Although adverse events in childhood do not necessarily lead to adult pathology, survivors of trauma do not escape pain. Protective factors, conditions that help people successfully negotiate trauma (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005), moderate the effects of risk, and enhance adaptation. As an ecological concept, resilience reflects complex person-in-environment transactions in addition to personal attributes (Gitterman & Germain, 2008), such as family support and the broader social environment. Although personal attributes include temperament, intelligence, coping skills, social skills, the ability to regulate emotional experiences, and self-esteem (Gitterman & Germain, 2008) these "skills" develop from biological, psychological, and environmental processes.

Supportive parent-child relationships increase a child's self-esteem (Gitterman & Germain, 2008). The family may also provide a critical protective factor (Hauser, Vieyra, Jacobson, & Wertlieb, 1985). Since family members directly influence coping skills, competency, and social dimensions, they influence child and adolescent vulnerability and resiliency. Aspects of family communication and interaction reinforce individual capacity for coping; individual family member relationships are as important as the influence of parental attitude and support (Hauser et. al., 1985).

Most of the literature on resiliency focuses on children. However, resilience is achievable at any point in the life cycle. Stress and coping are constructs similar to trauma and resilience. In Ego Psychology, coping is "realistic and flexible thoughts and acts that solve problems and thereby reduce stress" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p.118). It involves the application of defense mechanisms (Vaillant, 1977) that help a person manage stressful demands regardless of outcome (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Certain

defenses may be adaptive in certain situations and assessment of the adaptive strategy depends on the context (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Coping is a shifting process in which some defense mechanisms occur more than others (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). As the status of the person-in-environment relationship changes, coping addresses the problem that causes stress and regulates the emotional response to the stress. Another aspect of coping involves changing a stressful situation or controlling the meaning of experiences before they become stressful. People can also cope by controlling the stress after the experience (Pearline & Schooler, 1978).

Lazarus' (1984) stress-coping paradigm and the ecological perspective are similar. They both consider individual characteristics, the environment, and the exchanges between them. Although real life circumstances may create pain, stress is internally generated and has emotional consequences (Lazarus, 1984). These stresses are a result of a person's appraisal that they do not have the internal or external resources to deal with a difficult life event. Although some people may experience a difficult event or period as a stressor, others may perceive it as a challenge. While the first appraisal views the stressor exceeding one's personal and environmental resources and involves a reactive response, the second consists of taking responsive measures and initiates coping strategies. Consistent with resiliency theory, adaptive coping can lead to personal growth, increased self-esteem, competence, and relatedness (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). For example, remembering the rejecting experience and forming a coherent account of the abuse can serve to protect the individual from aligning oneself with those behaviors or seeking out others who repeat the abusive behavior (Gitterman, 2001).

As with family systems theory and psychodynamic theories, the risk resilience paradigm developed within the context of the family or the parent-child relationship. None of these theories isolates the sibling relationship as a significant feature in development. In addition, they do not consider the consequences of sibling abuse as a unique phenomenon.

Summary

The theories described in this review served as sensitizing concepts and established the basis for constructing the interview guide for the dissertation. They suggested how family processes and the emotional climate of the family influences conflict inclusive of parental unavailability, differential treatment, and the availability of internal and external resources. Historically, most of these theories focused primarily on parent-child relationships and dynamics that may influence the developing individual, while the psychodynamic theories consider the parent-child's dynamic as an influential force on the quality of the sibling relationship. As such, they did not attend to the impact siblings have on one another and the implications of destructive sibling relationships and reflect the lack of scholarly interest in the topic of sibling abuse. However, they served a parallel guide for inquiry and contributed to the analysis of features of the discourse that emerged in the study.

Chapter 3: REVIEW OF THE EMPIRICAL LITERATURE

Introduction

Defining Sibling Abuse

Researchers do not always differentiate sibling abuse from sibling rivalry. This suggests a lack of awareness of the intensity of sibling abuse (Wiehe, 1990) and its potential consequences for victims. In this study, I defined sibling abuse as the presence of physical or emotional acts perpetrated by one sibling on another that resulted in feelings of fear, shame, and hopelessness (Wiehe, 1990; Kiselica & Morrill-Richards, 2007). Definitions of sibling abuse from previous studies shaped a definition that enabled me to assess self-identified experiences of abuse in contrast to rivalry. Sibling abuse involves an act where the abusive sibling gains a sense of control and minimizes the other sibling's self-esteem (Whipple & Finton, 1995). It is different from sibling rivalry because it is perpetual, consistent, and severe. Stock (1993) suggested that legal definitions contribute to the lack of distinction between sibling abuse, sibling violence, and sibling rivalry; consequently, there is not a clear definition for sibling abuse. Since no specific federal law protects siblings from other siblings, it is unlikely people outside of the family will take action as in cases of parent-child abuse. As a result, protection from a sibling generally occurs when a parent files charges against the perpetrator on behalf of the victim (Stock, 1993) or child welfare investigation uncovers it as a risk factor or a threat to the safety of a child.

Previous researchers have qualified physical sibling abuse that result in injuries such as bruises, welts, abrasions, lacerations, wounds, cuts, bone fractures, and other evidence of physical harm or injury inflicted by a sibling (Wiehe, 1990; Hart, Germain, & Brassard, 1987). However, physical evidence of injury is not the only indicator of

physical abuse, which could also include behavior that is physically intrusive, physically painful, and experienced as physically overwhelming. Emotional abuse involves active expressions of rejection and actions that deprecate the sibling, including verbal denigration and ridicule, actions or threats that cause a sibling extreme fear and anxiety. Another form of emotional abuse occurs when a sibling uses another for advantage or profit (Schneider, Ross, Graham, & Zielinski, 2005). Sexual abuse between siblings was not a topic of this study due to an interest in learning about the subtleties of the impact of emotional or physical sibling abuse and the pre-existing literature on sibling incest and assault.

In this study, I screened informants for inclusion by a general criterion of enduring ongoing physical or emotional acts from a sibling during childhood or adolescence. They must have been denigrated or ridiculed by a sibling; emotionally bullied; physically harmed or threatened; and often felt fearful and/or anxious around their sibling. However, the subjective interpretation of sibling abuse was necessary to allow room for discovery and allow a definition of the phenomenon to grow out of the experiences subjects reported. Both the extant literature and self-reported experiences of the participants operated as a working definition of sibling abuse, which respondents' descriptions further shaped. Operational definitions emerged which subsequently included the emotional experience of sibling abuse, its resonance, and consequences.

Limitations of the Sibling Abuse Empirical Literature

The literature on sibling abuse is limited despite findings that its effects may be devastating and long-lasting (McLaurin, 2005; Caffaro & Conn-Caffaro, 1998; Wiehe, 1997). Although researchers have found sibling abuse has long-term ramifications, the

particular aspects of these difficulties remain relatively unexplored. The current sibling abuse literature focuses on sibling incest and assault (Caffaro & Conn-Caffaro, 1998), children in foster care (Linares, 2006), perceived acceptability (Hardy, Beers, Burgess, & Taylor, 2010), and ethnic differences in the interpretation and experiences of sibling abuse (Rapoza, Cook, Zaveri, & Malley-Morrison, 2010). Researchers also focused on learned helplessness in adult survivors (McLaurin, 2005) and feelings of guilt and shame in both survivors and perpetrators (Garey, 1998). This dissertation addressed the paucity of literature on the effects of sibling abuse on the survivor's intimate relationships.

Overview of Child Abuse Literature

Studies on child abuse are vast and reveal the effects of parent-child abuse on the child during childhood, adolescence, and adulthood including relational aspects of functioning. Research on parent-child abuse generates insight into the potential interpersonal repercussions of sibling abuse, because siblings are also important agents of socialization and have significant ability to influence development (Kahn, 1988).

Studies on domestic violence presented here establish causal indicators of sibling abuse and demonstrate the consequences of experiencing and witnessing family violence on the children's adjustment. They support the notion that exposure to inter-parental violence shapes one's perception of intimate relations. In addition, exposure to and witnessing violence within the family can create the groundwork for dysfunctional relationships and distorted perceptions of relatedness.

Research on the sibling bond and the relationship of attachment theory to the quality of sibling relationships were critical to this study, because they served as a lens through which to view sibling abuse and intimacy. Finally, as a prelude to a review of the

literature on sibling abuse, research on the incidence of sibling violence demonstrates the social construction of normative behavior between siblings, which may explain the lack of recognition of sibling abuse.

The reviewed literature establishes the basis for the dearth of information on sibling abuse and support for further exploration of its long-term manifestations. Likewise, empirical studies on domestic violence and parent-child abuse demonstrate the effects of destructive and abusive familial relationships and create direction for inquiry into sibling abuse based on potential common aspects of context and resonance.

Child Abuse and Development

Physical abuse and sexual abuse have adverse effects on the developing child that continues into adulthood. The perpetrator of abuse exploits the emotional dependence of the victim and fuels feelings of helplessness and rage in an effort to deliberately eradicate or compromise the child's separate identity (Shengold, 1989). Shengold (1989) called child abuse, "soul murder," which when intense and enduring leads the child to be overwhelmed to the point of causing psychic damage. Although there have been many studies about the effects of childhood physical and sexual abuse (Cyr, Wright, McDuff & Perron, 2002; Ferrara, 2002; Finkelhor & Browne, 1988; Ammerman, Cassis, Heren, & Van Hasselt, 1986), the long-term effects of emotional abuse during childhood are not as widely studied. This may be due to the difficulty in isolating emotional abuse, since it does not occur in a vacuum (Schneider, 2005). However, research about parent-child abuse offers insights into the devastating consequences of abuse, particularly within the family, and sets the stage for the developmental considerations of the effects of sibling abuse.

Most studies involving children do not differentiate abuse in terms of severity and extent of injury or specific types of abuse, frequency, and duration of abusive incidents. However, the effects of childhood abuse are considerable and include problems with peers, aggression, social withdrawal, isolation (Ferrara, 2002; Trickett & McBride-Change, 1995; Briere, 1992), depression, anxiety, conduct problems, and deficits in intellectual and academic functioning (Ammerman et. al., 1986). Few researchers have studied the differential impact of abuse on girls and boys (Trickett & McBride-Chang, 1995). However, one study found that whereas physically abused boys and girls demonstrated similar levels of externalization of problems, girls showed more internalization of problems (Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1990).

A few studies have compared physically abused and non-abused children and found that physically abused children were significantly more depressed, hopeless, unhappy, and had lower self-esteem than non-abused children (Kazdin Moser, Colbus, & Bell, 1985; Pelcovitz, Kaplan, Goldenberg, Mandel, Lehane, & Guarrera, 1994; Toth, Manly, & Cicchetti, 1992). This occurred across samples of children of both genders and with different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. Conflicting results regarding the level of aggression in each population were found in a meta-analysis of comparative studies of physically abused children and non-abused children (Rudo, Powell, & Dunlap, 1998). Physically abused children were significantly more aggressive than non-abused children (Feldman, Salzinger, Rosario, Alvarado, Caraballo, & Hammer, 1995; Kinard, 1980; Trickett, 1993) and had more difficulty with trust and separation (Kinard, 1982). On the contrary, several studies found no significant heightened aggression for physically

abused children than children who had not been physically abused (Kravic, 1987; Straker & Jacobson, 1981; Toth et al., 1992; Wolfe & Mosk, 1983).

Influence of Child Abuse on Adolescent Functioning

Studies on child abuse or neglect focus primarily on its effects on infants, toddlers, or pre-school children. Research on adolescents abused during childhood is sparse but it addresses sexual abuse and indicates a range of behavioral and emotional problems including depression, low self-esteem, aggression, truancy, and substance abuse (Meyerson, Long, Miranda, & Marx, 2002; Malinosky-Rummell & Hansen, 1993; Briere and Runtz, 1988; Finkelhor & Brown, 1988). Increased sexual activity during adolescence may also be an indicator of sexual abuse, and problems such as unplanned pregnancy, sexually aggressive behavior, sexual re-victimization, and self-destructive acts are found to occur (Godbout, Lussier, & Sabourin, 2006).

The developmental perspective emphasizes that adolescent adjustment problems arise from childhood maltreatment which, when not addressed, leads to impairment of later developmental tasks (Kaplow & Widom, 2007). A comparative study of abused and non-abused school-aged children and adolescents found that abused children displayed pervasive and severe academic and socio-emotional problems in childhood and adolescence (Putnam, 1997; Kurtz, Gaudin, Wodarski, & Howing, 1993). Included was a failure to process social cues which leads to interpersonal problems (Putnam, 1997).

At least one prospective study (English, Graham, Litrownik, Everson, & Bangdiwala, 2005) suggests there is no relationship between age of onset of maltreatment and psychological functioning, while other studies (Bolger, Patterson, & Kupersmidt, 1999; Keiley, Howe, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 2001) report significant associations

between the age maltreatment occurred and psychological distress. These latter studies claim that children abused earlier demonstrate lower self-esteem (Bolger et. al., 1999) and more significant adjustment problems (Keiley et. al., 2001) than children abused later in childhood.

Child Abuse and Adult Functioning

Influence of Child Abuse on Adult Functioning

There are various outcomes associated with each different type of child maltreatment, for example neglect, sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse, or witnessing family violence. Despite the likelihood that a particular type of child maltreatment does not occur in isolation, researchers have only recently studied the coexistence and long-term effects of multiple types of maltreatment. Psychological maltreatment is often an aspect of other forms of child maltreatment. Long-term symptoms in adults who have experienced a combination of physical abuse, neglect, and verbal abuse as children and adolescents include higher levels of trauma, depression, and self-deprecation than those who have experienced a single episode of maltreatment or one or two types of maltreatment (Higgins & McCabe, 2000).

A cohort study followed 496 abused and neglected children into young adulthood (Kaplow & Widom, 2007). Women represented slightly more than half of the sample. The initial phase of the research identified abused or neglected children through county juvenile and adult criminal records. The second phase involved interviewing these individuals at approximately 22 years, and the third phase assessed the participants when they were approximately 40 years old.

These researchers used The National Institute of Mental Health Diagnostic Interview Schedule to assess psychiatric symptoms, an instrument designed for lay interviewers. In addition, The Depression Scale and the Beck Anxiety Inventory assessed specific symptoms of depression and anxiety as forms of psychological distress. Four measures assessed social functioning at follow-up interviews. Control variables included gender and age (Kaplow & Widom, 2007).

This study found differential effects of child maltreatment based on the age of onset of abuse or neglect, and the authors reinforced that earlier onset of maltreatment predicted more symptoms of psychological distress in adulthood. Specifically, maltreated infants were at greater risk for the development of anxiety and depression in adulthood, while childhood onset of maltreatment predicted more behavioral problems in adulthood (Kaplow & Widom, 2007). This study included only individuals abused or neglected up until the age of eleven, thus excluding adolescents.

Childhood physical abuse has also been linked to adult violence towards dating partners, self-injurious and suicidal behavior, nonviolent criminal behavior, and interpersonal problems (Malinosky-Rummel & Hansen, 1993). Adults who experienced physical abuse as children were more likely to abuse their own children (Kalmuss, 1984; Straus et. al., 1980; Steinmetz, 1977). A prospective study of abuse with samples gathered from documented court cases included both data mining and interviews twenty years after indicated that adults who reported experiences of abuse as compared to those who did not reported higher rates of virtually every type of psychopathology (Horwitz, 2001). Men were more likely to report these symptoms than women were.

Comparative studies conducted on characteristics of father-daughter incest and brother-sister sexual abuse and associated psychosocial distress found comparable long-term symptoms such as substance abuse, depression, suicidality, and eating disorders (Cyr, Wright, McDuff, Perron, 2002; Rudd & Herzberger, 1999). In addition, characteristics and consequences of sibling incest were of equal magnitude than those of father-daughter sexual abuse (Cyr et. al., 2002). However, despite the significant effects of abuse of sisters by their brothers, more studies exist about sexual abuse committed by fathers and other adults than sibling sexual abuse (Jones, 2002).

Abuse and Attachment Patterns

Adults who have been physically or sexually abused or neglected by caregivers during childhood have preoccupied, fearful, and dismissive attachment styles. In stressful relational situations, men demonstrate avoidance of closeness and develop other psychological symptoms, while women demonstrate abandonment anxiety, more so in those women who have experienced sexual abuse (Godbout, Lussier & Sabourin, 2006). This abandonment anxiety affects the woman in the couple relationship through fear of rejection, feelings of low self-worth, and intense dependency needs creating couple distress (Godbout et. al, 2006).

Childhood experiences of maltreatment may influence adult intimate relationships and their overall quality, leading to dissatisfaction and infidelity (Colman & Widom, 2004). Sexual abuse, physical abuse, and neglect in childhood lead to higher divorce rates in adulthood (Colman & Widom, 2004). The sense of powerlessness, betrayal, and intrusion by victims of child sexual abuse result in sexual difficulty with poor self-esteem, feelings of isolation, and difficulty trusting others (Finkelhor & Browne, 1988).

Researchers who study sexual abuse theorize that experiences with close relatives are more traumatizing than experiences with people outside of the family (Finkelor & Browne, 1988). The sexually abused child's trauma heightens when outreach to a caregiver fails to result in the acknowledgment or termination of abuse. The child's inability to find adults who understand, believe, or end what is happening magnifies feelings of powerlessness.

Abuse of *any kind* threatens one's sense of trust (Kahn, 1988). Both overt and covert messages of inadequacy and worthlessness conveyed to the abused individual through these acts results in interpersonal struggles. Although research has predominantly focused on parent-child relationships, the sibling relationship is another powerful and influential dyadic relationship within the family constellation that can serve as a precursor to relational perceptions (Kahn, 1988).

Domestic Violence between Adults and its Effects on Children

Numerous studies on the effects of domestic violence on children determined that both parent-child violence and witnessing domestic violence result in increased aggression and delinquency among children (Grych, Jouriles, Swank, McDonald, & Norwood, 2000; Levendosky, Huth-Bocks, & Semel, 2002; O'Keefe, 1996). One study conducted on the patterns of adjustment among children of battered women (Grych et. al., 2000) concluded a "dose-effect" model of the effects of family violence. It proposed that children's pathology increased with more exposure to father-mother violence. However, findings about the specific nature of long-term psychological consequences have been inconsistent, because the type and severity of symptoms varies. Researchers report problems such as anxiety and depression, externalizing behaviors, low self-esteem, and

other pathologies (Fosco et al., 2007; Grych et. al, 2000; Levendosky et.al., 2000; O'Keefe, 1996). Some reported correlations between witnessing family violence and abuse in dating, marital, and parent-child relationships in adulthood (Fosco, et al., 2007), while others found that intra-familial conflict was associated with aggressive behavior and vulnerability towards victimization in intimate relationships (Jackson, 1996). Although there is greater susceptibility to both victimization and aggression, most children who have lived in violent families do not abuse their partners or children (Fosco et. al., 2007).

Some indicate that children who experience being abused or have been abused and witnessed domestic abuse have more negative outcomes than those who have only witnessed adult domestic violence (McClosky, Figueredo, & Koss, 1995; Hughes, Parkinson, & Vargo, 1989). For a young child in particular, exposure to violence coupled with the parents' lack of ability to provide a safe environment triggers an even greater need for emotional soothing and results in the creation of an internal model of unmet needs (Dutton, 2000). Adolescents have poorer outcomes when they witness inter-parental violence and are at greater risk for becoming abusive (Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980; Kalmuss, 1984). The trauma they experience witnessing inter-parental violence threatens the adolescent's belief in their parent's capacity to provide security and protection (Dutton, 2000).

Understanding children's immediate responses to family violence can help determine how they form beliefs and expectations about aggression and intimate relationships (Fosco et. al., 2007; Higgins and McCabe, 2003). Family systems theory and object relations theory provide a framework for understanding how these experiences

may shape children's representations of relationships and the insecurity children experience in violent home environments. The insecure attachments that produce and evolve from abusive environments have a direct effect on later interpersonal relatedness and the ability to form satisfying intimate relationships (Fosco et. al., 2007).

Sibling Relationships

The Nature of the Sibling Relationship

As described earlier, none of the classical theories of personality or psychological development portrays siblings as important agents of socialization. Historically, parental influence on child development was the primary focus of these theories. However, the developmental importance of peer relations is receiving recognition because families are complex social systems in which each member has the potential to influence another (Lamb & Sutton-Smith, 1982). The dyadic sibling relationship may assume great importance, because it can powerfully reinforce the processes of communication, empathy, and affection.

Although the sibling relationship was not a part of classical theories of personality, researchers have demonstrated that siblings are a major influence on each other's behavior and development (Lamb & Sutton-Smith, 1992; Cicerelli, 1995). Siblings influence socialization and learning and provide both direct and indirect effects on skills, expectancies, tasks, and interpretations of companionship. These dynamics help to cultivate a preferred level of intimacy and distinct style of communication (Leader, 2007).

Although conflict is inherent in any close relationship, how conflict is resolved in sibling relationships can foster or hinder peer relationships and influence socialization

(Vespo, 1997). Common causes of sibling rivalry include conflict over tangible goods and division of labor in the household (Felson, 1983). Rivalry also develops from age differences in the family and a desire for power, parental attention, recognition, and love or jealousy of younger siblings (Felson, 1983; Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz et, 1980). Factors such as divorce, family size, and levels of family violence might also influence sibling conflicts (Lamb & Sutton-Smith, 1982)**.** Family systems theorists assert that conflict arises between siblings because of the intense emotional involvement, the amount of time spent together, and involuntary membership (Gelles & Straus, 1979). Others believe that power struggles within the sibling relationship have more to do with living together than with being siblings (Raffaelli, 1992); nonetheless, these are ways of testing grounds for appropriate peer boundaries in relationships outside of the home.

Sibling relationships also influence self-esteem. An emotionally denigrating or physically violent experience elicits vulnerability to one's well-being. An individual with low self-esteem has the potential to lack assertiveness, social skills, and the ability to resolve interpersonal conflict, resulting in a susceptibility to either victimization or perpetration of aggressive behavior (Lewis & Fremouw, 2001).

The Sibling Relationship in Adolescence

Although there are numerous empirical studies on the effect of the parent-child and marital relationship on adolescent development, the quality of sibling relationships on adolescent development has been underexplored. However, some researchers have studied this area, among them, Reese-Weber (2008), who examined attitudes towards adolescent dating and sibling violence. He found that people were more accepting of sibling violence between adolescents compared to dating violence among adolescents.

This finding may indicate a complacent attitude towards sibling violence and a general acceptance that sibling relationships include aggression as a matter of course. Other studies have found that same-sex siblings share greater closeness during adolescence than opposite sex siblings, and conflict is greater when children are closer in age (Bhurmester, 1992; Buhrmester & Furman, 1987).

Sperling and Berman (1994) found that adolescents who felt they had secure relationship with their siblings exhibited higher self-esteem and emotional well-being; they were less depressed and had less social anxiety than those who perceived a lack of support from parents. A longitudinal study of 374 families measured the potential effects of sibling relationships on adolescent development (Yeh & Lempers, 2004). Here, the researchers found that high self-esteem predicted a more positive sibling relationship, and more positive sibling relationships predicted higher self-esteem and more positive peer relationships. A bidirectional relationship also occurred between a quality sibling relationship and a quality friendship.

Compared to children, adolescents reported less interaction, less intimacy, less companionship, and less affection with siblings (Buhrmester, 1992), yet sibling relationships did not necessarily become less important in adolescence (Yeh & Lempers, 2004). Comparing the importance of adolescent relationships with relationships with parents, siblings, friends, and teachers, adolescents ranked their closest sibling higher than they ranked parents for companionship, intimacy, and nurturance (Lempers and Clark-Lempers, 1992).

Sibling Relationships and the Development of Intimacy

Some empirical studies support the significance of the quality of sibling relationships for intimate relationships in adulthood. A retrospective study explored associations between emotional qualities of sibling relationships during adolescence and perceived aspects of intimacy in women's adult interpersonal relationships (Novit, 1998). One hundred females between the ages of 18 and 30 completed self-report questionnaires to measure predictor variables associated with sibling relationships such as warmth, closeness, conflict, status, and power. The researcher operationalized "intimacy" as the degree of perceived support and communication ease. Because adolescence is a developmental phase during which children develop the capacity for intimacy, this study suggested that the sibling bond during adolescence was a mitigating factor in the development of women's intimacy and interpersonal dynamics in young adulthood. Warm and close sibling relationships during adolescence were associated with women's perceptions of support and open communication experienced in their current interpersonal relationships; the greater the warmth and closeness experienced with a sibling, the greater participants felt positive about their adult intimate relationships (Novit, 1998).

Sibling transference has been found to influence partner choice (Bank & Kahn, 1997; Toman, 1988; Abend, 1984) and may be equally or more important than the effects of parent-child relationships on intimate relatedness (Leader, 2007; Klagsburn, 1992). A key resource for couples resolving conflict is to explore themes of sibling experiences (Mones, 2001). Recognition of current themes of power and hierarchy, fairness and

justice, communication styles, conflict resolution, friendship, loyalty, and complementary role development are important in the context of the sibling relationship (Mones, 2001).

Sibling Violence and Aggression

Sibling violence occurs more frequently than parent-child or spousal violence (Goodwin & Roscoe, 1990; Straus, 1988) and can even be fatal; ten percent of all murders in families occur when a sibling kills another child in the family (Gelles, 1997). Violence was found to occur at least once in the history of all sibling relationships (Greenleaf,1990), and two-thirds of parents reported that their teenage children hit a brother or sister on average nineteen times a year (Straus et al.,1980).

Social norms may encourage expressions of aggression among siblings which result in its normalization and leads parents to view aggression as “good training” for their child to learn to handle themselves. Nonetheless, research on sibling violence has not produced a consistent language for the experience of sibling abuse. In fact, the majority (70%) of 218 college-aged students sampled experienced or perpetrated severe sibling violence but did not identify their experience as a form of violence (Kettrey and Emery, 2006). “Conflict”, “rivalry”, “aggression”, “violence” and “abuse” were used interchangeably to describe physical violence among siblings that depicted the degree or intensity of this behavior (Kettrey & Emery, 2006). Feelings of isolation may stem from these terms which invalidate the abusive sibling experience (Ketterey & Emery, 2006); this confirms the need for further clarification of this experience.

In an early study of sibling conflict, Steinmetz (1977) explored the methods parents use to resolve conflict with their children and discern whether siblings used similar methods as parents when they had conflicts. She also wanted to determine

whether the use of violence as a means of conflict resolution mirrored societal attitudes about the use of verbal and physical aggression as modes of resolution. This study involved a random sample of 57 families selected by public-opinion polling and market research organizations. Criteria for inclusion in the study were intact families with two or more children between the ages of three and 18 years of age. This multi-method study employed in-depth interviews with parents, questionnaires completed by a parent and an eldest child, and daily conflict logs. The logs included reports of any conflict that occurred, members involved, and methods used to resolve the conflict. The researcher did not define "conflict" for the study participants; instead, she relied on individual families to define it.

Parents stated that their friends experienced the same behavior among their children, and therefore, they considered violent sibling interactions normative. A large majority of all sibling pairs used violence to resolve conflict: 78% of sibling pairs eight years of age or younger, 68% of pairs aged 9 to 14 and 63% of those aged 15 or older used violence as a means of resolving conflict (Steinmetz, 1977). However, the decline in aggression between siblings as they aged may have been an artifact of increased time spent outside the home as children matured. An alternative explanation was that because of increased time spent with peers, parents might not have witnessed sibling conflict. Although physical aggression appeared to decrease with age, findings indicated that adolescents typically became more verbally aggressive in their attempts to resolve conflict. Conflict resolution between siblings reflected parent-parent and parent-child interaction demonstrating the significance of learned responsiveness (Steinmetz, 1977). Results also indicated that the brother/sister dyad (68%) represented the highest level of

violence amongst sibling pairs. Triangulation increased the reliability of these findings, since it included the perspective of two observers, parent, and eldest child. However, absence of inquiry into the youngest siblings' perception of conflict resolution neglected the significance of violence and conflict resolution from their perspective.

A later study assessed the types of behavior that lead to violent acts, combative verbal interactions, and methods of resolution among siblings (Goodwin & Roscoe, 1990). This was an anonymous survey of 272 adolescents in high school aged 16 to 19 consisting of 141 females and 131 males who were predominantly white (91.2%). The sample represented various gender dyads. The Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, 1979) assessed the occurrence of physical violence.

Adolescents experienced negative interactions less frequently than younger subjects did, perhaps because they spent less time in the home (Goodwin & Roscoe, 1990; Steinmetz, 1997). Violence experienced between siblings was also found to be the most significant predictor of adult violent behavior. Significant gender differences were revealed. More females than males reported sibling teasing, and more males admitted threatening to harm their siblings. A comparison of males' and females' experiences as victims or perpetrators of antagonistic behaviors found males significantly more likely to report threatening to harm a sibling rather than being victims. Overall, more males than females were victims and perpetrators of severe acts of violence; these included hitting with a fist and hitting with an object. The greatest incidence of hitting with a fist occurred among brothers, and the greatest amount of scratching occurred among sisters (Goodwin & Roscoe, 1990).

A more recent study on the verbally aggressive messages emerging adult siblings use with each other (Myers & Bryant, 2008) found that individuals who experienced various types of verbal aggression from name-calling to physical threats did not differ in their perceived hurtfulness, intensity, and intent. This raises consideration of the effects of consistent, severe, and multi-type abuses from a sibling.

The Enduring Consequences of Sibling Abuse

The effects of sibling violence during childhood are damaging and long lasting (Graham-Bermann, Cutler, Litzenberger, Schwartz, 1994; Bank & Kahn, 1982). A study of victims, perpetrators, mutually violent siblings, and nonviolent siblings (Graham-Bermann, et al., 1994) compared the effects of highly conflictual or violent childhood sibling relationships on adult functioning. Most felt they did not have highly conflictual sibling relationships. Yet, almost 20% of the subjects felt that the level of conflict directed at them was worse than in other families, and almost 17% reported they perpetrated more conflict than other siblings they knew. Males reported higher levels of harassing a sibling than females and middle and younger siblings reported being picked on more often than older siblings did (Graham-Bermann, et al., 1994).

Importantly, females in this study were more likely to have higher levels of anxiety and lower self-esteem when experiencing high levels of emotional aggression or severe violence from a sibling (Graham-Bermann, et al., 1994). They had higher levels of negative problem solving and higher levels of depression and anxiety. Contrary to women, men evidenced a weaker association between emotional outcome and negative forms of conflict resolution. However, there was a significant association between low

self-esteem and use of negative problem solving and emotional aggression (Graham-Bermann, et al., 1994).

These researchers found that conflict among siblings proved to be a source of long-term distress for approximately 30% of the sample (Graham-Bermann, et al., 1994). This finding set a precedent to explore the long-term distress associated with sibling abuse and the manner in which this experience informed a child's expectations for romantic partnership. In addition, the more detrimental effects of sibling violence on women suggest they may feel more negatively affected than men, or more likely to make associations between their current emotional state and their earlier experiences. Nonetheless, the differential gender experiences raises interest in determining not only the prevalence of these findings but also causal factors. Similarly, high levels of conflict characterized by gender and birth order (Graham-Bermann et. al., 1994) and the distinction between mild and severe forms of conflict raises potential to explore the impact of these variables on adult outcomes of sibling abuse.

Sibling Abuse and the Work of V.R. Wiehe

In the most comprehensive work on sibling abuse to date, Wiehe (1990) conducted a qualitative exploratory study of the feelings, emotions, and experiences of survivors of sibling abuse. The study instrument was a fourteen page mailed questionnaire with both open-ended and closed-ended questions. Wiehe conducted a content analysis of the narrative findings to explore themes such as types of sibling abuse and potential causes, effects, and parental responses. Although he obtained a vast amount of information, the use of a mailed instrument limited exploration and opportunities for clarification, depth, and emergent flexibility. There has been minimal research on sibling

abuse since this pivotal study; however, recently there has been growing interest in the subject. Nonetheless, symptoms continue to go unrecognized. National statistics on sibling abuse are murky, parents do not report cases because they are embarrassed, view the behavior as normative, and the culture of freedom of parenting allows them to raise children as they see fit (Wiehe, 1990).

For recruitment, Wiehe sought informants through advertisements in major newspapers, newsletters of professional associations, and self-help groups related to child abuse. Mailings went to directors of family service agencies and organizations dedicated to the prevention and treatment of domestic violence. Letters sent to members of professional associations throughout the United States and Canada requested that they share the research questionnaire with their clients. Clients willing to participate in the research and had experienced physical, emotional, or sexual abuse by a sibling while growing up completed an anonymous questionnaire.

Despite this extensive and far-reaching recruiting strategy, Wiehe (1990) garnered a sample of 150 respondents: 89% (134) were female and 11% (16) male, with an average age of thirty-seven. Eight-five percent (127) were white; 13% (20) were African-American, and 2% (3) were of other racial or ethnic groups. Thirty-four percent (51) had attended graduate school; 50% (75) had attended college or completed an undergraduate degree; and 16% (24) had a high school education or less.

Based on this groundbreaking research Wiehe produced several books between 1990 and 1998. Importantly, he established the distinction between normative sibling rivalry and abusive sibling interactions and spotlighted the critical role parents play in prevention of sibling abuse. Further, he uncovered many explanations for sibling abuse

such as modeling parental behavior; differential parenting of siblings; parents overwhelmed with their own problems; drug and alcohol abuse in the family; mental and physical illness; ineffective parent interventions regarding conflict and lack of supervision; inappropriate parental expectations; and parental normalizing of the abusive behavior (1991).

Parental responses to sibling abuse varied from ignoring or minimizing the abuse to joining with the abuser by blaming the victims ineffectively responding to the behavior, exhibiting indifference, and disbelieving the abuse was occurring (Wiehe, 1990). Although these findings presented suggestions and strategies for parental intervention, Wiehe surprisingly did not explore the emotional and psychological effects of such parental responses upon the victim.

Nonetheless, the survivors' experiences suggested that the ramifications of sibling abuse were long-term and lasting. They experienced low self-esteem, depression, anger with the perpetrator, and difficulty with interpersonal relationships. Survivors had a tendency to report being "overly" sensitive, depressed, and engaged in self-blame and also described problems in relationships with the opposite sex, including repeating the victim role in relationships, feeling distrustful, fearful, and suspicious. Some experienced symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, eating disorders, alcohol and substance abuse.

Children generally responded to sibling emotional abuse by fighting back verbally, but this often resulted in the abusive sibling intensifying the abuse either verbally or physically. Victims of physical abuse tended to hide or withdraw from their sibling, because they were often smaller or weaker and unable to fight back effectively.

Additionally, victims of sexual abuse generally did not fight back; instead, they dealt with the abuse by pretending to be asleep during the assault (Wiehe, 1991).

Sixty-seven percent of Wiehe's respondents reported histories of sexual abuse by a sibling, while 37% reported physical or emotional abuse. He stated that society recognized that sex between siblings was reprehensible, whereas physical and emotional abuse did not have a clear definition separate from sibling rivalry. Thus, he proposed this might explain the higher reports of sexual abuse victims among his informants. Although limited research on sibling sexual abuse exists, more researchers have studied brother-sister incest than physical and/or emotional abuse (Caffaro & Conn-Caffaro, 1998; Cyr et. al, 2002; Jones 2002).

Subsequent Research on Adults Who Experienced Sibling Abuse and Violence

Limited research on sibling abuse that followed Wiehe's work has not looked specifically at aspects of intimacy from the survivors' perspective. Rather, they focused on various aspects of the sibling abuse experience including emotional resonance, family environment, and later dating violence.

Garey (1998) studied the long-term effects of sibling emotional and physical abuse on adult self-concept and feelings of guilt and shame. His sample included one hundred eighty six subjects (131 female, 55 male) between the ages of 25 and 81 years who were self-identified victims and perpetrators of sibling emotional or physical abuse while growing up. The researcher recruited the participants from universities, civic associations, and psychotherapists. This study utilized self-administered questionnaires that included demographic questions and instruments to measure self-concept and feelings of guilt and shame.

Adults emotionally or physically abused by a sibling while growing up had low measured levels of self-concept compared with adults who did not experience sibling abuse. Those who had perpetrated emotional or physical sibling abuse had lower measured levels of guilt than the victims did.

This investigation found the greatest prevalence of victimization among females by males; younger siblings by older siblings; between natural siblings; and in the middle class (Garey, 1998). This quantitative study relied on subjects who voluntarily identified as having been either the victim or perpetrator of sibling abuse while growing up. Again, studies that utilize self-identification of sibling abuse do not begin with a consistent definition of the experience. In addition, this study did not differentiate experiences of abuse or seek to compare degrees of abuse with particular aspects of self-concept. Review of the literature on parent-child and sibling emotional and physical abuse makes apparent the difficulty in distinguishing the impact of the various types of abuse as they often co-occur.

Garey's study supports Wiehe's (1990) findings that emotional sibling abuse has a negative influence on self-concept which presents strong implications for relatedness and suggests further exploration regarding the ways in which negative self-concept effects the quality of intimacy.

Research on physical and sexual sibling abuse in childhood studied contributing family characteristics; how various family configurations and parental messages affect the relationship between siblings in abusive dyads; and how sibling incest and assault in childhood affects the adult survivor's ability to form adequate, sustaining intimate relationships (Caffaro and Conn-Caffaro, 1998). A convenience sample was used to

interview 73 adult survivors of sibling incest and assault recruited from advertisements in professional newsletters, colleagues in the local and national child abuse prevention community, and the local Child Protective Services. Participants were predominantly white (77%) and middle class and ranged in age from 18 to 54 years with a mean age of 38. This study found that contributing factors to the presence of sibling incest and assault included parents with an exterior role and re-entering the family system in an authoritarian or abusive manner. Abusive behavior of the caregiver was another contributing factor (Caffaro &Conn-Caffaro, 2005).

Caffaro and Conn-Caffaro's (2005) findings are consistent with Wiehe's (1990) regarding the effects of the physical and/or emotional absence of parents. Through overt or covert messages, unavailable parents might designate the oldest child as caregiver regardless of the child's appropriate sense of authority and readiness for this role. This abdication of responsibility creates a basis for the older sibling to become abusive to younger siblings as boundaries are blurred.

Adult relationships clearly suffer with a history of brother-sister sexual assault (Caffaro &Conn-Caffaro, 2005). Almost two-thirds of the sibling incest survivors over the age of 25 never married. About one-third of the participants had no contact with a sibling. The more subtle manifestations of the abusive relationship in the genesis of intimate relatedness remain unexplored.

The Sibling Abuse Interview (SAI), a psychosocial assessment tool to evaluate and plan the course of treatment intervention was developed from this research (Caffaro &Conn-Caffaro, 2005). The SAI uses a family systems perspective and assesses the history and current quality of sibling relationships focusing on sexual and physical abuse.

Several questions posed in the SAI proved useful in the development of this study's semi-structured interview guide.

The perpetuation of victimization into adult relationships has also been supported by studies that focus on sibling abuse and later dating violence (Simonelli, Mullis, Elliott, & Pierce, 2002; McLaurin, 2005). Simonelli and colleagues (2002) recruited 120 undergraduate college students (61 males, 59 females) between the ages of 18 and 27 with a mean age of 20. They were overwhelmingly white (91%) and all had been involved in heterosexual dating relationships. These researchers found correlations among male and female victims of sibling abuse to expressed emotional and physical violence towards a dating partner. Specifically for males, dating violence was associated with abuse by brothers and sisters regardless of age, while for females dating violence was associated with abuse by older brothers and sisters the latter of which was understood as a result of the influence of older siblings on younger siblings. Admiration of an older sibling intensified the effects of the abusive experience. Although the findings indicated the resonating psychological effects of being the victim of sibling abuse, the study did not explain why males who were victims of such abuse become involved in dating violence despite birth order.

While Simonelli and colleagues' (2002) findings deserve further study, it has numerous limitations, primarily the generalizability because subjects were predominantly white and college aged. The study did not establish causal factors of sibling abuse and dating violence. An exploratory study in which the participants have the opportunity to reflect on the manner in which their abusive experience unfolded and affected their intimate relationships may facilitate the development of a deeper and broader

understanding of the dynamic relationship between experience, feelings, and behavior. The findings do suggest that sibling abuse, like parent-child abuse, may be an important contributor to dating violence (Simonelli, et al., 2002). This raises the question whether relationships might exist between child abuse symptoms and sibling abuse symptoms and between sibling abuse and intimate violence in adulthood. Further examination of this question could explore the magnitude of sibling abuse and the ways in which, other than dating violence, the sibling abusive experience influences intimate relations in adulthood.

A recent study explored survivors of sibling abuse regarding learned helplessness, their long-term mental health, and experience of violence in adult relationships (McLaurin, 2005). This phenomenological exploration of the victims' experiences and their impact on adult relationships was grounded in the concept of "learned helplessness" from social learning theory. The sample consisted of six adult female sibling abuse survivors; five sexual abuse survivors and one survivor of physical abuse. Sibling sexual incidents generally began between ages two and five (McLaurin, 2005).

Through in-depth interviews, the researcher explored the participants' family characteristics including marital relationships; parental relationships with children; discipline; stressors; and outside resources. Nonetheless, this study was unable to establish a clear pattern regarding the parent-child dyad and relationships to each parent. Survivors reported witnessing parental conflict and/or domestic violence. In these families, parents used corporal punishment and spanked their children until ages 12 or 13, after which they received groundings. Stressors found in the home were drug and alcohol abuse and physical and mental health problems (McLaurin, 2005).

Additionally, participants felt that learned responses related to experiences of sibling abuse influenced their interpersonal relationships and mental health (McLaurin, 2005). All reported experiencing physically and/or emotionally abusive relationships in adulthood widely involving husbands and boyfriends, children, peers, colleagues, parents, and adult siblings. Survivors identified their sibling abuse experience as a contributing factor to becoming involved in abusive relationships as adults and reported subsequent feelings of depression, anxiety, fear, numbness, and hopelessness. All participants had attended counseling to address symptoms as well as marital and family counseling (McLaurin, 2005).

Notably, informants in this study met inclusion criteria based on a history of sibling sexual and/or physical abuse and exhibiting characteristics of learned helplessness in adult relationships. Although the sample was very small, this research was this first since that of Wiehe's dating from the early 1990s to explore the emotional effects of the sibling abuse experience on intimate relationships. The findings confirmed significant repercussions of the sibling abuse relationship in the area of intimacy and support enlarging exploration of the manifestations of sibling abuse in intimate relationships in adulthood (2005).

One of the most current researchers on sibling abuse (Linares, 2006) studied 254 African-American and Latino maltreated children and adolescents who entered foster care as sibling groups to determine any association of sibling violence with other risk factors and to understand the ways in which sibling experiences might affect the well-being of these children. The researcher hypothesized that children exposed to past

familial victimization, incidents of disruptive behavior, and foster care placement instability were risk factors for problematic sibling relationships.

The researcher recruited sibling pairs from 13 foster care agencies in New York City. None of the children had experienced sexual abuse, but 17% experienced physical abuse. The vast majority (83%) had indications of neglect. Among the sibling pairs, 87% were together in the same foster home. The researcher obtained self-reports from siblings, biological mothers, foster mothers, and classroom teachers. The Sibling Relationship Questionnaire measured the sibling relationship (Buhrmester & Furman, 1990). Other existing instruments measured exposure to past familial victimization, quality of parenting, and psychological and behavioral symptoms.

Almost two-thirds of the siblings experienced multiple types of abuse and exposure to past familial victimization indicated risk for negative and violent sibling relationships. The parenting role in the foster home was a moderating factor. The researcher was able to establish a link between sibling violence and quality of care-giving; high quality of care giving correlated with fewer behavior problems whereas high sibling violence was associated with lower quality of care-giving. The study concluded that foster children were at high risk of being victims and perpetrators of sibling aggression and violence due to prior familial victimization.

These findings challenge the suggestion that the sibling subsystem plays a stabilizing and reorganizing role during family crisis and disruption associated with foster care placement (Linares, 2006). The various forms of family violence (child neglect, abuse, or exposure to intimate partner violence) were not isolated in terms of their potential impact on sibling cohesion or disruption.

Another study (Button, Parker, & Gealt, 2008) on the effects of sibling violence sampled eighth and eleventh graders and found a lower prevalence of sibling abuse (42%) than previous studies. Yet it found that that sibling violence occurs more frequently than child abuse. However, the study only assessed sibling aggression over a one-month period, and the sample did not represent children under the age of 12.

Rapoza and colleagues (2010) studied the ethnic perspectives of sibling abuse. Their research assessed extreme, moderate, and mild cases of sibling abuse and found gender and ethnic differences in the interpretation and experiences of psychological aggression. Women were more likely than men to identify physical aggression as extreme abuse. Asian Pacific Americans were more likely to indicate experiences of physical aggression in their examples of mild abuse and psychological aggression in their examples of severe abuse, while Europeans reported more experiences of sexual abuse. This study supports earlier discussion about the normative aspect of sibling abuse and inconsistencies defining sibling abuse or violence.

Summary

Sibling relations play a significant role in development, functioning, and interpersonal relationships. The ramifications of sibling abuse are multifaceted (Wiehe, 1990) and indicate a need for increased professional attention to this phenomenon. However, it remains understudied perhaps because of limited funding for research on sibling abuse (Kiselica & Morrill-Richards, 2007). This may both reflect and reinforce the notion that sibling abuse represents normative behavior. The literature review has demonstrated the potential for profound and lasting repercussions of any type of childhood abuse. Children who experience sexual, emotional, or physical abuse by a

parent or who have witnessed domestic violence are subject to internalizing and externalizing pathology and behavior. Adults abused during childhood develop preoccupied, fearful, and dismissive attachment styles. The attachment styles that evolve from the experience of being sibling abused are of significant interest considering the recognition of this as critical to the development of relatedness.

Object relations theory emphasizes the basic human need for connectedness and attachment theory adds the need for a sense of safety and protection. Furthermore, attachment theory suggests that the security of children's connection to their parents is associated with the quality of sibling relationships. Children who have insecure attachments to parents are more likely to have hostile relationships with siblings, since they re-enact various aspects of the emotionally unsatisfying, neglectful, or inconsistent nurturing (Dunn, 1992). Intense relationships may also develop when parents want to have their children close because of their own projected needs. The displacement of parents' unmet and unsatisfied needs onto their children may result in a positive sibling relationship, but may also induce a negative relationship between siblings (Kahn & Lewis, 1988).

Empirical studies reported here demonstrated the long-term and devastating repercussions of sibling abuse inclusive of relationship difficulties (Wiehe 1990/1991; Garey, 1990; Caffaro and Conn-Caffaro 1998/2005; Simonelli et. al., 2002). Although victimization of dating violence may be a consequence of sibling abuse, the manner in which sibling abuse corresponds to other aspects of intimate relatedness such as trust, satisfaction, communication, and feelings about dependency has received less attention.

Considerable research supports adolescence as a developmental stage marked by doubt and insecurity (Gemelli, 1996; Sperling & Berman, 1994; McKay & Fanning, 1987; Erikson, 1968). However, little research exists regarding the effects of abuse during this phase of development, particularly on an adult's capacity for intimacy. The importance of understanding the survivor's perception and interpretation of abuse is essential to understanding how people internalize these experiences. The theoretical and empirical research reviewed here point to a central question for this dissertation. How does the sibling abusive experience affect the survivor's perception of intimacy and in what manner is the quality of the relationship affected?

Most of the studies presented in this review use quantitative methods. It appears clear, however, that research that seeks to understand personal experiences and the emotional states of individuals should employ a qualitative approach. In the early 1990's Wiehe pioneered the study of sibling abuse. Although other researchers have supplemented his observations, it continues to remain an underdeveloped field of study. The gaps in knowledge are substantial. No study to date adequately explores the long-term emotional effects of sibling abuse that occur during adolescence. Studies that have indicated long-term repercussions have not distinguished the specific types of problems that arise in areas of relatedness. There is also a need to identify the various dimensions of emotional and physical abuse that constitute this phenomenon. If children experienced both emotional and physical abuse, are the outcomes more profound? Are physical and emotional abuse distinct, or does physical abuse always imply the presence of emotional abuse?

A phenomenological approach provides a lens through which people who have experienced sibling abuse can characterize it. This could produce a clear and distinct picture of the phenomenon and serve as a platform to develop theoretical constructs about the quality and nature of the intimate relations of sibling abuse survivors.

Chapter IV: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Purpose and Overview of the Proposed Dissertation

The purpose of this study was to understand sibling abuse experiences from the perspective of adults who experienced sibling abuse during childhood and adolescence. This research strove to advance understanding of the phenomenon of sibling abuse and determine its effects, if any, in the area of relational intimacy. Exploring critical incidents of sibling abuse, the internalization of the abusive experiences, their manifestations on the capacity for emotional investment, and the quality of adult intimate relationships might affect the detection, prevention, and treatment of sibling abuse. How survivors made meaning of their history with their sibling and whether they perceived their quality of intimate relatedness as connected to this relationship provided insight into the internalization of the sibling abuse experience.

Conducted in the phenomenological and grounded theory traditions of qualitative research, this study used in-depth interviews with adults over the age of 21 who self-reported a history of childhood or adolescent sibling abuse. The purpose of the research was to understand the sibling abuse experience contextually as a distinct phenomenon and to explore its effect, if any, on the survivor's intimate relationships. It also explored the ways in which survivors coped with their childhood experiences as adults. These interviews explored survivors' current perspectives on close relationships and inquired if survivors of sibling abuse had considered any connections between their abusive sibling relationship and their adult experiences with intimacy. This research investigated the nature and characterization of sibling abuse and the family context including parent relationships and parent-child relationships. It also explored parental response to the

sibling abuse and differential implications regarding the manner in which parents responded to the abuse. The survivors' current relationship with the abusive sibling was another area of inquiry, including how informants made decisions to remain in contact with the abusive sibling as opposed to ending the relationship. This qualitative study queried adults who were victims of sibling abuse as children and through adolescence. It was retrospective in nature and focused on understanding how as adults, they negotiated current relationships in light of their historical experiences with a sibling.

This researcher began with a definition of sibling abuse based on previous research (Wiehe, 1990, 1997). Since sibling rivalry is considered a normative aspect of development (Gelles & Cornell, 1985), it was important to differentiate it from sibling abuse. Based on prior research, the definition of sibling abuse used in the present study was persistent and unrelenting acts intended to cause physical or emotional pain and characterized by acts of rejection or terror. Although I screened potential participants using this working definition, I left room for subjective interpretation of experience to allow room for discovery and develop a cohesive elucidation of the phenomenon. This, in addition to the lack of instrumentation to assess for sibling abuse, led to a study that relied heavily on self-report. In the context of a qualitative study, however, self-report and concepts rather than measures were the appropriate vehicles to advance knowledge.

This inquiry helped to shape a definition of sibling abuse as dimensions such as resonance, consequences, and emotional experience. During the interview process, survivors' descriptions of their experiences contained common elements of duration and intensity which helped formulate a more precise definition of sibling abuse. The

flexibility given to emergent material was an effort to advance knowledge about a relatively unexplored phenomenon.

Rationale for the Qualitative Methodology

Because of the nuanced nature of the abusive experience, a qualitative methods approach was most appropriate to study informants' lived experiences; it was consistent with the research goal of elucidating the meaning subjects made of sibling abuse incidents and the influence of the abuse on their lives (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Qualitative research allows a detailed picture to unfold and reveal the complexity of an under-explored phenomenon; it brings a human element to the study of people (Bogdan & Biklen, 1983). An inductive, qualitative inquiry was essential for an investigation to gain insight regarding the sibling-abused individual's integration of the abusive experience, self-perception, and view of the world. It also allowed for exploration of how informants understood their own capacity for interpersonal connectedness. Exploring the sibling abuse context, the nature of abuse, and the parental response insinuated the relevance of a dynamic interplay among the family members and allowed a rich descriptive picture to emerge of the abusive experience within the family system.

The dissertation captured the phenomenon of sibling abuse through a holistic perspective by recognizing it as part of a complex family system (Patton, 2002) and a relational/behavioral discourse that could not be reduced to a few variables and scrutinized in a linear fashion (Patton, 2002). Characterizing abuse not only facilitated a depth of understanding, but also allowed for analysis that proposed links between experiences and type of abuse, whether physical and emotional or emotional alone.

A quantitative positivist frame is not appropriate for research that seeks to examine dynamic feelings and the emotional effects of complex experiences. The pre-categorization of a quantitative scale of feeling states provides a sterile description (Mintzberg, 1983) of a multifaceted experience fraught with intricacies. In addition, it assumes the researcher has advance knowledge of the feelings and emotions relevant to the informants, in this case, survivors of sibling abuse. Quantitative measures would not have enabled the researcher to probe specific aspects of the sibling relationship that were important to informants. In contrast, qualitative exploration fostered rich descriptions of informants' lives, communication patterns in the home, and the quality of the parent's relationship with each other and with each child. It allowed the survivors to describe the nature of the aggression they experienced and caregivers' response to the abuse. The interviews revealed relationships among family members and the ways in which sibling abuse influenced daily functioning (Mintzberg, 1983). The dynamics of the inquiry and the interaction between the subject and the researcher facilitated the process of discovery.

Credibility, Transferability, and Dependability

This research presented high value for informing best practices for clinicians working with both children and adults. In quantitative research, internal validity refers to the extent to which the findings accurately describe reality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The positivist researcher postulates relationships and then tests them. In contrast, the naturalistic researcher assumes the presence of multiple realities and attempts to represent these realities adequately. Instead of the positivist problem of threats to internal validity, credibility is the concern for qualitative researchers. It rests on the richness of information gathered and the analytic abilities of the researcher (Patton, 2002). Various

means ensured the credibility of this research: the researcher's commitment to the orientation of the fundamental question, bracketing preconceived opinions and conceptions, and constantly measuring the design of the study to the significant elements that played a part in the total structure of the text (Van Manen, 1990). The researcher identified descriptions of recurring behaviors or actions and actively sought "disconfirming evidence and contrary interpretations" (Creswell, 1998, p.28).

Since the goal of the study was to describe sibling abuse and explore its possible manifestations in adult intimacy from the perspective of the participants, they judged the credibility of the results through "intersubjective validity" (Moustakas, 1994, p.42). This process involved testing and verifying understanding of the meaning of the sibling abuse experience through the back and forth social interaction of interviewing (Moustakas, 1994). I presented information gathered earlier to subsequent subjects as the interview process progressed to determine if they had similar or different experiences or feelings. In this way, I used theory triangulation as a measure of credibility in its application to both inquiry and data analysis.

I assumed a stance of empathic neutrality (Patton, 2002) in an effort to remain non-judgmental towards the subjects and neutral to the findings. Patton (2002) proposes this stance as a way to avoid engagement in the paradigm debate of objectivity versus subjectivity. However, in addition to the position of empathic neutrality, I made assumptions explicit by demarcating subjective paths of inquiry from objective ones in an effort to address researcher bias. Admittedly, subjective influence posed a challenge regarding interviewing and preliminary data analysis, since I faced my own presuppositions about the nature of sibling abuse and its effects. However, I did my best

to balance the productive use of knowledge with a preconceived psychodynamic lens in order to produce as objective a stance as possible (Osborne, 1994) and in a manner that did not deter comprehensive attunement to the whole phenomenon. On a positive note, my extensive clinical experience and analytic approach influenced sensitivity and attention to both individuality and comprehensiveness regarding the path of inquiry and interview guide construction. The use of colleagues to review evolving themes helped ensure credibility and diminish research bias.

In quantitative research, external validity refers to the ability to generalize findings across different settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The generalizability of phenomenological research is open to criticism because of the absence of random sampling procedures and small numbers of study participants (Hycner, 1999). However, the purpose of this study was not to generalize findings to larger populations of sibling abuse survivors, but to illuminate the world of the participants and reveal an under-explored, but potentially important experience. In this instance, small sample size or representativeness were not relevant to the purpose of the research. I did not seek to produce generalizable knowledge but to produce knowledge about a unique phenomenon of the human experience (Holroyd, 2001).

In the naturalistic paradigm, the purpose of inquiry is transferability as opposed to external validity or the generalizability of findings. The transferability of findings to other similar situations depends on the degree of similarity. The provision of a thorough description of the research context enhances transferability as determined by the reader who decides if the findings are applicable to a new situation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Reliability in quantitative research refers to the degree to which a measurement, given repeatedly, produces the same results; the stability of measurement over time; and the similarity of measurements within a given time period (Rubin & Babbie, 2005). Lincoln and Guba (1985) propose the use of dependability in qualitative inquiry as an alternative concept to reliability. The use of an "inquiry audit" allows committee members to examine both the research process and the final analysis for consistency (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p.317). Complete and accessible records ensured dependability. The purpose of the research was clear in the problem formulation; the selection of participants, use of tradition, data collection, and analytic strategies that were open to scrutiny through the dissertation process. This research is ontologically authentic in that it anticipated helping sibling-abused individuals, professionals, and the community understands more about the phenomenon under study.

Phenomenology and Grounded Theory

This study employed methods in the phenomenological and grounded theory traditions of qualitative research. The phenomenological approach was paramount to a study that focused on the subject's construction of reality rooted in their actual lived experiences (Patton, 2002) both during the abuse and in the present. Through the discovery of the details, processes, and dynamics of the actual abusive experience, I learned informant's historical recollection of the abuse. In addition, informants described current aspects of intimacy in their lives and any connections they made between these experiences and their abuse history. It also enabled me to explore how subjects coped with abusive experiences in the past as victims and in the present as survivors. The phenomenological approach paid thorough attention to how subjects constructed their

experiences and enabled them to describe how they made sense of, remembered, and emotionally experienced their abuse (Patton, 2002).

The tradition of symbolic interaction rests on the premise that individuals interpret their situation through shared meaning and interaction with others. This construct is aligned with and intrinsic to phenomenology (Blumer, 1969). The exploration of the manifestations of sibling abuse experiences presumes that an internalization process has occurred and as such, earlier experiences significantly influenced how survivors perceived themselves. However, rather than considering the individual's meaning making as emanating from social interaction on a grander scale (Patton, 2002), I employed a tighter lens to hone in on the family context. Specifically, inquiry focused on the survivor's perception of various family relationships and strains that surrounded the sibling abusive situation. To capture the essence of sibling abuse assumes individuals who have shared this experience construct a symbolic meaning about the experience. However, the phenomenological approach also recognizes the uniqueness of each individual set of experiences which is "treated as truth and which determines that individual's behavior" (Patton, 2002, p. 106).

The phenomenological stance requires the researcher to refrain from imposing preconceived criterion and instead remain open to individual experiences. Explicating the phenomena required investigating individual constituents while maintaining the context of the whole (Hycner, 1999). Each subject's experience had its own form and meaning and contributed to a greater understanding of the dynamic qualities of sibling abuse as a distinct occurrence (Patton, 2002).

The phenomenological, discovery-oriented approach demanded a flexible design strategy. This allowed the inquiry to change course as understanding of the phenomenon deepened (Patton, 2002). Although I developed a pre-constructed path of inquiry based on existing theory and empirical findings, I recognized that divergence might occur within an interview or between interviews and allowed questions to be contingent on what evolved as the interviews progressed. For example, if a particular participant revealed a significant feature about their experience, I took that factor and tested it application in subsequent interviews with other informants.

Ultimately, the aim of the study was to uncover aspects of a phenomenon about which little research exists. This called for a process of unfolding or discovery as the significance of relevant material was unknown until exploration began. The limited research on sibling abuse facilitated the researcher's ability to remain open to the events as informants presented them with their own meaning and fostered the process referred to as "bracketing" (Giorgi, 1997). Consequently, I suspended personal biases, everyday understandings, theories, and beliefs. While the phenomenological approach focuses on the subjective, lived experience of individuals, grounded theory attends to how subjective experiences can result in theoretical statements and potential relationships among important concepts (Suddaby, 2006). After uncovering the various elements of a phenomenon, grounded theory methods establish patterns, themes, and categories for analysis (Patton, 2002). These categories or concepts emerged through constant comparison between and among interviews and guided both the course of inquiry and analysis. Theory emerged directly from the data rather than preconceived understanding of sibling abuse or existing theories or research that initially informed the study. This

approach to data collection and analysis paid careful consideration to each round of data collection that informed the next. This iterative process facilitated theoretical refinement until a point of saturation, and the researcher could not identify any additional conceptual material (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Grounded theory is the most appropriate method to adopt to interpret reality rather than testing hypotheses about reality. It helps researchers who seek to address a phenomenon and discover theory from data (Suddaby, 2006). The objective of grounded theory is not to generalize findings to a broader population, but to build a theoretical explanation by specifying phenomenon in terms of how they are expressed, the consequences, the conditions that give rise to them, and the variations in qualifiers (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

Research Methodology

Sampling Plan

Probability sampling is a method that utilizes random selection to assure that the different units in a population have an equal chance of being a research subject. Because of the hidden nature of sibling abuse, probability sampling was not realistic or appropriate. I wished to explore the sibling abuse experience in a preliminary way, and I did not intend to yield findings about a proportion of sibling-abused individuals for generalization. Instead, I expected open-ended interviewing of abused individuals would provide valuable insight into the phenomenon of sibling abuse.

In non-probability sampling, participant criteria develop from the richness of experience they are able to offer relative to the phenomenon under investigation. Purposive sampling relies on a small sample size but promotes an in-depth focus (Patton,

2002). I used purposive sampling to determine cases selected to participate in the research. The sample included nineteen (19) survivors of sibling abuse. All of the participants resided in the New York City metropolitan area. The criterion of age (21 years and older) as well as critical incidents were the source of sampling. All respondents who self identified as victims of childhood or adolescent physical or emotional sibling abuse were eligible for participation. Initially, I was interested in adolescent experiences of sibling abuse due to the heightened state of vulnerability during this phase of development. However, participants revealed that they were initially abused in childhood and endured sibling abuse throughout adolescence.

Flyers were posted in various colleges and graduate schools of social work and in local Y's and churches. An advertisement was also placed in the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) newsletter and on craigslist, an online community. As this researcher engaged with professional and personal contacts on the discourse of this research suggestions regarding contacts emerged. Although outreach methods may have produced a sample of individuals engaged in mental health therapy, I was concerned that the underexplored aspect of sibling abuse may contribute to a difficulty identifying participants with such a history. Yet because treatment was not necessarily a variable of interest, but rather a source of obtaining respondents, snowball sampling was an approach used to obtain information rich cases. Snowball sampling is a non-probability method used when the sample characteristic is rare or when members of a special population may be difficult to locate (Patton, 2002).

I screened participants for inclusion by developing a criterion of physical or emotional acts, which were enduring, and where the participant experienced an unequal

opportunity for advantage with a sibling in which the other had clear physical or emotional power. I intentionally left room for subjective interpretation of experience. I considered using peripherally related scales such as the conflict tactics scale (Straus, 1979) and the child abuse and trauma scale (Sanders & Becker-Lausen, 1995) to assess the presence of sibling abuse. The sibling abuse interview (Caffaro & Conn-Caffaro, 1998) developed from a qualitative study is another template to assess for sibling abuse. The limited available tools to assess for sibling abuse led to a study that relied heavily on self-report. In the context of a qualitative study, however, self-report and concepts rather than measures were the appropriate vehicles to advance knowledge.

Sample Characteristics

Of the 19 survivors interviewed for this study, the majority was female (16). Three were male. Five were between the ages of 21 and 30; five were between the ages of 31 to 40; three were between the ages of 41 to 50; four were between the ages of 51-60; and two were 61 years of age or older. The majority of the respondents were single (15); four were married.

Regarding ethnicity, 17 were white, one was Hawaiian and one was Jamaican.

Regarding family composition during childhood, two parents raised most of the respondents (12) but two of those families were blended. Seven of the respondents were raised by single parents; five by way of divorce and two due to a parent's death.

An older sibling abused all of the respondents, with the exception of two; one was abused by a younger sibling of five years and one by a twin. A sibling between one and two years older abused almost half of the informants (8). A sibling between three and

four years older abused four of the participants; and five were abused by a sibling five to seven years older.

Development of the Research Instrument

McCracken (1988) refers to the questionnaire construction as an opportunity to identify cultural categories not addressed in the literature. The guide construction developed from an interest in learning how survivors of sibling abuse made sense of and internalized their experiences, and how the trauma emotionally resonated in areas of self-perception and relatedness. It drew on sensitizing concepts from both psychodynamic theory and empirical research conducted to date on this subject. Family systems theory guided exploration around parental reactions to the abuse and the parental relational system, family stressors and factors that may have contributed to the evolution and perpetuation of sibling abuse. In addition, coping strategies drew on the construct of resilience.

I developed a pilot interview guide for a course in qualitative research design to explore aspects of the sibling abuse experience. This initial guide included domains such as the critical incidents of abuse, the general nature of the sibling relationship, the family context, parental responses to the abuses, and adult romantic relationships. Object relations theory suggests that the residue of past relationships influences self-image and present functioning inclusive of interpersonal relatedness (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983). As a derivative of object relations theory, attachment theory helps to explore long-term developmental issues of relatedness. Specific aspects of intimate relationships of interest were communication patterns, expressions of conflict, trust/mistrust, loneliness/satisfaction, demonstrations of affection, feelings about

dependence/independence, and comfort with alone time/shared time. These categories grew out of suggestions from existing research and theory that the emotional resonance of an abusive sibling relationship resulted in feelings and behavioral patterns associated with these dimensions of intimacy. Attachment theory proposes that issues of trust, conflict, communication and self-esteem are critical aspects of connectedness (Ainsworth et. al., 1978). The combination of attachment theory and the significant role siblings play in the development of self-perception and relatedness (Cicerelli, 1995; Lamb & Sutton-Smith, 1992) created the basis of the initial exploration.

The use of pre-determined consistent questions used across interviews initially limited spontaneity and flexibility and hindered the process of pursuing emergent material. Open-ended questions facilitated the respondents' explication of insights, thoughts, and feelings in informant's own words (Patton, 2002) and helped to guard against researcher bias. The stimulus-response format of a structured interview might have helped respondents who had not thought about their experiences. However, a standardized interview guide proved too confining for a phenomenon not well understood and a study aimed at capturing the multiple dimensions of emotional experience (Fontana & Frey, 1994). The decision to use a semi-structured guide grew out of the need to balance flexibility with sensitivity with individual and situational differences to underscore uniqueness and variations of experience.

Consequently, questions highlighted each survivor's understanding of why they were the targets of abuse and whether there were any indications that an abusive episode may occur. Interest in the role parents played in the sibling abuse generated questions

regarding the parental relational system, stressors that may have contributed to the evolution, and perpetuation of sibling abuse.

My own presuppositions about how sibling abuse manifested influenced the pilot interview guide. This inhibited spontaneous, emergent material. Additionally, my heavy focus on exploring specific aspects of intimacy may have come about because of my own interest. Although the first two interviews resulted in information-rich material, my own focus did not leave time for or unanticipated findings to emerge. Participants' own experiences needed to be uncovered in order to understand what other potential dimensions of the experience existed in their own systems. Therefore, I began to engage in a more iterative process.

My revision of the interview guide for the dissertation reflected the need to learn more about the sibling abuse experience and to be true to the purpose of this research: to find out what there was to learn. As a result, the interview guide became increasingly open-ended. I began later interviews with the question "tell me about your experience with your sibling," and respondents provided detailed information as they recalled the critical incidents of the abuse. The next challenge was to balance unfolding material with moving the interview along as time became a challenge and often there was little time to explore current relationship experiences. Having obtained significant information about the critical incidents of sibling abuse, I experimented with beginning the interviews focusing on current relationship experiences. This allowed participants to reflect on their current life as well as their histories as they considered the effect of their sibling abuse on their dating patterns.

I paid close attention to the emotional resonance of sibling abuse and focused on capturing emotional and perceptual experiences. Bogdan and Biklen (1982) refer to "feeling questions" as "evaluative" because the interviewer asks the informants about how they feel about what happened. Similarly, Patton (2002) describes these questions as reactive responses to an experience. In this case, they captured the emotional experience of the abuse and served as probes: "How do you feel your sibling's behavior affected you at the time?"; "What was your self-perception at the time of abuse?"; "How do you feel in close relationships?" Questions were structured to elicit the affective dimensions of informants' history (Patton, 2002) since the primary focus of the study was to explore the survivors' experiences and perceptions.

Sensory questions provided a sense of survivors' perception of their abusive relationship. By inquiring about the context of the abuse and the relational environment in the home, I was able to gain knowledge about how the subjects "heard and viewed," both literally and figuratively, their home environment (Patton, 2002). A series of descriptive questions helped obtain the subjects' characterization of the abuse (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982); what happened during the time of abuse; the nature and form of the abuse; how often it occurred whether the conflict escalated; and what, if any action, the sibling abused individual took.

During the interviews, I posed questions in a general and nondirective manner (McCracken, 1988). For example, a question such as, "What were your parents' views on counseling?" was open-ended and allowed the subjects freedom to express their experience while avoiding the assumption that there were positive or negative views that

the researcher anticipated. These types of “grand-tour” questions do not suggest or provide the terms of the answer (McCracken, 1988).

My desire to explore all topics and questions with each participant hindered the process of emergent flexibility. As a result, I abandoned the interview guide after the second interview and adopted a checklist of domains that served as prompts to explore current relationships, the abusive experience, parental involvement/response, family context, emotional experience/resonance, coping strategies, and demographics. The checklist gave subjects more room to introduce emergent material while ensuring the researcher could cover important domains without overly directing the flow of the interview. This strategy gave informants maximum control over the course and direction of the interview. Through a more open-ended nature of inquiry, participants provided thick description of their experiences.

Analysis

As the interview process unfolded, the researcher coded transcripts of the audio taped interviews. Uncovering themes led to further revisions of the interview guide. The analysis took place in the context of existing theory and the findings from the literature. Although phenomenological analysis revealed the essence of the sibling abuse experience, grounded theory provided the framework to analyze the ways in which the abusive experience shaped the development of specific relationship patterns and determined variations in themes regarding the family environment and parental responsiveness.

Units of *general* meaning developed phenomenologically to produce expressed, unique meaning that represented the essence of the discourse through the scrutiny of

every word, phrase, and sentence (Hycner, 1999). Examination of the nature of the responses determined a general sense of the meaning-making experience of sibling abuse. Analysis moved from reliance on the actual words of the participants to uncovering the layers of meaning and involved the selection of words or phrases that provide specific relevance to the research interest or the units of *relevant* meaning (Hycner, 1999).

Statements made by the respondents at various points in the interview were "clustered" to develop thematic material and memos helped integrate understanding of events and processes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Successive readings contributed to further understanding and organization of the data as repetitive patterns emerged (Hycner, 1999); a global sense of the text determined how the parts were constituted (Giorgi, 1997). Subsequent readings surfaced overlooked content in the interviews that produced important clues to themes and feelings not initially perceived. I began to identify concepts I initially thought were marginal to the inquiry. For example, resiliency, which had not been an area of predetermined focus evolved through the analysis of thematic content and produced a refinement of exploration to understand more about how informants coped with their abuse as children and how they integrated abusive experiences as adults.

The iterative process broadened the scope of emerging material. This analysis resulted in data-driven sub-themes and dimensions. Simultaneously, constant comparison incorporated into the phenomenological interpretation to organize and understand concepts that surfaced. This offered a path towards refinement and saturation (Bowen, 2006). Grounded theory analysis allowed me to reach beyond describing and reporting

details of the participants' perspectives and assume responsibility for interpreting observations and information (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

During interviews and initial readings of the transcripts, I chronicled memos and reflective remarks (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The memos recorded my personal reactions; observation of affect or an interpretive observation; and mental notes to pursue something during the interview or in a follow-up interview. The memos highlighted issues that required analytic attention and contributed to the interpretive process (Miles & Huberman, 1994). After each reading, I drafted general impressions, recalling the nonverbal manifestations of the content as well as the intonations, such as pauses.

Although the descriptive aspect of qualitative research means making complicated things understandable by reducing them to their parts (Miles & Huberman, 1994), the general issue of phenomenology was to present a clear account of sibling abuse through "explicitation," implying an investigation of its constituents while keeping the context of the whole phenomenon (Hycner, 1999). Given this principle of phenomenology, matrices used in the grounded theory approach limited my ability to maintain the whole phenomenon. Generating consequences, explanations, or comparisons of experience emerged without reducing the data and obscuring phenomenological understanding. Miles and Huberman (1994) describe the difficulty in moving from describing to explaining in the analytic process: explaining "something" is difficult until one understands what the "something" is. The progression of data transformation began with condensing and then moved to clustering, sorting and linking information over time (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The exhaustive, systematic, and reflective study of the lived experience and its underlying structure or essence allowed for each of the subjects' uniqueness to emerge in addition to the commonalities they shared (Holroyd, 2001). After I extracted themes from each interview, I tested hunches and findings in an effort to integrate the data into an explanatory framework (Miles & Huberman, 1994). For example, one theme was that many survivors faced repercussions for seeking protection from parents. There was also a normative aspect attributed to the sibling abuse experience, as some respondents said they did not know their experiences of sibling abuse were not universal. In various ways, survivors expressed they found unavailable partners. The varied nature of a partner's unavailability revealed both a common theme and unique experiences. Additionally, concerning parental blame for the ongoing nature of the sibling abuse, some respondents held their parents responsible and others defended their parents' lack of intervention.

The grounded theory method allowed theoretical implications of the data to develop. This process unfolded through the coding sequence, by dividing it into text segments, labeling, and examining the codes for overlap and redundancy. In vivo codes, the use of labels named from the actual verbatim words in the text, served to identify emergent concepts derived directly from the data. Initially, I generated codes based on the individual content of each interview. There were approximately 100 codes developed after the first five interviews. The codes were reviewed to extract themes based on a general similarity amongst the characteristics of the concepts.

Open coding involved labeling and categorizing relevant parts of the phenomena with similar characteristics (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Data with similar traits were grouped together and given a conceptual label. A line-by-line analysis opened the text

and uncovered thoughts, ideas, and meanings in order to develop these concepts (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Axial coding facilitated the development of subcategories that further elucidated the properties and dimensions of the established categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). These subcategories served to answer the "when, where, why, who, how and with what consequences" regarding the phenomenon and provided greater explanation for the concept (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p.125). Axial coding facilitated the contextualization of the phenomenon and because coding for properties and dimensions occurs simultaneously to developing relationships between concepts, the process proceeded until the point of saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Selective coding involved the integration of the categories that developed to form the initial theoretical framework (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Theories helped develop statements that linked thematic material. A composite summary of findings grew out of the subjects' recounts into expressions appropriate to the social-psychology discourse used to present the findings (Patton, 2002).

Protection of Human Subjects

Although there were no direct benefits for participation in this study, it provided relief and a sense of universalization to the participants. Participating in this research acknowledged the abusive experience, confirmed it as abuse, and identified the potential source of long-term problems. This provided participants with a sense of validation. Although I determined participation based on meeting basic criteria for sibling abuse, a prerequisite for involvement was a participant's self-identification as a survivor of sibling abuse.

This research involved asking subjects questions about intense emotional and physical relations with their sibling and the quality of their intimate relationships; at times, informants felt emotionally distressed. In the consent form, participants read they could stop participation at any time and skip any questions they did not want to answer for any reason. I took steps to avoid "secondary victimization" by preparing participants about the nature of the research. Every participant received a list of treatment resources. None of the participants chose to interrupt or end the interviews, and no informant had an emotional reaction that was difficult to contain.

In general, the benefits of this study outweighed the risks. Benefits included developing awareness of the sibling abuse phenomenon, which has the potential to contribute to the safety and protection of siblings who are currently in abusive relationships and promote information of the relational dynamics of survivors of sibling abuse. The phenomenological and theoretical findings should provide a basis for this researcher and others to develop clinical strategies of intervention.

All of the study procedures received approval from the Graduate Center Institutional Review Board (IRB). Initially approved on December 15, 2006 for one year as Protocol # 06-10-1114, the study received a one-year continuance on November 15, 2007 and again on October 28, 2008. All of the participants signed an IRB-approved informed consent prior to their interview, which indicated their voluntary participation. Interviews took place at locations convenient to participants such as at their home, the interviewer’s private office, or the Hunter College School of Social Work.

To protect confidentiality, subjects interested in participating in the research contacted the researcher. During the phone screening, subjects provided oral consent. The

researcher provided all pertinent information about the study and provided the opportunity for subjects to ask questions about the research. At the time of the interview, participants received a written consent form. This informed them of their voluntary participation and the purpose of the study; their right to discontinue the interview at any time, or change their mind about participation; the location and length of the interview; the benefits and risks of participation; and confidentiality issues regarding mandated reporting. They also learned that that the researcher intended to use interviews for her dissertation research and possible publication; participants could receive a written report if interested. I audio-taped the interviews with informants' permission, and only one participant declined. I also took notes during the interview. Participants used a "pretend name" during the interview and could erase any portion of the tape they did not want included; they had the right to choose not to answer any questions.

I explained how I intended to protect their identity as an individual in written reports and how I would secure documents related to the study. None of the informants exercised their option to terminate the interview at any time. After I received transcriptions of the interviews, I destroyed the tapes. I kept all materials related to the study in a locked file cabinet in my home office. After three years, I will destroy all documents related to the study. Changing the identities of participants through a designated pseudonym and disguising characteristics in this written report ensured the identity of individual participants would remain protected.

Summary

This dissertation sought to understand both the sibling abuse experience for the survivor and its potential effects in the realm of intimate relations. It employed qualitative

research methods. A quantitative approach would have circumscribed findings, whereas qualitative methods opened the research process to discovery and gave voice to the phenomenon of sibling abuse with narratives. Rather than presenting a breadth of information, this research strived to develop a deep understanding that would result in a rich presentation of the findings. This approach was appropriate for a topic that lacked a substantial body of empirical research; it offered flexibility of discovery since categories of inquiry evolved as the interview process progressed. The subjective nature of the abuse experience coupled with the vastly unexplored terrain of perception regarding the understanding and conceptualization of the sibling abuse necessitated an unclassified approach essential to make meaning of these experiences.

The holistic aspect of qualitative research enabled the researcher to uncover the "hows", "whats" and unanticipated findings conducive to the research aim of understanding rather than explaining (Lincoln & Guba, 1994). Descriptive and inductive research proved well suited for a study seeking to advance learning in an area of little research. Identifying critical incidents of sibling abuse and the familial context facilitated knowledge regarding contributing factors and integration of experience. The primary question of this study grew out of the experiences of individuals with their abusive sibling and in adult intimate relationships. A phenomenological frame allowed exploration and interpretation of survivors' experiences. These questions situated the study in a theoretical context using object relations and intended to build understanding of the effect of these interpretations on self-perception and feelings in intimate relationships by way of the grounded theory method. Coding and analysis, elements of

grounded theory were rooted in cross case analysis, constant comparison, and analytic induction techniques.

The iterative process, critical to qualitative research, served to enhance the credibility of this study. The interactive aspect of interviewing facilitated testing and verification of the meaning of the sibling abuse experience and allowed representation of multiple realities. This study employed rigorous qualitative methods that attended to credibility, transferability, and dependability of informant's reports.

CHAPTER V: PSYCHODYNAMIC THEORY AND SIBLING ABUSE

Introduction

The purpose of this dissertation was to learn about sibling abuse in childhood and adolescence and explore the experiences resonating from this relationship in adulthood. In addition, it sought to determine the extent to which existing theories of human behavior could enhance understanding of this phenomenon. Psychodynamic theorists have helped practitioners and researchers interested in human development conceptualize the ways in which childhood experiences influence adult behavior. Psychodynamic theory emphasizes interpersonal relations, primarily in the family, and the ways in which these relationships affect interpersonal situations in the present. It rests on the premise that conscious and unconscious influences affect human behavior and relationships. Although psychodynamic theory helps explain how children manage in the face of parental deprivation and abuse, theorists have not applied these concepts to the particular phenomenon of sibling abuse. Through the narratives of adults who experienced emotional or physical abuse at the hands of their siblings, this dissertation examined the ways in which psychodynamic theories and other human behavior theories, such as family systems and resilience theory, might explain or reveal new theories about the relatively unexplored phenomenon of sibling abuse.

This chapter focuses on the experiences and responses of sibling abused children while they lived with their abusers. It creates a platform from which to understand how these children internalized this experience. It sets the stage for examining whether object relations theory might enrich understanding of patterns of adult relatedness among these informants as surviving adults, which I will explore in the next chapter.

Patterns of Abuse

A widespread societal belief holds that most siblings have conflicts and fights while growing up, and that these conflicts are normal. Studies on sibling violence, aggression, and abuse use the terms “conflict”, “rivalry”, “aggression”, “violence” and “abuse” interchangeably; this neutralizes the intensity of sibling abuse. In contrast, sibling abuse is a distinct phenomenon characterized by the intention or the perceived intention of causing physical or emotional pain or injury to a brother or sister (Gelles, 1979). Although rivalrous sibling behavior includes occasional or intermittent bouts of discord with an equal opportunity for advantage or disadvantage between siblings (Gelles & Cornell, 1985), perpetual, consistent, and severe actions characterize sibling abuse (Wiehe, 1997).

The present study used Wiehe’s (1990) characterization of sibling abuse as a working definition. He includes injuries such as bruises, welts, abrasions, lacerations, wounds, cuts, bone fractures, and other evidence of physical harm or injury inflicted by a sibling. Physical evidence of injury, however, is not the only indicator of physical abuse; it includes any behavior that is physically intrusive, physically painful, and experienced as physically overwhelming (Wiehe, 1990).

The nineteen participants in this study self-identified childhood or adolescent experiences as abuse at the hands of brothers or sisters. Even though some questioned whether these experiences qualified as sibling abuse, all responded to flyers recruiting informants to a study of survivors of “sibling abuse”; they self-identified as victims of this type of abuse. No one validated their experiences as children at the time it occurred and this led them to feel they did not have sufficient evidence or descriptive accounts to

convey the depth of pain they had suffered. Throughout childhood, these survivors felt isolated in their attempts to make meaning of their sibling relationships and its effects.

Nonetheless, they instinctively knew they did not deserve what they experienced as children. They emerged from these experiences scarred, weathered, and doubting whether they had caused the hostile relationship with their abusers. This intellectual and emotional dissonance speaks to the internalization process of abuse, in which the victim takes on the perspective of the abusing sibling. In this way, survivors internalized messages of blame or inferiority from the abuser, which influenced how they thought about and experienced themselves in the world (St. Clair, 2004).

In the present study, reported abuse occurred between natural siblings; siblings who were an average of two or more years older were more likely to have abused younger siblings with two exceptions. In one case, the abuser was a male who abused his twin sister, and in another case, a sibling five years younger abused his older sister. Previous studies on sibling abuse found older children were more likely to victimize their younger siblings (Bhurmester, 1992). Same- sex siblings have reported greater closeness during adolescence than opposite sex siblings, and conflict greater when children were closer in age. Similarly, in his study on sibling abuse, Garey (1998) found the greatest prevalence of victimization was older children victimizing younger siblings, between natural siblings, and in middle class families.

Consistent with earlier studies, findings revealed that the greatest prevalence of victimization occurred in middle class families, although this finding may be an artifact of small, non-probability sample in this and other studies of sibling abuse. Of the 19 participants represented here, eleven females were the victims of abusive brothers, and

three females were the victims of their sisters. All three male informants reported their abusers were brothers. Earlier studies documented that violence was more likely to occur across gender, with the brother more likely as the abuser (Garey, 1998; Steinmetz, 1977).

All of the survivors interviewed experienced physical or emotional abuse from a sibling for at least five years. The abuse often began when the victim was 6 years of age, but could begin anywhere from aged three to 11. Several endured abuse for as long as sixteen years, from early childhood through late adolescence. Commonly, the abusive behavior continued until the abusive sibling moved out of the home, often to attend college. In some cases, the abuse was still occurring. Every participant expressed feeling terrified and powerless to stop the onslaught of abuse. Despite its consistent recurrence, the abuse was unpredictable. This created a situation where the victim was unable to understand, anticipate, and subsequently avoid the wrath. A resounding theme was a sense of the victims' helplessness, characterizing these experiences as "psychological torture," "traumatic," "debilitating," "tragic," "devastating," "relentless," or "very damaging." These terms convey the intensity of the sibling relationship and the emotional consequences of living with sibling abuse. Psychodynamic theory recognizes that critical experiences and exchanges with others leave their mark; children internalize these experiences which shape subsequent perceptions of self and others and reactions to others (Fairbairn, 1952).

Although the participants in this study were childhood *victims* of sibling abuse, they were also *survivors* who lived to speak about their earlier violent sibling relationships. Consequently, the term "victim" reflects the adult participant's childhood experience, and "survivor" refers to the participants who emerged from a history of

sibling abuse. The informants provided rich descriptions of their childhood experiences, which they carried into adulthood.

Narratives of Sibling Physical and Emotional Abuse in Childhood

Physical Abuse with Emotional Abuse

Although some assert violent or aggressive acts between siblings occur more frequently than parent-child abuse or domestic violence (Straus et al., 1980), unfortunately there are no national or state statistics on sibling abuse to validate this claim. Often overlooked as sibling rivalry, no statutes exist to mandate reporting of these incidents. All of the participants' experiences were consistent with Weihe's definition of sibling abuse. Through their narratives, they described enduring fear, physical harm, and in some instances, potentially deadly assaults. The detailed recounts reveal experiences of profound helplessness and powerlessness, fear and anxiety, and emotional reverberation.

Helplessness and Powerlessness. During their interviews, the informants' affect frequently revealed the consequences of their abuse. While on survivor, Tammy recounted her brother's emotional tormenting and physical intimidation, her appearance and manner revealed a young woman physically and emotionally burdened by her past. Slumped over in her chair, visibly depressed, and barely audible, she wore the emotional scars of her adolescent experiences:

> When I was 14 years old, I had major depression suddenly and very severely and I didn't know what was wrong. As a result, I had cognitive impairments and difficulties in school and I couldn't sleep. My brother had taken the same classes and had the same teacher and I actually asked him for help. He was helpful initially regarding time management but then that Christmas he came home from college and he decided that I was being delinquent and I needed tough love. So one night he closed the door, stood in front of it, and started yelling at me. He was really mean and started attacking me. He wouldn't stop and I called my mom and said 'Douglas won't let me out'. And she said 'well I think he has important things to say'. So I was stuck in my room with my brother being really nasty and

> attacking me. Finally after a LONG time, I convinced him to let me get out of the room to get a glass of milk. As soon as I got out, I just ran as fast as I could. He came after me - I got to my car - and he was running at me and I didn't have much time so I threw my keys at him and I ran in the opposite direction. He ran at me and tackled me – I got across the street – and then my mother came out of the house and her reaction was to go pick up the keys that I had thrown. Douglas started dragging me across the street back to the house and I was yelling 'Help, this is abuse'… and no one helped. He dragged me back into the house, back in my room, closed the door, stood in front of me and started yelling at me. And I just cried and cried and said 'you don't know what you've done, you don't know what you've done'. And he was just going on and on and on and on and I was just crying.

Even at age 52, Sonia had vivid recollections of suffering at the hands of her twin brother:

> He would slam the door on my fingers and break my fingers… the apartment doors were pretty heavy. It was mostly sparring – he'd hit me, punch me, push me, slap me – he would break down whatever he needed to break down to get to me. One time he wanted the house to himself, but I told him I had mono and had nowhere else to go. I said I would lock myself in the bedroom but that wasn't enough for him. He came into my room, broke the mirror on the entrance and stood on top of the bed and held me down and punched me – and I was black and blue for a long time after that.

Sonia experienced psychological torment in anticipation of the impending assault. She made futile attempts to ward off her brother by seeking refuge in the bathroom of their home; she was terrified as she waited powerlessly:

> The bathroom was a big thing in my life because I could wedge my feet to hold the door closed unless he broke the door down. I waited terrified for him to push his way in. He busted the door open, pushed me down and I would lose all my air and couldn't breathe. He would slam the door on my fingers and break my fingers. I can't tell you how many times the super came up and replaced the bathroom door.

Not only was Sonia's relationship with her brother distinguished by brutal physical force, it always included emotional abuse. Even as an adult survivor, Sonia carried her brother's anger and charges of emotional denigration. During her interview, she produced a tape of a telephone answering machine recording to play for the researcher:

> Do you want to hear a tape? I'll play it for you because even though this is him as an adult, it is how he has always talked to me. He left me hundreds of phone messages during this whole thing with my father's will (*plays tape from an answering machine*): (*Screaming*) 'Hey asshole, pick up the fucking phone or I'll start harassing you in the middle of the night, morning noon and night at 3am and 5am until you move off your ass, you fucking piece of shit'.

Her brother's menacing communication began during Sonia's childhood and persisted throughout her adulthood. Despite the consistent and familiar aspect of this behavior, Sonia still appeared astonished by his tirade. Nonetheless, her desire to have the researcher hear the tape for herself may have been an indication of her need for confirmation of the intensity and duration of a profoundly abusive relationship. Many survivors did refer to their experiences as "abuse." But without external familial or societal validation of experience, survivors doubted its profound nature. The intensity of Sonia's fear of her brother as an adult reflected both her current experience and her powerlessness in a physically abusive relationship during a vulnerable period of her development as a child.

At the most extreme end of physically abusive relationships, some informants reported potentially fatal acts. At 44 years of age, Thelma described childhood incidents that could have resulted in her death. In order to protect herself from her brother's "pranks," Thelma was unwilling to submit to his provocation. But, her refusal to acquiesce magnified her brother's anger; resistance only intensified her brother's violent actions:

> I recall that my brother had me touch this electric fence, and it knocked me over and he thought that was really funny. I was probably about four or 5 years old. Then after that, I wouldn't touch it when he would ask me to, so he would push me into it and it was funny to him. Other things he did were putting my head in a bucket of ammonia. The first time he made me take a big smell of it. I choked and fell over.

Similar to Sonia's experience, Thelma related co-occurring psychological abuse and physical violence. In her case, she endured "psychological torture" when her brother directed his violent acts against her prized possessions:

> I remember we had this rocking horse, my sister and I just loved it. I might have been 7 years old, and I came home and my brother had butchered it. He cut it up and wrapped it up in newspaper and it was sitting in the room for us when we came home. My sister and I just freaked out. It was like a pet for us. So that was a pretty big thing.

The victims' sense of helplessness and inability to protect themselves from abuse intensified their victimization. For example, one older abusive brother had the physical advantage that made it difficult for the informant to exert any power to protect him. At age 50, Ben recounted a potentially deadly incident. Although it occurred 38 years before, the event remained emotionally potent:

> My brother would take out his misery on me. He would wrestle me to the floor, spit on me, or suck up his spit before it would hit my face-- pretty yucky stuff. He would hit me fairly often and hang me out off the second floor balcony from my heels. It was pretty extreme stuff… I was scared he would kill me. I was pretty helpless. I was smaller, and he was a lot stronger, and there was nothing I could do. I remember trying to hit him but he would pin my arms and hold me down so I couldn't punch him.

Informants used various methods in their attempts to protect themselves from their abusers. Some conformed to the abusive sibling's needs, others avoided their abuser, and still others fought back. However, most reported they did not feel they had the emotional resources to contend with their sibling's behavior. None of the participants felt strong enough to defend themselves against the physical battering they received. One of the younger informants, Beth, age 24, described herself as being "held hostage" by her older sister. Jenny was two years older and hung out with older youths who were gang

members and used drugs. Jenny's friends frightened Beth when they visited her home. They came to their home when her parents were away:

> It was scary to have these people over. When I would try to say that I am going to call Dad and tell him that there were boys in the house, Jenny would get very angry and do something to the phone so I wouldn't call out. When I would try to leave the house, she would lock the door so I couldn't get out. Even if I tried to get out of the house, there was a feeling of having nowhere to go. Then there would be times that I was doing my homework, and she would tell me to clean up my books. I would tell her that I would clean up when I was done, and she picked up all the books and threw them down the stairs. I was so angry I tried to hit her. And that was it – she really hit me then. She really beat me up. I had a huge black eye and bruises all over my body. And (*crying*) there was nothing I could do to help myself out of the situation.

Isabelle, age 57, related her brothers' physically abusive and emotionally menacing behavior. Jack, her oldest brother of seven years, not only abused Isabelle, but also recruited her middle brother, Matthew, to engage in abusive acts:

> Jack used to wash my face in the snow. He would push my head down and say 'Face is dirty, Isabelle'. He would also hold my head under water in the bathtub and it was always when my mother wasn't looking. He would also give me Indian burn and rubbed me in a very painful way. He would sit on top of me and tickle me to the point where I couldn't hold my bladder. I felt physically ill. You name it, he did it. He would practice wrestling holds, headlocks where you can't move. Jack would incite Matthew to do things to me. Sometimes it was the two of them, sometimes it was just Matthew. Once Jack pushed me down and had Matthew run over my leg with his bike. So even when Jack wasn't doing physical things to me, he was orchestrating. It was this thing you couldn't get away from.

Because Isabelle was unable to fend off her brothers' attacks, she complied with their needs; she hoped this would protect her. Accommodations to meet the needs of her abuser may have been necessary to deter acts of aggression. Tragically, the result was a compromised sense of self. Isabelle sacrificed her own desires and needs for self-protection. Ultimately, she relinquished her independence and became unable to think and act on her own or in her own best interest:

> Jack trained me to do his homework. And I did it as a way to get some sense of protection from him. I knew I wouldn't get beat up like Matthew did. But I wouldn't say it was a free choice. It was the same if he wanted to teach you how to swim in the neighbor's swimming pool, you don't say no, you just did it.

Fear and Anxiety. Both physical and emotional abuse precipitated a heavy emotional burden. The survivors' depictions of their emotional states during childhood illustrated how they transferred short-term reactions into long-lasting repercussions. Victims lived in a chronic state of fear because of perpetual and potential threats to their well-being. As a result, victims existed in a heightened state of arousal and adapted to this situation by maintaining hyper-vigilance.

The unpredictable nature of sibling violence and the abuser's dominant and controlling behavior thrust victims into positions of complete surrender. Tammy, who reportedly operated with trepidation throughout her adolescence, related how she needed to tune into her environment in order to protect herself. From her perspective, constant vigilance was a more powerful defense than martial arts:

> I had a friend when I was growing up who was into martial arts. I always wanted to learn it but I felt like if I trained myself to react to a physical attack that I would lose my instinctive reaction. I was kind of a street fighter at home or at school – physical reaction that was instantaneous. I was afraid that if I studied martial arts and trained myself differently that I would not be able to defend myself as well as I had been able to do with the constant 24-7 vigilance that I conducted myself with.

Although martial arts are a recognized technique for self-protection, Tammy thought they had the potential to lower her reactive instincts and therefore make her even more vulnerable.

Anxiety about physical harm was common. Ben was anxious because of his brother's maltreatment; he was unable to participate in simple pleasures at school such as physical education or social interaction with his peers because he was afraid of getting

hurt. “The sibling abuse was worse for my self-image than anything else was. I think it fucked up my self- esteem. In school, I was scared of any kind of game, but especially dodge ball. I was scared of the balls, anything coming at me.” Lynn also felt afraid and vulnerable in her life at school and in friends’ homes:

> I had a lot of anxiety as a kid, I still do now. It was affecting my schoolwork. I couldn’t concentrate and I was scared to go home. The school social worker talked to me and asked me if things were ok at home. I was very embarrassed and didn’t want to talk about it. I used to have panic attacks when I was 4 until I was 12 years old. I couldn’t sleep at anyone’s house. I was terrified of everything. I would have nightmares and flashbacks of my brother’s screaming and his voice. I had Obsessive Compulsive Disorder symptoms as well. I was scared that people were going to kill me or break into my house.

Lynn’s remarks conveyed a generalized feeling of vulnerability to danger that resulted from feeling that she had little control over her environment. Feeling unsafe in their homes made victims susceptible to anxiety in situations outside of the home that were unfamiliar or replicated feelings of vulnerability that were aspects of the abusive environment.

A common theme among informants was bewilderment about why they were victims of sibling abuse. Their inability to make sense of these experiences heightened their psychological susceptibility. Alice felt betrayed and abandoned, and perceived her sister Nancy as indifferent to her well-being. She was anxious because she could not understand anything she did or said that elicited they way her sister treated her. Nancy’s anger did not connect directly to Alice’s behavior, it was not something Alice could control or affect:

> My mother heard my sister curse and she took her into the bathroom and tried to shove soap down her throat. I remember feeling scared for her and so when my mother went into the bedroom, I went in to see how Nancy was doing. I don’t remember what I said. I was trying to comfort her. She started hitting me, which I didn’t understand. She threw me off the bunk bed and onto the floor.

Alice's narrative implied she still believed she must have done something to elicit her sister's rage. Later in the interview, Alice was able to depersonalize her sister's behavior and recognized it as a displacement of her anger towards their mother:

> If we went to the store, Nancy would just leave me there. Or when she would get really angry, she would beat the crap out of me for whatever reason. She was always at odds with my mother and they physically fought all the time. So I took the brunt of that – the extra anger she had left, she would take out on me.

The intellectual and emotional dissonance of her experience was apparent in Alice's reflection. Although she appeared to distance herself as the cause of her sister's abuse, she still blamed herself.

Reports of physical and psychological abuse often intertwined, and the inability of the child to understand the victimization heightened the experiences of both. Mia's description of her sibling relationship exemplified the co-occurrence of physical and emotional abuse. In these circumstances, victims often took on their abuser's worldview:

> She would hit me. I don't even know why to tell you the truth. She wouldn't ever hit me hard. She would just hit me in the same place to the point where I couldn't lift my arm anymore. I would try to hit her back but she would move and I would end up hitting a wall instead. It was around third grade she started hitting harder. I just took it. At some point, I would start crying and then the emotional abuse began. She blamed me for my parent's divorce and told me that I never should have been born because that is when all the problems began. That started when I was four and she was 6. I believed her. The intensity would grow as the years went on. Somehow, my being born changed the family -- made it problematic.

Mia internalized her sister's idea that her birth ruined the family. She came to believe she was responsible for her parent's divorce, even though she was only four years old at the time. She related her sister's view of the circumstances as though it were her own. She became increasingly guilt-ridden and felt responsible for the turmoil of her parents' relationship and the hardship her sister experienced. This example reflected the way a

number of victims took on the critical perspectives of the abusing sibling. The victims absorbed it, and ultimately, it became a part of their self-perception.

Emotional Abuse

Although physical abuse always had emotional consequences for the informants, some reported they were the victims of emotional abuse alone. Emotional abuse involved active expressions of rejection and deprecation through verbal denigration and ridicule or actions or threats; these caused extreme fear and anxiety. Emotional abuse also included situations in which one sibling used the other for advantage or profit (Schneider et al., 2005). Those informants who experienced emotional abuse used the language of physical violence to describe it; they referred to emotional attacks as being "verbally pummeled" and "profoundly emotionally hurt." Their use of metaphors of physical violence to express responses to emotional abuse suggests the intensity of the pain it caused victims. Tammy, a 28-year-old student, described the attacks she experienced as "something that warps your mind." For many victims, verbal onslaughts caused deep wounds that were as devastating as physical assaults. Paula, another victim of emotional abuse, described an incident that occurred when she was 12 years old and her sister was 14.She was waiting for her father to arrive for parent's day at her school:

> I was saying 'I wonder if Daddy is here'. My sister said, 'I don't know why you are so excited'. I said, 'Daddy is coming to my parent's day' and she said 'just so you know, he doesn't love you as much as he loves me, he doesn't love you that much at all. In fact, when mommy was pregnant with you, he said throw it away, throw it away. Throw away the pregnancy, terminate it, destroy it'. She said 'he didn't want you. And he doesn't want you now.' I started crying and she just walked away. I was supposed to go to class afterwards but I couldn't go. I was crying so hard I felt that I couldn't even move. I went to the nurse's station and I just laid there and cried and cried.

At 65 years of age, Gwen remembered how her older brother of four years constantly teased her and made fun of her appearance. If they went to their grandmother's house a few blocks away, he made her walk on the other side of the street because he did not want anyone to know that she was his sister because she was too ugly. Gwen said these daily insults made her life miserable. Moreover, as with reports of physical abuse with emotional abuse, victims of emotional abuse only illustrated the devastating power of insults.

Abuse Amnesia

Several respondents had difficulty remembering the details of a specific incident of a sibling's abusive behavior. This phenomenon was "abuse amnesia." It appeared some informants defended themselves from the emotional pain of their experience through repression or suppression. In effect, they had difficulty remembering the details of abusive behaviors that caused painful emotional reactions. One example of abuse amnesia was Marc's struggle to capture the details of incidents of emotional abuse from his brother, John:

> I do not remember specific situations. But it happened over a period of when I was 8 years old until I was 13 or 14. I think that I don't remember the specifics because it was such a common occurrence that it all kind of blended together.

At age 13, Kelli struggled with adolescent development. Although her memory of specific incidents was vague, the humiliation her brother imparted 38 years before was still present. "My brother came to school – I had gained a lot of weight and my chest was kind of big and he said something about it, I don't remember it, it was just something really ugly and really mean." Her inability to remember specific incidents bothered Sandy. At 25, she could not recall details of her brother's abuse. She felt that she needed

to be able to produce examples that would reflect the gravity she ascribed to her sibling relationship in order to legitimize her experience. When asked about the events of her childhood, she responded, “I don’t know (*crying*). I don’t really remember. I can’t point out anything specific (*sobbing*). He would make fun of me at school. When I was little - I don’t remember this but I have a memory of it, a story was told to me, that he pushed me down the basement stairs.”

Another adult survivor who had problems remembering the details of painful events was Lynn. At age 28, she said, “I wish I remembered specific things he said. I just feel like all of this is nebulous. I know I was terrorized, but I just can’t put my finger on it. Maybe I just don’t want to remember it.” Similarly, at 40, Julie said she did not remember instances of abuse with her brother because it was too painful. She was clear that her brother would “beat her up every day,” but she said she had made a conscious decision to “block out the details of her childhood.”

Informants employed a variety of defenses widely described in the psychodynamic literature. For example, what I describe as “abuse amnesia” may represent disassociation. In this instance, victims repressed memories of abuse so they are no longer accessible to them. Dissociation may have been more typical for children who experienced physical abuse, and repression more typical for those who experienced emotional abuse only. Ego functions, such as memory or perception (Goldstein, 1995), which allow a person to adapt to the external world, may be compromised when the individual experiences trauma. Ferenczi (1933) identified disassociation as a response to psychological trauma. When disturbance in the relationship between an individual and the environment disrupts adaptation, defense mechanisms develop that serve adjustment

to the external world (Hartmann, 1958). Defense mechanisms are generally unconscious processes employed to seek relief from anxiety (Polansky, 1991). The defenses of disassociation and repression allow the individual to distance him or herself from the memory of the traumatic event, thereby avoiding re-traumatization. The individual may have difficulty recalling devastating events as an ego defense. However, the ability to repress painful memories may have repercussions later for the sibling abused survivor and at the same time serve as successful adaptation to trauma. I will discuss how these defenses influence risk and resilience in the face of sibling abuse in a later chapter.

Contributing Factors to the Emotional Reverberations of Sibling Abuse

The experiences of abuse left survivors feeling psychologically bruised and emotionally defeated. They characterized their sibling relationships as fraught with feelings of hopelessness and helplessness. Their desire for strong sibling ties contributed to the negative emotional consequences of their siblings' actions. They not only suffered repetitive and ongoing abuse, but they struggled as they mourned the absence of a loving relationship with their sibling perpetrator. Victims felt rejected when physically or emotionally assaulted. More than their physical pain, they remembered the hurt they felt when someone harmed them whom they idealized or idolized. Inherent aspects of sibling relationships such as birth order and role expectations may have heightened acts of rejection. A younger sibling may have wanted the older sibling to protect him or her. The older sibling might have been in the position of caregiver, which would have engendered a sense of dependence in the younger sibling. As a result, the younger sibling might admire the older sibling. The power of the firstborn rendered idealization in the second born and reliance on the sibling for modeling.

These abused siblings felt anguish when their older and admired sibling rejected them through physical or emotional assault. In addition, continuous sibling violence or behaviors that communicated the older sibling's perception of the victim as worthless intensified the distress and grief the younger child experienced. Although rivalry is an assumed characteristic of sibling relationships, some siblings expected friendship. Survivors indicated a desire for loving relationships with their siblings, with mutual respect, understanding, and a shared belief system. The betrayal of desired love could have devastating effects. In the short-term, the victims experienced symptoms of grief: sadness, fear, anxiety, vulnerability, abandonment, and loneliness. In the long-term, this betrayal revealed itself in similar form in later intimate relationships with many of the same "symptoms" and manifested in distrust and a fear of closeness. Later chapters address the subtleties of these manifestations.

Desire for Closeness with the Abusive Sibling

All informants suffered at the hands of their siblings, yet, they held a common childhood aspiration. They yearned for a close relationship with their abuser. Herman (1992), extrapolating from Kleinian theory, refers to preserving hope as the survivor's task in trauma, without which he or she is destined to a state of despair. In cases of parent-child abuse, the child needs to preserve an idealized image of the parents and therefore, cannot recognize their faults (Herman, 1992). Studies on child development (Winnicott, 1965) focus on the child's idealization of a parent. When a parent fails to take into account his or her child's needs, the child internalizes a sense of inner badness, although the ideal of the parent does not wane. Instead, victims sacrifice their sense of self in the process of preserving the image of the parent (Fairbairn, 1952).

Historically, these representations of the dynamics of parent-child abuse were not applied in sibling abuse. In some families in this study, parental figures were unavailable, and the sibling assumed the care-giving role. In some cases, when children did not receive support from their parents, the sibling took on considerable importance. Survivors employed a defense where they needed to preserve the image of the sibling similar to the need for attachment to their caregivers. Without this image, these children would be virtually alone in the world. The tradeoff for preservation of the sibling was to sacrifice their selves. Consequently, they came to see their siblings as justified in their actions and perceived themselves as possessing qualities that would warrant abusive behavior.

In his work with abused children, Fairbairn (1952) found that there is an intense connection and loyalty to abusive parents (Mitchell & Black, 1995). While the pleasurable parent-child bond leads to a "healthy" and pleasure-seeking relationship with others, when the parents provide mostly painful experiences the child learns to seek pain as a form of connection rather than avoidance of pain. According to Ferenczi, emotional abandonment by a parent during child abuse and the lack of parental understanding compounds the child's suffering and leads to a sense of despair and a kind of "traumatic aloneness" (Frankel, 1998). A child defends against the emotional loss of the parent by "splitting." This defense serves the purpose of the child's attempt to improve a terrible problem in the environment by changing and splitting the "object" into good and bad parts and takes in the bad part in an effort to preserve the abuser as good (St. Clair, 2004). The child's need for and dependence on the abuser prevents them from rejecting them. In effect, the only way to control the abuser is to internalize them.

However, once internalized, these "objects" gain full power over the child's inner world (St. Clair, 2004). The child internalizes not only the perception of the other person but also of the other's sense of relationships. Consequently, this internalization changes how a person thinks about and experiences him or herself in the world (St. Clair, 2004). Although these concepts are often used to help understand the importance of parent-child relationships, they have not been previously applied in the context of sibling abuse. I discuss this concept further in relation to sibling abuse in the next chapter. In its immediate form, the concept of splitting may represent a victim's internal response to an abusive sibling. The sense of loss experienced by the abuse or acts of rejection overwhelmed the victims in this study. They expressed their utter despair over their siblings' ostracizing behavior. Consequently, they carried over this expectation of rejection into other social relationships.

Sandy tried to ingratiate herself to her brother, but to no avail. Regardless of his abuse, she repeatedly sought ways to thwart his hostility. Sobbing, she said, "I just always wanted to have a good relationship with him. I would do anything for him in an effort to make him like me. It never worked." Similarly, Julie longed for a sibling relationship like the ones she saw in other families:

> I was always the butt of Jason's jokes even or especially when we would go over to other family's homes where there were children. I couldn't understand why these brothers and sisters got along ok. And that Jason and I didn't was confusing and sad for me. I always longed for a close sibling relationship. I even approached him about that when he was 16 years old and I was 14. I remember asking him why we couldn't be as close as our family friends' children could. He would just say 'I don't know'.

The experience of sibling disdain and lack of understanding combined with uncertainly about what caused their contempt confused the victims. They internalized messages of

low self-worth that mirrored the sibling's distant, rejecting, and hostile behavior and left them feeling that no one could love them. Several respondents said they lived with a pervasive sense of aloneness and loneliness during childhood and adolescence. The emotional abandonment from a sibling coupled with the longing for a sibling bond interfered with developing important social relationships beyond the family. Sonia related her sense of inferiority around peers:

> I was a bit of a loner. I never felt comfortable opening up to people, and I remember my mother always saying to me 'why are you always sitting in the house'. It was very hard for me to be around peers because I never felt comfortable with my equals. I always felt comfortable with kids and older people.

Through further discussion, Sonia said how it felt too risky to develop close relationships because of her experience with her twin brother. She could not imagine having warm and supportive relationships with children her own age. Ben had similar reactions to normal social interactions, because he did not feel safe: "I was a kid in a lot of pain. Because of my brother, I was withdrawn in school. I didn't have many safe places."

Sibling rejection left some victims feeling as if they were an only child. Even so, victims still fantasized about having a close relationship. Lynn reflected this sentiment:

> I was always asking my parents for a sister or a brother even though I already had a brother but he was not the kind of brother that I wanted. I always felt alone and I felt like I was an only child even though I grew up most of my childhood with him. I always felt like I was gypped on the brother thing. Other people's brothers didn't act the way my brother did.

Paula confided in her sister, Josie, about romantic matters, but sadly, Josie used the information in an emotionally destructive manner. Paula allowed herself to be vulnerable in an effort to be close to her sister. On one occasion she confided in Josie about her interest in a boy whom she began dating, and Josie vindictively sought out the boy to pursue sexual relations with him herself.

Two respondents, Sonia and Tamar, lived in extremely unstable households. They identified their desire for a loving and bonded relationship with their siblings in part because they needed a consistent, reliable, and supportive companion. However, their siblings did not reciprocate; the combination of violence and camaraderie was confusing and painful. Sonia shared the dichotomized relatedness of her brother and her wish for union. She stated “I really wanted to be in a loving relationship with my brother. And when I felt we were in a loving relationship, I felt good. I guess I wanted some kind of joining with him. My mother was nuts and my father was in his own world. And the two of them would fight in a way that was just unhealthy for any kid to be around”.

Tamar’s parents did not provide her with a sense of safety and well-being, so she desperately wanted to have a partnership and mutually empathic relationship with her brother, Brett: “It would have been nice if the two of us could have formed a bond against all of the stuff that was going on around us. As a kid, Brett felt like a traitor—we were in it together with my parents’ abuse but he didn’t reciprocate. I loved him, and it felt crappy. I wanted to trust him.”

Idealization of the Abusive Sibling

Survivors’ experiences with unavailable parents may have led them to seek comfort and closeness with their older sibling. However, it was apparent that some survivors at one time had close relations with their siblings. The unaccounted for and inexplicable change in their siblings’ behavior intensified the affect of the abusive behavior. It is difficult to determine if their need for a trusted caregiver contributed to their idealization, and the sibling served as a proxy for the parent. Also intensifying the devastation of the idealized siblings’ emotional abandonment was the sometimes affable

and other times hostile behavior. Talia, a 32-year-old survivor, described her feelings about Alicia, her older sister by three years, when they were growing up:

> I worshipped her. There is nobody on earth I have more fun with than my sister. She is very funny, fun, playful, kind of wild. I never laughed so hard except with her. So when it's good, it's really good. But then she would flip. We would literally be playing and I would be having the best time ever and she would scream 'Get out! Get out of my room!' and I would be like why and she would yell at the top of her lungs 'I don't want to do this anymore! Get out!'

Unable to predict Alicia's mood swings and baffled by how easily Alicia's moments of likeability could seduce her left Talia bewildered. As an adult, Talia explained she should have "known better" and not be lured in by her sister's fun-loving nature. Although she knew Alice was mercurial, Talia was shocked every time her sister turned on her. Each time Talia would get over a tirade, move forward, and trust her sister again, her sister betrayed her.

Isabelle's brother, Jack, was seven years older, and she adored him:

> I thought my brother was the coolest guy. I idolized him. Even as I got older and started dating, I would always measure every guy to him. He was wild, funny, and handsome. He would come home, and I would want to hear all about his adventures and he would just walk into the room and tell me to get out. I remember feeling like what did I do to deserve that. My bubble just completely burst. I went from a major high of not being able to wait to see him to feeling like he hates me.

Isabelle was devastated. Her excitement to be with him heightened the pain of his rejection when he dismissed her. This eroded her sense of worth. Tammy also idealized her brother, Douglas and like Isabelle, the loss of this once amicable relationship devastated her. Her pain was palpable as she communicated her extreme depression because of her brother's withdrawal during their adolescence. Although she had a very close relationship with him when they were younger, it became more strained as his relationships with friends consumed him, and he lost interest in Tammy:

> I was extremely close to him and just really wanted that to stay that way. He didn't have any friends so he would hang out with me. And then he started to make friends in high school and he didn't want anything to do with his little sister anymore. And I was totally shut out. And it was very difficult for me. My mother would say 'just you wait Tammy, he'll come back'. So I waited. And I waited. And he never came back.

Tammy linked her own sense of importance to Douglas's perceptions of her. Douglas' distant and increasingly abusive behavior left her feeling profoundly lonely. She had to take a leave from school, because she was unable to concentrate and experienced cognitive difficulties. The abuse, coupled with the loss of her brother's friendship culminated in a sense of despair. Tammy equated the loss of her brother's friendship with death. She felt that the brother she knew and admired was no longer available and she had to rectify his absence. Tammy explained that this loss was more difficult than mourning the death of a loved one. Her brother withheld his love. Whereas death is final, love lost brings hope of reconciliation. She explained that she felt punished and spent considerable time pondering how to repair this relationship. The significance of the sibling relationship to these victims confirmed the depth of anguish they experienced over this loss. This sets the precedent for understanding the magnitude of the abusive sibling's influence on the victims' perceptual outlook.

Sibling Abuser's Influence and Control

Individuals gain meaning about the world by interacting with their social and physical environment. These interactions and their interpretations contribute to the development of identity, perceptions of others, and the world (Blumer, 1969; Rank & LeCroy, 1983). The abusive siblings' dominating, directive and controlling behavior left the participants feeling that they had to justify their own ideas if they were different from that of their sibling's. Siblings with extremely strong opinions and convictions imposed

their views on the victims and admonished them when they did not mirror their older sibling's perceptions. When informants attempted to exert their own opposing ideas, their siblings rebuffed them in harsh and punitive ways; consequently, they lost confidence in their own belief systems and worldviews. Isabelle remarked that whenever her brother expressed his opinion, she could not retain her own. She said the intensity and forcefulness of her brother's beliefs left no space for her own voice. Consequently, she felt her perspectives were not worthy of being expressed, heard, and ultimately, accepted. Tammy had such an experience with her brother. He was coercive with his views and his sense of what was right for her:

> When I was a kid, I became a vegetarian and my brother told me I was being irrational and was all over my case about it. It wasn't until I could learn the scientific elements from my science class that I could bring that to my brother and do this cost-benefit analysis and prove to him why I became a vegetarian. I wasn't allowed to have feelings when I was a kid. Any time I expressed anything about myself, my brother would put me down. Whenever I try to stand up for myself he would just put me down… When it came time for me to take the SAT's, my brother yelled at me and told me that I have to apply to college for computer science. He forced me into it when I really wanted to study acting and film. I got a really high SAT score, but I felt like I wasn't good enough because I had to do what he wanted. It was very damaging. He was always putting me down and my choices.

Tammy's attempts to justify her point of view were confronted by her brother's disapproval. She felt she had to assume his viewpoint so that he would accept her. Ultimately, any relationship with him depended on her assuming his attitudes and beliefs. Tammy's intellectual capacity and academic abilities were not enough to mitigate her brother's relentless directives or allay her feelings of helplessness. She internalized a sense of inferiority as her more powerful brother instilled a sense of inadequacy in her. It may be difficult to understand why Tammy did not proceed with her own goals despite her brother's disapproval. However, the cumulative effect of his derogatory messages

broke down her sense of self-efficacy and resulted in compliance. Any attempt to separate from her brother by thinking independently resulted in a barrage of insults; this diminished her capacity to pursue her own independent thoughts. Tammy's relationship with her brother reflected the significance of interpretation of experience; people make meaning about themselves and others through their interactions with those around them. Although subjective in nature, the interpreted meaning became the subject's reality.

Her brother's strongly dominating opinions coupled with his inability to tolerate her perspectives stifled her from expressing her views. As a way to fend off potential criticism, Tammy adapted through withdrawal. She was at a loss as to how to interact socially:

> My social life is very very challenging to me. My home life is challenging to me. My family life is challenging to me. My work life is challenging to me. My school life is challenging to me. I have trouble relating to my fellow students. I have trouble in all of my friendships. There's nothing I can relax in and just kick back. I'm always expecting judgment. I can't' really get my mind around my brother.

An important aspect of adolescent development is the ability to form personal opinions and construct moral values. Children are vulnerable when they grow up in families with frequent forbidding gestures and a lack of differentiation between behavior and identity (McKay & Fanning, 1987). The anticipation of criticism stifled Tammy's willingness to communicate. This began when she was an adolescent and her brother imposed his moral constructs onto her. Inevitably, the constant devaluation of her perspective compromised the development of her identity. The need for recognition, acceptance, and mirroring is a critical aspect of adolescence. This developmental stage facilitates ego development and basic trust (Erikson, 1968). Conditions of abuse magnify

the potential for self-criticism and youth, who are susceptible to narcissistic injuries, question self-expression. As an aspect of self-emancipation, autonomous decision-making is a challenge during adolescence, and youths achieve it through internalization of and identification with their representational worlds (Gemelli, 1996). Some survivors who felt their independent thoughts were thwarted portrayed insecurities regarding their individuality. The idealization and admiration of a sibling inevitably increased the experience of harm and rejection by their perpetrators. As children, these informants sought positive, amiable, and respectful relationships with their siblings. When one sibling betrayed this bond, the other had to contend with debilitating consequences.

The Role of Parents

An earlier study on sibling abuse found that parental responses to sibling abuse ranged from passive to active ineffectiveness (Wiehe, 1990). In some cases, parents ignored, disbelieved, or reacted indifferently (Wiehe, 1990). In the current study, parents also behaved in different ways. Not only did they not provide a safe and secure environment, but they reinforced messages of inferiority and worthlessness communicated through a sibling's physical and emotional assaults. Whether a parent abused the victim or willfully or unintentionally neglected to address the sibling abuse, they colluded with the perpetrator. This covert or silent communication fostered the sibling abuse to become pervasive.

Object relations theory allows understanding of the significance of the parental response to sibling abuse. Although discussed regarding the mother-infant relationship (Winnicott, 1971), object relations theory has the potential to consider the influence of the maternal response to her child's stress at any phase of development. Winnicott (1971)

proposed that the mother's nurturing relationship with the infant provided a "holding environment" for the infant to develop internal psychic structures (Brandell, 2004). The term “holding environment” refers to the mother’s ability to offer her child emotional security and offer him or her protection against the inevitable failures in maternal attentiveness or empathy (Brandell, 2004). If a mother is well attuned to her child, she is able to provide empathic support. This requires her to meet the needs of her child and put aside her own needs. Brief lapses in attunement from the “good-enough” mother teach the child that he/she is not omnipotent and gradually prepares the infant to learn to self-soothe (Brandell, 2004).

Survivors experienced unstable and unsafe environments when they were children. Their abusive sibling relationship did not allow for development of a holding environment. Although “good-enough” mothering is used in reference to infancy, the concept may be extended to include childhood, since the influence of parental attunement is imperative to a child’s self-esteem. Consistent acts of abuse do not allow healing to occur, and assaults were so emotionally intrusive that the child is unable to self-soothe. With parents who did not intervene or emotionally soothe their children, victims did not develop their own internal soothing mechanisms. Additionally, survivors developed the expectation that others would also fail them (Rholes & Simpson, 2004). The perception of the caregiver’s accessibility and responsiveness not only forms expectations about the self in relation to the other but also affects one’s assessment of self-worth (Rholes & Simpson, 2004).

The lack of parental responsiveness compounded the effects of sibling abuse. Tamar described her mother’s emotionally and physically abusive behavior as a response

to her cry for help. She said her mother would smack her when she complained of injury from her brother. “I was in the backyard once, and my brother was pinching and grabbing me so I smacked him back. My mother saw from the window and alluringly said ‘Tamar, come hoooome, I have something special for youuuu’ and then she beat the crap out of me.” Meanwhile, her father responded to her request for help by physically abusing her brother. This led her brother to take out his anger on her again, and Tamar would become a victim of his abuse again. Tamar failed to experience a holding environment and good-enough mothering (Winnicott, 1971). As a result, she lost all hope for protection from within her family.

Victims who encountered a passive response from parents had similar emotional responses to those whose parents were punitive. Survivors reported that without effective parental intervention, they thought that they must have done something to provoke the abuse. Rather than attributing limitations to their parents, children inevitably interpreted parental inaction as an indication that they did not warrant any help. In actuality, it is not clear whether these parents would have been able to influence the abusive children’s behavior.

Summary

Parent-child abuse occurred in more than half of the informant’s homes. For some victims, parent-child abuse resulted directly from the sibling abuse. In other cases, it was inherent in the family system. In some instances, both children were targets, and the victim desired to bond with the sibling abuser. The shared experience of abuse at the hands of a parent compelled victims to seek comfort in a potential ally. However, not only was bonding absent, but the perpetrators’ abuse at the hands of a parent fueled their

displacement of aggression towards their sibling. The sense of disappointment over a lack of camaraderie shifted to devastation when a sibling became abusive.

Sometimes the sibling-abused child was the target of parent-child abuse. This reinforced victims' sense of worthlessness and inner badness. The abused child developed a belief that he or she deserved maltreatment. At the same time, the abuse of the perpetrator by a parent, often in a misguided attempt to address the abuse, left the victim feeling frightened of the repercussions. The inability to understand the cause of abuse created a chronic state of anxiety, despair and powerlessness to effect change. They could only determine that they must be inherently bad. In effect, the parental reaction to the abusive sibling relationship only enhanced its effects. Ideally, parents would have been the victim's most trusted adults, but their lack of support exacerbated feelings of helplessness and worthlessness. In a later chapter I will elaborate the way in which parent-child relationships affected the victim of sibling abuse. The next chapter extends the application of objects relations theory to intimate relationships among these survivors of sibling abuse in adulthood.

CHAPTER VI: OBJECT RELATIONS THEORY AND THE ENDURING CONSEQUENCES OF SIBLING ABUSE IN ADULTHOOD

Introduction

Object relations theory focuses on current interpersonal relations as representations of reactivated internalized relationships from the past (Kernberg, 1984). It emphasizes the lasting impressions of early life relationships (St. Clair, 2004). The concept of transference (Freud, 1923) is a cornerstone of this theory. Transference rests on the notion that people react to situations based on earlier experiences with others. As a result, interpersonal relationships may reflect an internalized representation of another person (Fonagy & Target, 2003). These earlier experiences, whether conscious or unconscious, may influence affective states and reactions (Fonagy & Target, 2003).

The process of internalization involves taking in a person or experience and making it one's own (St. Clair, 2004). In the context of this study, overt communication and covert messages from the sibling abuser was likely to influence the victim's self-perception. When abuse was normative within a family structure, the victims learned and accepted it as their own. A child is more likely to internalize the norms from those people he or she respects, admires, needs, or idealizes (Dutton, 2000). Members of a family, who have influence through their role and status, are more likely to influence family norms and the subsequent process of internalization (Haskins, 2003).

As evident from the narratives of the adult survivors in this study, their childhood experiences made them vulnerable to deficits in ego development. They reported it hampered their ability to develop "healthy" interpersonal relationships as adults. Their siblings beat, ridiculed, berated, and disparaged them for long periods. They endured considerable suffering at the hands of siblings and did not receive parental support. This

situation contributed to the internalization of low self-worth. In an effort to adapt to feeling devalued and vulnerable as adults, survivors defended themselves against intimacy. Their historical experiences with their families led to the development of defenses that reduced their risk of repeating the hurt they previously experienced. Inevitably, defense mechanisms employed to reduce vulnerability compromised their sense of satisfaction in interpersonal relationships. They needed validation, and this need persisted in relationships with other adults. Their insecurities and self-doubt further demonstrated the "taking-in" of the perceptions of others, namely siblings. Consequently, their experiences mirrored those promulgated in object relations theory.

Participants in this study articulated long-term ramifications of sibling abuse in a number of ways. They had problems finding their place in the world. Their self-doubt, self-disapproval, self-denigration, and internal discomfort were rooted in internalized self-perceptions brought on by messages of inferiority communicated explicitly or implicitly by a sibling's behavior. Self-reports of low self-esteem were universal and took various forms. Some informants doubted their physical attractiveness; others doubted their intellectual capacity. Still, others did not feel entitled to express their own opinions, because they were afraid other people would disregard them. Some informants were unable to identify their desires because their siblings had admonished them when they had expressed them. Participants were terrified to explore life, take risks, and make decisions. If they did, they expected others would chastise or reject them. They understood that these behaviors resulted from earlier experiences with controlling, directive, and opinionated siblings who imposed their beliefs and views on them. As a result, they struggled to develop their sense of mastery, control, and identity.

Emotional Ramifications of Sibling Abuse

Informants reflected on their emotional reactions to sibling abuse in childhood that set the stage for how, as adults, they related to others. Fundamental were struggles with self-acceptance. For example, Ben described himself as fragile and easily affected by others' acceptance or judgment. He described a childhood of self-loathing, because of his brother's persistent devaluation. The physical abuse Ben endured at his brother's hands made him afraid of getting physically or emotionally hurt. As a result, school personnel had to coax Ben to participate in everyday school activities, and Ben became critical of himself for not fitting in. He expected others to view him the same way his brother did.

Other survivors recounted their dire struggles to accept themselves; they repeated their earlier sibling relationships in adulthood and continued to embody the perceptions that their abusers had of them. Julie's experiences exemplified the internalization process and the enduring effects of her brother's ridicule:

> I really beat myself up over things. It is a challenge for me. I have been trying not to do that so much. A simple example would be if I was reading a book on the train and I missed a stop going uptown I would just berate myself: This is so stupid. How could you do this? This is just like you. You are going to be late. What are they going to think of you? It's sort of repeating the verbal abuse my brother said to me and now I do it to myself. It's so interesting to think about human nature -- if 20 people are telling you how great you are you only pay attention to the one who is not. So even though I knew I had talent I paid more attention to what my brother was saying and doing to me.

Self-flagellation was the antecedent of relatedness to others. Some survivors, such as Julie, expressed her low self-esteem through self-deprecation. Others, such as Sonia, illustrated internalization and subsequent externalization of low self-worth. Her low self-esteem engendered expectations of punitive, judgmental, and unaccepted responses from

others. She believed other people would view her as inadequately as she saw herself. In this example, she links her low self-worth to her relationships with men:

> My low self-esteem around men has a lot to do with the way my brother treated me. There was no excuse for him doing what he did to me, and yet no one ever stood up and protected me. So in my mind if they weren't protecting me then I must have deserved it. And then, when his friends came over they would say to me 'gee I never knew he had a twin sister'. It's really hard to heal psychically from that, and believe in your heart that you're worthy.

Self-denigration among survivors was consistent. Joe deemed himself a "loser" because he was socially isolated. He replayed his brother's taunts that he was inept and accepted them as true. In his view, they were the source of other people's criticism:

> I'm scared of being judged, basically being looked down on. This is what keeps me from starting a more active search for a relationship. I can't even eat alone in a restaurant. Most people can do that. I know logically intellectually nobody cares how I eat my hamburger unless I stick it in my ear. But I would rather buy a bag of potato chips and a soda and walk down the street eating it than sitting at the restaurant alone because I have low self-esteem and it feels like everyone is watching me. Intellectually I know they are not judging me, but emotionally, I think they are.

Consistently, survivors believed that others would judge and criticize them. They shared an intellectual and emotional dissonance from reality. Most of the survivors stated that while they knew this was not rational, the ingrained messages of abuse led them to question what others really thought. However, areas of sensitivity were diverse and inconsistent. There was not a direct connection between the specific statement of emotional abuse, for example being called stupid or ugly, and this area of self-repudiation.

Tamar's fragile self-image was evident in her struggle to depersonalize conflict in her relationships. She spoke of her tendency to take ownership of conflict, which perpetuated self-blame and led to excessive focus on her shortfalls. She found it difficult

to trust that relationships could withstand discord. She linked this belief to the emotional abandonment she experienced from her parents when her brother assaulted her:

> My mother abandoned me, my father abandoned me, and my brother used to come after me with such anger, and such violence. Nobody ever protected me. And the remnants of that have to do with a sense of self-worth and worthiness, and that really gets tested when you are in a relationship.

Participants struggled with what they knew to be true and what they experienced emotionally regarding self-appraisal. They wavered between feeling confident about their strengths and questioning their capabilities. Many female survivors felt confident about their intellectual capacity, but insecure about their appeal to men. Sonia believed she had many positive qualities, but nonetheless felt undesirable. Although she could identify a host of positive characteristics, she found it difficult to affirm her desirability to men:

> I think my biggest issue is around being with somebody who I think I deserve. Intellectually I think I deserve it but emotionally I think that's really hard for me. You know if I find somebody who's very bright, very accomplished, and financially independent, and has a lust for life, and a good sense of humor, and all that other kind of stuff, it's really hard for me to believe that somebody like that would want me.

In summary, most survivors felt insecure in many areas. Despite feedback from others about their strengths, survivors were frequently unable to internalize these positive perceptions. Although they were able to reflect intellectually on their positive qualities, they found it difficult to maintain positive self-regard. In fact, they reported struggling daily to undo the damage they attributed to their sibling's perceptions. Moreover, although they received positive reinforcement as adults, the internalization of their early sibling relationship held firm.

Search for Validation

In the face of persistent low self-esteem, some survivors sought explanations from parents or abusive siblings to help them understand the abuse. They hoped for acknowledgement of the abusive sibling relationship, because it would validate their experiences and help depersonalize the behavior targeted at them. If the perpetrator took ownership of their behavior and recognized their actions as distinct from a flaw in the victim, the victim could alleviate self-blame and self-flagellation. Survivors did not want to believe that they deserved such intense maltreatment. In an effort to absolve themselves of a sense of badness and to depersonalize the perpetrator's actions, survivors confronted parents and siblings about their behavior. Even in adulthood, the abusive sibling continued to control the survivors' ego.

Search for Understanding from the Abuser

The need for absolution from a parent or sibling reflected the power others still had over the survivors' sense of self. Although most attempts for validation from family members disappointed survivors, some perpetrators did acknowledge and accept responsibility for their behavior. Whether or not this helped survivors to move forward remains a question; all reported they continued to struggle with the experience.

According to Tammy, "The closest we've ever come to speaking of it is when I confronted my brother about the things he did and he referred to it as horribly overreacting on my part." Her brother minimized the experience and her pain. Although Tammy questioned her brother's viewpoint, she wanted him to accept how his abuse influenced her current emotional state. She acknowledged her struggle to move forward without his affirmation. Tammy's sense of self was strongly rooted in her brother

accepting responsibility for the abuse. If not, she had to manage the belief that she did something to provoke the behavior and was bad. Alice also confronted her sister in an effort to understand the reason she abused her. “I confronted her 25 years later, and it was still no big deal to her. She said ‘you turned out ok didn’t you’.” The power the abusive sibling held into adulthood was evident in Julie’s desire for her brother’s validation:

> Up until recently, I felt that talking to my brother about our childhood was imperative for me to go on with my life. My father tells me not to expect an apology. I just needed to tell him my truth. I asked to talk to him and he was agreeable but I didn’t follow through and he wasn’t even curious what it was about. I just felt done. I have to move on. He is not someone I would want to hang out with even if he wasn’t my brother.

Julie’s need for her brother’s acknowledgement persisted despite his continued rejection. Yet, she did not want her brother to know how desperate she was for him to “know her truth.” Although Julie realized her brother should not hold such power over her and had proved he did not deserve her idealization, the need for his recognition overrode reality.

Even when abusing siblings accepted responsibility for past behavior, survivors were not always satisfied:

> I was home for Thanksgiving, and I told my parents about what had happened and I guess my father said something to my brother and he decided it was time to talk to me about it and he defiantly said, ‘Yes, I did it, and I’m sorry. What are you going to do blame me for all of your bad relationships with men?’ And I said ‘yeah, probably’… He’s tried to apologize. He’s acknowledged what he had done to me and that he was not a nice person but I don’t think he really understands the damage it caused.

Although Lynn’s brother apologized for his behavior, he did not accept the magnitude of its effects on his sister. Still, his ability to see their relationship had contributed to her problems with men suggested he could understand the consequences of his behavior.

Other survivors in this study, in particular the men, did not seek out their sibling's acknowledgement. Ben felt he shared his brother's problems, which emanated from their parent's limitations and "narcissism." This enabled him to understand his brother:

> I think I am pretty resolved about the sibling abuse. He has never apologized. But we talked enough about what happened. We have a good understanding. We actually talk about our parents from time to time. He's upset about things my parents focused on, and invested in that weren't about us -- like their clothes and vacation when he wanted things like clothes and toys that other kids have. Even though I saw our parents' self-focus affect us in other ways, I understand what he said; we both weren't taken into account.

His recognition that his brother was also a "victim" of his parents helped Ben to understand his brother's actions. For Ben, his brother's openness to recognize his experience may have been as satisfying as an acknowledgment.

Although survivors generally sought acknowledgment from a sibling, Joe's brother apologized for what occurred during their childhood:

> My brother is going through this phase where he is asking me if I regret being his brother and he says he is sorry for the things he did to me as a kid. And I resolved myself. I said to him 'kids can be kids, this is what happens, and I don't regret it. I am who I am today'. He is carrying his guilt. If he wants to carry on his pity pot, I have other things to worry about. I don't like what happened to me. It happened – it was 35 years ago.

Whether or not siblings took responsibility for their behavior, survivors remained scarred by their experiences. The pervasive nature of hostile sibling relations continued into adulthood. As a result, some survivors emotionally cut-off their siblings or remained in abusive relationships. Those who remained in contact with their siblings were ambivalent about the relationship, and none of the survivors said they currently had a congenial relationship with their sibling. The reasons for maintaining contact varied from a desire to retain a "semblance of family" to longing for a sense of connection. These aspects of sibling relationships appear later in this paper.

Search for Understanding from Parents

Survivors also sought acknowledgement about the sibling abuse from their parents and their role in it. Informants confronted their parents about their dismissal of sibling abuse. They could not understand why parents had not protected them or even at times encouraged the abuse. Nonetheless, participants were hesitant to hold parents accountable. Most described strained relationships with their parents and anger at the lack of parental attentiveness to early abusive sibling relationships. These attitudes continued in adulthood, since parents remained overtly or covertly rejecting.

Julie's parents found it difficult to talk about emotions. Julie attributed her sister's abusiveness to a lack of good models of communication. Her parents could not tolerate hearing about her episodes with her sister and claimed they were unaware of its seriousness. Julie struggled with blaming her parents; she wished she could absolve them of responsibility and did not want her anger to disturb the stability of her relationship with them:

> The first time I went to therapy I was 19 years old and a lot of this stuff with my sister came up. I tried to talk to my parents about it because we were really close. The fact that they could not tolerate hearing it was illuminating for me… I don't feel angry towards them. I was very hurt the third time I tried to broach the subject with them about how hard it was for me. They shut me down. In that moment, I realized that I can't talk to them about it. I don't want to blame them; I want to blame my sister. I think my mother could have done more. She said to me, 'till this day I thought these were just sisterly fights that all sisters have'. I guess she blocked out the extent of it or didn't think it was anything major.

Julie found it difficult to contend with the possibility of her parents' guilt, therefore her quest for validation was only moderately satisfying.

In contrast, Thelma's mother expressed remorse about her parenting, which Thelma accepted with qualifications:

> My mother said recently that she didn't praise us enough. She said she didn't want to raise children who were conceited or full of themselves. She was a product of her generation and Catholic background – there is importance to raising humble children, so she went a little overboard in that respect. She has a lot of remorse about not really protecting us. I feel like she did the best she could.

Although Thelma understood that her mother's religious background encouraged corporal punishment, she struggled to accept this was the truth.

One survivor, Gwen, was less forgiving of her mother's offer of accountability. Instead, she was exasperated by her mother's inability to acknowledge her early neglect or her current behavior that only reinforced her alliance with her son:

> I sat with my mother one day and started telling her from my heart all the things that she did or didn't do when I was growing up. I said 'how could you leave a 7 year old alone with a three year old. How could you do this? Why did you do that?' She said that I was remembering it wrong. I said 'I am not, I lived it'. At some point, I must have cried my heart out and she said 'alright you have it your way, I was the worst mother on earth and I was a terrible mother.' Then I get a phone call from my brother. 'Who the fuck are you to talk to my mother like that? Don't you ever hurt my mother!'I called her up and said 'why did you go and call him and tell him everything? She said 'you don't know how bad you hurt me, you really hurt me. I said 'so you had to sic him on me?!'

Lynn's mother felt overwhelmed by her son's behavior, and she was unable to stop his aggressive behavior towards herself, her daughter, or her husband. Although sending her son to Florida to live with relatives was an attempt by her mother to protect the family, Lynn described this had other repercussions. When her brother returned, he blamed Lynn for his exile:

> I confronted my mother about a lot of the choices that she made, and I think she made a lot of bad choices in how she raised my brother and she acknowledges that as well. I asked her how she sent her 16 year old son away. That's not what you do when you have a kid who needs help, you deal with it. And she said she was trying to save the rest of her family, she thought that was the best thing to do because I was so traumatized by him. That really was her intention to see if I got better. She was so worried about me.

Although Lynn did not agree with how her mother handled the situation, she understood the decision was made to protect her daughter. This validated Lynn's experience of abuse.

In part, the desire for parental acknowledgment was an attempt for validation beyond the abuse itself. Survivors' sense of self, even in adulthood, rested on acknowledgment and recognition from the family. Because of their abuse and internalized messages of worthlessness, survivors' quest to feel competent rested with parental acceptance. They continued to search for the "good enough" (Winnicott, 1971) parent. Unfortunately, most were grievously disappointed.

Whether explicitly or subtlety expressed, all of the participants acknowledged feeling impaired by their history of sibling abuse. They struggled to develop an identity beyond their subjugation by abusive siblings. Lacking confidence, survivors submitted to the needs or perceived needs of others and adopted roles and behavior that assumed subservience. They avoided conflict which led them to maintain superficial relationships. Because they felt vulnerable, they were particularly sensitive to specific behaviors in others. The attempt to preserve their emotional state meant limiting interactions based on anticipated, observed, assumed, and expected behavior among potential partners**.**

Survivors' Intimate Relationships

The object relations theorist, Fairbairn (1952) contended that the primary motivation of people is a connection to others. He proposed that the earliest, deepest wish is for a loving, satisfying bond with a nurturing parent, and the need for a satisfactory relationship constitutes the fundamental motive in life. Later, theorists acknowledged siblings as a key source of emotional connection (Winnicott, 1971). When children lack

nurturing relationships in their homes, they search for that connection throughout their life. Moreover, because they do not have a model for a "healthy" and satisfying connection, children of abuse tend to seek out relationships that replicate their previous experiences. Feelings of shame and inadequacy compelled the survivors in this study to seek partners who continued to subjugate them and corroborate these feelings.

Consistent with object relations theory, survivors of sibling abuse endured feelings of helplessness, powerlessness, and inferiority that eroded their self-esteem and ultimately influenced their relationships to others. Struggling with self-acceptance and managing intense feelings, they defended against intimate relations. Fear and anxiety also compromised their ability to develop "healthy" attachments.

Attachment theorists define "healthy" relationships as those that occur when a person is comfortable with closeness and can depend on others. Individuals must be capable of developing and sustaining intimacy, passion, and commitment and not preoccupied with abandonment (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Individuals who have secure attachment styles sense romantic partners to be well intentioned, reliable, and trustworthy (Hazan & Shaver, 1987).

Survivors' Definition of Intimacy

The nature of emotional relatedness in family systems sets a precedent for how people understand closeness with another person; how they think about connectedness; and how they experience intimacy. When asked to define "closeness," survivors' responses reflected the internalization process of personal experience. Unconditional acceptance was a recurrent theme:

> Naked honesty bare-naked emotionally; unconditional acceptance but I'm not sure if that is possible; staying present to one's own feelings and to another's. (Sarah)

> A lot of caring --a lot of unconditionality. It's about having similar values and beliefs that if I ever needed anybody, all I needed to do was pick up the phone and they would be there for me. There's a lot of mutuality and a lot of openness. If they do something that makes me angry or vice versa, we talk about it. You know, and I never question that I care deeply about them or they care deeply about me. (Sonia)

> Intimacy is when I feel most vulnerable - when I share something about myself that I wouldn't necessarily share with anyone. There is always a part of me that thinks 'I wonder what that person thinks about me now that they know that. Or I'm like 'oh no, what are they going to think now'? That's what intimacy is to me- to trust someone with my feelings, my most delicate feelings and they will be like 'I get you and I love you'. (Talia)

> To be able to talk with someone and express how you feel emotionally--to be able to talk freely without any advice or condemnation or ridicule but with acceptance and listening. And still at the end of it all be held. I don't know because I can't think of any person that I have gotten that from. (Paula)

> It means understanding somebody and showing that you care about them. Or someone identifying how I feel; knowing when that person feels bad and being able to reach them and finding a way to help that person through; providing comfort to each other. (Beth)

For all of the respondents, "closeness" included unconditional acceptance and a sense of unyielding support. However, they observed that they experienced these elements neither in their families nor in their own personal adult relationships; but they avidly desired them. They feared they would be hurt if they exposed their feelings or appeared vulnerable. This mirrored earlier incidents when they relied and trusted that their families were capable of providing support, but were severely disappointed. They did not believe others would value their emotions or respect their privacy. The betrayal and violation inherent within a sibling abusive relationship formed their perceptions of how the world at large would relate to them and engendered the expectation of rejection.

Talia and Beth were the only participants who reported having experienced trusting, satisfying, and caring relationships as adults: Talia with her friends, and Beth with her husband. Although Talia viewed her friends as supportive, she still felt the need to control the personal information she shared. A unique aspect of Talia's relationship with her sister was that despite the abuse, she had a close friendship with her. However, her sister used information about Talia's personal and emotional life to hurt her. As a result, Talia felt exposing her personal feelings would make her vulnerable and put her at risk of being the victim of a friend's assault, judgment, or criticism.

Recreating Experiences

An aspect of transference involves projecting one's own feelings, emotions or motivations onto another person without realizing the reaction is more about one's self and internalized experiences than it is about the other person. As a result, individuals interact with another person as though he or she were the person with whom they had an earlier relationship.

Isabelle described internalization and projection in its most literal form. She recounted her emotional reactions to men who reminded her of her brother:

> I feel like I'm re-traumatized when I meet someone who reminds me of my brother. I met a man who reminded me a lot of Jack and I had a physiological response. I felt physically shaky and my heart was racing. I became fearful of him; as though he was going to verbally assault me in some way and I needed to defend myself before he even spoke.

In another illustration of internalization and projection, Tammy expected that people would relate to her in the same way as her brother. She was fearful and immobilized in anticipation of human interaction. She was constricted by severe anxiety

and insecurity in social situations including school, work, and residing with roommates. She elaborated on these feelings in an e-mail following the interview:

> I really wish I could convey how awful it was and what it's like to be treated so badly by someone you love. How it warps your mind, traumatizes you, makes you believe that you deserve it, that you will never deserve any better, and that you spend the rest of your life half-covering from the universe in anticipation of the next blow.

Tammy behaved around men in a child-like manner. She proposed that her idealization of men was because of her sense of inferiority and that it repeated the power her brother had over her:

> I act like a little kid a lot… when it comes out I feel ashamed. I used to dress like a little kid and act like a little kid. It's really worse around men. And I think it has to do with my brother and I'm projecting somehow. He made me feel like such a little kid. And I think I adapted to his perception because it was how he *wanted* to see me. I don't know if I'm still looking for approval or what. I do know that I put men on a pedestal. It's confusing.

The re-creation of this helpless child, who needs the guidance of men, is an incapacitating defense mechanism. She took on a subordinate position and perpetuated her inner sense of inferiority.

Object relations theory helps inform the sequelae of sibling abuse in adult intimate relationships. The tendency to seek out experiences that repeat past ones is a common human experience. Paradoxically, discomfort may be a known, familiar state and therefore comfortable. Freud (1920) developed the concept of the "repetition-compulsion", a phenomenon that involves the repetition of a traumatic event. This may include putting oneself in a situation where the event is likely to happen again. Similar to the concept of transference, repetition-compulsion involves projection and displacement. Projection involves transposing one's feelings onto another and displacement refers to perceiving and reacting to a person *as if* he or she were someone else (Goldstein, 2001).

Object relations theorists understand repetition as some unconscious aspect of a childhood relationship with a significant other such as a parent or sibling. The re-creation of familiar experiences is a means to deal with past problems. An individual makes conscious or unconscious choices to remain with a "normal" pattern of pain instead of risking the perceived trauma of new experiences. Similarly, an individual bound by repetition-compulsion may be convinced that new experiences would be more painful. Tammy describes this phenomenon:

> I think the relationship I had with my brother leads me to abuse myself and now I'm not comfortable unless I live in deprivation. I will never give myself enough of whatever it is I need. I'm trying to learn to take care of myself but I'm not good at it. I was sleeping on the floor and my roommate was like why aren't you sleeping on the couch? The couch was too comfortable. I don't know. I think it has something to do with my defenses. I was always uncomfortable when I can't maintain vigilance, hyper-vigilance. Then I feel safer. I have nothing to lose if I'm uncomfortable.

Tammy's induced discomfort is an indication of the emotional pain she endured. Adjustment to a pain-free way of life would require adaptation. Change not only can produce discomfort, but at times, risk. The emotional assaults of her childhood left Tammy believing that it is dangerous to live comfortably. As an adult, Tammy remained hyper-vigilant and attuned to her environment and the risks of victimization.

People employ defense mechanisms, the unconscious mental processes that are a response to danger, fear, or anxiety, in an attempt to protect them from overwhelming feelings. Defenses are adaptive and protective responses to potential and perceived pain and can help an individual to regain psychological balance and withstand change. Although positive coping strategies and defense mechanisms may ward off further pain, they may also be maladaptive (Greene, 1999), because their use may compromise mental health, physical health, or interpersonal relatedness. All of the survivors' grappled with

issues of trust. They existed in a state of vulnerability with expectations of criticism, judgment, non-acceptance, and lack of support. Their direct abuse from a sibling coupled with parental emotional abandonment shattered their hope that others could be trusted. Thus, they were led to develop a wall of defense, which protected them against vulnerability but kept them from experiencing intimacy.

Compromised Trust

Survivors of sibling abuse had difficulty believing that others would be considerate of their needs, accept their individuality, and not hurt them. They expressed skepticism about their ability to find unconditional love but rather seemed to expect physical or emotional abandonment. Survivors also distrusted their own and others' ability to express a range of emotions and still maintain a stable relationship. They expected conflict in the face of differences.

Typically, survivors anticipated that they would find aspects of their abusive sibling relationship in other relationships. Tamar thought she would have to conform to the demands of the man she was dating; she thought a man would control her in the same way as her brother. "When I met my husband there was a strong physical attraction. We went to lunch and he told me his whole life story. But I felt it was too much and I found reason to undo this potential relationship. I was scared – he was a rabbi. Even though he was non-practicing, I thought there would be a list of rules and he would tell me what to do."

Several survivors made it clear they did not trust others with their feelings, fearful that exposure left them vulnerable, uncomfortable, and not in control. Consequently, survivors created one-sided friendships where they assumed the supportive, care-giving

role. Focusing on another person created a sense of comfort and safety. Some had superficial relationships that gave them a sense of control and created emotional distance. One survivor, Mia explained:

> I think I have avoided being in any type of a relationship, even friendships. I would only relate on a surface level. It felt like I was acting this part instead of being with that person. I feel like I know what to say and how to be a good listener. I have a lot of close and good friends. But I definitely separate how I am in a friendship and how I am in an intimate relationship. I don't want to be held by my girlfriend, though in friendships I love being held. I have her ask to give me a hug. That gives me the power to say yes or no. Even though I know rationally that she is not forcing me or taking away anything from me. When I tell something personal that was really hard to tell, I try to figure out a way to protect myself. It's about trusting that I can be vulnerable and not be taken advantage of. It scares the crap out of me.

Another survivor, Talia also reflected on the way she has constructed her relationships:

> I definitely have a lot of close female friends. My most significant close relationships are with women and gay men. I think with gay men I don't have to worry about being rejected or not being the girl that they choose to want to sleep with or want to be with. I feel like I can't trust men with my feelings... I have A list friends and B list friends. Those on the A list are people that I am intimate with – they know me well enough that I will share the tough stuff - the stuff that you don't want to share like talking about feeling lonely and I am never going to find anybody or I am going to be alone for the rest of my life. The people that are closest to me see my vulnerability and the part that is a complete and total mess… It's important for me to be in control about how much I reveal. In the midst of a conversation, I am thinking about how I can control how much the other person knows about me. They might see that I don't have it together and then this image of what I've put out there may be completely shattered.

Talia described feeling lonely and ashamed about being alone. She internalized the idea that something was wrong with her because she was not in a committed relationship. On the positive side, her self-exploration helped her address the situation. "I think ultimately I am scared of intimacy–to be that vulnerable with someone. Sexual intimacy raises even more potential for vulnerability-- you have to totally surrender --give up control. The idea of letting someone else in charge is scary--- allowing someone else to take care of me

where I don't have to worry about it." Other informants expressed similar feelings of exposure and vulnerability regarding intimacy. According to Alice, "I don't keep friends. I don't trust anyone. And when things get deep, I run." One respondent, Kelli, was not sure that she ever had the experience of feeling close to anyone.

Unable to successfully rely on another person for physical safety or emotional protection left survivors feeling unloved and unlovable. In an effort to protect themselves from feeling disappointed, some survivors had low expectations of their partners. Ultimately, these factors contributed to informants' sense of dissatisfaction in their relationships.

Desire for Independence and Fear of Dependence

The need for independence and the fear of dependence connect directly to issues of trust. The absence of positive sibling relationships and parents who were protective, supportive, caring, or nurturing, led survivors to believe that they were not entitled or capable of having these types of relationships outside of the home. As a result, they developed a powerful drive for self-sufficiency. One respondent, Tamar related her apprehension in asking for and accepting her husband's assistance:

> I have no problem being depended on, but I'm working on asking for help. It's an emotional risk because I might not get what I ask for. I have a hard time depending on my husband for tasks. I'm unsure he'll follow through. He's not good in an emergency and that disturbs me. It's hard for him to take action. He would go all out but I don't know if his decisions would be as good as mine.

On one hand, Tamar acknowledged that her husband extended himself to meet her needs. On the other hand, her assessment of his ability to make good decisions indicates her resistance to allow him to take care of her. "My husband is very demonstrative. But if he tells me three times in an hour that he loves me, I tell him he's obsessive. I don't like

sentimentality." She had difficulty accepting her husband's effusive expressions of love, because she interpreted it as a symbolic representation of his emotional dependence. Tamar also spoke about how her exchanges with her family affected her current feelings about dependency:

> One of my daily life occurrences was that no one ever protected me, and no one ever took care of me. So in my mind I must have deserved the abuse from my brother. So therefore I had a really keen sense of survival, meaning that I needed to know that I could take care of myself and I could protect myself because I didn't believe that there was somebody who would show up and do that. I became very independent.

Emotionally Unavailable Partners

Ainsworth (1989) examined long-lasting interpersonal relationships with affection bonds such as child-parent, parent-child, sexual pairs, and peer bonds. Like most psychodynamic theorists, she did not include sibling relationships in the attachment process. Nonetheless, she found that in adulthood, seeking security and protection is reciprocal in a sexual pair bond. However, the manner in which partners attach themselves to each other rests in the integration of early infant and childhood experiences with the caregiver. For the survivors of sibling abuse in this study, the need to be independent and their fear of dependence made them attach themselves to partners who were not available. This re-creation of earlier experiences may be in part due to the relationship between the victim and parent as well as the relationship between the victim and sibling-perpetrator. Although victims were emotionally needy, they adapted to their unstable environment by defending against the need for others. Conscious attachment to unavailable partners served a protective function for survivors. They were able to maintain their independence and not risk having to depend on another person. Moreover, knowing a partner was unavailable allowed them to maintain control over the

development of intimacy and shielded them from risking rejection or disappointment. For those informants who chose unavailable partners unconsciously, this created a painful replication of earlier attachments in which they could not easily acquire love. Although survivors reportedly desired intimate relationships, the physical or emotional distance of partners provided them safety and protection particularly from personalizing the rejection. It was rare for informants to look beyond their own ineptness as a contributing factor to a partner's loss of interest.

Bartholomew (1990), in proposing a model of attachment style in adulthood regarding avoidance of intimacy, differentiated a fearful style from a dismissing style. The former style is rooted in anxiety and the latter style is characterized by denial of the need for intimacy. Bowlby (1980) emphasized that adults become emotionally detached because of a history of rejection and self-reliance activated from the distress of another's unreliability. Survivors' quality of intimacy reflected trauma imparted by siblings. This had implications for the development of their attachment styles and their desire for attachment. Although Bowlby (1982) based his models of attachment on caregiver-child relationships, survivors of sibling abuse appeared to develop similar attachment styles.

Some survivors discounted the credibility of potential partners, which was a way to avoid the insecurity in the prospect of intimacy. Kelli explained:

> It's weird. I go after men who aren't attainable and even though I know they aren't available, I get upset when they ditch me. I always claimed to want a relationship but I probably would choose people that I know I couldn't be in a relationship with… I usually dated guys who were kind of beneath me and I didn't like it if guys were too nice. I was always convinced that whoever I dated would go back to their former girlfriend. There's another relationship I had, sort of like a friend with benefits if you will. It was a very masochistic relationship from my perspective because even though he had girlfriends and didn't want to commit, I was just forcing myself on him. When I look back now, I think 'oh, my God'.

Kelli's pursuit of a man who was already involved with another woman reflected her low self-esteem. If she could "win" this man's attention, then she would feel valuable. But, he was unattainable. Kelli was not interested in "nice guys. She was familiar with mistreatment and her promiscuous behavior reflected her low sense of self-worth. "I used sex as a way to keep a man's interest. I don't even know how many people I slept with but it was never with anyone that I would want to have a relationship. I felt like, why would I want to be with someone who wanted to be with me?"

Although survivors spoke about their fears of rejection, they defended themselves by breaking off relationships first. Talia said that if the other person was "good," she must be bad, or the other person would think she is bad. If she rejected them first, she minimized the possibility that they would reject her.

One of the respondents, Gwen, was married for many years. Her husband worked long hours and was unavailable. She explained the effect of his absence and how she chose to manage it:

> I was very lonely in my marriage. My husband was a workaholic. He made a lot of money. But he was never there to share the kids with me. I have always been the one to leave the men in my life. I think it's a form of protection. I guess it is having the control. I always thought my ex-husband was going to leave me so I left him first.

Gwen's decision to leave her husband allowed her to gain some control in the relationship despite her sense that he was going to leave her. In fact, he had already checked out emotionally while in the relationship and she ultimately felt abandoned.

Tamar felt sexually desirable to men and was aware that a transient sexual encounter would not lead to a long-term, emotionally intimate relationship. Similarly, Paula chose married men because of their unavailability. "After two boyfriends left me, I

refused to sleep with new people. I have not opened myself up to exploring new things or new people or being with someone else. They are both now married and I still choose to sleep with them. It is a horrible thing." Paula's choices served a purpose. By engaging with married men, she maintained a sense of control over potential rejection from available men. With married men, she knew what to expect and could predict what they would and would not provide.

In her justification for what she described as "polygamy," Sarah was ambivalent about her desire for a monogamous relationship. She rationalized her non-exclusive relationships, claiming she had varied interests. However, she was also concerned she would not be able to find someone who was unreservedly and willingly able to commit to her:

> I am currently dating two different people. I have explored polygamy and monogamy. One of the men I am dating is supportive of my dating. It's a healthy, enriching relationship. I have wanted to go to therapy but I want a therapist who is open to my lifestyle and would not view it as pathological. But I also see how my choice in polygamy may be connected to my history with my brother and not really believing someone will wholeheartedly be there for me. I do want one person to be my lover and would like an ever-deepening connection.

Sarah did not have to risk disappointment or contend with someone else's disappointment because her relationships were with men who accepted her polygamy. At the same time, Sarah made clear that having multiple partners allowed her to get what she needed; what one boyfriend could not provide, she was able to find in another. Because she was uncertain about having one man meet her emotional needs, being involved with multiple partners allowed her to feel loved.

Tolerating Maltreatment: The Price of Love

Unlike McLaurin's (2005) research, which found that survivors of sibling abuse were involved in multiple abusive relationships as adults, none of the participants in this study was currently involved in an abusive relationship and few reported histories of abusive relationships. Yet, despite their efforts to defend against vulnerability, the unavailability of companions and the experience of emotional neglect made them feel as vulnerable as victims of abusive intimate relationships. Informants were willing to tolerate this and a sense of unfulfillment in order to feel connected to another person.

Tamar realized she was repeating aspects of her sibling relationship in her adult relationships with men. She expected maltreatment and found men who mistreated her:

> As I got older I was attracted to men from Middle Eastern countries like Iran where they treated women in the same manner as I had been treated growing up….When I got married the first time, it was to a sadistic man. He was into drugs and alcohol. He shoved me around and was emotionally attacking. At the time, I thought I was making a big deal of it, I didn't even know any different in order to view it as a big deal. It was like my brother who could be really sweet and I felt like it would be ok and then it wasn't. I was wooed and then slammed. But I divorced him. I thought 'I can't do this again'. When I married him, I felt like I was going to save my husband in certain ways just like I was going to save my brother.

Tamar's allusion to saving her husband in a similar way as her brother expressed hope she could change someone's abusive behavior. Tamar's experience with her abusive brother molded her subsequent relationships with men. If she could change their abusive behavior, she could experience a sense of worth.

Ferenczi (1933) originated the term, "identification with the aggressor," to describe the destruction of the child's ego imparted by trauma (Frankel, 1998). A child subjected to abuse responds by submitting to the aggressor, and replaces his or her own emotional state with an understanding toward the aggressor. As with victims of parental

abuse, victims of sibling abuse anticipate all people as potential aggressors. Victims survive by intense attunement to the aggressor's needs and expectations so they can anticipate their actions (Freud, 1937).

Victims explained that their ability to tune into the needs of others and their willingness to accommodate them stemmed from their hyper-vigilance to their sibling's needs and attempts to anticipate their actions in an effort to thwart abusive behavior. Expectations of rejection and fear of conflict motivated this behavior.

Fear of Conflict

Some survivors chose relationships in which their partners maltreated them. At the same time, they feared conflict and felt threatened by expressions of anger. Some participants expressed feeling anxious from their own anger. Having also been the recipients of intense anger caused the survivors to fear any form of confrontation. They had lived with siblings who suddenly erupted with an onslaught of hostility and aggression. This made it difficult to tolerate anger within a "reasonable range" as a normative emotional response.

Bowlby (1973) asserted that anxiously attached children and adults are afraid to express anger toward an intimate partner if they believe their anger will lead to abandonment. Maintaining the attachment to an unsatisfying love object is a way to avoid the greater pain of abandonment and rejection (Young & Gerson, 1991). The enduring nature of the abuse survivors experienced generated a belief that conflict with people creates long-term and irreparable dissonance. Beth described her anxiety about conflict:

> I tend to think that any conflict is going to ruin a relationship forever. Oftentimes, if someone wants to do something with me and I can't or don't want to do that, if I have another obligation, it is very scary. In my mind, there will be a consequence and there will be no getting past it. I might lose that friendship. It is

> not necessarily true but it's how I perceive things. I wasn't raised with the experience of there being a way to make up for mistakes. I have never learned to work through conflict with people in a situation where I wasn't either belittled or hit by my sister.

Insecure attachments fostered in an atmosphere of family violence make it difficult for a child to self-soothe and may lead to deficiencies in affect regulation (Alexander & Warner, 2003). As with victims of parental abuse, survivors of sibling abuse have not experienced basic trust and safety in their homes or emotional attunement from a caregiver. As a result, survivors experience difficulty modulating their emotions. Lack of parental support or appropriate modeling contributed to survivors' struggles to tolerate intense affect. They believed that conflict would result in abandonment or the end of a relationship.

Gwen protected herself against any interpersonal conflict by refusing to engage with people whom she identified as potentially hostile. Because of her highly selective process, she was socially isolated. Similarly, Julie was intensely angry about the abuse she suffered from her brother; she saw how it affected her current relationships. "Instead of dealing with the topic at hand, I project my anger from a prior argument whether or not it is with that person - anger that's really from the past. And so, the past and present are still connected. I can get into intense arguments, and it usually involves wanting something in a certain way and the other person saying she doesn't get it or wants it the other way. And I feel like 'you are not hearing me'." The reverberations of her childhood relationship with her brother are apparent in this statement. She displaces her anger from her childhood relationship with her brother onto her present relationships. At the same time, she expressed how important it was for others to understand her, something she never experienced as a child. Her brother's tirades left her unable to express herself; his

strong influence undermined the development of her own perceptions. Julie's poignant metaphor reflected this struggle:

> In college in one of my theater classes, we had to draw a picture of what our voice looked like. When I think of my voices, I think of infection, because I had all these respiratory illnesses. Or my voice was very red and scarred--angry and hot. We got in clusters and showed each other our voices. Others had birds and rainbows. I was scared to show my voice. It brought tears to my eyes. Some of it was the sheer physical pain I experienced but there is something symbolic about that.
>
> With all of the yelling and screaming and threatening, it wasn't consistent. There was no rhyme or reason to my brother's outbursts. I never knew what was going to happen when. And it was very scary. I think that definitely relates to needing to know what someone's reaction is going to be. That was why my last relationship didn't work out. After a year, I still couldn't tell if my boyfriend was upset or mad or happy or content or what his feelings were in reaction to certain things…I think the worst thing for me in terms of being with somebody would be to be with somebody who is in any way angry or a screamer. I grew up living with that.

Although some survivors tolerated mistreatment in order to maintain relationships, some staunchly refused to become involved with partners who demonstrated hostile or aggressive behavior; they avoided conflict. Participants noted that siblings who were harshly critical and directive, and did not allow room for a separate and distinct personality, stifled their sense of self. This compromised their sense of mastery, control, and identity. As a result, survivors approached their adult intimate relationships cautiously.

Individuals who have secure attachment styles view their romantic partners as well-intentioned, reliable, and trustworthy. "Healthy" attachment occurs when an individual is comfortable with closeness, can depend on others, and is capable of developing and sustaining intimacy, passion, and commitment. They should not be preoccupied with abandonment (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). At the same time, they should

be able to see another person's vulnerabilities and reveal their own (Hazan & Shaver, 1987).

Insecure attachment patterns often result from previous attachment trauma and through experiences of loss, abuse, separation, inconsistency, and rejection (Ecke, Chope, & Emmelkamp, 2006). A child develops maladaptive patterns; he or she continues to use these maladaptive patterns in an attempt to find a more responsive and attuned caregiver (Whelan, 2003). Attachment theorists believe that individual experiences and behaviors regarding love relate to memories of childhood relationships with parents. Similarly, the history of intimate relationships portrayed by these survivors mirror the patterns of relatedness experienced by children who have had failed attachments with parental caregivers. Whether the maladaptive patterns are due strictly to the nature of the sibling abuse or is the culmination of the experience in their family environment remains unknown. Nonetheless, as these victims matured into adulthood, they continued to strive for adequate "nurturing" (love), acceptance, and mirroring. However, their maladaptive styles of attachment inhibited the achievement of the desired attachment (Setzman, 1982).

Summary

For the participants in this study, sibling assaults engendered a cyclical pattern where adult relationships mirrored earlier incidents of abuse. Although survivors' need for personal validation and emotional nurturance was intense due to early deprivation, they did not appear able to have satisfying love relationships. They needed approval, love, and consistent validation. At the same time, they felt incapable of being loved. As a result, informants expressed a pervasive fear of abandonment. This fear and expectation

of rejection prohibited survivors from becoming involved in successful relationships, or they experienced a chronic state of anxiety while in relationships. Survivors developed defense mechanisms in an attempt to protect themselves from anticipated emotional pain. In some cases, they achieved this by attaching themselves to unavailable partners. Although the unavailability of the love object was both unsatisfying and painful, it offered them a sense of control. Informants defended against their fear of abandonment by avoiding deeper, more intimate relationships with partners. Survivors who did not have long-term relationships wanted to preserve their independence. Those who allowed themselves to become involved did so with major trepidation. Their need to ensure their partner's love resulted in over compliance and dependence. Both of these manifestations served as "symptoms" induced by feeling of inner "badness" and generated a sense of vulnerability. Two of the survivors, one married, and one reportedly satisfied with her mate still struggled with challenges resonating from the sibling relationship, including difficulty with confrontation and dependence on another person. However, through these connections they were developing their sense of entitlement, their tolerance for "healthy" conflict, their willingness to accept support, and ultimately a new construct of relatedness.

CHAPTER VII: FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY AND SIBLING ABUSE

Introduction

Family systems theory focuses on the connections among members of the family and thus suggests that they affect each other's thoughts, feelings, and actions (Chibucos & Leite, 2005; Bowen, 1978). Rather than focusing on each individual as a separate person, a systems perspective stresses the interrelation and interdependence of all its members or the way in which a change in one person in the system affects the others. This type of perspective provides an important lens through which to understand sibling abuse. As evident from previous chapters, sibling abuse occurred within the context of complex sets of interactions that frequently promoted harmful interactions between the abused and abusing siblings.

Structural family theory suggests that the family system consists of smaller units, or subsystems: the parent-child subsystem, the sibling subsystem and the spousal subsystem (Minuchin, 1985). An individual has simultaneous membership in various subsystems. Understanding a family's functioning requires looking at the boundaries within these subsystems, the roles ascribed to family members, and hierarchical relations that reflect what behaviors and communication patterns are acceptable in the family. (Chibucos & Leite, 2005; Minuchin, 1985). As children and adolescents, the informants in this study contended with neglecting or abusive parents. Some parents demonstrated overt favoritism towards one child. Additionally, either the victim of sibling abuse or the perpetrator often assumed the role of caregiver, which generated a sibling's aggressive behavior. Lack of boundaries, role confusion, and disturbed hierarchical relations characterized the family systems reported in these cases.

According to Walsh (1993) “healthy” family functioning includes caring and mutually supportive relationships; effective parental leadership and autonomy; protection of children; consistent patterns of interaction inclusive of clear rules and expectations; acceptance of a range of emotional expressions; and effective conflict-resolution processes. Virtually none of these features characterized the childhood homes of study participants.

Family Environment and the Effects on Sibling Relationships

Family systems theory (Bowen, 1978) contends that all children become involved to some extent in the emotional processes of their parents (Bowen, 1978). Each parent relates differently to each child, and the embodiment of emotionality is expressed in the parents’ response to the child. When parents are confronting their own conflict and stress, their children are affected. In the families of these informants, limited social and economic resources and marital strain made it difficult for victims to obtain critical support inherent to development and adaptation. Their parents were unable to model positive communication or manage interpersonal conflict and emotional turmoil productively. This inhibited their children’s ability to modulate their own emotional experiences. In effect, the structure and functioning of these families challenged the victims to develop supports within the family. Without the basis for effective coping, they did not learn ways to mitigate the effects of their abuse.

Deficits in Emotional Support and Poor Parental Modeling

Children must develop the capacity to modulate reactivity to the environment in order to learn to function autonomously and with others in social relationships (Bowen, 1978). Based on capacity and level of differentiation, the ability to feel good or poorly

may result from another family member's emotional response. When external environmental stressors, such as economic or social problems occur, parents who have difficulty controlling their emotions may act in ways that disturb the children. When this happens, children must separate themselves from a potentially hostile caregiver or stressful caregiver-child interactions. Otherwise, children may internalize parental hostility. This condition appeared frequently among informants in this study. When children were the objects of their parent's hostility, they struggled to modulate their own affect (Bowen, 1976). Financial strain, accompanied by tension was a common theme in their home lives. Gwen described her parent's conflict over money, primarily because her mother spent more than her father believed they could afford:

> My parents were always arguing about money. No matter how much money my father had, it was never enough. My mother always lived beyond her means. She would go out and buy a piece of jewelry. Then when my father was in a good mood, she would come out and show him and say, 'look what I got'. Then he would just blow! He would lose it. He was verbally abusive to my mother. My father was always screaming. There was never a happy moment with him. My mother was tense and so was I.

Another survivor, Sonia, described her parents' conflict over her college expenses. At the beginning of each school year, she did not know if she would be able to remain in school for another semester because her (divorced) parents argued about who would make the payment.

Alice's family lived in a house with fifteen people, including her immediate and extended families. The house had only three bedrooms. This environment did not accommodate their needs for privacy and space and the living arrangements were stressful for the entire family. In addition, Alice's mother was overwhelmed and resented the responsibility of raising five children while her husband worked full time:

> My mother and father fought every single day. They were always fighting about money. They also fought about the kids. My mom would say ‘why did I have so many f’in kids’? I asked my dad ‘why did you marry her,’ and he would say ‘when you get older, dolly baby, you’ll understand’. I still don’t understand, and I am older.

As a young child, Alice recognized her mother’s limitations, but even her father’s validation did not lessen the affects of her mother’s rejection. Not only was her mother abusing her, but also her parents were embroiled in marital discord. Their hostility overflowed onto her as her mother complained about how burdened she felt by her children.

Conflict between parents, whether it was because of financial matters or not, might have contributed to aggressive behavior and displaced aggression towards children. Parents who were overwhelmed were not able to provide emotional support to their children. Some parents could not tolerate a range or intensity of emotion in their children. These families often created a negative atmosphere of criticism, judgment, and abusive communication and lacked appropriate modeling of stress reduction. As a result, respondents did not feel attuned to, empathized with, or able to modulate their own emotional life. Beth described the emotional climate of her home:

> My dad was in the war and he learned to shut off his feelings. Any time I have gotten very emotional- like when my parents got divorced, I don’t know if it was explicitly said, but I was definitely not allowed to feel or mourn. It struck me how in my family we have this culture of not acknowledging pain, not acknowledging emotion.

Beth’s parents were unable to tolerate emotional expression or respond with care and concern. This stifled her freedom to express herself. It also influenced the way she and her sister learned to manage conflict. Beth associated her sister’s abuse to an absence of modeling effective communication in the home. On the contrary, their parents dealt with

their conflict with verbal aggression and detachment. Her parents lacked positive communication skills, and this pattern was the norm between her and her parents. Her parents dealt with conflict by screaming at each other and then refusing to speak for several days:

> No one taught us how to talk to each other. My parents had such a bad relationship that I think we modeled our relationship on them. I don't think my sister and I had a chance of getting along with that kind of behavior we witnessed. I think if somebody could have taught us to get along, it would have helped my sister more than me. My sister was very lonely. She didn't have friends. She didn't have social skills. My sister was a person who needed help knowing and learning how to empathize with other people. Somebody would have had to show her how to listen and what to do when you disagree with somebody, and no one did. My mom was an alcoholic -- she wasn't able to address our needs and that created many of the problems with my sister -- my sister's inability to process her emotions and relate to me. Another factor was my father's inability and unwillingness to notice there was a problem. I think that if my parents had a gentler divorce, my sister would not have been as emotionally damaged and therefore abusive to me. My mom was not able to handle the divorce well. She used us to get back at my father. That was her emotional manipulation. It really broke my sister.

Parental stressors, those involving taxing marital relations or financial strain, appeared to promote anger or aggressive behavior among the children. However, shared conditions of a chaotic, hostile, and unpredictable home environment engendered a desire among victims to bond with their sibling. Even so, the abusive sibling was not interested in forging a friendship; instead, they became assaultive. The victim's hope and yearning endured. Ultimately, the victim felt disappointed, rejected, lonely, unloved, and unworthy. Although ineffective modeling was one aspect that may have led to the development of abusive sibling relationships, the emotional and physical unavailability of parents propelled older siblings into roles of caregiver. In some instances, this was also how hostility developed between siblings.

Family Roles

Although middle class, some of the families in this study struggled financially. None had childcare support, and the emotional support for parents from outside the home appeared to be limited. In some families, the abusive sibling assumed the role of caregiver because of parental neglect or absence, parent-child abuse, or simply because in the hierarchical family structure, birth order dictated the expectation that the older children would oversee the younger ones. The older sibling's assignment as disciplinarian in the caregivers' absence created boundary confusion and abuse of power (Haskins, 2003). The sibling in a caregiver role dominated typical bargaining and negotiation between siblings, a critical aspect of sibling rivalry. Due to structural imbalances within the family system, the care giving child was able to exert overriding control.

The Abusive Sibling as Caregiver

The stress of caretaking and resentment that develops when one child must assume this role creates aggressive relations between siblings (Haskins, 2003). At the same time, informants reported there was an inherent expectation that an older sibling would provide emotional nourishment if not camaraderie. This expectation, in addition to the parent-assigned role of caregiver, produced bewilderment for the younger child when the sibling was supposed to provide nurturance but instead harmed them.

The more powerful sibling in the relationship often projected messages that the abused sibling was inferior. Parental approval or acceptance of the "assigned" sibling roles cultivated low self-esteem in the abused sibling. Victims often believed that because their parents accepted this role assignment, their sibling's abusive behavior was acceptable and deserved. The survivors in this study reported that nurturance from an

abusive sibling created confusion about the meaning of love and hate. One survivor, Mia, described the support she received from her sister as a much-needed reprieve from an abusive and neglectful environment:

> I never felt unsafe with my sister. Even as everything was going on, as we got older, I revered her, actually….She was someone I always looked up to. She was my savior in a sense. My parents divorced when I was four years old, and she became my caretaker when she was 7. Given her age and having to deal with caretaking responsibilities, she did her best. When she was in school, I would go to a babysitter who was definitely a lot more psychotic and much more abusive than my sister was. My sister would make me do her chores, but she would give me attention. It was something I was lacking from other people. She showed me that there is a possibility of affection and love. She would do my hair and feed me. It was very confusing because she was someone I really loved. I thought she cared about my well-being. I never told on her when she was abusive because I feared I would lose her protection.

Raised by working parents, Mia remained in the care of a sexually abusive babysitter who would threaten her life. Her only source of support was her sister, and she would have felt completely alone in the world if she compromised that relationship. Mia needed her sister for basic survival, and as a result, she overlooked the sibling abuse. However, behavior that was sometimes protective and other times harmful led her to confuse love and punishment. Ultimately, she equated love with pain.

The experience of emotional neglect and abandonment by parental figures, or a sibling serving in the care-giving role, created a strong desire for emotional support. The need to feel loved propelled victims to discount the magnitude of the abuse their sibling inflicted in an effort to preserve their "goodness." Thelma explained:

> I guess in comparison to the abuse I was getting from my oldest brother, I didn't see what my other brother was doing as so bad. Maybe because I was getting other things from him. He was my favorite brother; at the time I think because I saw him as some kind of support or protector in an odd way. I used to see him as a significant figure in my life, even though those horrible things happened there was a lot of fun there too. He used to include me when the other brothers

> wouldn't. I don't think it was as supportive of a relationship that I would have liked to have thought it was.

Beth described how her abusive sister, Jenny, was a positive support in her life when her mother was abusive. She portrayed an older sister who genuinely cared about her well-being, but became assaultive after her parents divorced:

> In our childhood, I turned to my sister to protect me from our mom. Our mom was really out of control and a dangerous person for kids. My sister would help me out a lot. If I needed milk in my corn flakes, she would be the one to pour the milk. My mom did terrible things to us and I remember one time when I was very young she was driving and told my sister and me to get out and then drove off. I felt sheer panic. My sister just hugged me and told me that it would be ok (*crying*). She was the brave kid who wouldn't let me get upset and comforted me.

The duality of the sibling's care giving and abusive roles made it impossible for victims to feel safe and secure. Furthermore, this behavior plagued the victim's sense of stability and trust. The paradoxical love and hate messages made the victims internalize messages of "badness" in an effort to protect the image of the caregiver as loving and caring. This distortion of reality "split" the image of the family member as "good" and the self as "bad" to preserve a sense of attachment and to keep victims feeling safe (Carey, 1997)

Victim as Caregiver

Distinct from abusers who were in care giving roles, some victims themselves took on the care giving function. Although being cared for by an abusive sibling produced confusion regarding love and punishment, being the emotional caregiver generally engendered anger, because the abusing siblings did not appreciate the efforts. Lynn could not reconcile her brother's harshness in the face of her kindness:

> I always felt like my brother needed me. He still needs me. He always needed me in a super-dependent way because he always pushed everyone else away. He still pushes everyone away. I was the only one who ever stuck by him and didn't disappear. He would manipulate me and scream at me but then he also loved me, and it would be very confusing.

Although Lynn was upset when her brother did not embrace her approach, it ultimately gave way to bewilderment and hurt.

Although she was the older child, Tamar was the victim of abuse from her brother, Brett. When she tried to protect him from their abusing father, she placed herself at risk. Compounding the situation, Tamar's mother abused her, but revered Brett. Although she resented Brett's close relationship with their mother, Tamar continued to protect him and made efforts to influence her father not to abuse him. She retained her love for Brett despite the abuse she suffered at his hands; she ultimately felt guilty when she tried to escape this complex web of abuse:

> I really loved my brother. I hated him and was envious of him because he was the favored kid. I also really loved him and I tried to get my father to treat him better. He used to call me Mommy, and I hated that because I was his sister, but I was certainly very maternal to him, took him places, and did many different things with him. I took off to Israel for my own sanity because my father was out of control, and my mother was crazy. I think for my brother that was a betrayal (*crying*). But I had to get out of there. So I certainly felt guilty. I felt like I had to take care of him.

Victims compromised themselves when they became caregivers for their abusers, but also when they received care from them. They expected reciprocity when protecting, supporting, or nurturing their perpetrators. Although genuine love and concern might have motivated victims to care for their abusers, the lack of reciprocity made them feel unworthy. It was unclear from these interviews whether victims hoped to curtail abuse when they protected their abusers. However, it is possible victims' desire for sibling closeness motivated them to offer empathy and protection. It was evident that abuse from the person they cared for produced resentment and confusion. Victims were not only unappreciated for their nurturing, they were maltreated.

Absence of Parental Boundaries

Overt assignment of a child as caregiver and physical or emotional absence are ways parents acquiesce their responsibilities. Parents who are unable to establish appropriate parent-child boundaries fail to fulfill the role of caregiver. In these families the hierarchical structure implicit in the parent-child relationship was not in place, and parents related to children in a manner that was not appropriate to their developmental age. Boundaries are an important aspect of regulation within a family. They normalize the flow of information within a family, and when they are appropriately established, there are implicit rules that regulate appropriate communication within various subsystems (Chibucos & Leite, 2005).

Boundaries within a family system may be clear, rigid, or diffuse. Clear boundaries are firm yet flexible and permit adaptation to change. Rigid boundaries limit adaptation and imply non-communicative patterns such as disengagement between family members or subsystems. Diffuse boundaries were evident in some of the informant's families and involved a lack of differentiation between family members and subsystems and a lack of hierarchical adherence (Broderick, 1993). The families of these informants functioned with inconsistency and an unclear hierarchy of power. Whereas a "healthy" family has clear and semi-diffuse boundaries with the parents interacting with some degree of authority (Minuchin, 1985), these families had parents whose behavior put into question their authority. Several of the respondents described blurred boundaries displayed by their parents and the subsequent instability and strain that ensued. In several instances, parents' sexual proclivities and inappropriate communication heightened their children's discomfort. At the same time, their communications minimized their authority.

For example, Sonia described her mother's perspective on romance and her indiscreet behavior:

> My mother had many boyfriends. Her philosophy was you always need to have three: one to satisfy you intellectually, one emotionally, one sexually—very healthy way of thinking (*sarcasm*). I can remember when I was a teenager yelling at her because her filthy diaphragms were left under the sink.

Because of her mother's indiscretions and Sonia's recognition of their inappropriateness, she not only lost respect for her mother but felt unprotected:

> My mother was dating an alcoholic, he came over looking for her and then came after me, kissing and fondling me, and I managed to get him out of the house. Then they went on a cruise and she brought him home, and I came home earlier than planned, and I found her in bed with him. It was unbelievable how she would never protect me.

Parental instability around sexual behavior was a frequent theme in the stories of informants. Ben's mother made him vulnerable when he became the target of her exhibitionism:

> My mother also abused me--in a different way. She was psychotic. Things would get weird when I got older; she exposed herself to me in disgusting ways. I consider that sexual abuse. She would come into my room when I was sleeping, as an adolescent, and just pull up her nightgown.

Tamar described her parents' openness about their sexual relationship and her mother's provocative behavior. "My parents were very open about their lovemaking. My mother would walk around in extremely revealing outfits. They both walked around in their underwear many times. I think sometimes that she did not want to have any part of my father. I think he was very demanding sexually, and she put me there to protect herself like 'go take a walk with your father.'"

The absence of parental boundaries, often expressed in their sexually provocative behavior, contributed directly and indirectly to a chaotic home environment. Parents who

were not able to recognize the differential needs of their children were unable to attend to them, and the result was ineffective modeling, poor relatedness, and inappropriate intervention. Although all the informants reported that acts of sibling abuse were the mainstay of their sense of instability, inappropriate parental behavior exacerbated their feelings of vulnerability. Without parental stability and the ability to trust their judgment, children developed the perspective that their parents were not trustworthy. Certainly, the presence of parent-child abuse compounded the feeling that parents could not provide protection but were also sources of fear. Poor modeling was pervasive in these families with parent-child abuse as its most dangerous example.

Parent-Child Abuse

As discussed in a previous chapter, in families where sibling abuse was prevalent, there were often incidents of parent-child abuse. In some instances parent-child abuse was inherent in the family system, and in others, it was in response to the sibling abuse. Sometimes both children involved in sibling abuse were the victims of parent-child abuse, sometimes the perpetrator, and sometimes the victim. The specific incidents and descriptions of the parent-child abuse demonstrate its ferociousness and intensity:

> Usually my mother hit us with the back of her hand or whatever she could get her hands on – a brush, hanger, and a frying pan. If we disturbed her sleep, she would hit us with her fist. She had a cat-and-nine-tails that she kept. We never understood what we had done but she would say ‘what the Hell is wrong with you, didn’t I tell you not to do that you stupid piece of shit’... If she was angry, we were all angry or scared. She did not need a reason to be angry. The sun did not come out and she was angry...I always had a pit in my stomach. (Alice)

> My father was a police officer and he would take out his gun and threaten to kill the dog and then say ‘cops like to kill their families and themselves’ He was a serious alcoholic and drug addict, and we were all terrified of him. As horrible as he was, I think he was worse to my brother than to me. My father would call my brother ‘shithead’ and say ‘let’s play ball,’ and he’d take a big heavy ball – like a basketball – and wham it at him – like I’m gonna kill you – it wasn’t like a nice

> game of catch. I was not expected to play catch because I was a girl … I was hit by my mother with her hand, a spoon, whatever was handy. She was a very controlling, brutal woman. She would smack the dog too, and I would cringe. I felt very identified with the dog. (Tamar)
>
> My mother had these ritualized ways of yelling at me, and the energy of it was like being hit by a freight train. (Isabelle)
>
> My mother was an alcoholic and said that if we had been better children, she would not drink. (Beth)
>
> When my mother got mad, she would pick up whatever was in her reach, a hanger, a broom, a frying pan, and she would run after me, pull my hair, and smack me. Once, she picked up a telephone, a heavy black metal one and hit my brother with it. (Gwen)

In some of these family systems, one parent was abusive and the other protective. Joe identified his father as the "softy" who would untie him when his mother handcuffed him to the radiator. He would also sneak Joe meals when his mother did not allow him to have dinner. When his father was at home, he was able to prevent Joe's mother from hurting him. However, the protective parent was not able to influence the abusive parent's treatment of the child when not at home.

When the abuse was a response to managing the sibling relationship, either the victim or perpetrator became the target of the parents' frustration. Often, a parent's strict behavior with the perpetrator induced that child to displace his frustration onto his younger sibling. Either situation demonstrated the learned aspect of parent-child relatedness and promoted development of hostile sibling relationships (Bandura, 1973). Social learning theory views the family as the most influential agent of socialization and asserts that children learn violence through observation and imitation. Witnessing and experiencing violent interactions in the family teaches its members that aggression is an appropriate means of dealing with interpersonal conflict and feelings of anger. Repeated

exposure to violence also creates the propensity to perceive violence as normative and therefore acceptable (Herzberger, 1996). Parents who modeled acceptance of aggressive behavior increased the likelihood that their children would use violence as a way to handle and cope with conflict (Bandura, 1973).

Victims whose siblings endured parent-child abuse feared retribution for reporting their own abuse at the hands of their sibling. In these cases, the parental response to sibling abuse was to abuse the sibling. The learned response from witnessing and being a victim of child abuse led victims to fend for themselves: “Once when Brett was really little, he smacked me really hard with a wooden doll, and my father beat him up, and I thought I’m never going to complain about him again.” Thereafter, Tamar sacrificed her own safety because of her desire to keep Brett safe.

Tamar’s story also illustrated the effects of parents who punished the abused child who sought parental intervention. In this case, her mother emotionally abused Tamar when she attempted to recruit her support. Angered by Tamar’s need for emotional support, her mother repeatedly told her that her brother had been “wanted,” whereas she arrived in the family by accident. Tamar ultimately withdrew her desire for help:

> I went to my mother and said, ‘I think my toe is broken.’ She said ‘well if your toe is broken, you’ll have to be in a cast up to your hip and stay home and never go to school, so what is it--is it broken? And I said ‘no’--there couldn’t have been anything worse than staying home. If I was hurt at my brother’s expense, it was more about being a pain for my mother. She wouldn’t be interested in hearing anything. I think I did say things to her sometimes about what Brett would do, and she would think that it was funny--hahahaha--she would say to me ‘you know we really wanted Brett. You have to understand this, Tamar, Brett was a wanted child’.

Alice also learned not to solicit her mother's help. She related her mother's fights with her sister and responding by threatening to leave her children. This led Alice to fear abandonment:

> I guess I knew by the way she would handle things – with physical force – that I didn't want to go to her. I guess I did not trust her. I remember I would go to dad all the time. I don't know if daddy would fix it but he would throw water on the fire. He would just say 'lesser of two evils, babe, lesser of two evils'. Because he knew, that mom would not change.

Although Beth had hoped that her parents would protect her, they were hostile and resentful. Beth made feeble attempts at self-protection, which she described as "misguided."

> There was no telling my parents about my sister's abuse. When they came home, I was so ashamed of myself that I had swung first even if it was in self-protection. My sister told my stepmother that we had a fight and she said 'you girls are really selfish – I wish that I could leave you alone for an hour and not worry that you are going to get into a fight and do something to the house'. There was no punishment for my sister and no alternative plan for me. It was our fault for being there.

Child Neglect

Participants related painful accounts of physically or emotionally absent parents. For these victims of sibling abuse, a passive response from parents had the same effect as a punitive one. Survivors reported that without effective parental intervention, they thought that they must have done something to provoke the abuse. Rather than attributing limitations to their parents, children inevitably interpreted parental inaction as an indication that they did not warrant any help. In actuality, the parents may have been unable to influence the abusive children's behavior. It was only in adulthood that survivors reconsidered their perceptions of their parents and recognized their negative influence.

In many two-parent homes in this study, children were in the care of the mother while the father was at work. Survivors described fathers who were depleted when they arrived home and had little tolerance for noise, complaints, or parenting responsibilities. Other respondents grew up in single parent homes because of divorce or the death of a parent; mothers raising children alone were overwhelmed. In both situations, children who reported the abusive behavior of a sibling met anger, upset, or ineffective or passive reactions. Other victims faced actively hostile confrontations when they attempted to seek a parent's help in fending off, addressing, or intervening with the abusive sibling. The lack of parental engagement and emotional support was a common feature in these homes, reinforced by a weak or hostile response to the abusive sibling relationship.

Talia's mother passively intervened in the abusive incidents between her children, which had little effect on her sister's behavior. In retrospect, Talia reassessed her mother's behavior:

> It wasn't really handled. It wasn't acknowledged as anything other than sibling fighting. What is interesting is that occasionally my mother would overhear my sister screaming and cursing, step in, and say 'you cannot talk to your sister that way.' And my sister would continue doing what she was doing. She could not stand it that we were fighting but she sure didn't handle it in any way that made it stop.

Sonia described her father as helpless; he was not able to influence his children's relationship. On his deathbed, he pleaded with his son to amend his behavior. Sonia's father did not have the ability to "control" her brother or have any influence on his behavior. As a child of divorced parents, Sonia looked back on her parents as focused on their own problems and unable to parent effectively. However, as a child she found their passive involvement and unresponsiveness to her unhappiness a reflection of how little her parents valued her. This may suggest that as survivors, those who are able to consider

the parental response as a reflection of the parent's limitations rather than their own, might have more readily reconstructed their self-esteem.

Some parents did have the ability to recognize the devastating behavior of the abusive sibling, and at least in one case, took the abused child to therapy. Others attempted to get both children into therapy, but the abusing child refused. This refusal indicated parents' powerlessness, which may have compounded the victims' sense of helplessness. Others felt that although they benefited from therapy, their identification by a parent as being in need of treatment made them feel as though they were the root of the problem.

Although some of the parents covertly communicated messages of blame, some parents suggested that the victim needed to stop the abusive sibling. Placing the burden on the victim perpetuated the belief that the victim was the problem and insinuated an alliance between parent and perpetrator. In Kelli's case, her parents always thought she was the instigator: "They never believed me any time I talked to them. Even today, somehow I am the troublemaker. I am the one who flies off the handle; I'm the one with the caustic sense of humor. I am the difficult one. I was, for many years, no question. But it's been a long time."

Julie's mother insinuated that she should have been able to stop her brother's assaults. "I would hear my mom so often say that I need to learn not to let him push my buttons." Although Julie felt her mother could have been trying to gain control over the situation, she interpreted this statement as an accusation. She felt that her mother was minimizing her brother's actions and suggesting that she was blowing things out of proportion. Similarly, Sonia also felt her parents thought she was responsible for the

"conflict" with her brother. They failed to see Sonia's behavior as a retaliation and defensive measure against her brother's abuse. Instead, they held both children equally accountable and overlooked Sonia's victimization:

> My mother would take me and my father would take my brother and pull us apart-- and my parents didn't protect me. They would say 'the two of you…'. And I would say 'but my hand is broken'. To this day, my mother is in denial about it all. My parents' response was 'you provoke him… the two of you this, the two of you that'.

These parents abdicated their responsibilities to their victimized children and minimized the severity of their children's experiences. Whether the abused children were blamed for their siblings' behavior by a parent or a parent reacted passively, their ineffective interventions compounded the sense of inferiority that abuse promoted. However, victim-blaming indicated these parents felt the victims deserved what occurred or provoked it to happen. This compounded the effects of sibling abuse and reinforced the development of a poor self-image, magnifying existing feelings of helplessness in the victims. It may also have promoted the abuse.

Survivors felt unprotected and fearful when they informed a parent who was subsequently ineffective or unable to manage their sibling's behavior. Parents' inability to provide a safe environment produced confusion among the victims. Misplaced anger led victims to conclude that their parents did not love them. Victims held them culpable for the abuse. The victims struggled with low self-esteem and contended with a lifelong challenge of distancing themselves personally from the mistreatment they experienced as children.

Victims experienced various levels of deprivation in their family environment. The abusive responses of parents to the destructive sibling relationship compounded their

inability to intervene effectively. Not only did victims suffer at the hands of siblings but by direct force or passive reactions, they also suffered at the hands of parents. Implicit in their reactions was an absence of emotional support. Parental favoritism of one child over another also demonstrated this lack of support.

Favoritism of the Abuser or Abused

Limited resources in the family may reflect material or emotional deficits; they may be perceived or real, but they are associated with gain for one member at the cost of another. Families perpetuated structural inequalities and sibling conflict from a combination of limited resources and power and hierarchical differentials (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993).

The informants in this study described parental preference for one sibling, as well as the limited physical or emotional availability of one parent, as a major contributing factor to the competition between siblings.

Some respondents described parents who overtly or covertly expressed a preference for one child over another. When parents favored them, victims thought it fueled their sibling's competitive and aggressive nature. Most, however, experienced their abusive sibling as the favored child. The bond between a parent and the abusive child had dire emotional consequences for the victim. In some cases, survivors reported a parent blatantly conspired with the abusive sibling to provoke maltreatment, while others experienced the favoritism in more subtle forms. Nonetheless, all of the survivors reported a perceived alliance between a parent and sibling increased their sense of worthlessness.

Paula felt her father was always more interested in her sister, Josie. He lived in another country and scheduled his visits around Josie's needs and activities. On Josie's birthday, her father sent extravagant packages that contained gifts and party favors whereas Paula did not receive any acknowledgement on her birthday. Paula attributed this preferential treatment to her sister's special needs. As a child, Josie suffered from depression and later meningitis, which caused her to lose eighty percent of her hearing. Although Paula understood her sister warranted special attention, she longed for her father to notice her. She experienced her father's "neglect" as forgivable, while her mother's disregard was more hurtful, because she was physically present in the home. Paula described her mother's primary focus as working to maintain the family's financial stability. She thought her mother was unable "to know how to provide what was needed." Although she made certain to meet her children's material needs, she overlooked their emotional needs.

Despite receiving greater attention, Josie for her part did not believe her "favored status" was permanent; she feared that Paula had an edge. This led Josie to undermine any of Paula's accomplishments or abilities. Her sister's castigations made it extremely difficult for Paula to take pride in her own accomplishments. Paula shared feeling "second best" in her parent's eyes:

> I was a little more advanced academically than Josie, because that is all that I had. She would always tell me that I am not as smart as she is. It would always be a competition. I remember Josie always saying 'So what if you got good grades, you are not smarter than me. It doesn't mean that you are going to get more attention because of it'. I just could not celebrate anything. If I had friends, it was 'you are not good enough for friends so I am going to take them over'. She always seems to take over my friends, just take over everything, even the first guy that I liked. It was a competition for her. She would say 'I bet he wants me and not you. I bet you I will kiss him before you do'. She sure did.

Joe remembered that his father spoiled his abusive older brother, Aaron. His mother, however, did not want to indulge Joe in this way and used "extreme strict behavior" with him, including physical and emotional abuse; she tied him to the radiator, beat him with a leather strap, and hit him with broom handles. His youngest sibling had Down's syndrome and, according to Joe, his mother overcompensated for his challenges. Even though Joe was also disabled, this legally blind albino remembered his mother never displayed empathy for his limitations. Joe became isolated and lonely because of the restrictions his parents placed on him: "If my brother had a tantrum because he wanted to go with my father, my father would sneak him out of the house. My father would take him everywhere and do more things with him. My mother would not allow me to do anything because she wanted to make sure that I was not spoiled."

Another survivor, Tamar, reported that overt statements from her mother confirmed her perception of her brother as favored:

> My mother had a few miscarriages after I was born. When my brother was born, he was very ill and did not have a big chance in life. My mother would say to me 'you know you have to remember Brett was a wanted child' the indication being that I was not. In fact, she thought I was not really her baby. She though the hospital had gotten us mixed up and I was literally the wrong person, which sometimes I wish were true.

Isabelle, like Joe and Tamar, had a mother who was emotionally abusive in favor of her brothers:

> We were at a party and my mother said to a friend, 'the first one is always special, right?' Jack was always my favorite'. She said that. I remember looking at my brother Matthew, and he was like a deer in the headlights. I was thinking 'didn't he know that?' Our whole life told us that. It was 'Jack you are so smart, going to do great things in life'. Matthew got the "you are true blue and loyal and wonderful but kind of dumb'. With me, it was 'you are a girl and girls get married'.

Favoritism of one child reinforced acceptance or promotion of the abusive sibling's behavior. Respondents had a range of rationales for the favoritism their siblings enjoyed. Tammy explained that her brother was the favorite because he was a substitute for their mother's emotionally absent husband. In parallel, her brother became a substitute father to Tammy. Tammy referred to both her mother and her brother as her parents. She felt that her father's passive involvement contributed to "the damage I was caused as a girl." She experienced her mother and brother as "perpetrating something" on her:

> There was always this thing about how wonderful Douglas was. He is sooo wonderful. The world revolved around him before I was born, and it still revolved around him. My mother stopped being social with my father and didn't have any friends, so Douglas was like her best friend. They would exclude me and were actually cruel about it sometimes, patronizing me and rejecting me, and I never got old enough to be part of their relationship. That was extremely damaging.

Notably, Talia reported different alignments between family members. She and her stepfather were close, as were her sister and biological father. Similar to Paula's experience, her parents' perception that her abusing sibling needed greater attention resulted in the victim feeling deprived. Ironically, for Talia, being the "easy" child did not always come with benefits. Instead, her parents did not meet her needs because her sister, the "difficult" child, demanded more attention. Nonetheless, Talia's stepfather provided her emotional nourishment and affirmation:

> I was very attached to my stepfather and I think that was because my sister always had my dad. She was his favorite. He wouldn't say that but he would admit that he paid more attention to her but said it was because she was needier. He would say that I was so easy. I didn't need as much as she did. I felt like a third wheel a lot of the time. I was never asked what I wanted to do but it always revolved around Alicia. It was always about keeping her happy or keeping her from flipping out and having a fit over whatever. But my stepfather was very connected to me and paid a lot of attention to me and I soaked it up and was very willing to have this wonderful father figure in my life. My sister didn't feel the same way.

> She would always say that I betrayed her because she saw a division between the core family and the new family whereas I never used to wish that my mom and dad would get back together. I really preferred my new family. My stepfather was so interested in my life and my friends.

Despite the attention she received from her stepfather, his love did not replace Talia's desire for her own father's attention.

Victims who experienced their sibling as favored because of their perceived likeability as opposed to those who recognized their sibling's limitations did not seem different in their susceptibility to abuse or their feelings of emotional deprivation. However, benignly favored perpetrators may have fared worse than those whose parents overtly denigrated the victims in comparison to their siblings. Victims whom parents labeled the "good" child did not experience this status as particularly beneficial. Either their sibling resented them, or the attention their sibling's negative behavior elicited overwhelmed the rewards of favoritism. Despite being preferred, sibling competitiveness outweighed any benefits. In retrospect, Ben recognized the negative aspects of being the favorite:

> My parents tried to get me to show up my brother. Like 'Ben knows the answer' and meanwhile I am the younger child so it was like really throwing lighter fluid on the fire. They would provoke a situation and stir the pot, this was a general family dynamic, that I was better. What a mess.

Intended or not, parental preference pitted children against each other. The manner in which Ben's parents demonstrated their favoritism created a dynamic of sibling competition that culminated in intense resentment and punishment of the repudiated sibling.

Some respondents in this study were aware that their parents resented them. Parent-child abuse, parental conflict, emotional neglect, or favoritism contributed to

meager emotional resources within the family system. Poor modeling of conflict, maltreatment, and scarce resources contributed to the displacement of aggression and competition between siblings. The lack of emotional support from parents posed an environmental stressor that colored the sibling relationship. Additionally, parents' inability to respond to strong feelings inhibited their children's capacity to modulate their own emotions.

While some children in this environment may look to their own siblings for nurturing and support, the emotional limitations of parents and the subsequent neediness of both children appeared to breed contempt. The anger at a parent was displaced onto a sibling or the sibling was perceived as a competitive force who is taking away the limited availability of the parent. It was apparent that a family environment characterized by parental emotional unavailability was likely to foster conflict between siblings and may set a precedent for sibling abuse.

Summary

Consistent themes described in the families of respondents uncover several conditions which may have contributed to the presence of sibling abuse and potentially promoted its occurrence. Role confusion and a lack of hierarchical structure in the families were clearly predominant. Due to parental stressors, the older sibling often took on a care giving role. Whether overtly assigned or implicitly expected, the role assignment may have contributed to the older abusive sibling's aggression towards a sibling. Because of victims' need for support, and the duality of the abuse and nurturance received in the absence of parental support, victims tolerated the abuse. However, the diffuse boundaries that existed within the households created a lack of differentiation of

roles and hierarchy. This led to a pervasive state of instability and lack of protection for the victims.

Parents who were abusive and neglectful in addressing the sibling abuse abdicated their parental responsibilities. Their responses to the abuse minimized the victim's experience and often fostered hostile responses from the abusive sibling. In fact, when parents responded to the sibling abuse with parent-child abuse, the perpetrator then displaced his aggression onto the sibling. Generally, parents were contending with their own stressors including financial strains, single parenting, marital conflict, and an inability to modulate their own emotions. They had poor internal and external resources on which they could draw to provide emotional support to their children. As a result, their children did not have models of effective affect modulation, appropriate communication and behavior, and supportive relationships. It appeared that these deficits in parenting contributed to the perpetuation of sibling abuse. The abusive sibling modeled parental behavior and displaced aggression onto a sibling. In this regard, the perpetrator may have also been a victim of parental misconduct, which placed both the aggressor and the victim at risk. Despite the risk factors, survivors were quite resilient. I discuss the ability of survivors to seek out formative experiences that contributed to resiliency in the next chapter. In addition, family relationships had the potential to continue to impose on the well-being of survivors in adulthood, and survivor's choices to continue or sever these relationship proved protective for some and promoted risk for others.

CHAPTER VIII: RISK AND RESILIENCE IN CHILDHOOD AND ADULTHOOD AMONG SIBLING ABUSE VICTIMS

Introduction

Resiliency theory describes how people successfully meet life challenges in the face of stress or trauma; it proposes a range of protective factors such as adaptation, healing and wellness, self-efficacy, and competence that enable people to mitigate the negative effects of adversity (Greene, 1999). Gitterman and Germain (2008) characterize resilience as an ecological concept that reflects more than the attributes of a person; they also include complex person-environment transactions in the resiliency paradigm. An important factor regarding an individual's resilience is the availability of emotional support, particularly during childhood and early adulthood (Doyle, 2001; Iwaniec, 2005). Although most of the respondents in this study received limited emotional support from their families and developed little social capital outside of the home during childhood, others did develop resources that provided them with support and hope. These informants proved resilient in the face of devastating childhood experiences, both during childhood and as adults.

This study extends findings from research regarding parent-child abuse to children who experienced sibling abuse. Prior studies of parent-child abuse found that children who are victims of emotional abuse lose confidence in their parent's availability and responsiveness (Iwaniec, 2005). Additionally, abused children are likely to develop internal working models of distrust and rejection that project them onto their close relationships (Doyle, 2001). This study found that victims of sibling abuse did not have parents who were emotionally responsive to them. This compounded the unavailability of sibling support, and survivors developed the expectation that people, even people closest

to them, would not be emotionally available. As a result, they developed insecure attachment styles in relationships. Even though sibling abuse threatened their egos, some informants developed resources outside of the home that may have contributed to their resiliency and affected their ability to establish relationships as children but less so later in life.

Although some informants found it difficult to develop peer relations as children, others were able to cultivate supportive relationships outside of their homes with peers, mentors, extended family members, or parents of friends. They felt safe and valued in these relationships. Respondents described these supports as providing an escape from the pervasive emotional deprivation they experienced in their homes. Nonetheless, most of the informants were unable to develop supportive relationships until adulthood, which they identified as imperative to rebuilding their sense of self.

Some suggest that resilient people tend to be those exposed to fewer risks for a shorter period of time (Rutter, 1999). Yet most of the respondents in this study were graduates of college and graduate school, and had established careers; in some respects, they were functioning at high levels. Despite these accomplishments, informants struggled with low self-esteem and had problems with interpersonal relationships. Nevertheless, their adaptive abilities enabled them to achieve in other areas of life. This chapter describes the actions these informants took as children and adults on their own behalf to preserve their egos.

Childhood Resilience

Response to the same adverse event or relationship may differ across populations. For some sibling abuse survivors, the experience had many deleterious effects. This study

revealed that some could take actions that helped them to adapt to trauma. For example, taking on the form of compensatory factors or relationships that helped them rebound from the experience with less harm, while others did not feel that they had the ability to cope at all. For those described as resilient, creative outlets, external emotional support, and nurturance were protective and instrumental in helping them to remain intact. These relationships and outlets allowed the children to develop a sense of accomplishment and experience their own value.

Creative Outlets

Ideally, a child should feel that he or she is a member of a cohesive family that is able to provide support in the face of life's challenges (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). Victims of sibling abuse did not have these supports in the home. Additionally, many informants were not involved in meaningful experiences outside of the home that would have helped them develop a sense of competence, mastery, and importance (Gitterman & Germain, 2008). Children raised in abusive home environments are generally not involved in activities that promote self-confidence, and this promotes a sense of isolation (Doyle, 2001; Richardson 2002). Despite the lack of parental attunement to their children's needs, some of the informants in this study sought creative outlets outside of the abusive experiences they had with their siblings. Others were socially isolated and lacked confidence to partake in such activities themselves or their parents did not expose them to activities outside the home. Nonetheless, social and creative activities supported resilience among those informants who did find these extra-familial outlets.

Youth who cope with trauma through creative outlets build a sense of belonging and competence (Malchiodi, 2008). Although it is difficult to determine whether or not

the survivors in this study involved in these activities ultimately fared better than those who were not, some reported that creative outlets provided them with an emotional release, a sense of meaningfulness to others, and relief from their home environment when they were children.

Marc's music served as an escape that proved fundamental to his emotional stability. He spoke about the solitude of playing the drums, which offered respite from the onslaught of abuse. He described his music as something that was "in his own control" and "separate from his family." Through music, Marc was able to escape from his daily life and attributed it to his emotional survival.

For other survivors, creative outlets not only provided emotional release but also helped them establish a sense of community and receive much needed attention. Beth's parents identified her as the "good child," because they struggled with her sister's behavior. However, Beth did not reap any rewards from this status. Her parents did not protect her from her sister's abusive behavior, and because she was the "easy" child, she survived by living "under the radar." Her parents paid little attention to her. Beginning in junior high school Beth sought out theater, which provided her the recognition she needed. Lynn also found that musical theater helped her to express herself and allowed her to have a literal and metaphorical voice that she did not have at home. There, her brother rebuked her when she expressed herself and invalidated her opinions. However, through participation in musical theater, she was encouraged to think creatively and actively express herself. This experience developed her ability to take risks. Acting allowed her to try out different personae without personally identifying herself with any particular one. The support, encouragement, and acceptance from her peer group helped

her to believe in her capabilities. Additionally, Lynn found her involvement in musical theater was a cathartic experience because it provided a purposive-directed outpouring of emotion.

Joe's parents did not encourage any of their children to become involved with their community. In addition, they did not identify any promising characteristics their children might have exhibited. Consequently, Joe's participation in after-school activities was an effort to avoid spending time at home, not because of a particular interest or talent. He said that his involvement in schoolwork and after school activities helped him to build relationships. He recognized the need for support and exhibited personal strength by identifying an environment in which this could occur.

Although some respondents highlighted their relationship and ego-building experiences as particularly meaningful, their reparative aspects were difficult to assess. It was not possible to connect their resilient gestures in childhood to the ability to establish intimate relationships as adults. Both Marc and Beth married and were content with their spouses. However, Marc revealed little about the nature of his marriage, and Beth was plagued with deep insecurity and needed constant reassurance. As an adult, Joe remained single and reported he was socially isolated and felt very alone.

Supportive Relationships

Supportive relationships with friends or caring adults and mentors are paramount protective aspects of resilience (Germain & Gitterman, 2008). A caring presence in the form of external support has the potential to provide physical and emotional well-being and help shape a child's worldview (Germain & Gitterman, 2008). As children, informants lacked emotional support in their homes. Despite this, some were able to take

refuge in their friends' homes. Isabelle related that having another home in which she felt safe and part of a family was critical to her self-preservation. She spent significant time at a friend's home from the age of ten through college. This friend had a close-knit family that welcomed her into their lives. Like Beth, another survivor who felt "taken in" by her friend's family, she was envious of the way in which members of these families communicated. These extra-parental adult relationships could promote a sense of competence in these children. For example, Beth attributed her good grades in school to her friend's mother who helped her with homework. The ability of victims to find sanctuary with another family and feel accepted is a testament to their appeal and resourcefulness.

Some respondents with more than one sibling were able to find comfort and care from the non-abusing sibling, one who often resided outside the home. Paula's older sister, Karen, was aware their father favored the abusing sister, Josie, and identified with Paula. Whether she felt empathy for Paula or because of her own need for friendship and affirmation, she offered Paula companionship. Paula felt that their alliance was imperative for her survival. She felt Karen valued her. Consequently, she felt significant in her presence.

Marc's oldest brother, Larry, confirmed that their home environment was chaotic. Marc described Larry as "the voice of reason" despite his own inner turmoil. "Larry was my lifeline. He was always the one there for me, the rational voice of the family. He was able to help my dad say 'I love you'. He started by telling my dad that he loved *him.* I don't know what I would have done if I didn't have Larry." In addition, his brother could influence other family members, whereas Marc felt ineffective and powerless with them.

Larry would try to defend Marc against his abusing brother's tirades, even if his efforts were not always effective. He also helped Marc understand his abusive brother's actions by attributing them to his mother's dysfunction and his father's lack of emotional relatedness. He helped him depersonalize his brother's assaults and put them in the perspective of broader family problems.

Marc credited his brother with helping him to recognize his parents' emotional limitations rather than viewing the way they related to him as a reflection of their feelings for him. Marc attributed Larry's affirmation of his victimization and perception of his parent's shortcomings as critical to his well-being. Additionally, his brother reflected his own feelings. Larry's need for his father to be more emotionally expressive also was reparative for Marc, who identified with the same need.

Thelma's circumstances were exceptional. As the youngest child of ten, her three oldest sisters lived outside of the home by the time she was four years old. Her father died in an accident when she was six months old, and her mother raised the family alone. She described her household as chaotic. The five brothers abused their sisters with varying degrees of intensity. Her sister, one and a half years older, offered Thelma a place to live, but her mother prohibited this arrangement

Although Thelma's move to her sister's home might have relieved her from abuse, the knowledge that her sister was willing to extend herself in this way enabled her to feel wanted. At the time, Thelma believed that her mother's refusal to allow her to live with her older sister was an attempt to thwart her happiness. However, looking back, she believed her mother interpreted her sister's offer as a slight, and she had "too much respect to give up one of her children." Thelma said that although her mother was

overwhelmed, she was not going to relinquish her parental responsibility and control. Thelma's reflection highlighted both her ability to adapt and the pain of trauma. As a child, when she endured sibling abuse, she perceived her mother's lack of support as personal. As an adult, she was able to reflect on her mother's motivations in a different manner. The shift in her perception of her mother's refusal to allow her to move in with her older sister helped her to heal. Those who relieved their parents of responsibility for their actions, or inaction, protected themselves from the perception that they were unloved.

Some respondents found relief, hope, and a sense of worth through their relationships with extended family members. Tamar spoke about feeling special when she was with her grandmother and aunts. Although at home she felt her parents favored her brother, with her relatives she felt preferred. In an effort to capitalize on these positive resources, Tamar spent considerable time with them. She conveyed their reparative role through her descriptions of their efforts to show interest in her life. Unlike her parents, they asked her about her friends, attended her sporting events, and helped her with homework. Similarly, Ben recounted spending extensive time with his aunt with whom there was mutual admiration. Although he described her as "nuts," he was able to experience genuine love and interest and felt a part of a family in a way that he could not experience in his own home: "My aunt and uncle were good with kids. That was a happy family--a place to have a good time. I really believe she saved my life. This was the only place I had comfort."

The Stress-Coping Paradigm: Relationships with Inherent Risks

The stress-coping paradigm (Lazarus, 1984) underscores that real life situations or circumstances create pain, but people may generate stress themselves with emotional consequences. These stresses are a result of a person's appraisal that they do not have the internal or external resources to deal with a difficult life event. Some informants took advantage of emotionally supportive peers or adults outside of their family, which gave them a reprieve from the onslaught of abuse they endured. Relationships or activities, however, did not preclude suffering. Other informants either did not have or could not access this type of support. All of the participants had limited internal resources that they attributed to the effects of the abuse on their self-esteem. However, some survivors were able to optimize their personal resources. Others were unable to function at their maximum capacity; they found refuge in sexual acting out, alcohol, drugs, or gang activity. Participation in these destructive, anti-social activities highlight the risk associated with sibling abuse for some.

The stress-coping paradigm emphasizes active strategies people use to manage stressful life events that have the potential to affect personal growth, self-esteem, competence, relatedness, and self-direction (Lazarus, 1984). The survivors in this study reported that as children they utilized various coping strategies to contend with the abuse, not all of which represented resiliency features. For example, in an attempt to protect themselves, some victims would "stay under the radar." They would either comply with their sibling's demands or calculate how to minimize a potential escalation of abuse. Others reported they tuned into the needs of their abusers. This is an aspect of the defense mechanism *identification with the aggressor* (Freud, 1937), which requires the victim of

abuse to submit to the aggressor and replace his or her own emotional state with the emotional needs of the other. This compulsive compliant strategy demands excessive vigilance and superficial compliance to the needs of others in an attempt to ward off further trauma (Crittenden & Ainsworth, 1989). This defense mechanism, which allows preservation of the self from further or anticipated harm, may also result in risk for the abused sibling. From a resiliency perspective, the abused child is adapting to the trauma by developing coping strategies to prevent further harm. From a risk perspective, the child who adopts these defenses is sacrificing a part of him or herself in the process. The replacement of one's own ego with that of another requires a loss of self. This inevitably leads to an internal construct of submission, compliance, and in effect inferiority.

Psychodynamic theory contends that compromised trust and hyper-vigilance are aspects of defenses that develop in response to trauma. Some survivors had difficulty identifying their own needs; their own preferences were submerged due to constant submission to others. In addition, the threat of harm that is diverted by this defense mechanism also manifests in a fear of confrontation or conflict. As a result, through the process of conformity, they compromised their individuality. Survivors reported that their intimate relationships were fraught with fear of conflict, difficulty tolerating anger, and fear of expressing their own needs.

Lynn's description of her response to her brother's demands highlights aspects of both resilience and risk during childhood continuing into adulthood. Although she did not want to participate in activities with him, he coerced her, and she gave in. Her contact with him exposed her to emotional abuse, but there were similar repercussions if she withdrew from him. He would taunt her relentlessly for not meeting his needs. In an

attempt to have an ally, she suppressed her own needs and tended to his. She explained, "I was always scared to make my brother angry, and I would always try to give in to do anything he wanted so that he wouldn't yell, because his yelling was just the loudest in the world." In adulthood, Lynn continued to fear intense emotions in the men she dated. In fact, she would not become involved in a relationship if she could not "read" the emotional state of the other person.

Although some victims of sibling abuse adopted defense mechanisms that allowed them to live through the trauma with some sense of protection, others did not feel the coping strategies they used relieved them from their internal pain. One survivor, Ben, related becoming severely depressed due to his relationship with his brother and turned to drugs as a method of coping. Another respondent, Mia, shared that she steered herself amiss in an effort to gain her parents' attention:

> I found a group of people who accepted me. It felt good to be a part of something. We were a gang. We did not do such great things. We hurt people. I think it was a feeling that I had this place and people who I could hang out with and know that they would be there, so to speak. Part of it was acting out, hoping my parents would notice. They did notice when I started self-mutilating. I think I was in 7th grade, and my father saw some cuts on my arm and all that was said was 'what's that?' I said 'nothing' and nothing was ever spoken about it again.

Desperately desirous of attention, Mia found a substitute family in a "gang" where she gained support and community. Although she cultivated external resources, she did so resulting in the detriment of others, unnoticed by her parents. These behaviors represented adaptations that put the informants at risk for even greater problems as youths.

In contrast, those informants who through design or circumstances found protective factors such as supportive relationships with extended family members or

parental figures or mentors who resided outside of their home environment evidenced resilience. The ability of victims to seek out, develop, or maintain emotional connections reflected their strengths. Others found different means of coping such as drug use or substitute "gang" families, which resulted in destructive or self-destructive behaviors. This put victims at greater risk. However, further exploration is necessary to determine whether the victims who had strong extra-familial support fared better in adulthood. Among these informants, *all* of the survivors of sibling abuse contended with challenges in intimacy in adulthood and most attributed these to their earlier experiences with their sibling and the co-occurring parental abuse or neglect. This raises questions about whether there are specific problems with intimacy for those who have had supportive childhood relationships and those who have not. Additionally, it raises questions about how the risk behaviors of some victims affected survivors in adulthood.

Resiliency in Adulthood

Most of the literature on resiliency has focused on children. It suggests that temperament, family support, trusting relationships, and peer and community support modify stress and contribute to resiliency in children (Ferguson & Zimmerman, 2005). Other protective factors include extra-familial social environments that reward competence and reinforce belief systems and adult mentoring (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Greene, 1999). Resiliency theory also contends that finding meaning and purpose in one's experience helps to pave the road towards resiliency (Richardson, 2002). Although none of the survivors in this study experienced supportive family environments, many found a sibling or relative who was supportive; this helped them to cope with their circumstances as children. These supports appeared to moderate the effects of risk and

enhance adaptation. In addition, some participants found creative outlets helpful. Notwithstanding internal strife, these factors enabled children to navigate the trauma they described in their lives. However, some extra-familial relationships only exacerbated risk as youths' coping strategies led them to anti-social groups and associated behaviors.

Given the potential availability of the protective factors throughout the life cycle, resilience should be achievable at any point. Survivors of sibling abuse interviewed for this study did not escape pain or long-lasting problems because of their experiences. Yet, many informants exposed to high risk because of sibling abuse were able to attain competence, build community, and achieve success and generativity in adulthood.

Through their stories of the efforts they took as adults to protect their stability and facilitate their emotional growth, survivors revealed additional aspects of resiliency that expand the risk-resiliency paradigm into areas of adult development. Those who managed to achieve supportive relationships in childhood managed to build on these models. Consequently, they could establish significant friendships in adulthood despite the adverse effects sibling abuse had on their ability to trust others. For some, adaptation came in a form of self-preservation that involved distancing themselves from their family of origin or suppressing painful memories of the past. These measures allowed them to remain mobilized as adults in the face of their childhood experiences. Interestingly, those survivors who actively tried to suppress memories found therapists a critical source of support. Although therapy rests on the notion of helping individuals work through the pain of their experiences, some survivors identified that their healing came through the supportive role of the therapist. The therapist provided a model of unconditional acceptance, something few of the informants experienced in their childhoods.

Again, a possible artifact of the recruitment method used in this study, many of the survivors had careers in the helping professions. A graduate school of social work was one venue of recruitment. Self-reflection is a key component in the field of social work; for these subjects, the ability to confront their histories and explore its manifestations was a testament to their resilience. Likewise, their experiences may have facilitated their ability to be empathic and their desire to help others who have experienced trauma. Nonetheless, they were able to sublimate their identification with trauma in a productive manner.

Therapy

Similar to parent-child abuse, sibling abuse caused children to lose confidence in their own abilities and worth. Additionally, parental unresponsiveness caused children to lose faith in the accessibility and responsiveness of others, having created an expectation that people were rejecting and untrustworthy. This study found that victims of sibling abuse, like children who suffer from parent-child abuse, might unconsciously choose adult relationships and social situations that replicated the abusive experience (Bowlby, 1973).

The absence of validating experiences during childhood causes survivors to blame and denigrate themselves. Doyle (1997) found that the most important single survival factor for abused children was the presence of at least one person who made them feel important and provided unconditional positive regard. Both in childhood and as adults, this person proved to be the therapist. When parents took victims of sibling abuse for therapy by during childhood, the victims thought this meant the problem was within them. However, informants described therapy as an invaluable experience; the therapist

was the only nonjudgmental and accepting adult who validated the sibling abuse. Sarah explained, "A therapist told me that I was not crazy but that I had an extremely dysfunctional family. It was so helpful to have an outsider validate the psychosis of my brother's behavior."

Many of the survivors in this study sought out therapy in adulthood. Therapists promoted resilience by helping survivors develop the capacity to make decisions, engage in other relationships, and detach emotionally from the abusive sibling. Helping survivors make meaning of the abusive experience allowed them to depersonalize the sibling's behavior and recognize the sibling as a person in their own right with their own problems, limitations, and struggles. Helping survivors distance themselves from the true cause of the perpetrator's aggression allowed them to begin to undo internalized messages of blame and gain a sense of control.

Beth poignantly captured the value of therapy; it enabled her to feel safe with her feelings in the presence of another person. The therapeutic relationship facilitated her ability to trust someone, and subsequently she transferred this confidence into her relationship with her husband: "Before I started going to therapy I was intent on being independent and never relying on another person. Now I'm able to trust my husband."

Beth's description of her relationship with her husband was indicative of a "corrective emotional experience." Franz Alexander (1946) originated this concept, which comes from the idea that a person internalizes images from others, including the manner in which others perceive the person. These interactions exert a strong influence over one's perceptions, including perceptions of the self throughout life. Alexander referred to the corrective emotional experience that a therapist provides by constancy and

suspension of moral judgment. The therapist offers empathy, insight, understanding, and acceptance. The premise is that the therapist, having communicated a positive regard for the client, provides a reparative experience. The client identifies the therapist as a replacement caregiver and begins to internalize the therapist's positive regard. The client learns new ways that people can respond to them other than what they expect based on the past. Through this relationship, the client has a new experience that does not include rejection. Identification with the therapist had a positive impact on the client's ego and superego. Through therapy, survivors reported they were able continue these corrective experiences with important figures in their lives. In Beth's marriage, she became able to expose her vulnerabilities and have "needy" moments, which her husband met with consistent support. Although she was still working on believing in and accepting his emotional availability, his tolerance of the range and depth of her emotions demonstrated to her that it was possible to experience and survive intense feelings.

Another survivor, Isabelle, also described the reparative role her therapist played. "I think in therapy I am getting the secure attachment that I need and have never experienced before." Talia introduced a different aspect of therapy, one that helped her to negotiate her current relationship with her sister. She stated she was able to understand her sister's limitations and develop realistic expectations of her. "When I went to therapy, I began to accept that my sister is not normal. I realized I couldn't have a regular relationship with her. Like the therapist said, 'you have to think of her as a paraplegic and you cannot expect her to walk.'" Tamar felt her therapist helped her address her anger at her brother and her parents. Without therapy, she would have severed relations with her parents and would not have been able to maintain healthy adult relationships with others:

> Had I not been in therapy for so long I would be like my brother – angry and hostile. So therapy helped me solve most issues, and I still have ones that I haven't conquered yet. If I had not been in therapy for so long, I think I would be living with the anger and the paralysis that comes from being abused. I don't think I ever would have been able to have a good relationship with each of my parents separately, or with anybody else for that matter.

Tamar's ability to address the profound anger she had towards her brother and parents also allowed her to develop healthy communication with her husband which included nonaggressive confrontation and handling of conflict.

Not all the informants found therapy helpful in the same vein. Joe did not view it as a vehicle for moving past his feelings about the abuse. He struggled with moving forward. Although he knew that therapy would not change his past or its effects, Joe did find it helpful to have someone who would listen, empathize, and support him:

> It's like a balloon. The more air you put into it, it blows up and eventually explodes. So if you go to therapy, it is like you let the air out a little bit. I go once a week and it feels good for a little while. The problems are still there. It is not going to change by talking about it. It doesn't mean that if you talk about the problems they stay on the shelf and are not in your head anymore.

However these survivors described the benefits or limitations of therapy, their recognition that they needed help was a testament to the significance of their past and a hope for the future. The ability to risk their emotional life with a therapist could provide a hopeful step towards healing. The therapist could serve in an invaluable role in which the individual's internalized construct of self and others is reconstituted. Although therapy could constitute a protective factor, the choice survivors made to capitalize on this resource was a manifestation of their resiliency.

Career Choice

Many of the survivors interviewed worked in the helping professions, particularly social work or counseling. This may indicate resilience in adults who experienced abuse

as children. It can be cathartic to help others; listening to the experiences of others may have allowed survivors to affirm their own emotional processes. Counseling others requires a high level of self-awareness. Awareness of counter-transference, or the reactions to the client based on one's own life experiences, is essential for effective counseling. Counselors must ensure their interventions and decisions are in the client's best interest and not based on their own comfort or familiarity as related to their own life. In addition, identifying one's own reactions and distinguishing them from that of the client is critical for effective intervention. Therefore, counseling requires a high degree of introspection around one's biases, perceptions, and values in order to refrain from imposing them on the client.

Isabelle made an explicit connection between her experiences and her career choice. She stated that her history enabled her to empathize with people who suffer. "I work with people with serious mental health issues. My experience with my brother has given me the ability to empathize with a lot of different people." A strong empathic ability also propelled Marc towards the field of social work. "One of the reasons I entered the field of social work is because of my experience with my brother. I feel very empathic towards people who go through bad stuff." Beth was direct about her identification with the population with whom she works:

> I always like to work with kids that not many people understand. I really identify with those kids, because I know what it is like not to be understood. Coming from a family that didn't and doesn't function well makes me want to help kids who are stuck in these circumstances. And being able to do that gives me a lot of hope.

While Talia did not work in a helping profession, her fundraising career required her to manage large groups of people. She reflected on how facilitation of group

processes required her to be aware of her own internal life and how others emotionally affected her, because in turn, this affected how she related to others:

> I picked my work because I felt like that was going to be my way of learning how to be in a relationship with others. You can't facilitate groups unless you can be in charge of yourself and understand what's going on and what's going on in the room and how people are relating to you, each other, and how you are relating to them. Every time I have to deal with a group, I see where all of my shit is. It just pops up. There was one guy who was not paying any attention and was loud and just wanted to hear himself speak. I have to learn how to manage my own stuff so I can be effective with the group and move them forward.

Talia's role working in a group dynamic replicates the therapeutic aspect of group therapy. Her self-awareness served to astutely recognize her own dynamics within the group process in which she projected earlier experiences onto her relatedness and responsiveness to others. Even though Talia did not work as a helping professional, she described incorporated social group work principles in her work. In addition, she utilized her family experiences to enhance her management skills and subsequently made meaning of her personal history either through her work or because of it.

Familial Relationships in Adulthood

Survivors desired to maintain a sense of a connection to their family of origin despite enduring strain with an abusive sibling or a parent. Some survivors chose to remain involved with the abusive sibling, because they wanted to preserve a sense of family. Although some informants reported they were able to arrive at an acceptable relationship, others did not. Some chose to cut ties with their sibling or parents in an effort to achieve self-protection. This decision was complex, because these adults chose to sacrifice their connection to their families in order to avoid the abusive sibling. Bowen (1978) described the concept of emotional cut-off (1978) as an individual's effort to manage unresolved emotional issues with parents, siblings, and other family members by

reducing or completely cutting-off emotional contact. Strategies include creating geographic distance from one's family of origin, rarely visiting with family, or staying in physical contact with family but avoiding emotionally close relationships. "Cutting-off" provides a sense of safety. Bowen claimed that despite the use of this defense to manage attachment to family members, it has the potential to cause pain or discomfort. The individual who employs cutting-off of family has a greater sense of vulnerability to intense emotional processes in other relationships (Papero, 1990). Those who did cut off family members or remained in contact all struggled with intimate relationships. Survivors revealed their internal processes regarding relationships that they externalized and caused intense distress. Bowen's claim raises question regarding specific variations of emotional strain in relationships for victims of sibling abuse who have cut off family members. In the context of a risk resilience construct, it also casts a shadow of a doubt about this theory, since remaining in an abusive relationship as an adult may interrupt the potential to employ protective strategies in adulthood. This raises the question whether cut-offs could be regarded as a protective feature in adult resilience.

Self-Protection: Emotional Cut-offs

Some abusive siblings continued to be abusive in adulthood. The emotional cut-off of siblings was an attempt by survivors to protect themselves from further pain. Most who severed relations with their siblings attempted to gain control of their egos because they remained easily influenced by their siblings' perception of them. But, the depth of the emotional scars remained intrusive. Nonetheless, emotional cut-offs helped survivors individuate from their siblings and families. The cut-off of an abusive sibling had the potential to allow room for mourning the loss of this relationship. Accepting that they

could not have the idealized or desired sibling relationship enabled some survivors to develop their own identity. Although this represented grief and loss, the decision to tolerate the feeling of despair began a reparative process. Survivors who created distance from continuous assault on their ego might have been more likely to heal and reconstitute their internalization of experiences. In this manner, survivors who emotionally cut-off their perpetrators may have demonstrated resilience.

Those who maintained connection to their siblings might have been trying to get what they needed from a sibling who was still unable to provide it. This presented greater risk for projecting these needs into adult intimate relationships. For example, many survivors sought partners who were emotionally unavailable. Their desire to change the other person or gain recognition was met with frustration, disappointment, and self-denigration. Others found partners who had difficulty communicating or were also abusive. Many of the respondents took on a care giving role with intimate partners, which repeated the sibling dynamic.

This study uncovered potential resiliency factors in adulthood for survivors who emotionally cut-off siblings or family members. At the same time, it represented risks for those who remain stuck in abusive familial relationships. Unavoidably, the emotional toll on survivors who cut-off family members paralleled those who remained in contact with their abusers. Those who terminated relationships with the abusive sibling were still devastated by the loss, while those who remained in contact continued to be embattled in turmoil. Although the pervasive aspect of the abuse was more distant for survivors who cut -off contact with the perpetrator, the projection of the experience onto their intimate relationships was apparent. However, they recognized that attachment to their family of

origin was destructive and prohibited the development of new “healthy” relationships. When survivors were able to separate from their family, and evolve outside of their toxic environment, they were more likely to develop personal and social capital. Nonetheless, this complex phenomenon requires further study to characterize the nature of risk and resiliency among adults in these circumstances.

In spite of their loss, survivors identified their decision to distance themselves from family members as a feature of their resiliency; it helped them to move forward. Beth explained that she chose to move across the country to “begin a new life.” She felt establishing an independent identity required emotional distance from her family. She admitted it was difficult for her to distinguish her sister’s perception of her from her own; she felt that “being 3000 miles away helps me to have my own life.” Furthermore, she reported feeling entangled in the emotional processes of her family. For example, when her sister visited her parents for a holiday, they expected her to be there. Beth’s parents were disappointed when she decided not to attend. Although they did not understand Beth’s need to protect herself from her sister’s continued abuse, she felt burdened by their distress. Unable to separate from their emotional responses, Beth gave herself the geographic distance that enabled her freedom to make her own choices. She felt that physical distance was the only way she could establish emotional distance. For Beth, the risk of change provided hope for a new beginning.

Tamar also tried to break her brother’s emotional hold on her. Her decision to cut-off relations left her feeling lonely, because she mourned the loss of their earlier friendship: “It makes me sad that I have no relationship with my brother. And yet, I don’t want a relationship with him. It’s been five years. He was dishonest and crappy,

and I had enough." Although she tried to safeguard herself, she had to contend with "traumatic aloneness" and find a way to mend the void. Although Tamar claimed she missed her brother, like other survivors who stated they wished for a bond with their siblings, what she may actually have missed was an idealized version of her brother, one who treated her with kindness.

In an effort to take control of their emotional lives, some survivors chose to terminate their relationships with parents who were emotionally abusive or diminished their self-worth. Some tied their tenuous relationships with parents with their earlier sibling experiences. Others felt that their unstable adult relationships with parents represented the cumulative effect of mistreatment. Survivors did not feel they had a choice when they ended these relationships; it was their first step towards self-preservation after longstanding parental emotional abandonment and rejection. Nonetheless, this choice carried the burden of loneliness. Beth recounted the time she chose to end her relationship with her mother:

> I think when I was 15 I realized that my mother wasn't somebody that I could talk to, because she is really difficult to be around. I decided not to speak to my mother ever again when she was in the hospital and had diabetes. She drinks, so it makes the diabetes worse. I was really upset with her because I knew she was drinking, and she denied it. And then she blamed her drinking behavior on me and my sister, saying that if we had been better children she wouldn't drink. For me that was it. I couldn't speak to her anymore and I was miserable for several days after that. I couldn't work and couldn't function very well.

Beth's decision to cut-off relations with her mother was a step towards separating from her mother's perception of her. She may also have demonstrated resilience by giving up a relationship she needed but knew she could not have. Beth also minimized contact with her father and stepmother, because their proximity to her abusive sister made it difficult for her to have a separate relationship with them:

> I have a decent relationship with my stepmother and father, but I don't visit them often. In fact, I haven't gone back home in four years. I don't even visit on the holidays because my sister will be there. So I have to make the choice that if I see them at Christmas, I also have to be abused by my sister.

In summary, Beth deployed a protective feature to distance herself from emotionally charged experiences that intruded on her self-esteem. Her choice to protect her sense of self resulted in the loss of important familial relationships, but, she knew that it was necessary to rebuild her ego strength.

Maintaining Abusive Relationships

Approximately half the participants chose to cut-off relations with a sibling or family member. Yet, some remained in contact with their abusive siblings in order to maintain connections with their families of origin. Others remained in complicated relationships with their families that brought them hardship and pain. Some adult abusive siblings continued to exert their power by threatening to cut-off relationships with family members. When Talia's sister, Alicia, felt injured, she threatened to abandon family members. This led Talia to maintain the status quo and attempt to placate her sister's hostile gestures. Talia worked on negotiating her relationship with Alicia by maintaining boundaries.

Talia described a persistent pattern between herself and her sister. Alicia would taunt cut-off contact with Talia for a period and then reach out to her because she felt guilty. Talia also had difficulty letting go of the idealized relationship she imagined she could have. She was afraid if she did cut off her relationship, her sister would retaliate and abandon her. In this way, Alicia subtly maintained the power in the relationship, in the same way she did when they were children:

> We recently had a horrible email exchange. She sends emails that send chills up my spine. She says the most horrible things about me and that I am the worse person in the world and that I make it impossible for her to be in a relationship with me and that I don't give a shit about her. She's very extreme. So I stopped responding. Then I feel guilty, and I think maybe I should just email her and say 'Hi, I was thinking of you'. There is nothing like a sister connection. I do love her. She is my sister but she is fucking crazy.

In a continuation of their childhood drama, Lynn, maintained a caregiver role with her emotionally abusive and physically threatening brother:

> He called and was upset so I checked back in on him later. Well, he started screaming his head off, cursing at me saying all these horrible things. This has happened in the past where I'll hang up and he'll call a zillion times over and over for hours. He would call me and tell me that I am ruining his life and who the hell do I think I am, and that he's going to kill me. He tells me he's going to throw me through a wall.

Here, Lynn casually related the nature of her adult relationship with her brother. She accepted his abusive behavior, and she continued to relate to him as if he were in control of her. She made every effort to preserve a peaceful relationship with him to placate her mother, who was concerned about his emotional stability.

Unlike those informants who maintained attachments to their abusers, Sarah attempted to cut-off her emotionally abusive brother. However, when he reached out to her and professed his love, she allowed him to reenter her life. Nevertheless, he was still abusive. The desire and belief in the potential of a loving sibling relationship forced her to remain connected. Yet, despite his remorse, he was unable to contain his rage:

> My brother is still very critical of me. Several years ago, I told him that if he can't talk to me in a respectful, humane manner I did not want to hear from him. So I didn't hear from him for two years but then he called and said he loved me. We've been building a relationship the last few years but when he's off his meds, he's emotionally abusive. He apologized and admitted that it is always his fault, and he doesn't know why he does it.

Despite acknowledging his abusive behavior, Sarah's brother was unrelenting. When asked what motivated her to remain in a relationship with him, Sarah stated that she loved him and would not remain in a relationship with someone she did not love. She wanted to retain their connection, as long he was not abusing her. She explained her involvement by concluding, "It's a primal thing--he's my brother."

Some survivors maintained relationships with the abusive sibling by choice. Others did so out of obligation or fear. Beth, who had moved across the country, remained consumed with anxiety about the potential for more intense contact with her sister. For example, she was afraid she would become ill, and her sister would want to visit. Beth felt trapped in this relationship and lived in anticipation of the next time she would see her. "The last time I saw her she was upset with me and she had pushed a door into me and I said to her 'I am not going to take this abuse.' And she started laughing in my face, really laughing and mocking me. She said 'poor you, you think you were abused. Everybody you tell that to will laugh at you'."

Beth was different from other informants because she recognized that it was a necessity to minimize contact with her sister for self-preservation. Although other survivors recognized what they were sacrificing to maintain contact with their family, they resolved themselves to a greater gain: a familial relationship and sense of connectedness, no matter what the cost. Their willingness to maintain this sibling connection demonstrated the magnitude of this relationship and the hope survivors maintained that it could be different.

Joe's mother believed that children needed severe restrictions and limited freedom if they were going to remain humble and unspoiled. During his childhood, she placed severe, abusive limits on him and continued to reject him in adulthood:

> I had lost my job and moved in with my mother. Her neighbor convinced her that at 40 years old I should be living on my own. So my mother took out an order of protection against me. She said that I was using menacing gestures. Usually, to be granted an order of protection, you would think there was some kind of violence happening. So now I have an estranged relationship with my mother. We haven't spoken in four years. .. I don't need her, I don't want her. Around the holidays, I miss not having a family. You get to pick your friends, not your family, but I don't miss her. I put that to the side. I don't dwell on it because it will send me over the edge.

Although Joe made the decision to keep his mother out of his life, he felt she dismissed him. His decision not to have contact with her provided him with a sense of control and protection. However, not having a supportive mother was difficult. Joe's father died when he was 14 years old. Without contact with his mother or communication with his siblings, he decided to maintain a relationship with his abusive brother. He felt it provided him with some semblance of a family, even though his brother's lack of respect made Joe feel empty. Like those who cut-off relations with their sibling, Joe felt a similar state of despair. However, although those who cut-off siblings mourned their loss, Joe remained at risk because he was embroiled in this relationship.

Survivors displayed a continuum of contact with their family members. Some had no contact with family members; a few limited times they spent with family; and others remained connected to emotionally abusive siblings and parents. According to Marc:

> I really took the work that I was doing with my therapist to heart. I made changes. I decided that I wasn't going to visit my parents more than once a year. I really restructured my perspective. What is in it for me? If it is hurtful for me, why am I doing it? Who am I doing this for?

Those survivors, like Joe, who chose to remain in contact with abusive siblings are embedded in risk for continued abuse. However, survivors like Marc, who cut-off ties with abusive family members, or were able to maintain boundaries, mitigated their risk.

Rebuilding Relationships

Participants terminated relationships with family members they felt were beyond repair, particularly with the abusive sibling. However, some were able to cultivate relationships with parents in adulthood. Paula conveyed how she and her father later grew closer because of his emergent dismay with her sister. The family dynamics changed when her unmarried sister became pregnant. Her father's disillusion with this first-born child and his staunch religious values created emotional and physical distance between them. He no longer allowed her to live in his home, disengaged from her, and inadvertently began spending more time with Paula. For the first time, she experienced her father's interest.

On the other hand, Paula's indifference towards her mother reflected their distance. Her mother worked two jobs and believed her primary responsibility was to provide financially for the family. This philosophy undermined the emotional needs of her children and as a result, Paula did not feel her mother supported her or even knew her. As an adult, Paula also felt obliged to support her mother financially. This way, she maintained some connection to her:

> I don't wish my mother ill, but I also don't really care what is going on with her. I don't think she knows how to really love.… I do help a lot at home. I bought a house for my older sister and two years ago for my mother. I send the mortgage payment, I pay for my mother's health insurance and send money for food and take care of my grandmother. I do it with no emotions.

In her description of her current relationship with her mother and sister, Paula proposed that the financial support she provided them helped manage her guilt related to her intense anger. Survivors' attempted to have their experiences validated and gain parental understanding. Their need to have a connection to a key familial figure provided them with a sense of worth and exemplified the enduring effect of the sibling abuse experience.

Summary

Although I did not initially explore resiliency with informants, through the iterative process, spontaneous accounts of the way survivors persevered in childhood and adulthood revealed meaningful contributions to their adjustment. It became apparent that many adult survivors were functioning well in the world despite their traumatic past. I uncovered protective factors that helped victims in childhood and survivors in adulthood cope with their experience, and other aspects that put them at risk.

The vast majority of participants were in therapy at the time of the study. The most common pattern was that survivors entered therapy on their own volition to address feelings of depression, isolation, intimate hardship, and family relationships. In the process, they felt supported and began to develop a new identity that was separate and distinct from the one their sibling imposed. As in childhood, adult survivors found that meaningful relationships helped them develop new connections that served to replace the emotional nurturance one often relies on from family. Others still struggled to build and maintain connections.

Many survivors found that reviewing past experiences in therapy helped them through a process of loss and mourning; it facilitated their desire to move forward. However, many times, informants coped by suppressing painful feelings and memories.

Attempts to remain emotionally stable involved efforts to contain deep emotions. Maintaining both geographic and emotional distance from family were also protective efforts. There was a notable distinction of coping methods among victims and survivors of sibling abuse. In childhood, victims sought out supportive peers and adults who could provide physical and emotional safety. As adults, survivors removed themselves physically and emotionally from family members. This indicated the potential of siblings to maintain control over the survivor, so that separation was the only escape.

Action-based changes to self-protect demonstrate survivor resiliency. However, as a defining element of resilience, “adaptive capacity” remains difficult to assess. All of the survivors were functioning, capable adults. Yet, none was free of emotional pain. Survivors in this study “survived” their trauma and demonstrated their capacity for resilience; they were educated, pursuing master’s degree, found gratification from their professions, and many had solid, supportive friendships. Nonetheless, their past trauma continued to take an emotional toll. Most struggled intensely with emotional issues and adult relationships related to their childhood experience. All of the survivors in this study expressed that they did not represent the “norm” of society because of their long-suffering challenges.

The iterative process facilitated the discovery of aspects of risk and resiliency factors in childhood victims of sibling abuse. Additionally, resiliency and protective factors in adult victims of childhood sibling abuse were uncovered. These understudied areas surfaced through survivors’ reflections of their experiences. However, further study about risk and resilience and protective factors in adult victims of childhood sibling abuse would broaden knowledge and potentially facilitate intervention and treatment methods.

CHAPTER IX: DISCUSSION

Introduction

The purpose of this dissertation was to explore adult survivors' experiences of childhood and adolescent emotional or physical sibling abuse and the influences upon them in the area of intimate relatedness. Although I started with a particular interest, the exploration of sibling abuse experiences highlighted other factors related to the sibling relationship beyond intimacy. This study revealed the damaging aspects of sibling abuse on survivors' self-esteem as well as the defenses they developed to protect themselves from further harm. Adult survivors disassociated from their experience, had difficulty trusting others, were fiercely intent on remaining independent, attached themselves to emotionally unavailable partners, and often accommodated to the needs of others in an effort to avoid conflict. In essence, victims of sibling abuse recreated their experiences in their manner of relating. In fact, although survivors had an intense fear of emotional abandonment, they often put themselves in situations where they were chronically disappointed or rejected. Additionally, this research uncovered complex family systems and dynamics which put children at risk. These families where often characterized by parent-child abuse, neglect, poor parental boundaries and modeling, and confused roles. Childhood and adulthood resiliency factors also emerged which demonstrated that survivors had particular experiences and supports that facilitated their ability to cope with their experiences and history and enabled them to prosper in certain areas of their lives. Perhaps the most significant outcome of this study is a clear distinction of sibling abuse from sibling rivalry. The narratives of the informants depict sibling abuse as an extremely

harmful sibling relationship that poses a threat to one's ego or physical state and causes long-term consequences.

I conducted the research in the interest of revealing the subjective experiences of survivors and proposing mid-level theories that emerged from their narratives. To this end, I abstracted theoretical statements to highlight relationships from emerging concepts. Critical incidents of sibling abuse, family climate, and adult intimate experiences exposed patterns and themes for analysis. Three major theories informed the inquiry and analysis: object relations, family systems, and emerging theories of risk and resilience.

Nineteen self-identified victims of childhood sibling abuse participated in the research. They shared the complexity of their relationships with their siblings and parents and explored their historical and current intimate relationships. They described how their sibling relationships affected them as children and their consequences in adulthood. In the family environment, parents appeared overwhelmed with external stressors in addition to managing the abusive sibling relationship. The lack of support intrinsic in these families and the inability of parents to intervene effectively qualify as neglect and contribute to respondents' sense of instability and distrust.

In this study, the most common perpetrator of sibling abuse was a male. A brother abused all three male participants, and in more than half of the sibling pairs, a brother abused a sister. Seventeen of the nineteen survivors were the youngest sibling in the family. Therefore, in most cases, older brothers perpetrated sibling abuse on their younger sisters. Survivors consistently desired a strong bond with their abusers, perhaps an implicit expectation of the sibling relationship that exacerbated experiences of abuse and emotionally painful ramifications. The physical or emotional absence of parents

inherently created or assigned caregiver responsibilities to the older sibling and contributed to their resentment and perpetration of sibling abuse. I analyzed the consequences of ascribed and implicit roles and hierarchy in the discussion of family environment.

Because childhood sibling abuse remains understudied, the analysis of the sibling abuse relationship extends major theories to incorporate a novel experience that most have not considered. This study also addresses the developmental significance of experiencing sibling abuse during childhood and adolescence.

The Role of Family Relationships and Environment on Interpersonal Development

This research deepens understanding of the nature and characterization of sibling abuse and the messages about the self and relationships internalized from that experience. It reveals family environments fraught with explicit and implicit neglect, parent-child abuse, poor parental modeling, and inappropriate hierarchical relations. Family systems theory addresses the influence of the family on development and interpersonal dynamics. Following, I discuss how family systems theory highlights risk factors prominent in the home environment for children abused by a sibling. This theory also serves as a basis for understanding how survivors of sibling abuse develop working models of interpersonal relatedness that evolved from the influence of key figures and childhood experiences.

Parent-Child Abuse

Although this study did not seek to uncover causal factors of sibling abuse, several themes emerged regarding family circumstances that might contribute to the phenomenon. Deprivation was a theme in the lives of most respondents. Although all participants described their homes as “middle class”, parents were financially stressed

and unable to cope with parenting responsibilities, single-parent status, and intense emotions. Indeed, parent-child abuse was prominent in more than half of the families. Perpetrated on both children or at times, on the abusive sibling in an attempt to manage their behavior, parent-child abuse led to misdirected anger onto the sibling victim. In fact, parents who experience their children as a burden may provoke them to abuse their siblings and therefore, siblings serve as a proxy for parents (Gil, 1996).

Parent-Child Neglect

Not only was parent-child abuse present in the families of the respondents, but parent-child neglect was also an element in all of the homes. The absence of a parental presence and parent-child relationships characterized by favoritism, alliances, and role confusion led siblings to compete for scarce emotional resources without having negotiation skills to deter it from escalating into brutal conflict.

Parental neglect also occurred by virtue of the lack of parental responsiveness to the sibling abuse which overtly or inadvertently accepted or condoned children victimizing siblings. In addition, when abused siblings attempted to seek help from a parent, they became vulnerable to physical or emotional repercussions from their sibling or from a parent. Responses ranged from abusing the child perpetrator or even abusing the child victim. Passive parental responses were equally difficult for victims. The family's construction of reality influenced how survivors thought families are supposed to function and affected the way they related to the outside world.

Family systems theory serves to understand the influence each family member, including siblings, have on other members. It also reflects the roles, hierarchical structure, and lack of boundaries implicit in sibling abusive families. The choice of many

survivors to cut-off relations with family members indicates the long-term effect of the abuse and behavior from the perpetrator which continues into adulthood.

Closed Systems

This study uncovered family dynamics that prevented most victims from seeking help outside of the family and may be a factor in keeping sibling abuse under the radar. Because of parental emotional unavailability and unresponsiveness to the sibling abuse, victims felt alone and isolated. Informants did not bond with family members and they were insecure in their peer relations outside of the home. The closed family system is difficult to penetrate. It creates fixed parameters, which limit exposure to the outside world. Often, because of shame and embarrassment, victims kept outsiders at a distance. As a result, it might have been difficult for community members or peers to recognize the need for intervention. Moreover, due to the nature of the closed family system, there were repercussions for exposing family secrets to the community even through simple gestures such as inviting a friend to one's home. Some parents became angered and blamed the abused child when friends witnessed abusive family interactions. Victims who "successfully" recruited parents to intervene in the sibling abuse incurred punitive repercussions, because their siblings retaliated. Victims learned that disclosing their experiences had ramifications for themselves and family members, further complicating their ability to seek outside help. This may explain one way in which survivors develop constructs of interpersonal relatedness in which others are perceived as distrustful and unsupportive. It also may account for why sibling abuse as a form of family violence has received so little attention from researchers or mental health and child protection workers.

An Object Relations Perspective of Intimacy

Object relations theory proposes that siblings have considerable influence on each other and can influence adult expectations, feelings, behavior, and relatedness with others (Cassidy, 1998). However, psychodynamic theory most extensively focuses on the parent-child relationship. Object relations theory asserts children have a basic need to feel safe in their home environments (Cary, 1997) and that when children experience inconsistent, rejecting, or destructive patterns from parents, it threatens attachment, compromises development, and children develop defenses to maintain attachment (Blizard & Bluhm, 1994). When a parent maltreats the child, the child may internalize messages of "badness" in an effort to protect the image of the caregiver as loving and caring (Klein, 1965). The victimized child develops a split in which the parent is good and the child sees him or herself as bad in an effort to preserve the attachment to the parent (Klein, 1965). Survivors of sibling abuse created a similar split with their abusive siblings. Cast in the role of caregiver by neglectful or abusive parents, older siblings were frequently the paramount caregiver to their victims yet created an inconsistent and frightful environment. This severely compromised the victim's security and trust. Their desire to have a loving and stable sibling relationship led victims to preserve the image of a "good" sibling by sacrificing their own ego and developing an inner sense of "badness" As adults, these survivors felt challenged interpersonallywhich they attributed to the physically unsafe and emotionally debilitating environment in which they lived.

In an attempt to ward off repeating the trauma, these survivors avoided intimate relationships. Some defended against intimacy with a false sense of control; they simply avoided relationships as adults, because they feared repeating what they experienced as

children. Or, survivors attached themselves to partners who were unable to provide emotional nurturance, also a replication of early relationships. They strived to gain the love and attention of their mates or romantic prospects and experienced them relationships as disappointing, rejecting, and abandoning.

Attachment Theory and Intimate Relatedness

To date, no theoretically-driven studies about sibling relations and psychodynamic theory have incorporated sibling abuse into a developmental understanding of personality. One of my initial interests in this study was to learn how adult survivors of physical or emotional sibling abuse internalized their experiences and understand the influence of the abuse on the development and quality of intimate relationships in adulthood. I initially defined intimacy as the ability to trust a partner, feel satisfied in relationships, balance dependence and independence, communicate effectively, and manage conflict. This conception grew out of attachment theory, which suggests that issues of trust, conflict, communication, and self-esteem are critical aspects of connectedness (Ainsworth et. al., 1978). Although these elements of attachment theory were sensitizing concepts, the emerging flexibility of the narratives allowed room for exploration of other manifestations of intimacy. Bowlby (1969) asserts that early attachment relationships result in the development of both conscious and unconscious "internal working models." These contain information about the self, others, and relationships and determine the interpretation of the meaning of interpersonal interaction. The perception of the caregiver's accessibility and responsiveness forms expectations about the self in relation to others and one's assessment of self-worth (Rholes & Simpson, 2004). Based on the construction of internal working models, the influence of

the sibling is clearly an important one (Coles, 2003; Lamb & Sutton-Smith, 1982). When abuse replaces support and protection, the victimized sibling is prone to develop an internalized representation of low self-worth. The effects of sibling abuse and its co-occurrence with parental neglect parallel the experiences of infants who do not receive sufficient physical or symbolic holding from a parent.

Survivors' narratives consistently reflected their attribution of their sibling relationship to their discomfort with closeness and thrust to pursue independence in adulthood. These findings parallel studies on parent-child attachment, which emphasize the significance of the caregiver's nurturance on the child's ability to connect.

Ainsworth and colleagues (1978) characterized an anxious and ambivalent style of attachment by feeling misunderstood and unappreciated, lacking confidence, viewing others as unreliable, and unable to commit. The individual may have a strong need for care and attention, but harbor uncertainty about another person's ability to respond to his or her needs. Avoidant attachment styles indicate suspiciousness, aloofness, a skeptical view of partners as unreliable or overly eager to commit, and discomfort with dependence and intimacy (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters & Wall, 1978). These behaviors are defenses against feeling rejected which is the result of a history of consistent unresponsiveness, rejection, and inhibited physical and emotional relatedness (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters & Wall, 1978). There may be a tendency towards feelings of fear, anxiety, loneliness; low self-esteem; high rates of relationship dissolution; and extreme self-reliance (Hazan & Shaver, 1994).

An atmosphere of family violence, which fosters insecure attachments, makes it difficult for a child to self-soothe and can lead to deficiencies in affect regulation

(Alexander & Warner, 2003). The sibling abuse experience including the absence of modeling effective communication and provision of parental soothing seriously affected victims' ability to regulate their own affect and manage strong emotions of others. Additionally, being the target of intense anger from an object of love in this case a sibling led victims to fear intense feelings and interpret these emotions as inevitably leading to rejection and abandonment. The emotional abandonment from siblingscontributed to a fundamental perception that they were incapable of being accepted and loved.

Although the voices of the abusing siblings were not present in this study, they may have been responding to the same vulnerability as their brothers and sisters. An environment characterized by poor parental modeling, inappropriate and destructive parental behavior could lead one to speculate that was aggression was a defense that gave them an outlet, or sense of control over their problematic environments. This raises the question as to how perpetrators might have interpreted the lack of parental propriety within the family system.

Risk and Resilience

The Developmental Influence of Sibling Abuse

Some prospective studies (English, Graham, Litrownik, Everson, & Bangdiwala, 2005) suggest there is no relationship between age of onset of maltreatment and psychological functioning, while other studies (Bolger, Patterson & Kupersmidt, 1999) report significant associations between the age of maltreatment and psychological distress. These latter studies claim that children abused earlier demonstrate lower self-esteem and more significant adjustment problems (Bolger et. al., 1999) than children abused in later childhood. One study (Higgins & McCabe, 2003) found that children and

adolescents who suffered more than one type of maltreatment on more than one occasion are most negatively affected. Although this study set out to explore and distinguish the effects of emotional abuse from sibling abuse, they predominantly co-occurred. However, this research confirmed that earlier onset of abuse was a factor that increased risk for the sibling abused child.

I initially set out to explore sibling abuse during adolescence because children are particularly vulnerable during this phase of development. However, through the interview process, I discovered that the average age of onset for sibling abuse among the participants was six years old. The early onset of sibling abuse may be an additional indication of parental unavailability or neglect, since children at this age require supervision. Although there were households where the older child served as a caregiver, the average age difference of two years indicated that the older abusive sibling was also a minor who needed supervision. Typically, the sibling abuse continued until the abuser, most often the older sibling, left home. The length of the abuse and its occurrence during victims' formative and vulnerable years highlights its scope and has serious implications for home environments that allow it to exist.

Some developmental psychologists (Cicchetti & Toth, 1995; Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1990) assert that exposure to any type of abuse during childhood disrupts the course of normal development and causes maladaptive behaviors in later ages (Zingraff, Leiter, Meyers, & Johnson, 1993). Erikson's psychosocial stage theory (1968) explains the development of ego identity: the sense of self and competence developed through social interaction. Erikson proposes that successful adaptation to each stage results in a

sense of mastery, while poor adaptation results in a sense of inadequacy. The ability to negotiate, contend with, and adapt to conflict is pivotal in the achievement of mastery.

During childhood, which Erikson defines as age five to eleven, a sense of accomplishment evolves as children recognize their abilities. This psychosocial state of industry versus inferiority (Erikson, 1968) can conclude in two divergent outcomes. Children who receive encouragement and support develop a sense of competence and belief in their skills, abilities, and capabilities. On the other hand, children who receive little or no encouragement or external belief in their promise will develop self-doubt and low self-esteem. The general lack of support in the lives of the informants further subjected them to risk. Yet, some were able to find mentors that underscored their value or aptitude. A few others had another sibling, extended family member, or a friend's family who provided them with a sense of belonging and balanced the sense of disapproval directed at them in their home. These informants appreciated these relationships as "life-saving" in serving as protective factors that helped to preserve their sense of self-worth.

Those victims who had opportunities to engage in creative activities also emphasized these as invaluable escapes. Supports and outlets such as these can contribute to resiliency; they may indicate at-risk children who are more likely to prosper (Gitterman & Germain, 2008). It may be suggested that these relationships and experiences allowed them to develop a trusting relationship with a therapist in adulthood.

Without any opportunity to identify, develop, or validate their ego strengths in their home environments and from their most important sources of emotional nourishment – the family – children in this study were bound to develop delays in their

psychosocial development. The duration of abuse becomes another risk factor as the victims' ability to rebuild their ego strength during critical phases of development is limited.

Peer group approval is critical to the developing adolescent as self-perception forms by achieving new and more mature relationships with age-mates of both sexes (Havighurst, 1948/1972). The narratives of survivors conveyed the constraining influence of the sibling abuse on their struggles to relate to peers. The continuous and unrelenting emotional sibling abuse led them to lose confidence in their appearance and self-worth. Adolescents are concerned whether they can find a partner who will love and accept even with their faults (Gemelli, 1996). These sibling-abused children carried into adulthood a fear and disbelief that this was possible.

Erikson (1968) asserts that during adolescence, children have to learn to trust others. They achieve this through satisfying emotional experiences, consistency in rewards and punishments, and identification with and imitation of others (Erikson, 1968). Although adolescents seek to make independent decisions, a central dynamic is that they are "mortally afraid of being forced into activities in which they would feel exposed to ridicule or self-doubt" (Erikson, 1968, p. 129). Adolescents have a strong potential for self-criticism, magnified under conditions of abuse.

Survivors who described feeling depressed and isolated due to their siblings' behavior and maltreatment conveyed the devastating repercussions of sibling abuse during this particularly vulnerable period. Their potentially important peers, their siblings, had a strong hold on their development and lay the foundation for compromised relatedness in adulthood.

Resiliency of Victims and Survivors of Sibling Abuse

After the first few interviews, I found that despite potential traumatic effects of sibling abuse, most survivors function in the world and lead productive lives. This reveals resilience in overcoming the risks inherent in their childhoods. Feelings of self-worth may develop from positive intimate relationships, but also from successful task accomplishments (Gitterman & Germain, 2008). Protective factors include relationships that create an experience of trust; messages of belief in one's competency; and opportunities to feel productive and valued (Gitterman & Germain, 2008)**.** Although none of the survivors felt supported in their home environments, some were able to feel cared for by other relatives or siblings who lived outside of the home. A few others developed relationships from which they felt valued outside of the family. However, all of the participants expressed problems establishing trusting relationships. It is possible that the forceful imprint of betrayal within the family system overpowered positive experiences because of the intensity, depth, and consistency of sibling betrayal.

While many of the findings in this study echo protective features identified in resiliency theory, it has made new contributions. The participants in this study endured long-term and severe abuse from an important family member, which resulted in many obstacles to successful adaptation. These informants were extremely vulnerable during childhood and adolescence. And yet, various protective features emerged in their adulthood as they sublimated their trauma through successful careers or graduate school. In this realm, their adaptation represented resilience. Most participants were helping professionals. Although this may be an artifact of the method of recruitment used in this study, it may also speak to the ability of survivors to empathize with other people who

face intense struggles. They may also have undergone personal healing because they were able to provide others with the opportunity to mend. Many survivors reported they benefited from a reparative action with their own therapists. Therapy allowed survivors to experience a supportive relationship and make meaning of their history of sibling abuse. Importantly, engaging with a therapist provided a corrective experience in which they learned that trusting, nurturing relationships are achievable. Exploring protective features in adulthood which have the potential to mitigate the long-term effects of sibling abuse is a needed area of research.

Implications of the Study

The findings from this research strongly suggest there are opportunities to protect children from the devastating and long-term repercussions of sibling abuse. Detection, prevention, and intervention can occur on multiple fronts including child welfare, clinical practice, academia, and other helping professions. Specifically, it has the potential to develop awareness of the gravity of sibling abuse, contribute to the development of policy regarding mandated reporting, enhance risk assessment, improve parenting skills, develop appropriate interventions for adult survivors, and extend theories to amplify understanding of this phenomenon. None of which could be accomplished without developing a working definition of sibling abuse.

Sibling Abuse: A Distinct Phenomenon

I began this research with an interest in sharpening the distinction of sibling abuse from sibling rivalry. Previous studies made this demarcation by characterizing sibling abuse as persistent, consistent, and insistent acts of an enduring nature and intensity (Wiehe, 1990). Researchers conceptualized sibling abuse as physical or emotional acts

perpetrated by another sibling that resulted in feelings of fear, shame, and hopelessness (Kiselica & Morrill-Richards, 2007). The reports from participants in my study proved much more intense. It captured incidents of abuse that ranged from devastating emotional assaults to near-death experiences.

There is a clear distinction between childhood aggression, in which siblings are hostile or competing for parental attention, and sibling abuse. Sibling rivalry has the potential to foster skills of negotiation and conflict resolution if it does not devolve into unacceptable, destructive behavior. The participants in this study identified sibling abuse as physical or psychological torment involving brutal physical force or emotional devastation. It created feelings of helplessness, as victims were unable to protect themselves or gauge and anticipate actions that incited an assault. Abusive sibling acts engendered a pervasive state of fear and vulnerability; they resulted in hyper-vigilance and feelings of loneliness and isolation when it occurred and which endured into adulthood.

This research developed operational definitions of physical and emotional sibling abuse through the narratives of the participants; provided a rich descriptive picture of the phenomenon of sibling abuse; conceptualized resiliency factors amongst survivors; and revealed the effects of abuse on self-perception, family relationships, and adult intimate relationships. Participants in this study who had never considered their history with their sibling as abuse prior to the study felt they needed to continue to broaden their awareness of these experiences themselves.

Most of the participants came to identify their childhood experience with a sibling as abuse by the questions outlined on the recruitment flyer or by friends who pointed out

their experience as abusive. Others identified it when they were students in undergraduate psychology courses in which parent-child abuse was part of the curriculum. Whereas several of the participants in this study were graduate social work students, some had never considered their experience abuse.

The critical incidents of sibling abuse recounted demonstrate acts clearly distinct from sibling rivalry. The violent and threatening communication illustrates the extreme emotional threat or physical danger imparted by one sibling onto another. This study makes evident the intensity and longevity of sibling abusive acts that put children at grave risk and has distinct long-term consequences. The emotional resonance and repercussions highlight sibling abuse as a phenomenon that parallels the risk beset by children abused by adults. Future work would further refine a definition of sibling abuse and accentuate indicators that would allow child welfare workers, clinicians, and mandated reporters the ability to detect and assess its presence.

Sibling abuse has been established as a distinctively serious and complex phenomenon based on the experiences of those who were exposed to it first-hand. However, a testable instrument designed to assess for sibling abuse might prove useful in its accurate measure of physical and emotional sibling abuse. More females than males were found to experience abuse by a sibling and were more often the victims of males. The anonymity of a quantitative tool may also help to reveal whether a male sibling more often abuses sisters or more females responded to the study because they are likely to acknowledge psychological distress.

Child Welfare

In 2008, an estimated 3.3 million children were allegedly abused or neglected and underwent investigations or assessments by state and local child protective services agencies. Approximately 758,289 children were determined to be victims of child maltreatment (DHHS, 2010). In 2006, an estimated 1,530 children died due to child abuse or neglect (DHHS, 2007). The present study uncovered the presence of parent-child abuse and parental neglect in many of the homes in which sibling abuse occurred. Yet significantly, there are no national statistics on sibling abuse.None of the informants reported that their sibling abuse came to the attention of the authorities. Given the significant role child welfare plays in the protection of children and the well-being of families, it has a responsibility to protect children from all types of abuse within the household. However, the child welfare system does not specifically include risk and safety factors that would point to the detection of sibling violence. Without policies that identify this as a formidable phenomenon, there is no mandate for physicians, educators, social service providers, or mental health practitioners to report problems when they observe them.

Survivors failed to identify their history with their siblings as “abuse” because it does not have the same societal recognition as other forms of domestic violence. The closed family systems also allowed the abusive experiences to remain under the radar and contributed to the victims’ perceptions of sibling abuse as normative. As long as professionals responsible for the care of children do not distinguish sibling abuse from sibling rivalry, this situation is likely to continue.

Wiehe (1990) attributes the lack of awareness of acceptable or damaging behaviors to a culture of freedom, which allows parents to raise children as they see fit. Survivors in this study indicated their parent did not address or stop the sibling abusive behavior; indeed, in some instances, they provoked it. Currently, the only way to bring sibling violence or abuse to the attention of authorities is for a parent to file charges against the abuser on behalf of the victim (Eriksen & Jensen, 2006). The issue of privacy, or a culture of secrecy in the home, undoubtedly contributes to a parent or victim's unwillingness to file assault charges against the perpetrating sibling. Efforts to maintain a family secret when sibling abuse occurs may also contribute to its lack of recognition. Training mandated reporters and child protection specialists to distinguish sibling abuse from normal rivalrous behaviors might contribute to greater public attention to this problem.

Since some parents provoke the abuse between siblings investigators need to be aware of the factors that place children at risk for sibling abuse. This study found that parents who model poor communication through physical abuse and have difficulty tolerating intense emotions and have inappropriate boundaries create conditions that heighten the development and perpetuation of sibling abuse. These aspects highlighted by family systems theory potentially create a hostile sibling environment. Child protection workers must be privy to the nature and dynamics of parent-child and sibling relationships that create conditions where sibling abuse is likely to occur. The complex and intricate characteristics of the family system need to be assessed which demands child protection to institute more rigorous and specific training for its staff particularly around risk factors. Similarly, the role of child protection to provide services of

intervention requires that these workers are informed of resiliency factors. Survivors reported that they found involvement in activities outside of the home a critical aspect of their emotional well-being. They identified mentors, parents of friends, and extended family members as providing refuge from their home life and modeling love and concern. Building a family and its members' social capital is instrumental to prevention and intervention.

It is difficult to differentiate the effects of sibling abuse from the co-occurring factor of parent-child abuse. Future study of families involved in the child welfare system may determine risk factors and agency-wide responses to sibling abuse. In fact, evaluation of current child welfare practices may help to uncover obstacles to the development of policies to promote risk assessment and detection of sibling abuse.

Survivors who were raised middle class were overrepresented in this study. However, they were impoverished by virtue of scarce resources, poor social capital, single-parent status, mental health issues, and economic pressures. It may be that the secrecy of sibling abuse and the closed family systems in which it occurs impedes access to potentially available resources. However, their experiences of deprivation and their unmet needs placed these families at risk. This begs the questions whether middle class victims are also at risk to be overlooked or under-assessed by child welfare.

Risk Assessment

Based on the reports of victims in this study, I would promote prevention and risk assessment strategies to develop awareness of the severity of sibling abuse. Mental health and social service agencies that primarily focus on parent-child systems need to broaden their assessment capacity by exploring the nature and quality of sibling relationships. The

Sibling Abuse Interview (SAI), a psychosocial assessment tool (Caffaro and Conn-Caffaro, 2005), could help identify sexually and physically sibling abusive families and lead to planning the course of treatment intervention. The SAI assesses the history and current quality of sibling relationships focusing on the effects of abuse on the victim, the role of the perpetrator, and the family dynamics. This tool has potential for adaptation to incorporate emotional sibling abuse and modification according to the needs and services of communities and organizations.

An area of further investigation would be explore whether survivors who endure both parent-child abuse and sibling abuse are more strongly affected by sibling abuse than those who withstand sibling abuse alone. Additionally, it would be valuable to explore whether the compounding effects of sibling abuse are different from parent-child abuse in ways this study did not reveal. These findings would contribute to the development of family and risk assessments which could also be adapted by mandated reporters and the global community.

Clinical Practice

It is unknown what factors might contribute to parental de-escalation of sibling conflict. Future research might explore the ways in which parental responses influence outcomes for the perpetrator and victim from a family systems lens. Since appropriate parental intervention was absent in the homes of the victims of sibling abuse, clinicians aware of sibling abuse risk factors could arm parents with appropriate intervention techniques. Sibling abuse is not only a psychological issue for the individual perpetrator, but also representative of a dysfunctional family system in which the dyadic relationship or the behavior of the perpetrator is a symptom of greater pathology. Clinicians who are

skilled to assess the family climate to ascertain the presence of sibling abuse would be able to treat the family as a unit and its individual members.

The federal government has documented that protective factors for parent-child abuse and neglect include a supportive family environment (Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), 2005). Protective factors prevent parent-child abuse and neglect with nurturance, affection, and consistent rules and expectations (DHHS, 2005). Parents need to be able to cope with stresses of daily living and to identify and access services to ensure that basic needs and the safety and well-being of their children are met (DHHS, 2005). Additionally, respectful communication is critical to the development of appropriate expression and tolerance of feelings. Knowledge of child development helps parents understand the context of their children's behavior and provides alternative ways of responding to them. Future research might explore the ways in which family involvement with community organizations and resources may off-set sibling abuse. It would be worthwhile to explore parental resilience and the management of sibling abuse. Given that child welfare is a key in child protection and intervention, knowledge of resiliency factors can help investigators focus on identifying strengths within a family and provide strategies to enhance those strengths.

This study has concluded that sibling abuse is distinct from sibling rivalry; it requires parental attention and appropriate intervention guided by helping professionals and mandated reporters. Clinicians have an important role to play in detecting and treating sibling abuse. Survivors in this study often reported their parents identified them as the "problem child" and brought them to therapy. This left them feeling that they were the source of the problem and needed to be "fixed." Nonetheless, the perpetrator of

sibling abuse also required attention, because they often experienced parent-child abuse. Their assaultive behavior may have indicated other unaddressed problems. Because each family member has his or her own perception of their involvement in the abuse and the closed nature of family systems in which abuse occurs, it is imperative for clinicians to align with all family members. If treatment occurs with the family, clinicians should address patterns of communication, offer tools to manage conflict, and tap into community resources for support and socialization for all family members.

Practitioners who provide counseling services and psychotherapy to children and families have the potential to transform dysfunctional familial patterns of communication and help parents develop better parenting practices. The structural model of family therapy focuses on helping parents to develop and maintain appropriate boundaries within the family system and between siblings. Clinicians, counselors, and school personnel can provide parents with psycho-education regarding the effect of a child's capacity for healthy development when there is turmoil in the family. A cognitive-behavioral approach is one intervention strategy that can help parents provide support to their children and establish responses to inappropriate behavior.

Clinicians should also build on individual and family strengths and promote protective factors such as family and environmental supports to help develop strategies that reinforce resilience. The findings here underscored the importance of victims building social capital. Children who are involved in extracurricular activities, are connected with mentors and engaged with role models may have a greater opportunity for resilience. Counselors, school personnel, and communities are able to help children establish these connections and foster a nurturing environment. Parents, due to their own

limitations and external stressors, would also benefit by gaining a sense of connection to their community to develop a support network.

This study has clinical relevance for interventions with adults who seek treatment. Findings indicate that sibling abuse engenders feelings of inadequacy and helplessness and compromises the attainment of mature intimacy in adulthood. However, consistent with psychodynamic theories, clinical practitioners generally focus on the client's historical relationship with parents, and tend to ignore how sibling relations might influence current functioning. Assessment forms in clinic settings typically do not include the sibling relationships on the adult client's functioning or history. As a result, when the adult client does not arrive for treatment with a presenting problem of conflict with a sibling, clinicians are unlikely to explore a client's current or historical relationships with their siblings. An adult client's sibling abuse history has significant implications for treatment. From an object relations perspective (Fairbairn, 1952), clinicians need to understand potential projections from the past onto current perceptions and relationships and the subtle ways in which a survivor may then relate to others as if they were the abusive sibling. Clinicians need to be aware of clients who present with interpersonal difficulties and the ways in which siblings might have influenced partner choices and a client's behavior in relationships.

Survivors reported that because their parents or communities were not responsive to the sibling abuse, they continued to seek validation from parents and their abusive sibling. Survivors also tended to seek personal validation from intimate partners, which often met rejection. The unconscious reinforcement of low self-worth came with choosing partners who were emotionally unavailable. As a result, loved ones perpetually

disappointed survivors. This reenactment is likely to occur in the therapeutic relationship as victims seek positive regard from the clinician. Survivors' strained relations with their family of origin represent the unmet need for personal validation and validation of their abused background.

In this study, adult survivors recounted the important role their careers played in their ability to redirect energies to areas outside of intimacy. Although this may be an effort to avoid difficulties in other areas of their life, successful careers were protective. From a strengths perspective, a client should rise to his or her potential and receive support for these efforts. It is crucial to identify those traits that contribute to their accomplishments and validate achievements, which may be transferable to other areas of their life. Knowledge of risk and resiliency factors in this context arms the clinician with the ability to understand the family dynamics, their effect on interpersonal relationships, and the externalization of this experience in the therapeutic dyad.

Broadening Awareness

Undergraduate and graduate social work classes have the potential to broaden awareness of sibling abuse, its effect on clients, and the development of methods of prevention and intervention. Competencies in family systems and human development courses should include knowledge of the sibling subsystem and the manner in which hierarchical structures and role expectations exist within families. Discussions on child welfare or the child welfare system should also incorporate sibling abuse. Clinical practice classes that address child, family, and adult intervention can integrate risk assessment, family interventions and strategies to contend with sibling abuse. This would include a risk and resiliency paradigm, and a theoretical underpinning regarding the

manifestations of adult relationships for survivors. Discussions on transference and countertransference could include potential manifestations when working with survivors of sibling abuse and their families. The addition of content that clearly differentiates sibling abuse and sibling rivalry into the core social work curriculum would help students identify when sibling behaviors were normative and when they might pose a danger to children.

Limitations of the Study and Implications for Future Research

This study aimed to uncover the long-term implications of sibling abuse in the realm of intimacy. It sought to understand the critical incidents, the family context in which it occurred, and the processes of internalization. The knowledge generated has the potential to inform professional practice and lay the foundation to continue the effort to understand this phenomenon. My intent was that by interviewing sibling-abused individuals, I could produce valuable insights into the phenomena. The nature of the sample, the sample size, and the methods of data collection are consistent with the exploratory nature of a study in which I sought to understand the impact upon survivors. Numerous aspects are important for further study in the face of existing research on the subject and the significance of its long-term ramifications. Future research can address the gaps relevant to knowledge building and can build on the clinical knowledge derived from this study.

The Study Participants: Gender, Race, and Class

Because sibling abuse is an understudied area of inquiry, I was initially apprehensive that I would be able to recruit participants who would have identified this experience as their own. In addition, few theoretical constructs included sibling

relationships as a part of their understanding of human development. As a result, I chose a recruitment method that would attract participants likely to be interested in the topic. The method of recruitment that yielded the most results, posting flyers in schools of social work and distributing them to clinicians, led to a sample consisting largely of people who were in the helping professions. Future studies of sibling abuse would benefit from other methods of recruitment that would capture a more heterogeneous group of informants.

The primary method of data collection involved interviewing adult survivors and portraying the sibling abuse from their perspective. This method, however, allowed capturing the experience only from self-reported victims of sibling abuse. The victims were primarily female and white. Gender diversity in future studies may uncover varied effects of sibling abuse for men and women and allow exploration of victim and perpetrator genders on outcomes. It is currently unknown whether a sibling more often abuses females or more females responded to the study because they are more likely to acknowledge psychological distress.

Obtaining a sample that included more men as victims might yield interesting findings regarding family responsiveness: Do parents respond differently to female victims, male victims, female perpetrators, or male perpetrators? A study that involved members of the family including perpetrators and parents would add dimension to understanding sibling abuse within the context of the family system.

Caucasian participants were overrepresented in this study, which was similar to past research on sibling abuse (Wiehe,1990; Conn-Caffaro, 1998). Future studies should utilize recruitment methods that have the potential to capitulate greater cultural

representation of the sibling-abused population and greater variation of class, gender and employment.

Survivors reporting being raised middle class were also overrepresented in this study. Yet although middle class, they were impoverished by virtue of scarce resources, poor social capital, single-parent status, mental health issues and economic pressures. Nonetheless, families living in poverty may be at increased risk of sibling abuse. This study begs the question: how “adequate” are the educational resources and health care of the privileged? It may be assumed that the participants , by virtue of their middle class upbringing, are connected to adequate economic and social resources. However, the secrecy of sibling abuse and the closed family systems in which it occurs impedes access to potentially available resources. The social needs of victims were unmet, and they were raised in families clearly at risk. This raises the question whether middle class victims are overlooked or under-assessed by child welfare professionals. Additionally, the lack of social and professional awareness of the phenomenon prevents its detection for those cultures and classes of society who it may be assumed have access to more resources.

Summary

Because sibling abuse in childhood and adolescence is understudied, this research affirmed the devastating consequences endured by victims and highlights the need to further explore its prevalence, risk, and resiliency factors. Continued research, which verifies the prevalence and scope of this phenomenon and allows room for the voices of all family members, should advance knowledge and broaden awareness of sibling abuse. The implications of this research for children and adults, child welfare and clinical

practice indicate that greater action is important on community, organization, and policy levels to protect children from the long-lasting and traumatizing effects of sibling abuse.

Appendices

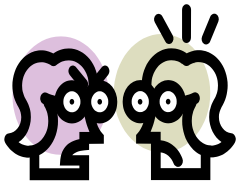
Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer

IN SEARCH OF ADULT SIBLINGS....

DO YOU WANT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY ABOUT RIVALROUS AND/OR ABUSIVE SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS DURING YOUR CHILDHOOD OR TEEN YEARS?

- Did you have a difficult sibling relationship during adolescence?
- Were you mistreated by a brother of sister?
- Do you feel you may have been emotionally bullied by your brother or sister?
- Did your brother or sister physically hurt you as a child or teenager?
- Could you have been a victim of sibling abuse?

If you answered *"yes"* to any of these questions,
please contact Amy Meyers at
917-817-7044 or amymeyers2002@yahoo.com.
Participants must be at least 21 years old.



Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

My name is Amy Meyers and I am clinical psychotherapist and a student in the Social Welfare PhD Program at the Hunter College School of Social Work, and Principal Investigator of this project, entitled "Adolescence Sibling Abuse: Implications for Intimacy in Adulthood". This study is expected to look at the source of difficulties in interpersonal relationships as may be connected to abusive sibling relationships during adolescence (retrospectively). I would like permission to interview you about your experiences which should take approximately one and a half hours.

With your permission, I would like to audio-tape this interview so I can record the details accurately (please see reverse side of this consent form). The tapes will only be heard by the researcher. If you prefer, the researcher will take notes during the interview. All information gathered will be kept strictly confidential, and will be stored in a locked file cabinet, to which only I have access. At any time you can refuse to answer any questions or end this interview. If you would like to strike any part of the interview from the record upon its completion, you may exercise this right at the end of the interview. If you should decide to terminate the interview at any point or strike from the record any part of it, there will be no consequences and the researcher will hold no judgment.

The risk involved in this study is that you may feel upset or saddened by your experiences. If this study causes painful memories or feelings for you and you wish to stop the interview and receive further assistance, you will be given information about where you can receive counseling.

The benefits of your participation include raising awareness about sibling abuse as a phenomena and its impact on the abused individual. Consciousness-raising seeks to address appropriate treatment in the therapeutic community as well as contributing to the identification and treatment of sibling abuse in its current state. Also, some people may benefit from the opportunity to talk about their earlier experience. There will be approximately 25 participants taking part in this study.

The information from the interview will be used to produce a paper for a graduate research project and I may publish results of the study, but names of people, or any identifying characteristics, will not be used in any of the publications. You will be disguised through use of "pretend" names and no identifying information will be used, and any that is used will be fictitious in order to protect confidentiality.
If you are interested, the researcher will provide you with the final report produced from this study.

If you have any questions about this research, you can contact me at 917-817-7044 or amymeyers2002@yahoo.com or my advisor, Harriet Goodman, PhD at 212-452-7113 or hgoodman@hunter.cuny.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this study, you can contact Kay Powell, IRB Administrator, The Graduate Center/City University of New York, 212-817-7525, kpowell@gc.cuny.edu.

Thank you for your participation in this study.
I have read the contents of this consent form and have been encouraged to ask questions. I give my consent to participate in this study.
I have received a copy of this form for my records and future reference.

_____	_____	_____	_____
Participant's signature	Date	Investigator's signature	Date

Appendix C: Audio Consent Form

HUNTER COLLEGE OF THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
AUDIOTAPE RECORDING RELEASE CONSENT FORM

Protocol #: _____
Researcher: Amy Meyers
Title: Adolescent Sibling Abuse: Implications for Intimacy in Adulthood

With your permission, an audiotape recording will be made of you during your participation in this project. Please indicate below the uses of these audiotapes to which you are willing to consent. This is completely voluntary and up to you. In any use of the audio tapes, you name will not be identified.

1. The audiotapes can be studied by the researcher for use in this research project. _____
   Initials
2. The audiotapes can be studied by the researcher and used for future presentation of findings. _____
   Initials

I have read the above description and give my consent for the use of audiotapes as indicated above.

Printed Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix D: Interview Guide

***Introduction*:**

- ☐ Informed consent
- ☐ Contact/referral sheet
- ☐ Define types of sibling abuse
- ☐ Selection of pseudonym
- ☐ Introduce study, interest

Current Relationships

- *Why don't we get started with you telling me about the relationships in your life now?*

- *Who would you say are the most important people in your life at this point?*

☐family members – what kind of contact (frequency/quality)
☐ partners– now and/or historically; level of involvement (length/# of rel's)
- are you someone who dates frequently/has long-term rel's/likes being single

☐ feelings about being in relationships– likes/dislikes
☐ description of partner(s)
☐ quality of current/past relationships

☐Defining closeness" – how came to understand it as such
☐ feelings about closeness/dependence/independence
☐ expressions of affection– how is it expressed (by both/either); comfort
☐ expressions of conflict– what happens/would happen when you argue/fight?
☐satisfaction – how would you describe your happiness/satisfaction in a rel?
- How would you know, what would indicate to you that things did or did not feel good/right?

Abusive Experience

- *As we discussed, I am interviewing adults who had siblings who abused them when they were children. Tell me about your childhood experiences with sibling abuse.*

☐ age abuse began
☐ examples of abuse/repetitiveness of occurrence
☐ understanding of its occurrence and escalation
☐ response at the time

Family Context

- *Who were the adults who were taking care of you when these events occurred? Do you remember what was going on with the family then?*

- ☐ primary caretakers
- ☐ family stressors
- ☐ family relationships– parent/child; parent/parent
- ☐ time spent together
- ☐ parental communication; arguments
- ☐ family support
- ☐ communication/demonstration of love
- ☐ discipline

Parental Involvement/Response

● *Were the adults in your home aware of what was going on between you and your (sister/brother)?*
Did they know anything about it?

- ☐ intervention/facilitation
- ☐ counseling

Emotional Experience/Resonance

● *You have told me a lot about your family and your experience with your sibling who abused you as a child – what is your relationship with your sibling/s now?*

- ☐ feelings towards sibling/ relationship with sibling currently
- ☐ why stay connected/why cut-off?
- ☐ sibling's current perception of respondent- effect

Some people think that when people have experienced abuse by their sibling as a child, it affects their relationships with adults. What do you think of that idea?
((have you ever thought about any connection between earlier relationships and current intimate relationships?))

- ☐ effect of sibling's perception then and now
- ☐ effect on self-image/self-perception
- ☐ effect on friendships/perspectives on dating
- ☐ connections between SA and intimate relationships

Therapy:

- ☐ If yes, how has it influenced understanding
- ☐ How has it influenced rel's

Demographics:

- ☐ age, race, family of origin composition, social class, current and past marital status, age/gender, siblings

Feedback

- ☐ thoughts/suggestions re: topic
- ☐ willingness for further contact

Appendix E: Interview Check List

***Introduction*:**

- ☐ Informed consent
- ☐ Contact/referral sheet
- ☐ Define types of sibling abuse
- ☐ Introduce study, interest

Abusive Experience

- Tell me about your childhood experiences with your sibling.
  - ☐ Tell me about your sibling
    - ▪ age, characteristics
  - ☐ Can you give examples of the incidents with your sibling?
    - ▪ how old were you when these things began?
    - ▪ how long did it continue?
  - ☐ What is your understanding as to why it occurred?
    - ▪ why do you think you were targeted?
    - ▪ how did the incidents escalate?
  - ☐ How did you respond to the actions at the time?
    - ▪ were there consequences of fighting back? For you? For sibling?
    - ▪ some people have stated feeling that if they told, their sibling would get hurt by their parent(s). Others said their parents tried to protect them. Was that the case for you or something else entirely?

- Several people have expressed a yearning to bond with their sibling during childhood in regard to the home environment or parent-child abuse. In what ways do you think this would have been helpful?

- At what point did you label this experience as abuse -- How did that happen?

☐ Can you remember any positive experiences with your sibling?

Family Context

- Tell me about your family life when you were growing up.
  - ☐Who were the adults who were taking care of you when these events occurred?
    - ▪ who was in the home?
  - ☐ Family relationships– parent/child; parent/parent
    - ▪ what was your relationship like with your parent(s)? what was their relationship like with your sibling(s)? what were some of the ways they communicated with each of you?
    - ▪ what was their relationship like with each other? how did they communicate?
    - ▪ explore other relationships in the family
  - ☐ How did your family spend time together?
  - ☐ Family stressors

- ☐ Family support
  - In what ways did you feel supported or unsupported by your parent(s)?
- ☐ How was love demonstrated?
- ☐ How was discipline demonstrated?

Parental Involvement/Response

- How did the adults in your life respond to what was going on between you and your (sister/brother)?
  - ☐ intervention/facilitation
  - ☐ counseling
- Some people have talked about not wanting to "blame" their parents for the sibling abuse. What are your thoughts? Why do you think you do/don't (blame them).

Current Relationships

- Who would you say are the most important people in you life at this point?
  - ☐family members – what kind of contact (frequency/quality)
  - ☐ partners– now and/or historically; level of involvement (length/# of rel's)
    - are you someone who dates frequently/has long-term rel's/likes being single

- When I say "closeness", what does that mean to you – can you give an example?

  If you have someone in your life now with whom you have closeness, what does it look like?

  Do you think that earlier relationships have effected your feelings about closeness, or how you are in relationships? In what way?

- What are relationships like for you?
  - ☐ feelings about being in relationships– likes/dislikes
  - ☐ description of partner(s)
  - ☐ quality of current/past relationships
  - ☐ feelings about closeness/dependence/independence
  - ☐ expressions of affection– how is it expressed (by both/either); comfort
  - ☐ expressions of conflict– what happens/would happen when you argue/fight?
  - ☐ satisfaction– how would you describe your happiness/satisfaction in a rel?
    - How would you know, what would indicate to you that things did or did not feel good/right?

- People have revealed that they have a tendency to find partner who are not available in one way or another- what has your experience (history) been like with this?

Emotional Experience/Resonance

- What is your relationship with your sibling/s now?
  - ☐what has determined your cutting-off / staying connected?

● Many people I have spoken with seem to have mixed feelings about how or whether their sibling abuse experience has affected them. I'm curious as to how you feel you are able to attribute certain adult experiences to your sibling.

- ☐ effect on self-image/self-perception
- ☐ connections between SA and intimate relationships
- ☐ Do you have feelings about relying on others for emotional support?

● People I have spoken to have expressed wanting stability. How do you feel about change?

Resiliency:

● How have you found fulfillment in your adult life?

What gives you meaning?

In what areas? e.g.: community, social connections, work…

What meaning does work have for you in your life?

Therapy:

- ☐ If yes, how do you think it has influenced your understanding of your experience with your sibling?
- ☐ How has it influenced your adult relationships?
- ☐ Has your therapist asked about sib relationship?

Demographics:

- ☐ How old are you?
- ☐ What is your race/ethnicity?
- ☐ What is your social class?
- ☐ What is the composition of your family: age/gender/sibling

Feedback

- ☐ thoughts/suggestions re: topic
- ☐ willingness for further contact
- ☐ selection of pseudonym

Appendix F: Treatment Resources

National Child Abuse Hotline
1-800-422-4453

Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network
1800-656-HOPE (4673)

National Domestic Violence/Abuse Hotline
1800-799-SAFE (7233)

National Self-Help Clearinghouse
Graduate School and University Center
Of the City University of New York
365 5th Avenue – Suite 3300
New York, NY 10016
www.selfhelpweb.org

Sliding Scale/Low Fee Treatment:

Washington Square Institute
4 East 11th Street
New York, NY 10003
212-477-2600

National Psychological Association for Psychoanalysis (NPAP)
40 West 13th Street
New York, NY 10011
212-924-7440

Hospitals

Payne Whitney Psychiatric Clinic
525 East 68th St.
New York, NY 10024
1800-694-5700

New York-Presbyterian Hospital/
Columbia University Medical Center at 168th Street
New York, NY
212-305-6001

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