THE EXPERIENCE OF THE LOSS OF A SIBLING:
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

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The experience of the loss of a sibling: A phenomenological study

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Abstract

The study of the loss of a sibling in mainstream bereavement literature has been largely neglected in psychology. This sentiment has often, and still continues, to be expressed by those outside and within the psychological field. The focus in the childhood bereavement literature has been on the loss of a parent and, in adulthood, on the loss of a child or of a spouse. Despite the growing interest in sibling loss in more recent times (since the 1980s), more specifically in childhood and adolescent sibling loss, in reality bereaved siblings remain “forgotten” and even marginalised.

The present study concerned the experience of the loss of a brother or sister in young adulthood, an area that has been largely neglected. The phenomenon was explored using a qualitative approach and employing the empirical phenomenological psychological research method as articulated by Amedeo Giorgi. In-depth interviews with three research participants, who were asked to describe their experience of the loss of their sibling, were used to gather the data. The emphasis was on discovery, on allowing the siblings to speak for themselves by posing an open-ended question rather than focusing on isolated aspects of the loss experience.

The general psychological structure revealed that the experience of the loss of a brother or sister evolves over time and cannot meaningfully be understood as an event that can be contained within a specified moment in time. The experience is a fundamentally relational and paradoxical phenomenon and is reflective of the context in which it occurs. With the loss, the sibling’s whole world changes in a very radical way. It is a triple loss: the loss of the brother or sister, the loss of the family unit and the “loss” of the parents as the siblings had known them. Initially bereaved siblings put aside their grief in an attempt to protect parents and significant others. A conspiracy of silence evolves which conceals their pain and as they continue with life as “normal” there is a deceptive belief of “coping well”, of personal stability. Yet internally the bereaved sibling struggles with intense emotions and a lonely struggle ensues. The lack of acknowledgement of the sibling’s grief by others compounds the sense of
isolation and alienation and he/she begins to feel like an “implicated alien”, a participant-spectator; part-of and also apart-from the grief situation. Finding a safe space to grieve is critical to bereaved siblings and when this is possible they are able to let go of their deep emotions and grieve the loss of their brother or sister. The loss of a sibling is the experience of losing various parts of the self and needing to reclaim and reintegrate the self.

The main contribution of this study can be described as providing insights concerning the complex, multi-layered and multi-dimensional process of this loss experience to clinicians and others who care for bereaved siblings. Where the extant psychoanalytic and object relations literature is willing to concede that a sibling relationship exists, screened behind parental relationships, the present study reveals that siblings have a unique relationship of their own and that the loss of this relationship demands radical mourning. This study also reveals that a death in the family is a fundamentally relational experience. The loss of a brother or sister and the loss of a child frequently overlap and tumble into each other and it is difficult to know for whom the sibling is grieving at any particular moment. Thus, grief over the loss of a brother or sister cannot be reduced to a purely intra-psychic or psycho-social process. The fact that sibling grief is not visible does not mean that it does not exist. Clinicians and caregivers need to be aware of the existential chaos, the trauma, and the ambiguous and paradoxical nature of the sorrow experienced by a sibling-who-loses-a-sibling.

Future research into the loss of a brother or sister beyond young and middle adulthood, an area that has also largely been neglected, would constitute an important contribution to the psychology of siblings and of sibling loss/bereavement throughout the life cycle. Also significant would be the exploration of what happens in the sibling group following the loss of one of their members.

**Key Terms:**
- Siblings
- Sibling Bond
- Sibling Loss
- Adult Sibling Loss
- Parental Grief
- Sorrow
- Grief-process
- Grief-work
- Grief-therapy
- Qualitative research
- Phenomenology
- Existentialism
TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

1.1. Motivation for the Study 1
1.2. Overview of the Study 3
1.3. Aim of the Study 6

CHAPTER TWO
SIBLING LOSS
Too Little Acknowledged; Too Little Mourned 7

CHAPTER THREE
LITERATURE REVIEW: PART ONE
THE SIBLING BOND

3 Introduction 16

3.1. The Place of the Sibling Bond in Psychology 18
   3.1.1. Sigmund Freud 18
   3.1.2. Carl Gustav Jung 20
   3.1.3. Alfred Adler 20
   3.1.4. Object Relations and Attachment Theorists 21
   3.1.5. The Cultural Revisionists 21
   3.1.6. Erik H Erikson 21
   3.1.7. Harry Stack Sullivan 22
   3.1.8. Family Systems Theorists 23

3.2. Unravelling the Sibling Bond 23
   3.2.1. Sibling Relationships are Long-lasting 24
   3.2.2. Sibling relationships are ascribed rather than earned 24
   3.2.3. Sibling relationships are egalitarian 25
   3.2.4. The Subtle Dialectic of Sameness and difference 25
   3.2.5. Sibling relationships are deeply embedded in the family 26

3.3. The Dimensions of the Sibling Bond 27
   3.3.1. Socialisation 28
   3.3.2. Familiar Presence and Constancy 28
   3.3.3. Companionship 29
   3.3.4. Supportive and Solacing Power 29
   3.3.5. Loyalty 30
   3.3.6. Rivalry 31
   3.3.7. Identification 31

3.4. Concluding Comments 32
CHAPTER FOUR
LITERATURE REVIEW: PART TWO

SIBLING LOSS

4. Introduction and Definitions

4.1. Theoretical Perspectives on Loss, Grief and Mourning

4.1.1. Sigmund Freud (1917) - Psychoanalytic Theory

4.1.2. Melanie Klein (1940) - Object Relations Theory

4.1.3. Erich Lindemann (1944) – The Medical Model

4.1.4. John Bowlby - Attachment Theory

4.1.5. Elizabeth Kubler–Ross – Stage Theory

4.1.6. Theories of Ongoing Attachment

4.1.7. Systems Models of Grief

4.1.8. The Existential-Phenomenological Perspective

4.2. Literature and Research Review of Sibling Loss

4.2.1. Individual Aspects of Sibling Loss

4.2.1.1. Sibling Losses in Childhood and Adolescence

• Grief Responses

• The Nature of the Pre-death Relationship

• Circumstances of the Death

• Sudden or Unexpected Losses

• Perinatal Loss : The "Invisible Loss"

• Loss of a Twin

• Losses due to a Life-threatening or Chronic Illness

• The Effect of Time

• Persistent or Enduring Grief

• Ongoing Attachment

• Personal Growth and Developmental Interference

• Enhanced Spiritual Awareness

4.2.1.2. Sibling Losses in Adulthood

• Personal Vulnerability Toward Death

• Impact on Sense of Self

• Threat to Family Unity

4.2.2. Familial Aspects of Sibling Loss

4.2.2.1. Parental Grief

• The Conspiracy of Guilt : The "Haunted" Child

• The Preciousness of the Survivor : The "Bound" Child

• Substitution for the Lost Child : The "Resurrected" Child

4.2.2.2. Communication within the Family

4.2.2.3. The Family as a System

4.2.3. Societal Aspects of Sibling Loss

4.2.3.1. The Social Pathology of Death

4.2.3.2. The Role of Siblinghood

4.2.3.3. Relationship with Peers, Professionals and Others

• Withdrawal, Loneliness and Isolation

• What was Helpful

• What was not Helpful

4.2.4. Intervention and Support

4.3. Concluding Comments
## CHAPTER FIVE

**THE STUDY: METHODOLOGY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>5. Introduction</th>
<th>93</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5.1. Methodological Orientation</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1.1. Philosophical Ground of the Phenomenological Approach</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1.2. Empirical Phenomenological Psychological Research</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2. The Research Process</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.1. On Bracketing</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3. Data Gathering</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.1. Research Participants</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.2. The Preliminary Study</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.3. The Research Interviews</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.4. Protection of Research Participants</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4. Data Explication and Analysis</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4.1. Sense of the Whole</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4.2. The Emergence of Natural Meaning Units (NMU)</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4.3. Central Themes</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4.4. Situated Constituents</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4.5. Situated Narrative Description (Situated Structure)</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4.6. The General Structural Narrative</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4.7. The General Psychological Structure</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4.8. Structural Synthesis</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4.9. Essential Structure</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5. Concluding Comments</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## CHAPTER SIX

**THE INVESTIGATION AND RESULTS**

| 6.1. The Research Question | 117 |
| 6.2. The Research Participants | 117 |
| 6.3. Data Analysis | 118 |
| 6.3.1. Participant 1: Cathy | 119 |
| 6.3.2. Participant 2: Dia | 156 |
| 6.3.3. Participant 3: Elena | 164 |
| 6.4. The Findings | 171 |
| 6.4.1. General Structural Narrative | 172 |
| 6.4.2. General Psychological Structure | 177 |
| 6.5. Structural Synthesis | 205 |
| 6.6. Essential Structure | 208 |
CHAPTER SEVEN

DISCUSSION

7. Introduction
   7.1. Findings and Theory
      7.1.1. Fragmentation of Familial Holding Environment
              • The Double Loss
              • The Dialectic of "Holding" and "Holding-on"
      7.1.2. Space and Nothingness
      7.1.3. Oneness and Separateness
      7.1.4. Remembering and Forgetting (Memories)
      7.1.5. The Developmental Challenge (Intimacy vs. Isolation)
      7.1.6. Paradox and Polarity
      7.1.7. The Pain of Loss (Grief)
              • Distancing and Connectedness
              • Anger, Pain and Sadness
              • ‘Guilt’: Concern and Responsibility
      7.1.8. The Trapped Position of the "Involved-Outsider"
      7.1.9. The Silent and Lonely Journey
      7.1.10. Resolution

7.2. The Gestalt of Sibling Loss

7.3. The Pattern of Sibling Grief

7.4. Professional Perceptions of Siblings and Sibling Loss

7.5. Cultural Perceptions and Social Practices

7.6. Implications for Psychotherapy

7.7. Revisiting the Method
      7.7.1. Limitations of the Study
      7.7.2. Implications of the Study
      7.7.3. Possibilities for Future Research

7.8. Concluding Comments

REFERENCES

APPENDIX A: Tables I & II
Participant 2: Dia
Participant 3: Elena

APPENDIX B: Interviews
Participant 1: Cathy
Participant 2: Dia
Participant 3: Elena

APPENDIX C: Forms
Form A: Letter to Research Participant
Form B: Participant Consent Form
Form C: Thank You Letter

APPENDIX D: Preliminary study
Written Descriptions
Volunteer 1: Angie
Volunteer 2: Mary