

CHILDREN AND FAMILY RESEARCH CENTER

**The Nature of Adult Sibling Relationship
Literature Review**

September, 2002

Hyun-ah Kang, MSW, PhD Candidate

PREPARED BY

CHILDREN AND FAMILY RESEARCH CENTER

SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

1207 West Oregon Street

Urbana, Illinois 61801

Executive Summary

Until recently, the adult sibling relationship has received insufficient attention both from academia and the public (Cicirelli, 1991). However, with increased numbers of studies, the importance of the adult sibling relationship is beginning to be recognized and many aspects of the relationship are starting to be uncovered. This review specifically addresses the following questions:

- (a) What is the significance of the adult sibling relationship?
- (b) What are the patterns and types of the adult sibling relationship?
- (c) What are the factors that affect the adult sibling relationship?

Primary Findings

The adult sibling relationship has significance in influencing the adult life psychologically, cognitively, and even instrumentally.

- Cicirelli (1991) asserted that the sibling helping relationships in adulthood provide not only psychological supports, but also instrumental help.
- Schulman (1999) claimed that the sibling relationship in later life could be a good opportunity to resolve old conflict.
- Bedford's (1998) study showed that cognitive reappraisals of sibling conflict that stem from childhood were related to adulthood well-being.
- Bedford, Volling, and Avioli (2000) found that conflicts originating both from childhood and from adulthood benefited in improving parenting skills, social competence, open and honest interchanges, and sense of self.

The adult sibling relationship can be categorized into specific types. Adult siblings have different types of relationship according to their combinations.

- Stewart, Kozak, Tingley, Goddard, Blake, and Cassel (2001) built an adult sibling typology: a supportive group, a longing group, an apathetic group, a hostile group, and a competitive group.
- According to Leder (1993), of the three sibling pair types (brother-brother, sister-sister, and brother-sister), sister-sister pairs seemed to be the closest and brother-brother pairs seemed to be most competitive.

Generally, gender, life events, age, marital status, parent status, and geographic proximity are primary factors affecting sibling relationship.

- Lee (1990) showed that geographic proximity, emotional closeness, and feeling responsible for a sibling's welfare primarily explained the motivation to contact among siblings.
- White and Riedmann (1992) found genetic closeness affected emotional closeness among siblings.
- Connidis (1992) found that the life transitional events (e.g. divorce, loss of family members, and having a child), except marriage, were related with greater emotional bonds among siblings.
- Connidis and Campbell (1995) found three major factors affecting sibling ties. The first factor was gender, with women tending to have closer relationships with their brothers and sisters. The second factor was marital status, with single and widowed siblings reporting closer relationships. The third factor was parental status; the childless reported closer relationships with their siblings.

- Crispell (1996) revealed that the higher the age, the weaker the strength of the adult sibling ties. Adult siblings also seemed to seek their siblings' help, especially when spouses or children's help were not available.
- Folwell, Chung, Nussbaum, Betheas, and Grant (1997) found that three primary reasons for maintaining sibling relationships in later life were family events/hardship, commonality, and age-related problems.
- According to Miner and Uhlenberg's study results (1997), there was no racial difference in exchange of instrumental support. Results also indicated that the higher the age related with more support from siblings who were living in proximity when core family members were not available for the respondents.

Introduction

Adult sibling relationship has received less attention than childhood sibling relationship. Until recently, both public and professionals had not recognized the existence and the significance of the adult sibling relationship (Schulman, 1999). Cicirelli (1991) claimed that middle aged adults, or even those in older ages (over 60) maintain some kind of contact with their siblings. Moyer (1992) explained the specific contexts that the sibling relationship might have importance for older adults: care giving for their parents, care giving for each other, reconciling past differences, friendship, and changes in family structure and role.

Despite the increasing recognition of the important roles that the sibling relationship plays in adult life, existing studies show somewhat mixed results. This review includes studies on the significance of the adult sibling relationship, the patterns or typologies of the adult sibling relationship, and factors that influence the pattern or quality of the adult sibling relationship.

Search Strategy

The following sources were used to locate relevant literature about the adult sibling relationship: Eric, Psych INFO, Social Science Abstracts, and Social Work Abstracts. The studies were limited by English language and publication year of 1990-2002. Combinations of the following terminologies, “sibling” AND “adult” were used to identify appropriate studies. To be included in this review, a study must have: (a) been published in a psychological, sociological, and/or social work journal, or (b) been a review of professional and accrediting organization standards. Literature of the sibling relationship in adulthood can be categorized according to sample age groups: young adult group, middle-aged and elderly adults, or whole adult group. This report excluded the literatures regarding only young adult (17-college age).

Results

A number of reports are available indicating significance, patterns and types of the adult sibling relationship, and factors affecting the relationship.

Significance of the Adult Sibling Relationship

According to numerous studies (Bedford, 1998; Bedford, Volling, & Avioli, 2000; Cicirelli, 1991; Schulman, 1999; Stewart, Verbrugge, & Beilfuss, 1998), adult sibling relationship has as much significance as does childhood sibling relationship. Cicirelli asserted that the sibling helping relationship in adulthood provides not only psychological support but also instrumental help, including sharing household responsibilities, caring for children, and providing transportation. Schulman claimed that the sibling relationship in later life could be a good opportunity to resolve old conflicts. Other studies found that sibling conflicts originating either from childhood or adulthood resulted in positive consequences in later life. For example, Bedford's study showed that cognitive reappraisals, or making positive meanings, out of sibling conflict that stemmed from childhood were related to adulthood well-being. In another study (Bedford et al.), conflicts both in childhood and adulthood were found to improve parenting skills, social competence, open and honest interchanges, and sense of self.

Patterns and Types of Adult Sibling Relationship

The nature of the adult sibling relationship has been shown as complicated and fluid (Connidis, 1992). Leder (1993) examined the negative aspect of sibling relationship: rivalry. According to the author, past studies have shown that of the three types of sibling pairs (brother-brother, sister-sister, and brother-sister), sister-sister pairs seemed to be the closest and brother-brother pairs seemed to be the most competitive. By interviewing twin brothers, Leder found that

comparisons made by parents between brothers, as well as societal norms that encourage aggressiveness and competitiveness likely contribute to the rivalry between them.

Stewart et al.'s (2001) study was conducted to build an adult sibling typology. The study attempted to categorize the sibling relationship in adulthood using a newly developed measure of sibling relationship, the Sibling Type Questionnaire (STQ). Five types were developed based on the study results: a supportive group, high in mutuality and low in competition (26% of the sample); a longing group, high in longing and mutuality (24%); an apathetic group, low in mutuality and high in apathy (19%); a hostile group, low in mutuality, high in criticism and apathy, (16%); and a competitive group, high on competition (15%).

Factors Affecting the Adult Sibling Relationship

In studies about the factors affecting the adult sibling relationships, Lee (1990) examined how and why siblings maintain contact. General contact patterns, obligatory contact motivation, and discretionary contact motivation were examined. Lee conducted mail and telephone surveys of a sample of 313 adults aged 25 years or older living in a southwest Virginia urban area. Geographic proximity was found to be a major factor that increased the frequency of the sibling contact. Emotional closeness and a feeling of responsibility of a sibling's welfare created the greatest motivation for obligatory contact. Respondents were more likely to feel obligated to make contact with their siblings if they felt closer to the siblings or responsible for their sibling's welfare.

White and Riedmann (1992) examined whether genetic closeness affected emotional closeness among sibling. Using the data from the 1987-88 National Survey of Families and Households, the authors compared the frequency of adulthood contact of respondents with their full siblings and with step/half siblings. The results showed that respondents (aged 17 or more)

considered their step/half sibling less important than their full sibling, although they were found to keep contact with their step/half siblings. Factors that contributed to contact with full siblings also contributed to contact with step/half sibling: respondents who were female, black, younger, and geographically closer. The authors concluded that individuals might define stepsiblings as their family, but genetic closeness influenced the perception of the importance of the sibling relationship. As factors for discretionary contact motivation, results revealed that emotional closeness was the most contributory.

Connidis (1992) examined the effect of life transitions on adult sibling ties. Through semi-structured interviews with 120 participants, 60 sibling-dyads aged 25 to 89, the author asked questions regarding the effect of life transitional events on the sibling relationship:

- the changes in the sibling relationship over times;
- the influence of gender and marital status on the sibling relationship; and
- the consistency of the siblings' views on their relationship.

Life events included marriage, having children, divorce, widowhood, and the death or health problems of family members. Results revealed that life transitions, except marriage, were related with greater emotional bond among siblings. The effect of marriage varied among siblings. Divorce and widowhood contributed to siblings staying closer, having more frequent contact, and giving more support. A family member's death or health problem was also related with closer sibling ties.

Connidis and Campbell (1995) investigated demographic factors affecting the three dimensions of the adult sibling ties: emotional closeness, confiding, and contact. The study examined the social support networks of 678 residents, aged 55 years of age or older, in London, Canada, who were interviewed in their homes in 1990-1991. Findings revealed that the major

factor was gender; women tend to have closer relationships with their brothers and sisters. A second factor was marital status; the single and widowed reported closer relationships. A third factor was parental status; those persons without children reported closer relationships with their siblings.

Crispell (1996) analyzed data from the National Survey of Families and Households conducted during 1987-88 and 1992-94. Results revealed that the higher the age, the weaker the strength of adult sibling ties. Nineteen percent of people aged 75 or older never saw their brother or sister, while just 4% of those aged 25 to 34 did not see their sibling. In terms of exchange of support, results showed that adult siblings shared not only emotional support but also economic ties. People aged 45 to 54 are the most likely to have spent at least \$1,000 on siblings in the past year. The average amount spent on siblings dropped sharply after age 65, to \$300. Adult siblings seemed to seek their siblings' help, especially when spouses or children's help were not available.

Folwell, Chung, Nussbaum, Betheas, and Grant (1997) explored the degree of the closeness of older adults and the reasons for their closeness. Through interviewing 61 participants who were over age 54, findings revealed that respondents perceived differences in closeness with their different siblings. Additionally, three primary reasons for keeping sibling relationships were: family events/hardship, commonality, and age-related problems. Reasons given for not keeping close to siblings were: the younger years, tragedy/death/illness, and they were never close to the sibling. The majority of the respondents (70 %) perceived fluctuations of closeness with their siblings resulting from commonalities, proximity, and a surrogate parent role.

Miner and Uhlenberg (1997) examined factors that affected the exchange of support and frequency of contact between siblings aged 55 or over. Obtaining their sample from the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), collected during 1987-1988, the authors found that race was not a factor in the exchange of instrumental support. However, Black persons reported a higher frequency of contact than did Caucasians. Results also indicated that older ages were related to more support from siblings who were living nearby when core family members were not available for the respondents.

Conclusion

From the results of studies on the adult sibling relationship, it appears this relationship may have as great an influence on a person's life as does the childhood sibling relationship. The nature of the adult relationship is extremely complex, with many different dimensions and various factors affecting the relationship. According to the literature in this review, many adults have lifelong sibling relationships and consider it to be an important source of instrumental and/or emotional support. Generally, gender, life events, age, marital status, parental status, and geographic proximity are primary factors affecting the sibling relationship. However, more in-depth studies are needed, as the limited number of studies to date reveals mixed findings due to the complicated and fluid adult sibling relationship.

References

- Bedford, V. H., Volling, B.L., & Avioli, P.S. (2000). Positive consequences of sibling conflict in childhood and adulthood. *International Journal of Aging & Human Development*, 51(1), 53-69.
- Bedford, V.H. (1998). Sibling relationship troubles and well-being in middle and old age. *Family Relations: Interdisciplinary Journal of Applied Family Studies*, 47(4), 369-376.
- Cicirelli, V.G. (1991). Sibling relationships in adulthood. *Marriage & Family Review*, 16(3-4), 291-310.
- Connidis, I.A. (1992). Life transitions and the adult sibling tie: a qualitative study. *Journal of Marriage & the Family*, 54, 972-982.
- Connidis, I.A. & Campbell, L. D. (1995). Closeness, confiding, and contact among siblings in middle and late adulthood. *Journal of Family Issues*, 16(6), 722-745.
- Crispell, D. (1996). The sibling syndrome. *American Demographics*, 18, 24-30.
- Folwell, A.L., Chung, L.C., Nussbaum, J.F., Bethea, L.S., & Grant, J.A. (1997). Differential accounts of closeness in older adult sibling relationships. *Journal of Social & Personal Relationships*, 14(6), 843-849.
- Leder, J. M. (1993). Adult sibling rivalry. *Psychology Today*, 26, 56-58.
- Lee, T. R., Mancini, J.A., & Maxwell, J. W. (1990). Sibling relationships in adulthood: Contact patterns and motivations. *Journal of Marriage & the Family*, 52(2), 431-440.
- Miner, S. & Uhlenberg, P. (1997). Intragenerational proximity and the social role of sibling neighbors after midlife. *Journal of Applied Family Studies*, 46(2), 145-154.
- Moyer, M. S. (1992). Sibling relationships among older adults. *Generations*, 16(3), 55-58.

Schulman, G. L. (1999) Siblings revisited: Old conflicts and new opportunities in later life.

Journal of Marital & Family Therapy, 25(4), 517-524.

Stewart, R.B., Kozak, A.L., Tingley, L. M., Goddard, J. M., Blake, E. M., & Casse, W. (2001).

Adult sibling relationships: Validation of a typology. *Personal Relationships*, 8(3), 299-324.

White, L. K. & Riedmann, A. (1992). When the Brady Bunch grows up: Step/half- and full

sibling relationships in adulthood. *Journal of Marriage & the Family*, 54(1), 197-208.