

**CHAPTER 3**  
**LITERATURE REVIEW : PART ONE**  
***THE SIBLING BOND***

**3. Introduction**

It is appropriate to unravel this complex loss of one's brother or sister. The psychological literature on the sibling bond, as already mentioned, is sparse and in its sparseness slanted. Remarkably, this theory-rich discipline simply lacks a nuanced understanding of siblings apart from the parent-child bond, as if sibling ties are derived solely from parental relationships. Probing this oversight of an important life-world relationship is a pivotal theme of this study.

Loss presupposes an attachment (Freud, 1917/1957; Bowlby, 1979, 1980). Thus, articulating the importance of bonding provides the necessary context for examining the theme of sibling loss. In the case of the sibling relationship one may more accurately speak of “attachments”, as over the life span the distinctive feature of this unique relationship is a multiplicity of relationships with one's brother or sister and complex ties to the shared parents.

First a few comments on the meaning of the word “bond”. Part of Freud's pioneering work was to introduce the term into psychology. He used the richly nuanced German word “besetzung” to capture the multidimensional nature of human bonding. “Besetzung” means bond, link, tie, ... *investment* (as someone invests capital) and occupation (the force with which an army occupies a country). Freud is referring not only to the intimate bond of the infant to the mother, the investment in a cause, the embrace of adult love, but also to the fist shaken in anger/hatred. By describing the vicissitudes of the drive (*trieb*), Freud provides a roadmap of human development. Likewise, he demonstrates that the formation of a *group* is a matter of attachment, one in which members bond with one another in their shared bond with the leader of the group (in this case the parents). In terms of dealing with loss and grieving, he articulated the structure of grief-work. The bereaved must hyper-invest in order to de-link in service of re-bonding. In the English Standard Edition of Freud's works, his down-to-earth language has been changed in favour of the Greek terms: cathexis (“καθεξις”, a holding; retention), hyper-cathexis, de-cathexis, re-cathexis. This distortion has contributed to depicting Freud as a medical positivist and has detracted from the insights that could be gained from his reflections on loss, grief and depression (mourning and melancholia).

Developmental psychology has appropriated the term to characterise the close mother-child relationship. Bank and Kahn (1982) also refer to the sibling attachment as a “bond”. The definition of the term “bond” provides some clues as to the appropriateness of referring to the attachments formed

by siblings as “bonds”. The Pocket Oxford Dictionary (1984) defines “bond” as “a thing or force that unites or restrains”; “linkage of atoms in a molecule”; “hold or tie together”. “Bondage” has the meaning of “slavery”; “confinement, subjection to constraint or influence.” Bonds paradoxically unite and restrain. In the evolving self, they influence and constrain. Part of the mystery of the sibling relationship is that, like the parent-child bond, relationships between brothers and sisters cannot be dissolved. Siblings are bound to each other for life.

Turning to the dictionary definition we find that the term “sibling” is not even mentioned in the earlier editions of the Concise Oxford Dictionary. One entry was found in the 1952 edition: i.e. “sib” defined concisely as “related” or “akin.” “Brother” and “Sister” are respectively defined as “*Son* of same parents” and “*Daughter* of same parents” (my italics) thereby emphasizing the parent-child bond and ignoring the *relationship between* brothers and sisters. In the 1984 edition of The Concise Oxford Dictionary two brief entries are found: i.e. *sib = sibling*, and *sibling = one of two or more children having one or both parents in common*. The Greek word for brothers and sisters, “adelphoi” (“αδελφοί”), also identifies siblings by biological criteria using the maternal line as the main criterion: i.e. “*of or from the same womb.*”

A more comprehensive definition can be found in The World Book Dictionary (1988): i.e. “*sib*” - *related by blood; closely related; akin ... a brother or sister*. The word “*sibling*” (*sib + ling*) is defined as “*a brother or sister*”; “*A sibling may be (a) each or any one of two or more individuals born to the same parents...including twins, triplets, and the like; (b) each or any one of two or more individuals having one parent in common; and (c) any brother or sister adopted into the family*”. “*An only child has no siblings*” - i.e. is **not** a sibling. In the last-mentioned definition, the relationship between siblings is not only acknowledged, but also suggests that a brother or sister extends the sense of self and changes the status of the child to that of “sibling.”

Today it is generally accepted that the world of the child changes radically with the advent of a brother or sister but this realisation, and that of the impact of the death of a sibling, have not always been recognised as significant life events. Davies (1999) advances the hypothesis that this stems in part from historical facts. Prevailing attitudes in the Western world during and prior to the 16<sup>th</sup> century considered the child as “nothing more than a lower animal” (1999:18-19). High infant and child mortality rate at that time is another consideration. It is not within the scope of this thesis to explore the history of childhood (for some interesting information in this area, see Philippe Ariès, 1962). Suffice it to say that attitudes in the Western world towards children have changed dramatically over the past years and the above definitions seem to reflect the historical development of greater interest in children, and of siblings.

Although it is also outside the scope of this study to make cross-cultural comparisons, it is apparent that various cultural groups differ in the way the term *sibling* is used and in respect of who is identified as a sibling. Within some African cultures, for example, “my brother” or “my sister” is applied very broadly and not limited only to biological and adoptive siblings. The term can refer to any other member of the same tribe or group.

Western societies are more generally inclined to identify siblings by genealogical or biological criteria in the case of full siblings and half siblings, and by legal criteria, in the case of step- or adoptive siblings (Cicirelli, 1995: 71). Biological and legal definitions include full siblings, half-siblings and adoptive siblings. Given the increasing prevalence of blended families, Cicirelli (1995) also mentions stepsiblings - i.e. where the individuals have no biological parents *in common* - and “fictive siblings” - i.e. non-family members who have been accepted into the family as siblings based on “desirability or custom rather than on the basis of blood ties or legal criteria” (1995: 3) and where “affectional or behavioural” criteria would apply (1995: 71). Foster children who may live as fully integrated members of a family for a few years could arguably be included in this latter group.

The broader application of the concept of siblingship presents a challenge to researchers of sibling bereavement who seek to understand this loss experience as distinct from bereavement following the loss of other significant others (Robinson & Mahon, 1997). From a phenomenological perspective it is the *meaning* that counts. Cross-culturally and within a culture or within a sub-culture or within a family, it is the *meaning* predicated to another that makes one a “sibling.” For the purposes of this study, the participants themselves decided who counted as a “sibling”. In point of fact, only full siblings volunteered to participate, and were included in the study.

### **3.1 The place of the sibling bond in psychology**

Sigmund Freud started the psychiatric-psychological investigation of the phenomenon of grief. His notion of “besetzung”, of course, is pivotal to any understanding of loss, grief and sorrow. But has he, or have his followers, dissidents or revisionists, shed light on sibling loss? Or has the psychoanalytic emphasis on the nuclear family essentially minimised sibling bonds and contributed to the way in which the grief of siblings has been marginalised?

#### **3.1.1 Sigmund Freud**

Existentially, Freud was stuck in the patriarchy and he accentuated parental authority as befitted the historical and cultural situation of his time. His most astonishing discovery concerned the core of neurosis, the Oedipus complex. Few scholars fail to note that Sigmund was a first-born and his mother's favourite. Some writers argue that this may partly explain why Freud focused his attention on the special and intimate relationship of the child to his parents. Most critics, however, realise that

Freud's own attachment gave him a special sensitivity to his patients' Oedipal predicament, and helped him to explain various psychological phenomena that until then had been explained reductively as flaws in the brain or in the central nervous system.

Pertinent to the theme of this study, Freud did not highlight the sibling relationship in his theory of personality development (Brunori, 1998). However, in a very thorough article on the psychoanalytic literature on siblings, Colonna and Newman (1983: 289) document that Freud did indeed bring to the surface the importance of siblings, even describing specific developmental advantages in the sibling relationship. Some of these developmental advantages include: intellectual stimulation provided by siblings, impact of siblings on later object choice, and the effect of a sibling on a girl's maternal instincts. What does this ambiguity mean?

Ernest Jones (1953/1956: 4) points out that when Freud was 11 months old, a brother, Julius was born and died 8 months later (i.e. when Freud was 19 months old). Although Freud makes little mention of the loss in his writings, he does accentuate the powerful emotions associated with such losses, the tremendous conflict and guilt resulting from rivalry towards the newcomer. In terms of the multiple conflicts and relational breaks with male friends, both older (Breuer) and younger (Jung, Rank, Firenczi), it is safe to say that the loss issue, with all its unconscious and ambivalent features, haunted him throughout his life. As we will see below, he left it to Adler to emphasise the drama of siblings within the family.

Concerning the full reality of sibling bonds, what is significant is that few papers appear with *sibling* in the title, and that in contrast to other important topics, there has never been a panel or symposium on siblings. Fifteen years after Colonna and Newman's publication (1983), a Workshop on Sib-Links was held by the Group-Analytic Society. Surprisingly, even then Wooster (1998: 331) notes that, "in scanning the relatively small amount of literature on sibling dynamics much of it seems to be confined to the last 10 or 15 years."

With his discovery of a *dynamic* unconscious, Freud became preoccupied with the Oedipal triangle. He probed the dramatic issues that take place within that constellation, the various and sundry emotions that the erotic-aggressive *trieb* spurs: love and hate, jealousy and envy, possessiveness and resentments. Within the "games of triangles", sibling interactions were dominated by that geometrical figure (mother-child-father) and by the play of forces that occurs with its various constellations of lines and angles. Sibling interaction was relegated to issues of rivalry for the mother's attention and affection or for the father's power and respect.

Freud's (1954) contribution to this century's understanding of the significance of early childhood experiences for subsequent development and the observations, in his work on dreams, of the intensity of conflicting emotions in the child's inner world (not only in relation to parents but also in relation to siblings): namely that "intense hostile feelings between siblings are far more frequent in childhood than the unseeing eye of the adult observer can perceive" (1954: 252), opened the door to the exploration of the meaning of the sibling relationship. In referring to the relation of children to their brothers and sisters, Freud not only introduced the theme of sibling rivalry and Oedipal jealousy but also the concept of ambivalence in the sibling relationship: "I do not know why we presuppose that *that* relation must be a loving one" (1954: 250).

Unfortunately, Freud did not expand his insights into the sibling relationship and in the psychoanalytic literature following Freud, siblings were perceived mainly as rivals, as objects which frustrate the child's egoistic needs for union with the mother and who generate anxieties about being replaced by a younger brother or sister (Colonna and Newman, 1983: 286). Followers and dissidents of Freud did little to highlight the power and mystery of the sibling bond.

### **3.1.2 Carl Gustav Jung**

Jung's anthropological and spiritual psychology, so far removed from Freud's preoccupation with Oedipus, never specifically addresses the sibling relationship. He merely alludes to it while detailing the archetypes of the collective unconscious. The "Sister"/"Brother" archetype is subsumed under either the "anima"- "animus" or the "shadow" insofar as the sister/brother frequently functions as one's "alter ego": balance; the other side; one's "shadow".

### **3.1.3 Alfred Adler**

Adler (1927/1998) deviated from Freud by stressing the social factors in development and in the origin of the neuroses. His emphasis on inferiority is part of his picture of the individual confronting the social situation. It is within this context that Adler is the only major follower of Freud to discuss sibling influences at any length. Each child is born and raised within a family with a specific perspective contingent upon his or her position in relation to other siblings. In this sense, Adler (1932/1980: 144-155) provided a nuanced view of the stylistic differences of the child according to birth order.

His emphasis on the importance of the social dimension led to a break from Freud's intimate circle. Adler postulated specifically that power was more basic than sexuality to familial, gender and inter-gender relationships. As the second of six children (Orgler, 1939), Adler acknowledged the importance of siblings but focused more on the effects of the drive for status and power and the importance of compensating for feelings of inferiority. Thus, competitive strivings, interpersonal

struggles and compensatory processes dominate his “Individual Psychology”. Sibling rivalry is one manifestation of the power struggles, the aggressive feelings that pivot around the inferiority-superiority dimension.

### 3.1.4 Object Relations and Attachment Theorists

“Object relations” and “attachment” theorists revised Freud by placing a premium on the pre-Oedipal, early mother-child relationship. Possibly this emphasis has contributed to the perception that the horizontal or “lateral” sibling relationships are secondary and relatively unimportant when compared to the “vertical” parent-child relationship (Brown, 1998). In the same vein, there is the expectation that siblings would be less affected in a *direct* way by the loss of a brother or sister.

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Bowlby (1980) concedes that siblings may function as substitute/surrogate attachment figures and caregivers, especially when the mother-infant bond is characterised as deficient in “holding” and “handling” or where there has been “failed dependency”. Following Freud, Bowlby (1979) also notes that ambivalence, the jostling of feelings of anger and hate with concern and love towards their siblings, and the conflict and guilt which arises within the child when these feelings are directed toward the same person, is the rule rather than the exception (Bowlby, 1979: 5).

In general though, object-relations theorists also missed the powerful impact that siblings have on each other's lives. The implication remained that the sibling relationship is a secondary and less significant one.

### 3.1.5 The Cultural Revisionists

The cultural revisionists of Freud (Karen Horney; Erik Erikson; Erik Fromm; Heinz Hartmann; Ernest Kris; R. M. Loewenstein) excise the *todestrieb*, the death-drive. They try to inject a healthy optimism into Freud's alleged lapse toward pessimism. Still this group did not resurrect the sibling bond and neglected its originality as a genuine relationship in its own right.

### 3.1.6 Erik H. Erikson

Erik Erikson's (1982/1994: 32-33) psycho-sexual/social developmental theory is rich with “radii of significant relations” throughout the life cycle, influencing all phases of an individual's development. He too views the sibling bond as deriving solely from the relationship to parents. Erikson underscores a major insight of both Freud and phenomenology, namely that time is personal, existential and lived, not linear, static or of successive duration. Thus he provides some perspective on the ways that sibling relationships change during various phases over an entire life span. For example, siblings assist or impede each other as they go through adolescence, play a mediating role in the family, help each other to better understand their parents, help one another to break away from home, influence marital

choices, share in the care of aged parents, and co-negotiate the funeral when parents die. However, Erickson does not make thematic the sibling bond, *qua* bond.

### 3.1.7 Harry Stack Sullivan

Sullivan's (1953) interpersonal relations theory, perhaps more than any other psychological theory, deconstructs the exclusivity, the “monolithic influence”, of the family as the main or only structure of developmental significance in the child's life. Although he too fails to elaborate on the sibling relationship, Sullivan does note that even in the early phases of an infant's life other caregivers (apart from the mother) may be intimately involved with the child and influence his/her development positively or negatively. A nurse, a grandparent or “older sister” may become as significant a person in the child's life, as primary a caregiver, as the mother/father (Sullivan, 1953: 115). Later, peers provide the opportunity for significant favourable change in a young person's sense of self that can be distorted by relationships within the family. This opportunity begins powerfully in the “juvenile era”, the “actual time for becoming social” (Sullivan, 1953: 227). Sullivan focuses on the “chum” relationship (1953: 245) during preadolescence as one of distinctive emotional power capable of modifying many of the “warps” in a child's personality development which arise from unsatisfactory parent-child relationships and the fixed roles which he or she is allocated within the primary family group. Especially because Sullivan's own life-experience made him well aware that the coming of a friend is a gift, an epiphany, a miracle, he urges everyone to be open to developing a “chum” relationship as early as possible. It helps one to overcome some of the “fantastic” ideas about the self that come from being the favourite in the family, the firstborn, the only boy/girl, etc. However, it is also the first “we”- relationship, and the first budding of love. With this exhortation in mind, and insofar as sibling relationships are considered to be relatively egalitarian and a brother or sister can also be a good “friend”, it may be argued that the sibling very often serves to accelerate the separation from mother and helps to overcome the illusion of symbiotic oneness with mother.

In the sense described above, it is perhaps safe to say that the earliest “chum” relationship occurs within the relationship between brothers and sisters. However, whereas friends can be conceptualised as “characters from different novels” (Blackwell, 1994: 44) coming together and creating their own story, siblings are essentially characters from the same “novel” thrown together, stuck with each other and sharing a common concern - their parents. The sibling bond, in these respects, is therefore far more complex and multi-layered than a best friend relationship, which can be discontinued once it ceases to be a mutually satisfying one. Reflecting on the above statement, one is confronted with the existential reality that while a brother or a sister can be disowned, the bond itself cannot be cancelled. It exists for life. How then is it possible that our social sciences have so thoroughly overlooked this bond for so long?

### 3.1.8 Family Systems Theorists

Turning to the family therapy literature (Barker, 1991; Haley, 1963; Minuchin, 1974, 1984) with its over-arching concern with the family group, there is an expectation that family therapy thinking would be sensitive to the power and inherent value of the sibling bond. In part, it is. However, mostly we find that in family systems theory (particularly that influenced by general systems theories), the sibling relationship is conceptualised as a “subsystem” or “subgroup.” The individual members are objectified as components in a system, rather than as individuals involved in a genuine relationship with a real other person. By reducing the relationship to a subsystem, the relationship *qua* relationship as well as the individual is lost.

If the lives of siblings are so little acknowledged and so little understood then their deaths too cannot be considered significant for the surviving sibling. More recently researchers have focused more specifically on the relationship between siblings, providing some important insights into this unique relationship.

## 3.2 Unraveling the Sibling Bond

Echoes of each other's being.  
Whose eyes are those that look like mine?  
Whose smile reminds me of my own?  
Whose thoughts come through with just a glance?  
Who knows me like no others do?  
Who in the whole world is most like me  
Yet not like me at all?  
My sibling.

From *What makes us siblings*, Faber & Mazlish, 1989 (in Davies, 1999:1)

While the sibling bond has attributes in common with other significant relationships, the above quote reveals the mysterious sense of self-in-the-other that comes from being a brother or sister, while simultaneously highlighting the awareness that the other is still “other”. Siblings may share the same parents, look alike, speak the same language, have the same voice inflection and intuitively understand each other and know each other’s core self but they are also uniquely themselves. A number of writers (Cicirelli, 1982, 1995; Rosen, 1986; Maratos, 1998; Davies, 1999) are in agreement that sibling bonds have certain unique and distinctive characteristics which distinguish them from other relationships and give the sibling bond a different texture to the bonds which bind individuals in other relationships. The memories and feelings that accompany the thoughts of one’s brother or sister in childhood are not based on the sibling status alone; they derive from the direct, interpersonal



*relationship* between siblings (Davies, 1999). Some unique characteristics of the sibling relationship have been identified and will be briefly discussed.

### **3.2.1 Sibling Relationships are Long-lasting**

Sibling relationships often last a lifetime. The relationship begins with the birth of the second child (even before the birth if the firstborn is prepared for the coming of a brother or sister) and usually endures throughout the life span. Cicirelli (1982) notes that the relationship with a sibling will probably be the longest lasting that a person will experience and is unique by virtue of its very duration and shared memories over the life span. Pape (1999) proposes that it is not longevity alone that distinguishes sibling relationships from other relationships but the fact that they must “constantly adjust to the ever-changing and developing nature of humans, across developmental stages, crises, initiations, successes and changes” (1999:1). While this may be true of other close and long-standing relationships, developmental changes within the first two decades of life, the period when siblings typically have the most intimate contact with each other, are probably the most dramatic. The connections that siblings forge are “deeply entrenched and embedded” (Pape, 1999). The important role that siblings play in providing a sense of “rootedness” and a sense of continuity cannot be underestimated. While siblings may be separated under certain circumstances, there can be no dissolution of the sibling *status* and there are instances where siblings who have been separated either through emigration or disruption of the family system still long to be reunited with each other. Cicirelli (1982: 268) expresses this as follows:

“The nature of the sib relationship is such that intimacy is immediately restored even after long absences. Siblings often go to great lengths to locate a brother or sister who has been separated by adoption or other circumstances, and when reunited, a uniquely close relationship develops almost immediately, even when none existed before.”

### **3.2.2 Sibling Relationships are Ascribed rather than Earned**

Closely related to the long-lasting nature of the sibling relationship is the absence of choice. Not chosen means that the relationship is non-conscious and without freedom, i.e. it is not consciously and freely entered into, nor can it be annulled or cancelled: “There are no rituals of church or synagogue that celebrate sibling bonds, nor legal means to break them” (Bank & Kahn, 1982: 5). A sibship is forever. One can choose not to be friends or to divorce but one cannot choose to be or not to be a sibling. The relationship is “given” and sibling status is obtained by birth, or by legal action in the case of step-siblings and adoptive siblings. It is significant in this respect that according to South African law an individual has a right to maintenance from his or her siblings should the parents not be able to support him or her (i.e. where there is a need in respect of one sibling, and an ability to provide in respect of the other sibling. This applies to all blood relatives).

These dimensions of the sibling bond, i.e. the duration of the relationship and the fact that it is *not chosen*, may be a source of comfort/security and/or distress. Unlike other relationships that one approaches directly and consciously forms, and which can be dissolved if the relationship is no longer mutually satisfying (or, as in some instances, no longer "useful"), sibling relationships, whether positive or negative, cannot be terminated or totally ignored.

### 3.2.3 Sibling Relationships are Egalitarian

Sibling relationships are more or less egalitarian and have been referred to as "horizontal" or "lateral" relationships to distinguish them from the "vertical" parent-child relationships. Even though power and status differences may exist between siblings due to a number of factors, including their position in the family, age, size, gender, influence on parents, and the fact that elder siblings may assume the role of protector, substitute caretaker or mentor, siblings generally relate to each other as equals. Minuchin (1984: 59) describes the sibling "subsystem" as a "social laboratory" where children explore peer relationships. Of significance in this regard is that in comparison to the parent-child relationship, siblings expect to be treated as equals by their brothers or sisters. An example would be the younger sibling who refuses to take orders from a much older sibling: "You can't tell me what to do. You are not my mother/father!"

### 3.2.4 The Subtle Dialectic of Sameness and Difference

Siblings have a shared world and a common language and culture that is given through the history of shared environments and shared lived experiences within the same family (unlike relationships with friends who have to *create* a common ground and a shared language). The storehouse of memories contributes to their similarities and to an understanding between them which others may find difficult to grasp (Cicirelli, 1995: 2). However, siblings also have many non-shared experiences and non-shared environments and these contribute to the differences between them (Cicirelli, 1995; Davies, 1999). Apart from having different friends and different experiences with other adult authorities, siblings receive differential treatment from the parents (e.g. first born as opposed to second born, only son or only daughter, favourite child, terminally ill child). It is also apparent that parents are not the "same" parents as they move through their own transitional phases and life experiences. Indeed, no sibling ever has the "same" parent. The very act of bringing the second into existence changes everything. In addition, siblings themselves perceive and experience their parents differently and take up certain experiences in very different ways. As pointed out by Cicirelli (1982: 268), "the nature of the sibling relationship varies with the particular individuals involved and can range from extreme closeness to extreme rivalry and hostility and, in some cases, total apathy."

Sibling bonds also change over time so that a close relationship may become more distant, and a rivalrous one may become extremely close. Thus, the feelings towards one's siblings are not based on

the sibling *status* alone but derive also from the *direct* relationship and interaction between siblings themselves. Consequently, when a brother or sister dies, surviving siblings (and parents) each respond in their own unique ways to the loss.

### 3.2.5 Sibling Relationships are Deeply Embedded in the Family

The link with family is another characteristic that distinguishes the sibling relationship from other significant relationships. The sibling relationship is unique because the individuals share one or both parents, a common cultural milieu (language, heritage, traditions), and common early experiences within the family, all of which bind them in very complex and unique ways. Even in adulthood, siblings usually maintain contact, attend family gatherings and jointly help with the care of aged parents (Cicirelli, 1982).

Another but related feature of the sibling relationship is played out by siblings after the death of parents (at the wake or funeral, at the reading of the will and the settling of the estate), when feelings of dis-ease and alienation occur; when siblings break away from, or draw closer to each other. This dimension of the sibling bond is mentioned by Maratos (1998: 342):

“... siblings are part of the family ‘business’. Alongside the emotional dimension of the relationships is the business side. ...Two prominent features of the family business are (a) who does the work, what work and when, and (b) who inherits the wealth.”

This raises the question: why do brothers and sisters become so intense at such events? In terms of psychoanalytic theory, this could be understood as a reactivation of early sibling rivalries and the need to be affirmed as the first, the best, the most loved and the most important to parents. It may well be sibling rivalry, but it seems to be more than this. Death is life's ultimate imperative. When it sounds, who can be sure of the echoes? Alapack (2004: 6) succinctly describes the existential chaos that reigns at these events:

“Weddings and funerals bring out the best and the worst in families. Some people desire the impossible: water from the moon. In this boundary situation, those who insisted on being placed first were disgruntled. I marvelled at the way Death slices and dices, showing us who will hang together and who will be pulled asunder...Death who puts all of us in second place, absolutely.”

At the death of a parent, grief either reigns or is conspicuously “present” by its absence. The “gears” of family functioning in the moment are not perfectly meshed. Mourning creates an existential mess. Thus it triggers extremes. It heals or it destroys.

### 3.3 The Dimensions of Sibling Bonds

OLDER SISTERS....are liable to nag. To refuse  
 to lend you things. To scold. To make you walk too fast.  
 But, on the other hand, they take on bully  
 boys at school and send them running for  
 their lives.  
 They disentangle problems in arithmetic  
 and knitting. And when they're grown they listen  
 to your secrets and anxieties. And never  
 tell - without your say-so.  
 An older sister is a friend and a defender -  
 a listener, conspirator, a counsellor and a  
 sharer of delights.  
 And sorrows too.

(Pam Brown, in Exley, 1995).

Siblings can be teachers, friends, comforters, teasers, defenders, mentors, therapists and competitors. Many of us will have experienced most of the following emotions at one time or another, and some of these emotions at the same time, in our sibling relationships: the awe/horror at seeing the new brother or sister for the first time; the jealousy/pride when he is admired by others; the enjoyment of holding this little being for a few moments and the resentment at having to take care of her; the intense anger when she breaks your special toy and the hurt/sadness when she refuses to play with you; the irritation when he follows you and your friends around, "shadows" you, imitates you, and the comfort of having him around on your first day at school; the relief or embarrassment when she protects you from the school bully; the joy and pride when he gets into first team cricket; the shared tears when she has her first love disappointment; the huddling together when parents argue or fight; the sadness and loss when he goes away to college. As stated by Bank and Kahn (1982: 296):

"As lived by each individual who is a brother or sister, the sibling experience dictates some of the grandest and some of the meanest of human emotions. The whole range of human feelings enters into this relationship, whose complexity defies anyone to dictate how and what it ought to be."

The complex and multi-dimensional nature of the relational world of brothers and sisters and the various dimensions of this bond, have been the focus of much developmental research over the past three decades (Bank & Kahn, 1982; Cicirelli, 1982, 1995; Dunn & Kendrik, 1982; Dunn, 1985; Schachter, 1982; Schachter & Stone, 1987; Sutton-Smith & Rosenberg, 1970). This focus highlights the significance of the sibling and the sibling group in terms of the child's social, emotional and moral development.

A review of the literature reveals several interwoven themes that characterise the sibling bond.

### 3.3.1 Socialisation

In their interaction with each other siblings learn to develop their sense of difference, to respect the rights of others, and to develop ways of resolving interpersonal conflicts (Moss & Moss, 1986). It is within the sibling relationship that children learn to share and to show mutual concern, to comfort and to annoy. Because they are stuck with each other, they learn how to negotiate, co-operate and compete. They also learn how to make friends and allies, how to save face while accommodating others, and how to achieve recognition of their skills (Minuchin, 1984: 59).

As noted by Moss and Moss (1986: 405) a younger sibling may experience the older one as a guide or mentor in approaching social situations and may be reassured by the success of the elder sibling that a task can be accomplished. Correlatively the elder sibling may gain a sense of personal competence in having mastered a specific life experience that now is a formidable task for the younger sibling. Socialisation continues into adulthood as siblings share experiences as they meet developmental milestones and in most cases continue to be significant role models for each other (1986: 405).

### 3.3.2 Familiar Presence and Constancy

A sibling offers a sense of familiar presence from earliest childhood (Bank & Kahn, 1982: 16) and brothers and sisters derive a sense of constancy that is particularly meaningful during times of stress and change (e.g. marital conflicts, divorce, separation from parents). In early childhood the sibling relationship is one of intimate daily contact as siblings interact within the home and at pre-school - they may share a bedroom, bath together, attend the same nursery school, play with the same friends and, most importantly, deal with the same parents. These shared experiences, which do not automatically imply an emotional closeness, nevertheless provide a sense of constancy and familiarity that facilitates the transition from absolute dependency to a degree of autonomy.

Winnicott (1953) uses the term “transitional object” to refer to inanimate objects that provide comfort and security to the young child during the stage of separation and individuation or in the face of a strange and unfamiliar, sometimes frightening, outside world. To a certain extent, siblings provide the constancy and security which enables the child to make the transition from mother and to face the outside world. Davies (1999: 7) refers to two studies (Stewart, 1983; Samuels, 1980) which demonstrate how the presence of elder siblings enabled younger siblings to explore an unfamiliar environment and how, from a protected position with an elder sibling, young children were also gradually able to engage a stranger in interaction. Although it is more frequently an elder sibling who supports and assists a younger one, a confident and outgoing younger sibling may also help an older brother or sister and facilitate greater exploration of his or her world.

### **3.3.3 Companionship**

Particularly at the pre-school level when siblings spend a great deal of time together, a sibling may be the only playmate that a child has. The importance of peer relationships in the development of children's capacity for concern for another person and empathy has been well documented by Sullivan (1953). However, we do not live with our friends; we live with our siblings. By virtue of the intimate daily contact between siblings, the sharing of a history within the family as well as having many shared experiences and activities, the capacity for concern and mutual identification is enhanced. Within this context siblings come to know each other intimately, often developing a private language and an understanding of each other which may be difficult even for parents to understand. While sibling companionship may be strongest in childhood and sometimes also in adolescence and young adulthood, weakened during the years of establishing other intimate relationships and their own nuclear family, this dimension of the sibling relationship may be re-activated in later adulthood when the "empty nest, widowhood and joint parent care" become significant issues (Moss & Moss, 1986: 405).

### **3.3.4 Supportive and Solacing Power of Siblings**

Siblings can have great solacing power and can provide support and containment (Winnicott's "holding environment") in the sense that they do not feel alone and their shared experiences enable them to cope better with stressful situations, e.g. loss, and the trauma of a fragmented family life through separation or divorce. Although siblings are not the most stable caregivers because of their own needs and immaturity, Bowlby (1973) has also shown that children separated temporarily from their mothers or other adult caregivers, are inclined to fare better provided the sibling relationship is also not disrupted. The solacing power of siblings is perhaps most powerfully demonstrated when siblings are placed in a Children's Home due to parental failure to care for their offspring (Rodrigues, 1998). In such circumstances, siblings frequently become the main attachment figures for each other and the only link to parents, and exert a formative influence on personality development and identity. It is significant that, in this respect, the courts are sensitive to children's needs for continuity and recognise the importance of the sibling relationship. Except in extreme or unusual circumstances, the separation of siblings from each other is discouraged in the event of a divorce or placement in foster care or in a Children's Home. Bank and Kahn (1982) aver that these sibling's relationships and identities may be intertwined, sometimes for life, because they have jointly faced traumatic psychological losses at crucial stages of their development.

However, while a sibling is more likely to assume the caring role when primary relationships cannot be relied on, there is ample evidence (Dunn, 1985) to suggest that this also occurs simply because of who the siblings happen to be and even very young children will attempt to console and protect their siblings without any adult prompting to do so. By studying young children in direct interaction with

their brothers and sisters, Dunn (1985: 23-24) was able to demonstrate that even within the first two years young children are able to display an understanding of their sibling's feelings. The siblings in her study showed the beginnings of empathy by displaying concern at their sibling's distress - fetched their comfort objects, stroked their siblings, or called for mother's help. As they grow older, some siblings can be so close that they can almost complete each other's sentences or "know" how the other is feeling without speaking at all. Indeed, it can be argued that siblings provide the most reliable and consistently supportive relationship and it is not unusual for siblings to remain sources of emotional support throughout the life span.

### 3.3.5 Loyalty

There are many siblings who are good friends as well as being siblings and this paves the way for satisfactory relationships with peers outside the family. Within these sibling relationships, the individuals feel free to be angry, sad or happy; to be open and honest about themselves and each other. Siblings have a deep sense of trust and loyalty which goes beyond "group solidarity" (Bank & Kahn, 1982); they are aware of each other's feelings, preferences and secrets; they enjoy doing things together or not doing anything at all; they affirm and validate each other and "are there for each other", offering emotional support. Moss and Moss (1986: 401) cite Bossard (1948) in this regard, namely that "life among siblings is like living in the nude, psychologically speaking."

A friendship between siblings is distinctive in its emotional power and it is not unusual for an individual in our Western culture to regard a particular person who is not biologically related but with whom he or she identifies or shares a close emotional tie as "like the brother/sister that I never had" in order to denote a special kind of relationship; one that is closer than most other relationships. The mingling of blood by two friends to symbolize the closeness and enduring nature of their relationship is another example denoting the special nature of a sibling relationship. The "blood knot" can be tied or loosened but it cannot be severed - blood *is* thicker than water - even if siblings do not get on well with each other, they cannot turn away from each other. For example, in the film, "Marvin's room", two sisters estranged for 20 years are reunited when the elder sister, Bessie, is diagnosed with leukemia and her survival depends on finding a relative whose bone marrow matches her own. Although they have not always got on well together and they must acknowledge the past in order to confront the realities of the present, the younger sister, Lee, does not hesitate to come to her sister's aid.

Of course not all siblings become or remain friends and some sibling relationships can be uneasy, laden with conflict, apathetic or even violent and disturbed. The latter could include physical and/or emotional abuse, and incestuous relationships; interactions where the sibling becomes the enemy. While these dimensions of the sibling relationship have been noted by clinicians and by Freud

(1918/1948) himself, e.g. *The Wolf-Man and his Sister*, scope constraints do not allow for a lengthy discussion here. Suffice it to say that while sibling relationships are by nature ambivalent, the conflict and guilt arising from the above situations could complicate the mourning process in the event of the death of a sibling.

### 3.3.6 Rivalry

Ever since Freud's discovery of sibling rivalry and ambivalence in sibling relationships, we have come to realize that the sibling bond is not simply "a loving one" (1954: 250). Indeed, Winnicott (1964) found sibling rivalry to be so pervasive that he regarded it as "normal". Aggression and its tributaries: rivalry, competition, jealousy and envy, are perhaps the dimensions of the sibling relationship that have been most extensively explored in the psychoanalytical and developmental literature and research.

The term "rival" as pointed out by Bank and Kahn (1982: 197) is derived from the Latin word "*rivalis*" meaning "having rights to the same stream". It is also defined as "one who uses the same stream" and "compete" (World Book Dictionary, 1988). Within the family context, a child can be a rival of another child for the love and attention of a parent, for a favoured position or special role in the family, or for another sibling's interest and affirmation (Bank & Kahn, 1982). Typically rivalry and jealousy involve three people, but many forms of sibling aggression are not rivalrous and may become part of a "creative and interesting dialectic that strengthens the relationship" between siblings (Bank & Kahn, 1982: 198) and defines more clearly who they are.

That conflict between siblings is *normal* and can indeed contribute to the important process of self-definition is a central theme in Schachter and Stone's (1987) paper. However, the authors also stress that parental intervention in the normal processes of conflict resolution and reconciliation between siblings can lead to a pattern that they term "pathological de-identification" in which one sibling is assigned the identity of "angel-victim", and the other is seen as the "devil-aggressor" who is always harassing the "angel", and parents constantly intervene to protect the "angel". When a loss occurs, these family "myths" are likely to persist and may leave the surviving sibling feeling undervalued.

### 3.3.7 Identification

Each of the above dimensions of the sibling bond plays a significant role in a child's identity development. Bank and Kahn (1982) describe eight identification processes, on the continuum of sameness to difference, that characterise the sibling bond. For convenience the authors combine these into three main groups and note that some are transitory while others can endure for a lifetime (Bank & Kahn, 1982: 84-111):



- *Close identification*, in which each person feels great similarity with and little difference from a sibling. The relationship is fused, blurred or characterised by hero worship/idealisation. The distinctive feature of close identification is a “lack of self.”
- *Partial identification*, in which each person feels some similarity and some difference with a sibling. This is characterised by loyal acceptance and the relationship is a mutually dependent one.
- *Distant identification*, in which each person feels great difference and little similarity with a sibling. Rigid differentiation of self and a tendency to disown any need of, or attachment to the sibling is the distinctive feature of this form of identification and this usually leads to the “estrangement” of siblings.

Bank and Kahn (1982) posit that both close and distant identification tend to create rigid relationships where one or both siblings have a vested interest in keeping the relationship “in place” and change is resisted. Partial identification, on the other hand, is more flexible with siblings having emotional access to others without an insistence that their sibling relationship “comes before all else” (1982: 84). In dealing with the loss of a sibling, Bank and Kahn (1982) note that an important force in sibling grief is the type of previous identification between the siblings: “how did the survivor feel about a dead brother or sister in life?” (1982: 271-272). Put slightly differently, “what meanings did the deceased brother or sister have for the surviving sibling?” This is essentially what this study aims to explore and explicate.

### **3.4 Concluding comments.**

It is clear from the foregoing that the sibling bond is an extremely complex and multi-faceted one, with siblings establishing an intimate, warm, sometimes polarized, sometimes fused, and sometimes rivalrous relationship. Although they fluctuate, these dimensions of the sibling relationship persist into adult life.

The above characteristics and dimensions of the sibling relationship indicate the significance of the sibling bond over the life span. The shared life-world contributes to a sense of continuity and history through the link with one’s family and roots. The temporal continuity of the lives of siblings is linked to a history, to parents and even to the destiny of a people (as for example, survivors of the Holocaust) and extends far into the future: through their children, even beyond the temporal limits of their physical existence.

But blood alone does not account for the relationship between brothers and sisters. Sibling bonds emanate equally from the sibling's being or existence. Thus, apart from the link with parents, it is also on the ontological plane that siblings display concern, loyalty and caring. The “horizontal” or “lateral” relationship between siblings is unlike any other relational bond. The sibling relationship is free of the sexual and legal bonds that bind husband and wife or lovers (Bank & Kahn, 1982; Cicirelli, 1995) and yet the bonds that brothers and sisters have are stronger than any law.

Despite the significance of the sibling attachment, for many years psychology has not studied siblings directly. It is only fairly recently that it has been recognized that siblings within a family group have a unique relationship of their own independent of the parent-child relationship: that they have special social relationships, and that children may have valuable relationships with siblings in addition to their relationships with parents (Bank & Kahn, 1982; Cicirelli, 1982, 1995; Dunn, 1985). To a certain extent, literature has functioned by proxy to compensate for the gap in the psychological literature. Novels and popular films, such as “Little Women”, “The Colour Purple”, “Marvin's Room”, “Rainman”, and “My Brother's Keeper”, demonstrate the caring, supportive, and restitutive power of sibling bonds and highlight the mystery of the sibling relationship.

What is it like to lose such a vibrant, fluctuating and life-long relationship with a real other person with whom the surviving sibling has been intimately involved from birth? In my clinical experience, the loss of a brother or sister is seldom acknowledged, and the lack of opportunity to go through the grief “work” (Freud) may leave the sibling struggling with the loss many years later. The following section will deal with a literature review of sibling *loss*.