The Murderous Sibling

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Abstract

Owning our transactional analysis roots includes accepting co-ownership of the psychoanalytic vertical orientation. The dominance of the oedipal represents the vertical dimension of our lives and can be seen as the centerpiece of Freud’s theoretical framework, which found its way seamlessly into transactional analysis. This article takes a meta-perspective on these developments and focuses on the murderous aspects of sibling relationships. It starts with a vignette about a sibling relationship and a reflection on mythology, both in relation to murderous sibling behavior. The author then considers why sibling relationships have been neglected so long in the psychoanalytic literature. The article expands on the lateral and horizontal dimensions of society before adding the core dynamics of lateral psychology thinking: identification and deidentification. The author concludes by promoting the case for integrating both vertical and horizontal orientations and suggests three potential areas for further research.

Keywords

siblings, Oedipus conflict, mythology, lateral orientation, deidentification

Vignette

Some time ago a client spoke about the closest he had ever come to murdering his younger brother. He was about 10 at the time, his brother 4 years younger.

In one of the fights we had, for some stupid sort of reason, we were wrestling, and as I was the older and physically stronger one, I had my arms around him, held him tight, restrained him, and gave him a real hard punch on his head. I thought I heard something crack, and I stopped, as if something had cracked in me as well. My brother was screaming from anger and pain. I still had my arms around him as my anger switched to fear and mostly guilt. I called for my mother, who, as a nurse by profession, quickly assessed the situation with a calm that took the sting out of it. My brother had a mild concussion and was in bed in a dark room for some days, with me as his main carer. Before and after school I brought him juice, read to him, and was his company.
In her book on siblings, Juliet Mitchell (2003) wrote, “It’s often hard to tell if children’s arms around each other’s necks are strangling or embracing and this leads from children’s play to group behavior - friends become enemies, neighbours become aliens and vice versa, with lightning speed” (p. 20). The line between sibling murder and love can be very thin.

Mythology

Freud’s living and working space in Vienna at Berggasse 19 is mainly a museum now, as is his London residence where he spent the last year of his life. In London, the set-up of his working room is preserved, with, of course, the couch taking central stage. However, in front of where he sat when seeing patients, cupboards and a big table full of little pieces of art draw attention: artifacts representing figures, characters, deities, and situations from mythology from Greek, Latin, Persian, and other cultures as far away as Africa and Latin America. They represent an archaeology of the mind and reveal how Freud’s study of art and antiquities influenced the theories and methodology of psychoanalysis. He used them as inspiration and a resource for his associations while seeing his patients. Occasionally, he invited his patients to select and look at a particular figure, each of which represented a wealth of mythological meaning. Just as Freud (1900/1953b) famously referred to dreams as the royal road to the unconscious, we can add mythology as another important avenue to the deepest hidden representations of the mind, which can be paradise or hell.

Mythology is full of sibling histories. Well known is Sophocles’ play Antigone (circa 442 BC/1998 version), often referred to as the sibling story, in which Antigone, herself the daughter of the incestuous marriage between Oedipus and Jocaste, fights the laws of her country to provide her slain brother with a decent burial. It is mainly a story of sibling love, although there is a good deal of sibling killing and suicide in it as well.

Another famous tragedy is Thyestes, as told in a play by Seneca (62 CE/1985 version). The play returned to my awareness thanks to an adaptation for the Sydney festival a few years ago (Henning, Ryan, Stone, & Winter, 2012). The play is probably one of the darkest and most depressing ever written. Seneca’s original version of Thyestes primarily tells the story of twin brothers Atreus and Thyestes and a half-brother Chryssipus. Because Chryssipus was much cleverer than his brothers, their father, Pelops, appointed him as heir to the throne of the house of Tantalus. Atreus and Thyestes were enraged and murdered their half-brother. Pelops then exiled the twins and put a curse on them that they and their descendants would perish by each other’s hands. When Pelops died, Atreus returned and took possession of the throne. Thyestes also claimed the throne and sought to gain it by the foulest means. It was the beginning of a long, blood-soaked sibling rivalry. Revenge was met with revenge, which was met with revenge, and so on. Thyestes seduced his brother’s wife, Aérope, and with her assistance stole the magic golden-fleeced ram from Atreus’ flocks, on the possession of which the right to rule was said to rest. Atreus sought revenge in a way that makes all previous revenges pale in
significance. Under the pretense of reconciliation, he lured Thyestes to a banquet at which he serves Thyestes his own butchered sons.

The mythological story does not end there. The murder, incest, betrayal, cannibalism, and adultery among siblings continued into the next generations. The story represents the unrestrained expression of the most brutal, primitive, and dark impulses of revenge and violence. Thyestes committed himself to complete vengeance for Atreus’ crimes. An oracle advised Thyestes that if he had a son with his own daughter, that son would kill Atreus. Thyestes raped his daughter, who then bore him a son, Aegisthus. Only as Aegisthus entered adulthood did Thyestes reveal the truth to him: that he was both his father and his grandfather and that Atreus was his uncle. Aegisthus then killed Atreus, and Thyestes ruled once more.

While Thyestes ruled the house of Tantalus, the sons of Atreus, Agamemnon and Menelaus, were exiled to Sparta. There King Tyndareus accepted them as the royalty they were. He helped the brothers return to Mycenae to overthrow Thyestes, forcing him to live in exile again. As a token of goodwill and allegiance, King Tyndareus offered his daughter Clytemnestra to Agamemnon as his wife and his daughter Helena to Menelaus as his wife. Thus, through murder, incest, betrayal, cannibalism, and adultery, sibling rivalry is portrayed in these mythical narratives as a mindless intergenerational conflict.

This is where mythology and psychotherapy are connected, and we need to commend Freud for this: Both mythology and psychotherapy have the courage to enter into the darkness of the search for understanding this mindlessness, and both use the technique of telling the tale as a way to come forward.

We can wonder if pieces of art, representing Thyestes or Atreus, for example, were part of Freud’s archaeological table of research and association. Freud (1916-1917/1963; Hinshelwood & Winship, 2006; Roith, 2006) acknowledged the significance of sibling relationships and is also described as having a certain reluctance to give them much importance (Coles, 2003, 2006; Mitchell, 2009). Reading some of the biographical literature about Freud (Gay, 1988; Jones, 1953/1957; Roazen, 1979; Wollheim, 1971), one can relate this reluctance to Freud’s own complex family background and other social, political, and cultural contextual factors that heavily influenced his theories.

Freud’s Background and Social, Political, and Cultural Context

Freud had two brothers and five sisters plus two stepbrothers from his father’s previous marriage, the latter of whom were the same age as his mother. As the eldest in a Jewish family, and, for his mother, the golden son (“mein goldener Sigi”), the focus of the family was very much on Freud. His siblings were less important to his parents, and Freud introjected that attitude (Wollheim, 1971). He had special privileges: Despite the cramped conditions of their family housing, he had his own room; his siblings could not
play the piano for fear of disturbing him; and, as the eldest brother, he was entitled to censor what his younger siblings read (Wollheim, 1971).

Freud had a bad reputation in terms of how he dealt with his professional peers, that is, the siblings he had in his professional life (Roazen, 1979). From the early days in his famous Wednesday Psychological Society, which became the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society until the establishment of the International Association of Psychoanalysis, Freud built many relationships, which reflected his growing international status and recognition. However, many of these peer relationships -most notably with Kahane, Stekel, Rank, Jung, and Adler- broke down, with a number of individuals cut off or defecting. This was often followed by mutual vilification, which can be considered the psychological version of sibling murder (Wellendorf, 2014, p. 4). Even Freud’s strong friendship with Fliess, who is sometimes referred to as Freud’s real sibling (M. Whelan, personal communication, 25 October 2012), did not survive. In spite of their extensive correspondence, their personal meetings, and the role Fliess played in the development of psychoanalysis, their friendship disintegrated due to a case of perceived plagiarism (Rizzuto, 2001). In the process of dissolving their relationship, Freud ordered his correspondence with Fliess destroyed (Gay, 1988). “Freud had a way of marginalizing those who took a more relational and directly interactional approach to psychoanalysis” (Cornell, 2006, p. 14). In the same way that Freud had censored what his siblings read, he felt entitled to censor what his followers in the emerging psychoanalytic movement wrote.

Freud lived in Vienna, at the time the capital of the Austrian-Hungarian Danube monarchy, whose ruling Habsburger culture was highly patriarchal. This meant that in society and the family there was only one parent who counted: the father. The mother was not seen as important, nor were the children. It was a cultural context that feared sibling relationships and, in particular, incestuous sibling love. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, one is not allowed to have sex with a sibling, and thus brother-sister relationships were taboo, whereas affectionate relationships with parents, especially the father, were socially endorsed. Children and siblings were only seen within the context of adults, on whom they depended or were made dependent. Children were not in the picture unless in the presence of adults.

Recently, Sherwin-White (2014) suggested that Freud’s work on brothers and sisters is a neglected topic. As a consequence of authors who ‘‘cherry-pick a limited number of references to brothers and sisters in Freud’s work, more or less reflecting the similarly selective index of the Standard edition […] it is Freud’s work on siblings that is misrepresented and marginalized in a way that it has been institutionalized’’ (p. 12). Sherwin-White wrote about how Freud was often unable to publish the full account of his case studies in which sibling material is so rich -including the Ratman (Freud, 1909/1955c), Dora (Freud, 1905/1953a), Little Hans (Freud, 1909/1955a), and the Wolfman (Freud, 1918/1955b)- because of confidentiality issues in the context of Vienna’s early 1900s climate of anti-Semitism.
The Centrality of the Oedipal

In the context described by Sherwin-White (2014), it is not surprising that the Oedipus complex became the center of Freud’s theory. His mention that “when other children appear on the scene, the Oedipus complex is enlarged into a family complex” (Freud, 1916–1917/1963, p. 333) went largely unnoticed. The Oedipus complex focuses on the young boy’s triangular relationship with his parents, which comes to an end in a painful separation. The outcome of this conflict is that sexual and aggressive feelings are repressed and transformed into more socially acceptable forms as competition or guilt. Berne (1963) referred to the Oedipus complex as “an ongoing drama, divided, as are Sophocles’s Oedipus Rex, Electra, Antigone, and other dramas, into natural scenes and acts calling for other people to play definite roles” (p. 160).

This vertical orientation between child and parent became the template for many analysts and psychotherapists after Freud. “Generations of therapists have followed suit, with the result that parent/child relationships have been examined in depth for a century, while sibling studies have barely scratched the surface” (Safer, 2012 p. 50). In transactional analysis, too, references to siblings are missing, as I have described in previous articles (van Beekum, 2009, 2014). The most recent Transactional Analysis Journal theme issue on children and adolescents (Mazzetti, Jecht-Hennig, & Munari Poda, 2014) did not mention siblings once. Loving or murderous feelings between siblings are involved in Freudian theory as defense mechanisms, for example, as deflections from the competitive feelings experienced for the parents’ love. Siblings represent a displacement from the Oedipus conflict. Thus, when Atreus and Thyestes murdered their half-brother, Cryssipus, Freud would have interpreted that as a deflection from anger at their father, who obviously favored his love child, Chryssipus, over the two brothers. That anger was then enacted in the murder of their half-brother.

The primacy of the oedipal has found its way into mainstream psychological developmental theory and research. Like Sulloway (1997) and his “born to rebel” studies, much current research focuses on findings about birth order and parental favoritism. Older siblings are said to be strivers, younger ones are rebels, and middle kids are lost souls. These stereotypes are broad and carry some truth, but there the discussion mostly ends. However, even when the eldest identifies with authority, the youngest rebels against it, and middle ones are lost, these stereotypes only express a relationship to the vertical, oedipal dynamic. Middle children are described as lost because parents do not see them, instead focusing on the children who comply (the oldest) and those who deviate (the youngest). Of course, middle offspring then end up with the label “lost.” But most middle children have an active life among their siblings, which may not be noticed from a parental perspective.

This offers some interesting insights about the way psychoanalysis and psychotherapy have dealt with sibling issues: They have been, in a way, nonexistent. According to Coles (2006), Freud’s famous study of the Wolfman included a major oversight about the origin of the patient’s depression. Freud thought it was due to an illness that occurred when the Wolfman was 18. The Wolfman (1972/1973) himself explained it in his memoirs as
stemming from the suicide of his sister, with whom he had an incestuous relationship. Coles argued that Freud turned his back on the Wolfman’s attachment to his sister because it conflicted with his energy drive theory and the centrality he placed on the Oedipus complex. It is significant for the present argument that most of the defections from Freud’s inner circle occurred when his peers (siblings) challenged and sometimes abandoned the Oedipus complex as a central theme of psychoanalytic theory (Grosskurth, 1991; Makari, 2008; Stepansky, 1983).

Szalita (1968) reanalyzed the cases of 37 patients who were, in some way, not happy with their previous analyses. She illustrated that the omission of an important early relationship, usually with a sibling, was the most cited reason for the patients’ dissatisfaction. I do not know if such research has been repeated more recently.

This part of Freud’s legacy has had an enormous impact. The history, development, application, and research of psychoanalysis, psychotherapy, psychology, consulting, and a whole range of mainstream professions are deeply affected by the oedipal. After Freud’s death in 1939, his legacy in terms of concepts and methodology became frozen in time. (There may be an interesting parallel in that to what happened with transactional analysis concepts after Berne’s death.) A 1972 questionnaire found that most analysts believed “that no major discoveries had been made since Freud’s death” (Zaretsky, 2004 p. 313). The impact of the 1960s on the way society changed its relationship with authority could have led to a shift away from the oedipal. But other than the temporary rise of group analysis and group therapy, the focus on the oedipal did not falter. Transactional analysis has also embraced the concept of the oedipal. Berne’s deflection from psychoanalysis marked a profound change of paradigm, from change by insight to change by active engagement, a sort of prerelational development. What did not change, however, was the centrality of the oedipal in the transactional analysis concepts of ego states and scripts.

**Beyond the Vertical**

In the developmental psychology literature, the role and importance of siblings and sibling relationships has evolved over the past 25 years. The Yale studies in the Psychoanalytic Study of the Child were among the first to challenge the centrality of Freud’s Oedipus complex and to argue that the effect of siblings on emotional development should be conceptualized as a developmental sequence in its own right. Eissler, Solnit, and Neubauer (1983) argued that sibling relationships are not mere second editions of the original Oedipus complex but that they create their own moments of ego development and adaptation and are of a nature and quality different from those promoted by the Oedipus conflict.

More recently, the issue of siblings is making a comeback. In the analytical field, Mitchell (2003), Coles (2003, 2006), and Sanders (2004) have argued that sexuality and aggression are in our lives as part of the dynamics of the whole family, including
siblings, not just directed at parents. Most of us are born not just to parents but also to siblings. And when we extend the family dynamics into the lateral, it includes murder and competition among siblings as much as it does love and eroticism. As Rustin (2009) wrote:

_Siblings are the object of passionate feelings of love and hate and this is not only in the context of sibling rivalry for parental affection and attention, a part of the wider Oedipal drama, but also a site of our emotional lives with its own sources of energy._ (p. 165)

Likewise, Coles (2006) argued that sibling relationships are a long-neglected subject in psychoanalytic thinking. The consequence of Freud’s obsession with the oedipal was that sibling relationships have languished in virtual oblivion.

**The Horizontal Society**

Just as with early parent-child experiences, early sibling experiences form relationship templates that are carried from infancy through childhood and adolescence into adulthood. In affecting adult life, they can potentially turn out to be painful, blissful, eroticized, nurturing, disappointing, shocking, and more. Siblinghood is a valuable rehearsal tool for later life. In adulthood, many relationships are actually horizontal: at work, in the parent board at school, in the neighborhood building committee, during the community sausage sizzle barbeque, in a marriage. Does the chairperson who runs the parent-teacher committee use peacemaking skills learned in the family playroom? Does the employee struggling with a boss who plays favorites use the coping skills acquired from dealing with a sister who was father’s favorite daughter? Do husbands and wives benefit from the inter-gender negotiations they rehearsed when their most important partners were their sisters and brothers? Do vice presidents in a corporation deal with each other using skills learned on the school play-ground (Kluger, 2006)? Relational responses in an adult person’s environment can also be understood in the context of the person’s horizontal childhood experiences that showed him or her how to be and behave in relationships. This opens up for further reflection the lifelong impact of horizontal relationships among siblings.

Other disciplines in the social sciences make valuable contributions in this area. Sociologists have found that sibling birth-order dynamics affect career decisions (Bradley & Mims, 1992). Research also shows that teasing by older siblings is associated with younger siblings justifying their own behavior (Dunn & Munn, 1986). Studies about the impact of older siblings on younger siblings demonstrate that siblings have a profound effect regarding issues such as early sexuality, academic success, careers, drug use, gang membership, caretaking, and criminal behavior. Festinger’s (1954) social comparison theory focused on the comparisons siblings make with others with whom they have no direct social interaction, groups that are out there but influence their sense of self in relationship.
Social psychology researchers are launching a wealth of new studies about sibling dynamics in order to look at how brothers and sisters steer each another into, or away from, risky behavior; how they form a protective buffer against family upheaval; how they educate one another about the opposite sex; and how all siblings compete for family recognition and must come to terms with loaded dynamics such as parental favoritism. One study (Wright & Cassidy, 2009) described how boys are better off (meaning they end up being nicer) when they have a sister. Siblings have a socializing effect on one another. They have to negotiate things day-to-day, and with Facebook and Twitter, the intensity of this is high. Siblings are the best role models of more informal behaviors: how to act at school or on the street or, most importantly, how to act cool around friends.

Anthropologists have argued that the shift from individual to collective survival was a crucial stage in human evolution, one that is mirrored in the transition from sibling competition to sibling cooperation (Sponsel, 1995). Together with your neighbor, you can master the threat of a tiger or build the dam that prevents both your lots of land from being flooded. The horizontal organization of society is at the cutting edge when we look at developments such as social media. The fields of psychotherapy and psychoanalysis notably lag behind; the journey from societal forefront to psychotherapy takes at least a generation. Long term, however, horizontal is the future.

The Cain Complex and Deidentification

The lateral dimension provides a distinct developmental challenge, which is to find one’s unique place in a world with similar others (Schacter, 1982). Like the challenge that builds the vertical parent-child dimension, the lateral challenge is also filled with all the relational aspects of life, including love, conflict, and ambivalence. But in the lateral the dynamic changes. Where the vertical eventually leads to identification, the lateral pushes for differentiation and de-identification. These processes are the main denominator of the murderous aspects of sibling behavior.

According to Leventhal (1970) and Schacter (1982), siblings work hard to establish their own unique path and to be different from their brothers and sisters. In the unconscious process of seeking identity, siblings amplify differences with each other and minimize similarities. Schacter (1982) described the Cain complex, which draws on the biblical story as a metaphor for the murderous sibling in which each of the siblings identifies himself by de-identifying with his brother. One of the most poignant examples of this is the ongoing sibling murder between Israel and Palestine. Both share a Semitic heritage and are actually brothers and sisters, but Israelis and Palestinians de-identify with each other and in the process minimize their similarities and maximize their differences. Vivona (2007) illustrated that this type of sibling differentiation comes at a cost in terms of constricting one’s own identity and disfiguring relationships with others.

The sibling rivalry between Chryssipus and his murderous brothers ended in the slaughter of the former by the latter as a result of a process of de-identification. This is in contrast
to the Oedipus complex wherein the child-parent rivalry ends by the child identifying with the parent. We can view the identification with parents and de-identification with siblings as oppositional and competing dynamics of ego development, although they are actually complementary.

**The Lateral ánd the Vertical**

Clearly, parents are not the only influences on a child’s development. However, they set the tone for the manner in which horizontal influences can be managed and murderousness contained. We do not need to throw out the parents with the bathwater! Parents remain important in the way they are able to contain intersibling processes in which they do not take part. One of the most important things parents can do is to create conditions that foster supportive relationships between siblings from early on. The parental role of ongoing containment includes relational and emotional presence through discussion and dialogue, boundary testing, humor, giving in, letting go, and holding on to children lovingly. When that is missing, siblings will do their stuff anyway, although in a less safe environment.

When healthy parenting is missing, containment and authority are also missing, which is when murderousness among siblings becomes a reality. For instance, Palestine and Israel miss out on a healthy containing parental force that could keep them in line. In another example, Fitzsimons (2011) described the maiden voyage in 1629 of a ship owned by the Dutch East Indies Company VOC. The ship hit a reef just off the coast of western Australia. Captain Pelsaert decided to make a long journey for help, but soon his second in command, Jeronimus Cornelisz, displaced him and landed the ship on an island, where a reign of terror, murder, and sexual slavery began. Cornelisz realizes

> that 220 people on a small island are too many for the scant amount of supplies they have. Quietly, he puts forward a plan to 40-odd mutineers to save themselves by killing most of the rest, sparing only a half-dozen or so women to service their sexual needs.  

*(Book cover)*

Another thrilling, compelling, and disturbing story of lack of healthy containment is found in Nobelprize-winner William Golding’s (1946/2008) Lord of the Flies, in which the behavior of a group of stranded schoolboys degenerates into primitive savagery in their process between good (value the good of the group) and bad (value gratification of personal desires) impulses. Likewise, Susanne Collins’s (2009) The Hunger Games and its sequels plus the subsequent movies series show a level of mutual peer demolition introduced and fueled by cynical, manipulative, and non-relating authorities.

Mitchell (2003) made a case for a change of paradigm in psychoanalysis “‘from near exclusive dominance of vertical comprehension to the interaction of the horizontal and the vertical in our social and psychological understanding’” (p. 1). She highlighted the constant dynamic and reciprocal relationship between vertical and horizontal
relationships and how our area of interest should not exclude one or the other but rather focus at the points where they meet. When the balance is right, and the unobtrusive mother can be experienced by the child as a whole object and as a container for his or her own learning process, then sibling relationships with their own dynamics of fear, envy, rage, and love can come into the picture.

**Three Perspectives for Research**

I see three areas of further study and research that might illustrate the impact of the horizontal in developmental theory.

The *first* is acknowledging, in depth, the reality of systemic complexity. System thinking is not prevalent in one-on-one psychoanalysis and psychotherapy. But for family therapists, for example, siblings form an important and powerful subsystem within a family, one with a singular dynamic that is more or less independent of parents (Minuchin, 1974). Family constellations show not only parent-child relationships but have opened up the dynamics around dyads, including sibling dyads, so they can be explored and studied. Sibling relationships also have a powerful impact on individual script development (Hellinger, 2002). Family therapy has increasingly included social constructionist ideas and collaborative meaning making in which “the role of siblings began to be considered as meaning making contributors in the therapeutic process” (Gorell Barnes, 2014, p. 97).

When second, third, or even later children come into a family, they are born into an increasingly complex mixture of already existing multiangular relationships in which they have to find their own place. There is already an alive pattern and an established network of relationships, including love and hate, favorite children, power, and physical differences. The space that was open for a firstborn is not available for a secondborn, let alone a fifthborn, not to mention a ninthborn. Each new sibling enters a more complex minefield in which she or he has to survive and find her or his own identity. Power issues, such as birth rights, gender, and age, may determine and sometimes settle conflicts between siblings, with intergenerational impacts potentially so deep that next generations eventually have to resolve the traumatized representations of previous generations (see Volkan, 1997).

*An example of this is the following vignette.* Heather, the only girl in her family, had four older brothers. Her mother died when she was 11, and her father remarried soon after in order to have a caretaker for his children. This interrupted Heather’s grief process over the loss of her mother, and she did not like her stepmother much. She was relieved when her stepmother died when she was 17. Heather’s favorite brother, Fred, was just a few years older, and she was always close to him; they shared mutual friends and had an active social life together. When Heather married, her husband, John, became close to Fred as well. Fred’s wife, Ruth, was close to Heather. Both couples had children, who, as cousins, were in close contact with each other.
When Heather was in her late thirties, her stepmother’s grave had to be cleared. Fred, who was in charge of family affairs, wanted to rebury her in the family grave with both their biological parents. Heather did not like that idea and opposed it. They got into a fight, which was settled by Fred pushing his decision forward. Heather was so upset that she broke off her relationship with Fred and, at the same time, with Ruth. John was drawn into this drama and lost his contact with Fred. The children, first cousins, no longer visited each other to play or for sleepovers. It was sibling hostility of their own making, and it affected their families deeply. Heather never met Fred again, and they never reconciled. Until their deaths, years later, this issue was not resolved, as a result of which the cousins were forced to stop seeing each other. They only renewed contact after their parents died.

A second area for research involves acknowledging the impact of an older child or children on a younger child or children. From a relational perspective, we can postulate that survival mechanisms do not manifest only in isolation or within the individual but in relationship. Sibling patterns emerge and develop in a relational context, conditioned by the specific quality of sibling-sibling attachment. Traditionally, the arrival of a younger child has been viewed as traumatic for an older sibling. Most clinical studies have emphasized the burden on a first child when a second child, the intruder, enters the family. This emphasis mirrors the attention on the oedipal, that is, on the child and the parent. The older child, who feels like he or she is mother’s favorite, is shattered when the next sibling comes along, and, as a result, the older child experiences an increase in aggression and envy. Mitchell referred to Freud’s phrase “his majesty the baby” (Freud as cited in Mitchell, 2000, p. xi), who is threatened and narcissistically injured with the arrival of a new baby. The child’s throne is undermined.

This threat can be sensed in the reaction of the little bear in the tale of Goldilocks and the Three Bears (Marshall, 1942) as analyzed by Mitchell (2003). Goldilocks, the intruder, does not warm to Papa Bear’s large chair because it is too hard or to Mama Bear’s middle-sized chair because it is too soft, but Baby Bear’s chair is just right. So, she wants that one, Baby Bear’s place. In the same way, it is Baby Bear’s porridge and his bed that are just right for her. From his perspective, Baby Bear can only imagine two parents and himself, so how threatening is it when someone comes to steal his place? Goldilocks is the sibling that Baby Bear does not want in his family. The main story in this fairy tale is another example of the impact of a new sibling on a firstborn, and it fits well in the same oedipal-oriented view in which only firstborns seem to count.

There is, however, also the impact of the firstborn on the new sibling. What happens to the new baby who is on the receiving end of the firstborn’s envy and aggression? While enjoying the breast and the mother object with it, the new baby will surely pick up the rage and the envy around him or her and will feel anxious and threatened. Volkan (1997) introduced the concept of deposited representations whereby the younger sibling must deal with the unowned trauma of the older sibling. The baby will somatically store his or her reactions not toward the mother but relationally toward the other sibling (van Beekum, 2009). What happens to “the [mother-baby] balance between exploration and contact maintenance” (Fonagy, 2001, p. 99) when older siblings are around who interfere
by claiming their time and territory or when the child is engaging with numerous other children in daycare? The unobtrusive mother is then replaced by many obtrusive siblings and peers who may be willing to kill to get their needs met. In that process, power struggles are foreground, with messages attached, not from parents, but from siblings. A study found that, on average, children in the 2-to-4 year-old age group engage in some kind of conflict 6.3 times an hour (Smetana, 1989). This is more than one clash every 10 minutes.

The sibling can be conceptualized as another object in the child’s life, one from whom he or she can gain sustenance and self-esteem or from whom he or she might receive envy and aggression. Examples of the latter can be found in the stories of Goldilocks and Thyestes. Goldilocks, once she was close to being discovered by the three bears as they returned from their stroll, foreshadowed and sensed the aggression she would have to endure from Baby Bear. She jumped out of Baby Bear’s bed and ran out of the room, down the stairs, out of the house, and into the forest. Likewise, Chryssipus, living on the receiving end of the envy of his two brothers, realized that there was no place for him. He lived on the fearful side of never fully trusting his two older brothers. The protection from his father was not effective. He was exposed to unrestrained sibling hatred, which cost him his life.

A third area for further research would be to question the attachment paradigm. The development of attachment patterns (secure, hostile, ambivalent) is always understood as occurring between the mother and baby. Theory may need to add two more levels: (1) attachment to siblings and (2) attachment to the family as a whole as well as the clan or tribe. We are used to hearing stories about bad experiences at boarding schools, with kids missing home when they are away from their family, perhaps even being abused by uncaring caregivers. However, other boarders are relieved to be away from their dysfunctional, poisonous, or abusive families. With the help of a containing boarding environment, such children may be able to built healthy attachments with new peers and a new family system.

We are biased by the prevalent Western idea of the nuclear family, which is so different from the way 75% of the world’s population lives. I earlier (van Beekum, 2009) suggested that if Freud had been born into an Indian family, he would not have developed the Oedipus complex. Horizontal and much broader patterns of vertical attachment would have become mainstream in psychology. Currently, researchers are building a new sibling attachment model that discriminates between four types of sibling attachment: bonded, competitive, distant, and hostile (Kriss, Steele, & Steele, 2014). They have invited other researcher to test and refine this model.

Epilogue

My client and his brother were surely caught in a very damaging fight, a sibling rivalry with a potentially murderous outcome. The availability and intervention of their mother
as a containing agent prevented real and deeper damage. Beyond that, the mother seemed to be able to create a space in which some reparation could be made by my client, the murderous sibling, in caring for his brother during the days after the incident. It helped him to move from being driven by fear and guilt to compassion and love.

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**Author Biography**

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