Editorial

In search of more: siblings and their discontents

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What a pain siblings can be. According to the Judeo-Christian tradition, at least, they are foremost—if not exclusively—our competitors over limited resources. Cain murders his brother Abel after the latter curries God's favour; Esau wrestles his twin brother Jacob *in utero*, vying for dominance before even entering the world; sisters Rachel and Leah spend most of their biblical narrative trying to win their shared husband's fickle attention.

Sigmund Freud—arguably the most influential individual on secular culture in the twentieth century—did little to reshape the ancient notion of rivalry as the singular feature of the sibling dynamic. "The elder child ill-treats the younger, maligns him and robs him of his toys; while the younger is consumed with impotent rage against the elder," Freud (1900a, p. 250) wrote in a rare moment of acknowledging that these relationships even exist. Though this derision may have roots in a personal neurosis—borne of contentious relations with his own brothers and sisters (Coles, 2003)—it is more instructive to consider Freud as one link in a very long chain, a torchbearer of the millennia-old effort to write the narrative of human nature.

It is in this regard that siblings are most vexing. To the theologian or theoretician seeking universal truths, siblings generate an unwelcome chaos: they disrupt parsimonious ideas of how we develop and why we are the way we are. For ancient authors of religious texts, siblings complicated the relationship between man and God; for Freud, they muddled the primacy of the Oedipus conflict, a triangulation that demanded unmoderated lines between child, mother, and father. Beginning in the 1960s, John Bowlby, a major post-Freudian torchbearer, emphasised the vertical relationship between mother and child as the defining characteristic of the human species. Even though, by 1983, Judith Dunn had written that "it is now widely acknowledged that regarding mother and child as a dyad isolated from the other relationships within the family is extremely misleading" (p. 787), forty years later that acknowledgement remains far from evident in the literature.

Any modern researcher will be quick to tell you why this is so: to the inferential statistician—torchbearer of the twenty-first century—siblings are confounding

variables. One study participant has a single sibling, whilst another has five, whilst another has none. Siblings can be different genders, with age gaps ranging from less than a year to multiple decades. One can have step-siblings, half-siblings, adopted siblings. How can we make sense of human nature whilst taking siblings into account? And yet, how can we not?

Bowlby, ever the empiricist, once conceded an observation of the sibling dynamic that could not fully be explained by his attachment theory:

> In most young children the mere sight of mother holding another baby in her arms is enough to elicit strong attachment behaviour. The older child insists on remaining close to his mother, or on climbing on to her lap. Often he behaves as though he were a baby … [That] an older child often reacts in this way even when the mother makes a point of being attentive and responsive suggests that more is involved …. (Bowlby, 1969, p. 260)

It is the search for "more" that brings us to this special issue of *Attachment*. Occasional, often isolated voices have embarked on this search over the last half century, notably Judith Dunn and Carol Kendrick within developmental psychology, and Prophecy Coles and Juliet Mitchell within psychoanalysis. Mitchell's essential book *Siblings* (2003) reminds us, among other things, that the search for more has always existed across time and cultures, though it has often been lost or disrupted, subsumed back into the monolithic view of sibling-as-rival. Ancient Egypt, for instance, offered an alternative foundational myth to that of Cain and Abel. According to that tradition, the god Osiris was dismembered by his brother Set, only to be reconstituted by his sister Isis and revived long enough for her to become pregnant with his child. Here we see a more complex portrayal of the tension that exists between siblings, encapsulating love, hatred, incest, and the (literal) dissolution and creation of self. Mary Ainsworth named the sibling paradox when she observed, simply, that "many sibling relationships are characterized by ambivalent feelings … and yet are likely to constitute lasting affectional bonds" (1985, p. 809).

Psychology's mainstream attitude, indelibly impacted by the likes of Freud and Bowlby, has always felt very far from my personal experience of siblinghood. My brother and I have been many things to each other over the past four decades, yet rarely rivals: occasional playmates in early childhood, distant spectres in adolescence, good friends in adulthood. I watch my own children consider each other in ways that often seem to have less to do with competition than trying to locate themselves within the other. Recently, my three-year-old said, in reference to her older brother, "When he is a baby again, I will grow big and carry him around," as though both time and their relationship were cyclical, their identities swappable. It reminded me of what Sebastian cries out in *Twelfth Night* when he first sees his sister, Viola, dressed as a man: "Do I stand there?" (Shakespeare, 2019, p. 179)

It is a question that all people with siblings ask themselves in one way or another. Because the sibling is not—or not only—an *other* with whom we must fight. They are a *potential self*, an alternate version if certain variables—age, gender, friendships,

talents, illnesses, parental attitudes—were slightly, or tremendously, different. As an adaptation of Winnicott's (2005) notion of potentiality, I mean to suggest that siblings intermingle their thoughts, feelings, and fantasies in the uniquely shared space of their family. That not only competition but comparison, imitation, and role-swapping take place is inevitable, though how potentiality expresses itself is greatly influenced by the safety of the siblings' shared space.

In this context, *safety* differs meaningfully from *security*, the attachment construct denoting the development of a stable and largely benevolent internal model of the parent as held by the child. Safety amongst siblings is, instead, the development of compatible realities: it is the belief that your sibling sees the world—including the family environment—in a way that does not invalidate your own point of view. As a graduate student, I helped analyse dozens of interviews in which children talked about their siblings, and we found that whilst attachment *security* was an important predictor of things like emotional regulation skills and the quality of parent–child relationships, attachment *concordance* between siblings—defined as the degree to which siblings shared an attachment style, regardless of category (e.g. secure, insecure, disorganised)—was a better predictor for things like peer relationship quality, academic performance, and sibling warmth (Kriss et al, 2012, 2014). In other words, siblings who shared a perspective on the family dynamic seemed to relate to one another and other lateral constructs—like school and friends—better than those whose perspectives diverged.

Because sibling relationships are lifelong, the impact of existing in a shared or non-shared psychic reality can reverberate for decades. Recently, a patient of mine in his mid-forties came to session a few days after the twenty-fifth anniversary of his father's death by suicide. He sat restlessly in the chair, wringing his hands and furrowing his brow. I interpreted his agitation as the manifest conflict of a resistance to being sad in front of others, which we had discussed before. He shook his head.

"That's not it at all. Don't you see? I'm not sad. It's my brother who is sad."

My patient went on to explain that every year, this anniversary reminded him of the chasm that existed between him and his only brother, seven years his junior. This chasm existed, in my patient's mind, because they had experienced the loss of their father so differently. "I won the dad lottery," my patient said, a striking declaration from a man who, at seventeen years old, discovered his father's lifeless body. "I got to be with him for my entire childhood. I was about to leave the house for college anyway when he died." But where my patient had "won" a supposedly happy childhood, his brother had been robbed of the very same thing.

"I've told him how guilty I feel. He tells me I shouldn't feel that way, but I do. I see how he carries the sadness, how it has changed him."

Of course, the guilt had also left my patient transformed. Throughout his life a quarter-century later we could identify ways in which he forfeited his right to feel sadness or self-pity, replaced by a gnawing sense of having gotten away with something. His brother became a repository of that disavowed emotion, a speculative

case: *What if I let myself be sad? Then I would be him*. The sudden and violent loss of their father, along with other longer-standing aspects of the family dynamic, made it difficult for my patient and his brother to feel safe with each other in a way that might have facilitated greater exploration of feelings and roles. My patient believed that, looking at the coffin at their father's funeral, he and his brother saw different things—for one, a traumatised childhood narrowly avoided, for the other, one that was just beginning—which reinforced a sense that they were entirely separate beings, and that they were trapped that way.

"I'm the one person in his life who should be able to understand," my patient said. "But I can't. I just can't."

Which brings us to this special issue. We are here to try to understand—to search for the "more" that has been simultaneously ubiquitous and elusive throughout the record of human culture since the dawn of time. The seven articles that follow elucidate the complexities of the sibling dynamic and how it both intertwines with, and deviates from, the parent–child relationship that has dominated so much of the discourse across psychoanalysis, attachment theory, and developmental science as a whole.

Prophecy Coles, who I cited earlier, speaks directly to this history by aiming a spotlight on a forgotten chapter of psychoanalysis and the consequences wrought when parents attempt to meddle with how siblings understand one another. Kate Brown extends questions of grief and intergenerational trauma to understanding sibling ambivalence, through the lens of art criticism, analysing the family relationships in the animated film *Encanto* (which, it should be noted, both of my children were obsessed with when it was released).

Sibling research has always struggled against contentions that lateral relationships are entirely subservient to the parent–child dynamic—that is, we can "skip" looking at siblings and simply learn all we need to know from how parents and children attach and relate to each other. Two articles in this issue approach this idea head-on but from differing angles, producing a useful dialogue. Aysha Begum explores how the parental relationship influences siblings' internalisations and understandings of one another, suggesting that we might consider sibling relationships as a meaningful creation of the family environment rather than a byproduct that clinicians and researchers can ignore. Wayne Davis flips the paradigm on its head in his analysis of how sibling relationships are not just influenced by but *exert influence on* parenting styles, emphasising the oft-neglected bidirectionally of the dynamic between parents and their children.

As discussed above, many scholars have avoided siblings for the complications they represent on both social and methodological levels, so it is only fitting that this issue features articles that do the opposite, embracing the challenge of writing about the thornier aspects of siblinghood. Christiane Sanderson looks at the under-appreciated reality of sibling sexual abuse in childhood, and how societal norms and a lack of research have contributed to the blurring of important lines between normative development and play on one hand, and harmful abuse on the other. In

a different vein, Joy Schaverien reviews and expands the concept of "boarding school syndrome", considering the vicissitudes of siblings who are separated from one another during childhood. This is a prime example of the kind of specific, non-universal sibling experience that researchers have long overlooked, leaving countless families and professionals with a dearth of knowledge about psychologically impactful events and decisions.

Highlighting these works will hopefully encourage more scholars to explore idiosyncratic or taboo aspects of siblings in order to inform our understanding across the fields of psychoanalysis, attachment theory, and developmental psychology. In a kind of preview to this ambition, Sophia Tickell's paper represents a synthesis of many of the ideas present throughout this issue, looking holistically at the sibling relationship as one that is uniquely lifelong and can be better understood through an integration of multiple perspectives, especially those of psychoanalysis and attachment theory.

In total, the works contained in this issue can perhaps be regarded as intellectual siblings. They are separate entities that nevertheless exist and speak to one another within a shared reality, a reality that takes the sibling dynamic seriously and believes that there is so much more to learn, if we are only willing to continue the search.

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