

An Exploratory Look at Solidarity and Support between Siblings in Young and Middle Adulthood

Michael Bouvet

Department of Sociology
California State University, Los Angeles

This literature review explicitly centers on both solidarity and support of sibling relationships. Past research and analysis has clearly demonstrated that four variables—birth order of siblings, gender of siblings, family size and paternal framework—are vital and necessary to any research on siblings. However, there is no apparent research that has included a complete analysis of how these specific factors shape and mold the sibling relationships among young individuals emerging from adolescence into adulthood. Therefore, to complete the gap in literature, more analysis is necessary on the solidarity and support of young and middle aged adults.

INTRODUCTION

¹Siblings play very unique roles in one another's lives in several distinct ways. Sibling relationships have the greatest potential for a lengthy existence and one that most individuals nurture and maintain throughout the entire life course (White 2001). Siblings are also more likely than other familial pairs to share a common lineage and heritage, living environment, and passage through particular life events. Furthermore, siblings tend to be more egalitarian in

their relationships, more so than with other family members and certainly more egalitarian in nature than the parent-child or grandparent-grandchild relationship (Gentry 2001). Only ten to twenty percent of individuals grow up an only child, making sibling relationships highly prevalent (Cicirelli 1982). Previous studies indicate that siblings often have a profound and significant presence in the lives of individuals. They are integral and fundamental sources of affection, encouragement, support, comfort and friendship to one another (Cicirelli 1995). Additionally, among older adults, a sibling is often the only person that has known an individual his or her entire life. Therefore, it is not surprising that previous research has found that, along with parents, siblings

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form critical reference points in the development of identity, attachment and support (White 2001). Sometimes, support from siblings appears to compensate for a lack of support from other members of the social network, such as parents and/or friends (Milevsky 2004). Erikson and Gerstel (2002) found that a majority of adults give some form of help to at least one of their siblings within a year's time, many on a monthly basis, suggesting that siblings often act as important social safety nets. Because a sibling relationship can have such profound significance for an individual, it is one that is constantly analyzed. However, previous research either concentrates on the relationship in childhood years or in later life. There is considerably less research conducted on sibling relationships specifically on solidarity and support in the early and middle years of adulthood. This specific time within adulthood is significant because it is here that the bonds of strong future support are forged and solidified. As people live longer, have fewer children, remain single, or choose not to have families, their social networks may decrease, and the sibling bond often emerges as a vital source of support (Volkom 2006). The assumption is that as medical research and technologies progress, individuals are living longer and more robust lives, potentially making strong sibling relationships critical because they provide necessary social safety nets in later life. Therefore, as we continue to transition into the 21st century, we can anticipate the need for stronger sibling relationships in young and middle adulthood. As the baby boom cohort ages and the cost of health care

premiums continue to increase, young and middle adult siblings will need to work cooperatively in order to take care of not only their elderly parents, but each other as they age. Thus, we can better understand what the implications are for these relationships in the future by studying and understanding the sibling bonds present amongst young and middle adults in society today.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Since this review explicitly centers on both solidarity and support, it is important to define the terms in regards to how previous studies have utilized them. Past studies have conceptualized solidarity as closeness, value consensus, contact, and exchanges (Bengtson and Roberts 1991). Since the focus is on the degree to which family and siblings are integrated, solidarity is specifically based upon kinship. Support can, to an extent, be considered an indicator of solidarity. Support between siblings theoretically is influenced by family structure and solidarity. An observation of heightened support reflects actual behavior, thereby making the content and benefits of sibling relationships tangible. Support is specifically defined as both emotional and instrumental support. Emotional support is exemplified by the actions that individuals do to make their sibling feel loved and cared for, or reinforce their sibling's sense of self-worth and self-esteem (e.g. providing encouragement, talking over a problem, giving positive feedback, or advice); such support is often embodied in non-tangible types of assistance. By contrast, instrumental support pertains to the various types of

tangible assistance that siblings may provide (e.g., help with housekeeping or chores, childcare, provision of transportation or assistance with repairs) (Spitze and Trent 2006).

Support Among Family Members

There have been quite a few recent sociological studies that have focused on the relationships and bonds that exist between family members. Most of these studies have corroborated theoretical notions that these important bonds do often exist between various members of a family, demonstrating the many ways modern families work to provide care and exchange economic resources. These studies have also identified that there is a cascading flow of support, aid and resource exchanges both up and down the generational line. Parents provide support and care throughout their children's early and later lives (Mandemakers and Dykstra 2008), and children reciprocate that support and care more and more as their parents age (Burr and Mutchler 1999). A similar relationship can be found between grandparents and grandchildren. There are plenty of incidences where a grandparent raises a grandchild (Minkler and Fuller-Thomson 2005), and often a grandchild will assist with support and care of an older grandparent in later life (Chan and Elder 2000). Most of these studies, however, describe a vertical, exchange of resources between family members. Absent from these particular studies and corresponding discussions is the identification and relevance of the horizontal exchange of resources, support and care that exists among siblings. As vertical family relationships

across several generations are becoming increasingly important in American society, it is imperative that horizontal relationships between siblings are also methodically analyzed to better understand the dynamics that exist within these bonds. It is apparent that this belief is beginning to catch on in the sociological community as an increasing amount of research is being conducted on the solidarity and support between siblings. However, these studies tend to focus on the relationship and exchange of support in either childhood or later life, presenting a gap in the literature on these interactions in early and middle adulthood specifically.

Sibling Support in Adolescence

Numerous studies have determined the importance of siblings as a source of emotional support and instrumental aid in early and later life. As adolescents, the support given between siblings is more emotional in nature. Branje et al. (2004) found that because siblings are such an important source of support for each other during this period, they often affect both each other's externalizing behavior as well as each other's internalizing behavior. In the process of gaining autonomy and defining their identity, adolescents may seek help from their siblings, and therefore become important role models for each other. Tucker, McHale, and Crouter (2001) found that both older and younger siblings are viewed as sources of support in familial issues, and older siblings are viewed as a source of support about non-familial issues such as social and scholastic activities. Feinberg and Hetherington (2000) identified that

siblings share a unique relationship, making them more likely to experience similar discrete family events, such as death, divorce, unemployment, a relocation or parental discord. A shared traumatic experience between siblings often strengthens the bond between them and initiates a lifelong exchange of emotional support. Other research has indicated that the more an individual interacts with a feeling of love for his/her sibling, the less depressive symptoms for that adolescent become observable, indicating an effectiveness of a strong bond with a sibling on positive emotional and psychological growth (Vogt Yuan 2009).

Sibling Support in Later Life

Several studies suggest that the sibling relationship changes over time. As sisters and brothers get older, the relationship becomes less obligatory and more voluntary. Additionally, the support and care given and received by older siblings incorporates resource exchanges as well as emotional reinforcement (Martin, Anderson and Rocca 2005). Erikson and Gerstel's (2002) research refutes the notion that siblings are largely symbolic ties in adult lives. They found that a majority of older adults give some form of help to at least one of their siblings within a year's time, many on a monthly basis. Volkom's (2006) research characterizes the sibling relationship in later life as one of strong emotional ties, helping, and importance for the older adult's well-being. Because a sibling can be a great helper, confidante, and friend in adulthood, contact with a sibling can also improve the physical health of an older adult.

White and Riedmann's (1992) analysis of data taken from a national survey of families and households is a clear illustration of how valued the sibling relationship is among adults. Half of the adults surveyed indicated they had contact with a sibling at least monthly. Nearly two-thirds of these respondents considered at least one brother or sister to be among their closest friends. About a third indicated they would call upon their sibling first when in need of emergency help.

Conflicting Theories of Sibling Support in Early and Middle Adulthood

Although these studies are high caliber investigations consisting of quality research and analysis, these studies fail to fully evaluate the relationship that exists between early and middle-aged adults. What is acknowledged is that during this time, the bond between siblings early and middle-aged is often transformed due to other significant concurrent life events, such as full-time employment, marriage, relocation, and birth of an offspring (Voorpostel and Blieszner 2008). Another analysis by White and Riedmann (1992) yielded similar results. They postulate that early and middle-aged young people start to move to separate residences, invest in economic or educational endeavors and establish intimate relationships with a romantic partner. This is paralleled by decreased intensity of interactions with family members. White expounds on this idea in later research. She explains that underlying most interpretations of sibling relationships is the assumption of a hierarchy of kinship relationships. She

states that in the standard kinship model, family bonds are conceptualized as a set of nested circles. During childhood, siblings typically are included within one's inner circle or first tier of family social support. As people mature into adulthood, often distancing themselves geographically for their siblings and forming their own families, sibling relationships are commonly relegated to outer circle or second-tier status. The inner circle in adulthood is mainly reserved for parents, spouses and children (White 2001). Bedford (1989) discovered an hourglass effect in sibling relationships, where sibling closeness and involvement are intense as adolescents, gradually decrease in early adulthood, are relatively low in the middle adult years, and then rise again in later life. Other research has postulated that a decrease in contact during early adulthood is the reason why young adults reported lower levels of conflict with their siblings than adolescents, engaged in less quarreling, less antagonism, less competition, and less conflict related to power (Scharf et al. 2004). Thus, some previous researchers have hypothesized that the more that siblings grow apart and become immersed in their own separate lives, they have less opportunity to spend together ultimately limiting all interactions, including conflict.

However, that hypothesis has been contested by others. Some research has indicated that a reduction in conflict may be attributable to emerging adult siblings' greater ability to negotiate disagreements and their favoring negotiation over coercion (Laursen, Finkelstein, and Betts 2001). Further research suggests that early adulthood

fosters an addition of a new quality to the relationship between siblings. They can become a source of potential support, or an important source of advice, that can be relied on, despite the lower incidence of daily interaction or involvement. Once young adult siblings emerge from adolescence and leave home, the amount of support and assistance that they give each other is determined by the similarity of their roles and their feelings of closeness. During early and middle adulthood, they provide encouragement, companionship, assistance and occasionally financial support for one another. They also are usually relied upon for help during various life dilemmas, and typically cooperate with one another when it comes to caring for elderly parents (Goetting 1986). Because marriage and parenthood create decidedly unique social worlds, similarities in marital and parental status may ensure help from particular siblings (Erikson and Gerstel 2002). Milevsky (2004) conjointly touched upon sibling relationships in early adulthood. He also postulated that sibling support is related to an adjustment in emerging adulthood. However, he found that support from siblings appears to compensate for low support from other members of the social network such as parents and friends. These separate findings are in complete contrast to other research hypothesizing that sibling relationships become diminished in early and middle adulthood, presenting a clear and present contradiction in the previous research on the subject.

Furthermore, another analysis by White and Riedmann (1992) found that prevalence in contact and interactions

diminishes with age in late adolescence, equalizes during early and middle adulthood, and deteriorates sharply in later adulthood. White and Riedmann's (1992) nationwide study of 7,700 adults who had at least one biological sibling still living, indicated that approximately half reported some sort of interaction with their sibling (i.e. talking to or visiting) at least monthly. Among sisters, the amount of contact and interaction was the greatest. Conversely, it was the reported the least among brothers. Sister-brother pairs landed between the other two groupings. As anticipated, siblings who live in closer proximity to each other have more contact and interactions. The most contact was seen in those that lived within two miles of one another. The child that was the oldest, in addition to siblings with higher income and education, reported the most consistent contact. Frequent contact was also reported with siblings that still lived at home with their parents. White and Riedmann also found that biological siblings, living in integrated households with half-siblings and step-siblings, reported less close relationships. Interestingly, those same respondents viewed their biological siblings as a close companion through the life cycle.

Thus, a potential source of the conflicting results of young and middle aged adults' relationships may be due to dissimilarities in research measures and sampling methods as well as the utilization of cross-sectional data in the studies. Although these separate studies provide some insight to the relationships that exist among early and middle aged siblings, they are few and far between, they are not consistent in their findings,

and they lack the thorough and robust analysis seen in the research pertaining to adolescent and older sibling relationships.

Four Significant Variables

Because a connection in the literature is necessary, it is important to see how previous research has investigated the similar topics of solidarity and support among adolescent and older adult siblings. These studies provide an ample starting point from which to address the similar relationships that exist among siblings in early and middle adulthood. When analyzed as a collective body, previous research provides several themes that are apparent in sibling relationships both in adolescence and later life. Sibling research has identified four specific variables that must be considered when relationships between siblings are assessed: (1) the relative birth order, namely whether the sibling is younger or older, (2) the gender of the sibling, (3) the family size, specifically whether there are two or more siblings within the family, and (4) the paternal framework in which the siblings were raised, namely whether it was a single-parent or dual-parent environment.

Because research has indicated that children's experiences with siblings differ greatly depending on whether they are older or younger, any research on siblings should include birth order as a variable. Scharf et al. (2004) indicated that older siblings inherit some positions of authority and responsibility, and children were found to be satisfied more and to quarrel less with older siblings than with younger siblings. Additionally, older siblings were described as

being more a source of support and advice. Other research suggests that because most siblings differ in age, older siblings are likely to acquire experience and familiarity with certain issues, such as social life, schoolwork, and risky behavior, before their younger siblings do. In addition, parents may not be as knowledgeable as adolescents are about such non-familial experiences (Tucker, McHale and Crouter 2001). For these reasons, older siblings may provide elemental advice for their less experienced younger siblings. This idea could also apply to young and middle aged siblings. An older sibling might undergo a major life transformation prior to a younger sibling (i.e. moving out, getting married, having a child), providing a unique and invaluable source of information and advice on that particular subject.

Gender plays a substantial role in sibling relationships. This is evident in both research of adolescent siblings and older adult siblings. Previous researchers have concluded that sister-sister pairs had more contact and were emotionally closer than others (Spitze and Trent 2006). Cicirelli (1989) found that the perception of a tight bond with sisters by either males or females was directly correlated to psychological well-being, illustrated by fewer symptoms of depression, while a tight bond to brothers seemed to have little effect on well-being. White (2001) found that both being female and having sisters were associated with contact, exchange of support, and having a sibling as a close friend. Tests for statistical interaction suggested that women with sisters had the closest relations to siblings, whereas men with sisters fared

better than men or women without sisters (White and Riedmann 1992). White (2001) also reported that women, relative to men, increased levels of contact and help exchange with siblings over time. Previous research has also found that women were perceived to be more involved in their close relationships than men, and the sister-sister relationship was described as the most intensive bond among siblings. Among early adolescence, female siblings were most likely perceived to generate emotionally supportive outcomes (Howe et al. 2001). In contrast, participants in boy-boy sibling dyads reported less caring, less intimate exchange, and less coping resolution than participants in girl-girl dyads (Cole and Kerns 2001). This is highly relevant to the solidarity and support among young adult siblings, especially relationships involving sisters. It could be hypothesized that certain significant life events, such as the birth of a child or a marriage could actually bring sisters, or a sister and brother, closer together by creating a scenario in which gender specific advice and/or support is relevant. Additionally, Spitze and Trent (2006) found that women reported giving and receiving more child care and chore support (i.e. cooking, cleaning), consistent with gendered patterns of household labor. More specifically, men with a sister are about a third as likely than women with a sister to provide child care or advice, and women with a brother are about a fifth as likely than those from sister pairs to help with chores, and about half as likely to give advice. Thus, a woman with a sister will, in all likelihood, maintain a closer relationship with their sibling in early adulthood as opposed to

a sister-brother or brother-brother sibling configuration.

Another prominent factor identified by previous research is the size of the family. Researchers have proposed that adults from larger families exhibit greater affection and have more contact with all their siblings than those in smaller families. Based on this premise, researchers have found that older adults from larger families tend to have at least one sibling to whom they feel close than do those from smaller families (Connidis and Campbell 1995). Studies also suggest that adults with a greater number of siblings perceive more support will be forthcoming and actually receive more help than those with fewer siblings (White and Riedmann 1992), which is a pattern for receipt of help similarly noted among older adults. Eriksen and Gerstel (2002) found that those who have more siblings give significantly less total help to particular siblings, suggesting that having more siblings forces adults to act judiciously about what they give. Conversely, other researchers have found that siblings from smaller families may depend on each other more, relative to those from larger families who have more sisters or brothers to turn to in times of need (Tucker and Crouter 2001). Thus, research on young and middle aged adults should include analysis of the family size and composition to observe whether or not having more siblings will affect solidarity and support amongst them.

Finally, the paternal framework present in a family has been shown to affect the relationship siblings have with each other. For example, growing up with both parents predicted more interactions among adult siblings,

whereas those raised in single parent families had significantly more diminished contact in later life (White and Riedmann 1992). Poortman and Voorpostel's (2009) research results show that siblings from divorced families more often have conflict-laden relationships in adulthood than do siblings from intact families. There were, however, no differences between siblings from divorced and intact families regarding the more positive aspects of their relationships (i.e. relationship quality and contact frequency). It can then be hypothesized that a positive family atmosphere is likely to be related to warm sibling relationships, whereas a distressed atmosphere will probably be related to negative sibling relationships. In addition, Furman and Giberson (1995) suggested that conflicts with parents could increase the likelihood that children will be irritated and discharge their anger onto their siblings. Parents may influence their children's interpersonal relationships directly by giving advice and intervening in their interactions and disputes (McHale et al. 2000), or indirectly by modeling social behavior or regulating their children's emotions and behaviors (Parke and O'Neil 1999). Previous research showed that children, whose relationships with parents were characterized by warmth, reported exhibiting less hostility and rivalry and more affection toward their siblings (Stocker and McHale 1992). In contrast, parental assertion of power was related to a higher frequency of conflict between siblings (Furman and Giberson 1995). Thus, contemporary demographic trends such as the rise in single-parent families and decrease in family size

could be relevant to the solidarity and support of young and middle aged adults and should therefore be considered as contextually relevant to the study.

Implications for Research

Past research and analysis has clearly demonstrated that these four variables are vital and necessary to any research on siblings. However, no one previous investigation, to my knowledge, has included a complete analysis of how these specific factors shape and mold the sibling relationships among young individuals emerging from adolescence into adulthood. Additionally, variability in the extent of sibling support has typically been explored by studying sibling dyads from different families. However, comparisons of the experiences of two or more siblings from the same family are extremely rare. Therefore, information from a series of siblings, ranging in age and gender, across different families is extremely important to the analysis of solidarity and support of siblings. The addition of the relationship of half and step siblings would also be invaluable. Finally, nearly all of the previous research on siblings was obtained through cross-sectional studies, drawing the entirety of data from one point in time. Since it is important to see how the sibling relationship undergoes a metamorphosis as siblings advance through the young and middle adult years into later life, a longitudinal study might be more effective for discovering trends in data.

Implications for Practice

As previously mentioned, we are very much influenced by the relationships that we have with our parents and our siblings in early life. As we grow into adulthood, these complex influences continue to play a role in all our relationships, regardless of whether we are geographically or emotionally close, distant or detached from our family of origin. As siblings age, their relationships are influenced and altered by many actual or perceived events that may or may not be directly related to each other. It is postulated that as siblings grow into adulthood, their focus may move away from each other to their own children, and to their aging parents, which could negatively affect their solidarity and support for each other in later life.

Over time, some sibling issues will obviously remain the same. On the other hand, many social factors emerge that are bound to have an ever-increasing influence on the way siblings deal with their own inevitable aging. The biggest factor, arguably, is the ever-increasing number of older men and women in our society. Current trends and future projections include: (1) a population of aging siblings that is not only growing, but is changing in terms of longevity, health status, and needs, (2) a baby-boom generation that is already arriving at the threshold of retirement (projections suggest that 25% of the population will be over sixty-five early in the 21st century), (3) an expanding geographical dispersion among family members, (4) a projected increase in programs and legislation that expand services to meet the needs of aging siblings (these are projected to offer

more options than in the past, which may affect the quality of life for the elderly and their aging siblings), (5) families of aging siblings will have many more opportunities and options in their caregiving and support roles, (6) and finally, the prevalence of divorce and remarriage has produced a proliferation of step relationships, including sisters and brothers. As aging individuals face illness, retirement, a death of a spouse and other enormous life changes, their siblings also face questions of how involved they will become in their lives. These events and issues often bring siblings together on new terrain and highlight the strength and stressors of their relationships that have occurred in the most previous periods of their lives. How siblings come together and negotiate this new terrain is affected by many of the latent themes of the early and middle adult eras of their lives: a complex mixture of friendship and collaboration, support and solidarity, and sometimes rivalry around common sibling issues. Therefore, what older adults do for their aging siblings and how they negotiate their own behavior with siblings are salient personal issues for many people. These relationships ultimately concern almost all individuals for whom an aging sibling is, has, or will be part of their life. It ultimately concerns all of us who have siblings and hope to live long, fruitful lives, making it all the more important to investigate, learn and understand the relationship that exists between siblings in not only childhood and old age, but across the whole life span. Therefore, to complete the gap in literature, more analysis is necessary on the solidarity and support of young and middle aged adults.

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