

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Bereaved siblings have been described as silent, forgotten, “invisible” mourners. This study seeks to explore the phenomenon of sibling loss. Specifically it attempts to clarify the range of *meanings* that a sibling gives to the experience of losing a brother or sister to death. Using an existential-phenomenological research program, I will enter the *lived* world of surviving siblings, give them a voice and also contribute to an understanding of their world.

The sibling relationship, apart from a clinical interest in sibling rivalry, has not enjoyed a prominent position in psychology. In our western culture, the role of “siblinghood” is under-emphasised. However, the experiential facts remain: the sibling relationship is a powerful and intimate one; an egalitarian bond that under normal circumstances endures for life. Profoundly complex psychological issues surround the loss of a brother or sister. Burning questions motivate this research: How does one live through the experience of losing such a unique participant in one’s life? What is it like to lose someone who has been part of your world from childhood - a brother or sister who shares the same parents, speaks your language, affirms you in many ways; one who may have the same inflection of voice and even look like you? In this study I explore and explicate the meaning of sibling loss in young adulthood as it unfolds within the context of the family.

1.1. Motivation for the study

Arguably most social scientific research has roots in one’s personal life. In my case, two realities, separate yet profoundly related, ground my interest in, and sensitivity to the phenomenon. Firstly, I am a survivor who has experienced the personal loss of a brother (stillborn); secondly my role as psychotherapist unwittingly invited the phenomenon into my professional domain. Thus, the importance of the phenomenon has impressed itself upon my psyche as sister/daughter/mother and has increased my awareness as a clinician.

In psychotherapy, I have been a witness to the place that sibling grief occupies in the emotional lives of survivors. I have been struck by *knotted grief*, the tendency of adults to conceal their grief and to minimise the impact of the loss of a brother or sister. Although they come to therapy suffering, they rarely mention their sibling's death as the presenting or central issue. Spontaneous stories of loss, if told at all, typically come to the fore well into the therapeutic process. Even then, the narration is often unemotional, as if the death belongs merely to the *historical past*. Frequently adult clients do not mention the loss at all unless specifically questioned about it.

What do these clinical facts mean? Why do some siblings themselves apparently push their sadness aside and “pretend” that life is the same as before? Have they learned to live with the loss? Or have these surviving siblings simply successfully “resolved” their grief and now suffer from unrelated issues? The correlative theoretical question is: Why has the discipline of psychology slipped into such a long silence about this loss-predicament?

Reflection upon the literature gives initial hints at answers. Certain losses are acknowledged as prominently significant: the life events of losing a parent, child or spouse are rarely ignored. Clients recall them spontaneously as life-altering happenings. Losing a brother or a sister to death, however, does not seem to have a place in the life of the survivor; seems to be relegated to “no man's land” or is overshadowed by the intense grief of parents and other significant others in the life of the deceased sibling. Once the subject is broached, however, grief wells up so strongly in some clients that it can scarcely be contained. Some speak out about the loss of their brother or sister for the first time - to anybody - even though many years have elapsed since the death occurred. Vividly recalled and intensely painful memories then become a cardinal therapeutic issue. Paradoxically, some clients continue to minimise the event, almost dismiss it, preferring to focus instead on more “pressing” and immediate issues.

A privileged listener to this unique death drama within the therapeutic context, I have witnessed its significance. Life-long scars follow in its wake; scars that need to be converted into marks. Seeking help, so I might aid in that conversion, I turned to the grief literature, to popular self-help writings on grief/loss and to psychotherapeutic texts. Above all, I discovered the neglect. Sibling loss is too little understood and consequently too little mourned.

This venture into the literature was fruitful. What I found present and what was absent were equally revealing. Like several other research workers, I learned that siblings who had lost a brother or sister in childhood feel very alone in their grief. Textbooks and manuals in the general bereavement literature (Bowlby, 1980; Parkes, 1972/1975; Raphael, 1984) either lack information on, or make only brief references to sibling loss. It is a chant that is often repeated: the bereaved parents remain the main focus when a child's death occurs. With few exceptions (Davies, 1999; Pape, 1999, 2002), both clinical practice and academic research deal with isolated variables related to sibling loss (e.g. reactions to the loss, circumstances of the death, closeness of the pre-death relationship, time elapsed since the death), and do not adequately reflect the whole experience of the loss of a brother or sister.

The fragmented corpus reveals a gap; a need for a more comprehensive understanding of the sibling loss experience persists. Only a comprehensive study will give a voice to the surviving brothers and

sisters. My task was to find the adequate theoretical vision that would promote the exploration of sibling loss and identify its place within psychology.

1.2 Overview of the Study

Over the past two-and-half decades (since the 1980s) researchers have attempted to break the silence surrounding the loss of a brother or sister. A burgeoning number of research projects on sibling loss have emerged. Later I will address that literature. However, from the outset it must be stated that, with few exceptions, the story of sibling loss has infrequently been obtained from siblings themselves. The first person perspective has seldom been used. Scant research has been conducted on the psychological *meanings* that such a loss has for surviving siblings. The gap between the lived reality and research has not yet been bridged.

“What does it mean to lose a brother or sister?”; “What is the lived experience like?”; “How does the grief process evolve over time?”; are questions that need to be answered.

Generally psychological understandings of loss and grief are based on theories of attachment and separation and these have also been applied to the understanding of sibling loss. In the context of bonding, Sigmund Freud's notion of “besetzung” – “attachment”/“bond”/“tie” - is pivotal to the understanding of grief and sorrow. Freud (1917/1957) also started the psychiatric-psychological investigation of mourning (i.e. grief) and was the first to identify the value of the “work” of mourning, while John Bowlby (1973, 1979, 1980) highlighted separation with its implications of anxiety and saw loss as a special form of separation anxiety. Other theorists, Klein (1940/1991) and Lindemann (1944/1981), also provide valuable insights into how the loss of a significant other is experienced. However, while aspects of the loss experience of siblings are evident in these theories, none in effect adequately conceptualise the full experience of sibling loss, which, as already mentioned, is unique.

In the context of the family, some researchers have highlighted the impact on bereaved siblings of the parents' grief with its implications of the intense and protracted mourning of parents: lack of personal resources to support remaining siblings (Rosen, 1984-85; Davies, 1999); changes in the parents' way of relating to surviving siblings (Cain, *et al.*, 1964; Krell & Rabkin, 1979); differential grief of family members and the emergence of conflict and additional stress arising from this (Rosenblatt, *et al.*, 1991; Gilbert, 1996). These factors were found to impact on the outcome of sibling grief. Similarly, the effect of other potentially supportive relationships, for example, peers, other adults, teachers and professionals, has been examined in terms of whether they help or hinder the adjustment of bereaved siblings following the loss of a brother or sister.

Davies' (1999) model of sibling loss, relating more specifically to the loss of a brother or sister during childhood, i.e. “I hurt inside”; “I don't understand”; “I don't belong”; and “I'm not enough”, provides a more comprehensive understanding of this loss experience. She notes that all of these responses are affected in turn by individual, environmental and situational factors. This model provides a map that can be used by caregivers in their attempts to understand and support bereaved siblings. Another map is provided by Pape (1999, 2002), one which focuses on the textural meanings, the undulations of this uncharted terrain, and the temporal qualities of the lived experience of losing a sibling in young to middle adulthood.

While the contributions of these and other theorists and clinicians provide a map to explore what it means to lose a significant other, in the present study every effort was made to remain open-ended and unbiased in my approach. By bracketing all preconceived ideas and bereavement theories, I hoped to approach the phenomenon freshly and to be receptive to new discoveries that would extend beyond the definitions of psychoanalytic, object-relations and attachment theories. The intention was not to seek theoretical confirmation, but to allow the phenomenon to reveal itself.

Willingness to move beyond the defined limits of theory was highlighted by the existential-phenomenological perspective that enables us to envisage death and mourning as a profound and lasting transformation of existence. Based on his own suffering, the Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, provides us with a vision beyond the predetermined paradigm of ego structure and its definitions. Focus on the phenomenon revealed that the study concurs with Freud's concept of the mood of “mourning” (grief in today's parlance) and Kierkegaard's concept of “sorrowing” as part of the human condition. Both Freud and Kierkegaard recognise that grief is normal, that it is not time-bound, and both acknowledge the need to sorrow through our suffered losses.

Using an existential-phenomenological perspective was helpful where, with the spirit of Heidegger, Levinas, and Kierkegaard, an attempt was made to explore and understand the lived experience of sibling loss. Heidegger's concept of being-there-in-the-world-with-others suggests that man and world are interrelated. We cannot speak about the one without referring to the other. Thus, with the loss of a significant other, Dasein not only experiences himself differently, but his world is also changed. Revealing the structure of the phenomenon of sibling loss facilitates an understanding of the fundamentally relational aspect of this loss experience. It is not simply a matter of individual pain. The loss has reverberations that affect many others. Finding a space amongst all the torn relationships in which to grieve generates existential confusion and frequently delays the sibling's mourning process.

The present thesis comprises seven chapters. Following Chapter One, with its introduction to the study, Chapter Two provides an overview of the state of the literature on sibling loss and highlights the fact that it is an experience that, perhaps more than any other loss, is too little acknowledged and too little mourned. This provides the basis for the literature review that follows.

The literature review is divided into two chapters.

Chapter Three concerns itself with the sibling *bond* and unravels some of the dimensions of this unique relationship as revealed in the literature.

Chapter Four presents a selective rather than an exhaustive literature review of sibling *loss*. Although the present study specifically concerns the experience of sibling loss in young adulthood, there is a paucity of literature in this field, and studies relating to the loss of a brother or sister in childhood and adolescence, on which the bulk of the literature is based, are therefore also included. The respective themes of individual, familial and societal aspects of the loss are then discussed and these are grounded in the sibling bond. This section focuses on the research (both quantitative and qualitative) that has addressed the phenomenon. The chapter's contribution is, in a sense, limited in that it succeeds only in demonstrating the paucity of research that adequately reaches the lived-world of bereaved siblings. The meaning of the experience can be understood only when we know its full context. When we discuss the loss experience simply in terms of individual, familial or societal *reactions* to the loss, the meaning for the bereaved sibling is lost. Having encountered death, we need to know *how* the sibling experiences himself or herself in his or her world and *what* gives rise to this. Awareness of context gives meaning to, and even changes the meaning of the loss experience for the individual. Taking into account that sibling loss is a lived relational phenomenon, this Chapter will illuminate how the studies have bypassed and neglected the *interactive* and *processional* nature of sibling loss. This has important implications for research methodology, and the need for an alternative research method becomes apparent in this chapter.

Chapter Five deals with the methodological orientation and the rationale of the empirical phenomenological research approach, showing how the data are obtained and how the implicit structure is made explicit. The siblings' stories *are* the data and "fidelity" to the participants' accounts remains paramount. My task, as researcher, is to highlight its sense and to draw from it psychological insights. The intention is not to provide causative information or to make statistical deductions. My academic purpose is to conduct empirical psychological research; my clinical intention is to share insights with therapists and caregivers who inevitably will deal with a sibling grieving the loss of a brother or sister, or a parent who is grieving the loss of his or her child. Beyond this, there is the hope, as expressed by others (Kubler-Ross, 1969/1985, 1974), that our society may relearn that death is an

essential part of life, and that open discussion about grief, mourning and bereavement may contribute to a more accepting attitude in the community.

Chapter Six deals with the actual study; the Investigation and Findings. The final chapter, Chapter Seven, includes a discussion of the results and, where relevant, a dialogue between the findings of the present study and the existing literature on sibling loss in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of this unique loss experience. The chapter includes a concise description of the gestalt of sibling loss followed by the pattern of sibling grief and implications for support and psychotherapy for bereaved siblings, as these emerge from the study. Professional and cultural conceptions and perceptions of the sibling bond and sibling loss and the extent to which these beliefs contribute to the conspiracy of silence surrounding the loss of a brother or sister in young adulthood, are also briefly discussed. The chapter ends with a revisiting of the method used: the implications of the study; its limitations; and suggestions for further research.

For ease of reading, and also because the participants in the study were all female, I have chosen to use “she” and “her” when referring to the bereaved sibling in the Investigation and Findings (i.e. Chapter Six) and in the Discussion (i.e. Chapter Seven) sections of the thesis. This in no way intends to exclude the male surviving sibling and may apply equally to the other gender. When writing about the sibling who died, “he” or “she” and “his” or “her” will be used. It is indeed important to encompass both brother and sister in the text when referring to the one who is mourned. For the purpose of confidentiality, fictitious names have been assigned to *all* the participants who volunteered to participate in the study as well as to *all* members of their family that are mentioned in the interviews or written descriptions.

1.3 Aim of the Study

The aim of the present study is to understand the *meanings* of the experience of sibling loss, to discover and describe the structure and essence of the phenomenon and to give a voice to surviving siblings. In so doing, I hope to contribute to knowledge in the field of psychology and enhance clinicians’ awareness of the significance of this loss experience thereby also contributing to psychotherapy and bereavement counselling.