

FUNDAMENTALS OF FAMILY THEORY

9. SIBLING POSITION

9.1. Introduction

Bowen has referred to general ideas about sibling position in families throughout most of the period he has been developing his family theory. During the 1960's, he became more familiar with Toman's research on sibling position, and recognized that Toman's findings were largely consistent with his own. Toman's particularly significant contribution, in light of Bowen's own interests and work is in his detailed observations and descriptions of behavior considered typical of different sibling positions. Bowen made similar observations and arrived at similar conclusions in a less structured way than Toman did and from a systems perspective as opposed to the psychoanalytic frame of reference Toman used. As well as describing behavior in particular sibling positions, the Bowen concept of sibling position relates to ways in which levels of functioning and differentiation are influenced by certain sibling positions and distributions. Bowen accounts for how the family emotional system modifies sibling behavior expectations based on chronology or sex. One's functioning sibling position in one's family of origin is considered a major determining influence on one's differentiation of self and on one's vulnerability to family projection and multigenerational transmission. Functioning sibling position strongly influences the probability of becoming emotionally trapped in a family.

One of the most frequent uses made of the concept of sibling position is as a notation category in family histories. Information about sibling positions is collected routinely in family systems clinical work. In this respect, some of the applications of this concept are more visible and are easier to make than are other concepts in the Bowen theory. The idea that structural sibling position in a family is an important influence on behavior is modified by viewing a person's "functioning" sibling position as a more accurate guide to behavioral expectations and predictions than chronological sibling position. Bowen's conceptualization of sibling position embraces this distinction, whereas Toman did not account for such differences in his work on sibling position. The difference between functioning and chronological position is illustrated by an only sister of brothers who may function

as a youngest in her family, even though she is chronologically the middle child of five. Another example is the parental perception and functioning of twins. People are not used to dealing with twins and parents frequently view one twin as being much older than the other. Although the first-born twin is usually treated as the older of the two, the age difference between them tends to be exaggerated.

Family projection is the strongest influence on the discrepancies that can exist between chronological and functioning sibling positions. Regardless of chronological position, the child who is the "object" of a family projection is frequently treated as a youngest, and that child behaves accordingly. One impairing consequence of being the focus of a family projection is that a child is encouraged to be more dependent on the parents than are the other siblings in the family. Family projection may be viewed as a strong neutralizing influence on the effects of the chronological ordering or sex distribution in a family and this process is an integral part of the family emotional system.

Studies of sibling position behavior add another dimension to predicting family interaction. The collection of data on sibling positions can be an important step in identifying the essential characteristics of a family. Information about sibling positions in earlier generations makes prediction more accurate because the distribution of sibling positions reflects characteristics of the broader emotional network. The most predictable sibling behavior occurs when there is no over saturation of emotional intensity in the family system. Lower functioning levels than the predicted profiles are attributable to the intensity of the impact of emotional influences such as family projection, multigenerational transmission, loss, or cutoff. Data on the sibling position of parents and an assessment of whether the functioning of each parent is typical of those sibling positions are fairly reliable indicators how a family may adapt itself to life, to emotional forces in the extended family, and to a course on psychotherapy. This information is particularly useful for predicting behavior in families with an only child where the sibling position of the parent of like sex may strongly influence that child's development and perceptions.

Quality of fusion also depends on sibling position. For example, the intensity of fusion is influenced by the sibling positions of participants in the relationship. Depending on which sibling positions are involved, the twosome behaves distinctly in conflict, in routine exchanges, and under stress.

9.2. Research

Chronological sibling position is easy to record accurately and control in an experimental setting. Whether research focuses on families or on behavior in the wider society, sibling position is an objective category of information generally not distorted by the emotional investment of family members. The major sibling position categories outlined by Toman are the following: the oldest brother of brother(s); the youngest brother of brother(s); the oldest brother of sister(s); the youngest brother of sister(s); the oldest sister of sister(s); the youngest sister of sister(s); the oldest sister of brother(s); and the youngest sister of brother(s). In addition to the eight basic sibling positions are two intermediary positions: the only child and twins. Individual sibling positions can be further classified by noting the sibling position of parents. This more complex categorization suggests that the life-style and differentiation level of two oldest brothers of brothers contrast with each other if the father of one is the oldest brother of brothers and the father of the other is the youngest brother of sisters.

The sibling position of children and parents can be used as a basis for mapping structural and process characteristics of a family. For example, diagrammatic presentation of several generations of sibling distributions highlights any clustering or thinning out of family members. From a scientific standpoint, this information provides leads for more detailed descriptions and emotional forces in a family. The accuracy of oral reports and the overall objectivity of the study can be checked by referring to written records. Scientific research on sibling positions optimally includes the study of sibling behavior in a variety of social settings. Performance in groups other than families is influenced by differentiation. Both social performance and family activity can be used to assess variations in behavior in identical sibling positions. For example, one person's behavior may appear more effective in social groups than in that person's family. Although it can be postulated that oldest rather than other sibling positions tend to become leaders in society, only oldest who function effectively in both social groups and family are well differentiated. An oldest who appears an effective leader in society but simultaneously participates in a significant family cut-off or does not function as an oldest in the family is less differentiated. In this instance, apparent social differentiation is neutralized or negated by low family differentiation. Documentation of this sort may contribute toward the substantiation of the hypothesis that sibling position influences the life-course of less differentiated individuals.

Research studies could compare the capacity of individuals in different sibling positions to initiate and accomplish change in self. Another research focus could be descriptions of the tendencies to deviate from the behavioral expectations for particular sibling positions. Sibling behavior that differs from expectations may reflect the impact of emotional forces and processes within a family, including the strivings for differentiation of self.

Another influence on sibling position behavior that could be documented by systematic research is the impact of the loss of a significant family member through death, divorce, or institutionalization. For example, an oldest brother of sisters whose father had died when he was young and whose mother had not remarried would behave differently from an oldest brother of sisters who had not lost his father. The oldest brother who lost his father would probably be pressured and programmed into taking his father's place in the family emotional system.

Research on sibling positions from a family systems perspective could begin to describe and define ranges of behavior characteristic of each major sibling position. For example, expectations for youngest could include behavior of more differentiated youngest as well as of less differentiated youngest. Some comparisons of different levels of differentiation in the same sibling position might indicate some of the most significant properties of becoming trapped in the family's emotional processes.

9.3. Therapeutic Considerations

Descriptions of sibling position differences for the purposes of psychotherapy optimally include an assessment of the emotional vulnerability of the different positions. The assumption of responsibility is another behavioral characteristic that differs according to sibling position and influences the course of psychotherapy. For example, oldest frequently assume more responsibility than their siblings, and youngest may assume correspondingly less responsibility than their siblings. Felt responsibility for others, or taking responsibility for the whole family are major influences in a person's day-to-day behavior and long-range planning. However, it is easier to coach an over responsible person to become responsible for self than it is an under responsible person. Another issue related to sibling position and psychotherapy is the kinds of responsibilities expected of an oldest in a family. The specific emotional forces that reinforce a youngest being viewed as irresponsible are also significant. The togetherness pressures that define the degree of

responsibility for sibling positions substantially influence how a family selects a patient or problem. Although over responsibility in certain sibling positions may be problematic, the characteristics of under responsibility are generally considered more severe. Conventional public opinion and more traditional psychotherapy are relatively unconcerned about symptoms or problems of over responsibility. Overly dependent behavior becomes a focus for family and therapeutic concerns more readily than overly independent behavior. A child who is the object of a family projection is more likely to become an identified patient than a child who is in a particular chronological position in a family. In a family where the child who is object of a family projection is not the youngest, the youngest in that family will have correspondingly fewer characteristics of a youngest.

9.4. One's Own Family

Sibling position characteristics can suggest criteria for evaluating one's own functioning in relation to the expectations for behavior in one's sibling position. A contrast between expected and actual behavior may indicate a particular level of differentiation. For example, better functioning and more effective behavior in a particular sibling position than the expectations for that position suggest a high level of differentiation of self. An oldest who is not overly responsible in conducting daily affairs appears more differentiated than an oldest who acts in over responsible ways. Also, a youngest who is responsible in conducting daily affairs, especially in relationships with other family members, is perhaps more differentiated than a youngest who is not responsible for self.

A useful starting point for assessing and comparing sibling behavior in one's family is to document characteristics of functioning in the various sibling positions. A disadvantage of defining sibling position in functional rather than chronological terms is that subjective and intuitive perception can displace factual components of the more crude chronological descriptions.

