

CHAPTER TWO

SIBLING LOSS

Too Little Acknowledged; Too Little Mourned

Shakespeare has Hamlet's mother say:

“Thou know'st 'tis common; all that live must die.” (Shakespeare, 1973: 49)

Equally common, despite technological and medical advancements, is that bereavement through death, at whatever age it occurs, has to be faced as a fact of life. Yet, as expressed by Lily Pincus (1974/1976), however honestly it is faced, bereavement brings about a crisis of loss, probably the most severe crisis in human existence. In this situation of inevitability and crisis, what happens to bereaved siblings within the family? How are they able to grieve the loss of their brother or sister? The following section provides a brief overview of the state of the literature on sibling loss and highlights that this experience is too little acknowledged and, therefore, too little mourned.

The death of children and young adults is a worldwide, daily, traumatic occurrence. In South Africa the high accident and crime rate and the devastation of AIDS are constant and persistent. The loss of young people on both sides of the divide during the apartheid era lingers in the psyches not only of mothers and fathers but also in the lives of bereaved siblings. The phenomenon of dying children does not discriminate among our citizens in terms of race, colour or creed. Professionals in all disciplines repeatedly encounter this phenomenon. Handle it we must; for better or worse, we do. The deeper our understanding and the better our knowledge, the more we can offer to survivors.

Mourning over death and especially the death of a child, is a theme as ancient as the human community. With Freud (1917/1957), however, grief entered as a theme into medical-social scientific literature. Pertinent to this study, the death of a child usually means that a brother or sister is left to grieve, often as an isolated, forgotten mourner. Current social scientific literature on grief and family dynamics shrouds in silence the meaning of the experience of sibling loss, or subsumes it under the general and universal experience of loss. Indeed, we do not even have a nuanced, integrated psychology of siblings. On the contrary, the sibling relationship is marginalised. The objective of this study is to explore and clarify these neglected, understudied phenomena; to join the chorus of voices that over the past two and a half decades have begun to address these gaps.

What basic insight into the theme authorises the previous assertions?

The quantitative literature, and even the sparse qualitative literature, remains on the edge, too far removed from the raw experience as it is lived, concerned more with facts than with meanings. A relevant investigation into the significance of sibling loss and grief requires entering the *lived world* of the survivors. Thus, I adopt an existential-phenomenological approach to tap into the issues in question.

A review of the bereavement literature reveals a gratifying increase in research articles on sibling loss since the 1980s. This trend seems to run parallel to the interest taken by many extra-psychological disciplines in the significance of the “lateral” or horizontal relationships between siblings across the life span. A similar interest seems to have been generated amongst psychologists, because they began to study the sibling relationship as an important bond in its own right (Bank & Kahn, 1982; Cicirelli, 1982, 1995; Dunn, 1985; Dunn & Kendrick, 1982; Lamb & Sutton-Smith, 1982; Schachter & Stone, 1987). Currently, it is recognised that one’s relationship with one’s brother or sister constitutes a significant and direct interpersonal relationship, *a-part-of* but also *apart-from* the child’s relationship with parents.

What has triggered this new focus on sibling loss? The Swiss-born psychiatrist, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, (deceased, September, 2004), pioneered the holding of conversations with individuals who were dying, first with adults and eventually with children. Although she encountered tremendous resistance, she persisted and in time she overcame not only medical taboos against discussing death with dying patients, but also helped establish Hospice care in the United States and gave permission to an entire generation and its successors to speak openly about our greatest fear - death.

Her remarkable work and writings (1969/1985; 1974; 1982) also inspired a generation of kindred spirits. As a result, many bereavement studies emanated from a growing interest by hospital staff in the psychic health of dying children and a concern about the effects on the siblings who were left behind. As noted by Vande Kemp (1999:355) these investigations were spearheaded mainly by pastors, nurses, social workers, psychiatrists and sociologists. To a lesser extent, psychologists also became involved. Many of the studies on sibling loss dealt with the death of a brother or sister from cancer, those suffering from cystic fibrosis, leukaemia, and other life-threatening and chronic conditions where death was anticipated. Healthcare practitioners who had regular contact with patients and their parents over a period of time, realised that the healthy siblings also needed to be included in the caregiver’s discussions with parents. The predicament of the sibling became part of the wider issue of death-in-the-family.

However, in the everyday, extra-hospital situation of sudden, accidental or unexpected deaths, parents and siblings were left unsupported and floundering. Some of these survivors found their way to the

psychologist's or psychiatrist's office suffering from behaviour problems or incapacitating symptoms of despair, panic and/or depression. Not surprisingly, therefore, psychiatric studies have been inclined to emphasise the *pathological* aspects of sibling loss. Many of the earliest writings on the theme (mostly psychoanalytic) focus on the *effect* of *childhood* sibling loss on *adult* patients who have undergone treatment for psychiatric disturbance (Rosenzweig, 1943; Pollock, 1962, 1972; Hilgard, 1969).

Correlatively, academic psychologists have paid scant attention to loss and mourning as normative events. Rosen (1986: 8) notes: "sibling loss has not been given the attention it deserves in the psychological literature...". As recently as 1999, Vande Kemp averred that few insights into sibling bereavement have come from psychologists.

A significant finding of the literature search is the multidimensional nature of the sibling bond. Equally important, the review poses a *methodological challenge*. Grasping what the loss of a sibling *really* means seems insurmountably complex. Not only is each individual unique in terms of how he or she experiences and deals with grief, but the developmental and cognitive levels of surviving siblings vary; each sibling's relationship with the deceased is different, and the circumstances of the death differ. In addition, it has become increasingly apparent that the loss does not occur in a vacuum (Cain *et al.*, 1964; Coleman & Coleman, 1984; Rosen, 1984-1985, 1986; Davies, 1999) and that the individual who is mourning also lives in a family, in a neighbourhood, a community, a society. Reactions of family members, of others, and societal attitudes towards death and bereavement, impact both upon the surviving sibling's lived experience of the death and loss, and on the opportunity to carry out the 'work' of mourning. Cain *et al.* (1964) succinctly enumerate the multiple variables that interact and subtly influence the surviving sibling's reaction to the loss of a brother or sister. These were found to include:

“the nature of the death; the age and characteristics of the child who died; the child's degree of actual involvement in his sibling's death; the child's pre-existing relationship to the dead sibling; the immediate impact of the death upon the parents; the parent's handling of the initial reactions of the surviving child; the reactions of the community; the death's impact on the family structure; the availability to the child and the parents of various 'substitutes'; the parents' enduring reactions to the child's death; major concurrent stresses upon the child and his family; and the developmental level of the surviving child at the time of the death...”
(Cain *et al.*, 1964: 750)

Compounding the above complexities is confusion about an operational definition. In our postmodern world, what constitutes a siblingship? Blood-bonds do not exhaust the meaning. The term is more broadly applied not only in certain cultural and religious groups but also because of the increasing breakdown of the nuclear family and the consequent emergence of "blended" and "reconstituted"

families (step- and half-siblings). Finally, infertile couples exercise several options including enlisting sperm/egg donors and the adoption or fostering of children.

Since the meaning of “sibling” has become increasingly ambiguous, applying an operational definition of what constitutes “*sibling* loss” is difficult for mainstream social scientists. In partial reaction, and possibly also because most psychological developmental theories end with adolescence, researchers have focused narrowly on the bereavement of children and adolescents, but have paid scant attention to the predicament of adult survivors.

Robinson and Mahon (1997) recognised the need for conceptual clarity about the characteristics of sibling bereavement beyond adolescence. The global social climate demands it. The needs of a great number of adults whose siblings are dying, or have died, from AIDS, especially in a country like South Africa, must be addressed by medical scientists and psychotherapists/counsellors dealing with grief. While it is beyond the scope of this study, the need to attend to grief *per se*, and to the loss of family members, magnifies as the world also copes with recurring natural disasters (tsunamis, hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, etc.), and the escalating man-made disasters that spin from the cycles of revenge and counter-revenge incessantly encircling our planet and threatening the lives of the many who die “before their time.”

By applying the Wilsonian Method of concept analysis, Robinson and Mahon (1997: 491-493) isolated three critical attributes which distinguish sibling bereavement as a unique phenomenon: (a) the relationship between the deceased and surviving sibling exists in the context of the family and includes shared experiences and history as significant components; (b) physical separation through death from a sibling; and (c) the death of the sibling alters the *externally defined* role(s) of the surviving sibling - for example, becoming an “only child” is a dramatic and an especially difficult role change.

The major strength of empirical scientific studies is the capacity to isolate and manipulate one or two variables that have been thought to influence the outcome of sibling grief. For instance, shared life space and sibling bereavement responses (Davies, 1988), the effects of time on sibling bereavement (Hogan, 1988; Davies, 1991a), the developmental level of the surviving sibling (Balk, 1983a; Hogan & DeSantis, 1992), self-concept perceptions (Balk, 1983b), things that help and hinder sibling bereavement (Hogan & DeSantis, 1994). The intention is to determine those factors that most strongly affect siblings’ grief, in order to reduce as much as possible negative effects of losing a brother or sister. These studies have contributed critical information about aspects of sibling bereavement and helped to dispel some of the misconceptions surrounding children and loss, viz. that children are less affected in a direct way; that very young children do not “understand” and, therefore, do not grieve;

the myth that children “get over things easily”; that siblings were constantly fighting and arguing and would, therefore, not miss each other. However, through her extensive research, Davies (1999) discovered that such findings have often been contradictory or inconclusive in identifying which variables are the most influential in predicting bereavement outcome. She maintains that sibling bereavement cannot be studied apart from the context in which it occurs (1999: 197). There is no simple cause and effect relationship between any of the identified variables and sibling bereavement, she concludes, and a causal model cannot take into account the fundamental interconnectedness of the sibling's world.

What is the bridge between this work and the present study? Evidence shows that quantitative research, which pivots upon the manipulation of clear and distinct variables, is stymied by a host of life-world complexities. The splintering and isolating of variables continues to generate contradictory findings or results of limited scope. Clearly, the phenomena under investigation do not interface easily with institutionalised criteria of isolation, replication, prediction and control. Indeed, it would appear that the very entrapment that keeps the bereaved sibling isolated is also evident in the methods used to understand sibling loss, reflected in their quest for totality and closure.

Thus, a move away from a mainstream experimental design is warranted. The above complexities revolve around the question of how to enter into the life-world of the grieving sibling: of how to tap profoundly personal - profoundly painful, almost taboo - experiences and their meanings. Although each death is unique, this does not mean that it eludes scientific study. A researcher can tap into its particular context, its situation, its configuration, draw out its meanings and then make them explicit. If this content area is to be thoroughly and rigorously scientifically canvassed, an appropriate qualitative method will have to be employed. To underwrite that method, a different vision is necessary: a shift in conceptual paradigm.

The shift has already begun. Several researchers have introduced qualitative methods in the form of semi-structured questionnaires and interviews in an attempt to expand our knowledge base of this complex phenomenon. The case study, an inherently qualitative method, continues to be applied with a shift from the emphasis on pathology (depression) to a fuller understanding of the phenomenon of sibling loss. A classical example of such a study is the self-analysis by Engel (1975), extending over a period of ten years, in which he describes his mourning and anniversary reactions over the loss of his twin brother in adulthood.

The research of Davies (1999), extending over 15 years and drawn from a non-clinical population, is to date the most comprehensive study of sibling loss in *childhood*. It offers context-rich findings about this complex phenomenon. Using grounded theory analysis she synthesises the findings of all her

work and develops a comprehensive conceptualisation of childhood sibling loss. The themes she has examined include siblings of all ages whose brothers or sisters died in *childhood* from a variety of causes and she provides an exploration of the immediate and long-term effects of the loss of a sibling. She also examines the contextual variables: i.e., situational, individual and environmental, which impact on the loss experience (Davies. 1999: 200). Her data depicting the most salient features of childhood sibling bereavement: “I’m sad”, “I don't understand”, “I don't belong”, and “I’m not enough”, provide a basic model for those who care for bereaved siblings. Her solid qualitative research project demonstrates both the rigour and the value of using a more comprehensive and contextualised approach to the multi-dimensional predicament of sibling bereavement. However, the psychological significance of sibling loss and the meaning-structure of survivors, particularly those who have lost a sibling in adulthood, still remain to be explored. Motivated by Davies' solid work, I take the next step. I use an existential-phenomenological platform that authorises an open-ended investigation. Specifically, I frame a research design that allows the definitions and meanings of siblings, siblingship and sibling bereavement to flow from the research situation itself. The design allows the surviving siblings themselves to reveal the context and the nature of the relationship to the deceased sibling.

Since siblings who have lost a sibling to death make up the subjects of this research, it is fitting to trace briefly the development of the place of siblings and of sibling bereavement in psychology. This review is representative but not exhaustive. It presents a broad outline not only of the dilemma of depth versus breadth that face research workers in the field, but also sounds the “cries” heard in the literature relating to this phenomenon.

The unique sibling bond is ripe with potential for individual growth and equally for disturbance, for love and hate, for competition and collaboration. It has been richly portrayed in Bible stories, fairy tales (Bettelheim, 1976). Themes of envy, jealousy and competition are reflected in the stories of Cain and Abel, of Joseph and his brothers, of Cinderella and her sisters, while the loving, supportive and restitutive power of the sibling bond is very richly portrayed in fairy tales such as Hansel and Gretel, and Brother and Sister. The implication of these narratives is that, whether positive or negative, the significance and impact of the sibling relationship is powerful.

Particularly in today's Western world of two working parents, single-parent homes, “latch-key kids”, etc., siblings often spend more time with each other than they do with their parents. As the face of the family continues to change, siblings may be the most constant companions in the child's world. Often the important developmental task of the transition from the vertical (parent/adult-child) relationships to horizontal (peer/sibling) relationships is facilitated by sibling interaction; a sense of “we-ness” (Sullivan, 1953) may develop first within the sibling group and then in peer relationships with same-

age members of the extended family and friends. Thus, the many meanings that a brother or sister has for a sibling have implications not only for development but also for the grief of bereaved siblings. However, as indicated above, the peer/sibling world has been under-emphasised in psychology.

The great complexity and distinctive emotional power of the sibling bond have gradually been gaining greater recognition and acknowledgement. The relationship begins with the birth of the second child and ends only with the death of one of the siblings. A brother or a sister can contribute to the harmony or conflict within the family but they can also bring each other tremendous meaning and value throughout the life span. Typically, sibling relationships fluctuate and change over time with child and adolescent siblings having more intimate daily contact at home (non-voluntary relationship) and adult siblings having less contact but in most instances still choosing (voluntary relationship) to participate in both shared and non-shared environments (Moss & Moss, 1986; Cicirelli, 1982, 1995). It is a relationship that is characterised not only by rivalry, competition, jealousy and envy, but also by feelings of loyalty, caring, hero-worship and a sense of mutual destiny (Bank & Kahn, 1982).

Yet, in our scientifically based western culture with our psychological preconceptions of the family, the *meaning* of the sibling bond has been ignored; too often, the sorrow that accompanies such a loss is negated. Consequently, sibling loss is regarded as “secondary” to other more important or “direct” losses. Clearly, this is not true for all siblings and for all cultural groups. Etched at the heart of Greek-driven Western thinking, is not only the tragic fate of Oedipus, but also the defiance of Antigone, the sister who affirms her entitlement to mourn the loss of her brother and to bury him. Nevertheless, siblings remain “forgotten grievers”, harbouring “hidden grief”, “silent sorrow” or “prohibited mourning” (Rosen, 1984-1985, 1986; Vande Kemp, 1999).

This has implications for the opportunity to do the grief work necessary for healing to take place. Experiences of loss not mourned and grief unexpressed mean that the healing of painful memories cannot take place. The passage of objective clock time accomplishes nothing. It only leaves half-closed wounds or wounds half-open. As stated by Weizman and Kamm (1985: 186): “It is not the passage of time itself that is healing. It is the *expression* of grief over a period of time that leads to the healing of painful memories.”

To repeat: in South Africa the loss of children is a daily and traumatic occurrence. According to STATS SA approximately 65,000 children (i.e. up to the age of 19 years), and 63,000 young adults (20 to 29 years of age) died during the year 2002 and the figures continue to escalate. Either as parents or as siblings, many of us will be touched more or less directly by such a loss in our lives. Psychotherapists and others in the caring professions have been listening to, and will continue to hear, stories of mothers and fathers who have lost a daughter or a son to death. The death of a child, at

whatever age it occurs, is generally recognised as one of the most distressing and incapacitating of all losses and one that is extremely difficult to come to terms with. This loss is particularly painful and resonates with our deepest feelings, and touches us all. Socially, the pain of a parent, particularly of a bereaved mother, has been recognised and acknowledged as profound. Even in Victorian times, a period when the loss of children was a common occurrence, the loss of a child was recognised as one that was difficult to accept. For example, on hearing of the death of a friend's baby from scarlet fever in 1893, Lady Desborough knew that no words of consolation could comfort the desolate mother:

“I think there must be no heartache like that of losing a child - for lovers love, childrens love, husbands love, are none of them so deep and high as mothers love - it is the highest shape love wears on earth ... Poor Mary, what can we do - what can *anything ever* do, to make it well for her?” (In Jalland, 1996: 119).

The intense grief of parents over the loss of a child is appropriate and not in question here. It is not a question of comparisons but rather an attempt to honour the mystery and power of the sibling bond - a bond that needs to be understood and not ignored -- and to identify a place for siblings and for sibling loss in psychology. It is also a response to the call of various caregivers involved with bereaved siblings and their families for contributions from psychologists towards a deeper, contextualised and professional understanding of the lived experience of sibling loss.

To summarise the grief picture: it is acknowledged that the loss of a child generates intense and very deep suffering for parents, rends the fabric of the family and also impacts on wider social structures (extended family, friends and even teachers and neighbours). However, until fairly recently, the grief and thanatology literature, as well as the psychological literature (apart from focusing on depression in bereaved siblings), has overlooked the fact that when a parent loses a child, the children in that family also suffer a unique loss of their own. In the face of the parents' intense grief and the family reorganisation and reintegration, the fact that the surviving sibling(s) is/are also mourning seems to be forgotten.

This raises an important question in terms of theory and support and/or clinical practice: although siblings have been losing brothers and sisters to death since the beginning of time, "why so little thinking on the theme of sibling loss?". It is perhaps not so difficult to appreciate why this is so. On the developmental and relational levels, it would appear that a number of factors apply: the risk of acknowledging intense feelings of helplessness and loss in a child and a feeling that children should be protected; the appearance that they grieve less intensely; and that they seem less capable of conceptualising the irrevocable nature of death.

On the theoretical level, one of the explanations for this may be that we do not have an integrated psychological theory of siblings. Significant in this respect is the experience described by Bank and

Kahn (1982: 5) who, when they began their study with siblings, commented: “When we tried to exercise our skills as psychologists in the emotional, and largely irrational, realm of siblings we felt as if we were in a foreign country without a map.” What are the possible roots of this neglect? The shadow of Western dualism unfolds sweepingly over all scientific pursuits. It has enveloped both mainstream experimental positivistic psychology and the radical psychoanalytic challenge to it. In essence, this means that a vision of the primacy of whole relationships - that man is a network of relations - is absent from the scientific landscape. Western dualism starts with isolated variables and tries to put “Humpty-Dumpty” back together again. Conceptually there has never been room in our Western culture for the sibling bond as a powerful reality.

It has also been argued that the emphasis in psychoanalytic, object relations and attachment theories on the earliest phases of human development and the exclusive focus on the mother-child relationship as the main, if not the *only*, influence on the organisation and development of an individual's personality and the evolving sense of self, has possibly contributed to the perception that the “horizontal” sibling relationships are secondary and relatively unimportant when compared to the “vertical” (Brown, 1998) relationships between child and parents. In the same vein there is the perception that siblings may also be less affected in a *direct* way by the loss of a brother or sister. While most theorists recognise that parent-child relationships are fundamental to human development, there is ample evidence from lived experiences and from clinical practice to suggest that the link between siblings and the impact that they have on each other's lives can be just as real and powerful. From discussions with siblings, it is significant to note that even when family relationships are optimal for development, siblings in and of themselves influence each other (either positively or negatively) simply because of who the siblings happen to be. Yet in the psychological literature the sibling is usually seen primarily as a rival for the mother's attention and affection (Freud), as an opponent to be overcome (Adler), or as a substitute attachment figure and “care-giving other” (Bowlby) largely as a result of “failed dependency” and deficient early “holding” (Winnicott, 1960/1990) experiences in the mother-infant relationship. The implication is that the sibling relationship is a secondary and, therefore, less significant one. Psychologists have only just begun to address the confusion and neglect in the literature relating to siblings and sibling loss.

In order to establish a context for the theme of the lived experience of the loss of a brother or sister, we need to understand the nature of the sibling bond. I will therefore first discuss the place of the sibling bond in psychology and look at the perspectives of different theorists as they relate to siblings, in an attempt to unravel the sibling bond. Thereafter, a review of the literature on the loss of a sibling will be discussed.