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Surviving the divorce : the power of the sibling relationship

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the Sibling Relationship

ABSTRACT

Out of all family relationships, the sibling relationship remains the least studied. Due to the limited research on sibling relationships, the study aimed to provide a greater understanding of the importance of sibling relationships and the significant role that siblings may play in one another's lives when coping with the stressful effects of parental divorce. In this qualitative exploratory study, 14 adult sibling dyads were interviewed to explore the ways in which they helped one another deal with the effects of parental divorce. The three main themes that emerged from this study are *(a) positive impact of sibling relationships on ability to deal with parental divorce*; *(b) sibling relationship dynamics;* and *(c) negative impact of sibling relationships on ability to deal with parental divorce.* These themes and supporting evidence by way of direct quotes from the participants suggest that positive sibling relationships have the potential to help children and adolescents cope with and adjust to parental divorce as sources of comfort, stability, and support in times of familial stress and change. Further, these findings suggest that parental favoritism, separation, and lack of parental communication or support during divorce can negatively affect the sibling relationship, undermining the potential for adjustment by the children.

SURVIVING THE DIVORCE: THE POWER OF THE SIBLING RELATIONSHIP

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

In the United States, parental separation and divorce is a common phenomenon. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2004), between 43% and 50% of first marriages end in divorce, and 50% of American children will experience parental divorce (National Center for Health Statistics, 2008). Given the large number of families impacted by divorce each year, much effort has been put forth toward a better understanding of how experiencing parental divorce affects children's adjustment.

Numerous researchers have documented the stressful impact of parental divorce on children (Wallerstein, 1985; Amato, 2000). However, findings in this area of research yield a wide range of outcomes and are at times confusing and conflicting (Amato, 2000). While there is considerable consensus amongst researchers that on average, children in divorced families exhibit more problems than those in non-divorced families, there still remains much debate around the size and significance of these differences (Hetherington, 1999). What is clear, however, is that the ways in which children adjust and deal with parental divorce is contingent on the role that individual, environmental, and familial factors play in undermining or promoting the positive adjustment, development, and overall well-being.

Research has only begun to uncover how certain factors contribute to the adjustment to parental divorce by children and adolescents; and thus far, most of the research on these factors has focused primarily on parent-child relationships, parental conflict, economic resources, and

access to support. At the same time, and unfortunately, widely overlooked by researchers is the role that siblings play in undermining or promoting positive adjustment for children and adolescents of parental divorce – a gap in knowledge that has driven this study.

While most of the research that does exist on this topic focuses on the parent-child relationship, only a small body of literature exists on the role that siblings may play in coping with divorce. (In fact, the paucity of research in this area reflects the relative lack of research on sibling relationships in all dimensions of child development.) Yet, the research that does exist on this topic suggests that the sibling relationship contributes positively to many aspects of child development, socialization, adjustment, and family functioning (Kramer & Kowal, 2005). Furthermore, it has been found that due to their shared history and strength of bonds, siblings can provide one another with support, guidance, companionship, and intense emotional experiences (Noller, 2005).

Thus, while research on siblings and divorce is limited, it still has brought to our attention the significant influence that siblings can have on one another and on the family system as a whole, specifically in times of familial challenges such as divorce. How siblings may influence one another's adjustment to parental divorce still remains largely unexplored, however; and to better understand that dynamic, this study was undertaken. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to explore how siblings may help one another deal with the effects of parental divorce. The research question asked was as follows: *In what ways can having a sibling help children and adolescents deal with parental divorce?*

To answer this research question, 14 individuals consisting of seven sibling dyads, participated in semi-structured interviews, reflecting on the ways in which having a sibling affected their ability to deal with their parents' divorce. Participants also reflected on their overall

experience with the divorce, highlighting various factors such as family dynamics, conflict, and challenges.

As noted above, out of all family relationships, the sibling relationship remains the least studied, a lack of research that reflects ongoing oversight in attention to the potential importance of sibling relationships amongst clinicians, policy makers, and parents alike. This study helps to close that gap, and it is hoped that the findings presented in Chapter IV will help social work practitioners incorporate the sibling relationship into their practice as they attempt to mitigate the stressful effects of parental divorce on their young clients. Finally, I hope that the findings of this study provide a guide to clinical practice with families that are struggling with divorce and help them to make good decisions around custody arrangements.

How This Document is Organized

The next chapter is the literature review, which evaluates the literature related to the selected area of study. Following the literature review is the methodology section, outlining important aspects of the studies' design, sample, recruitment, ethics, data collection, and data analysis. After the methodology chapter, findings of the study are presented, reflecting the major themes and patterns that emerged during data analysis. Last is the discussion section, which explores how significant findings relate to past related literature, which explores strengths and limitations of this study, and which offers implications for social work and policy makers dealing with families of divorce.

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of the study was to explore how siblings may help one another deal with parental divorce. Due to the limited research on sibling relationships, the study aimed to provide a greater understanding of the importance of sibling relationships and the significant role that siblings may play in one another's lives when coping with the stressful effects of parental divorce. To gain an understanding of the impact of parental divorce on children, this review of literature examines children and adolescents experiences with divorce as well as sibling relationships in families of divorce.

The literature is reviewed in three main sections: (a) the impact of divorce on children and adolescents; (b) the influence of sibling relationships on individual development; (c) sibling relationships in families of divorce. Section one provides an overview of the short-term and long-term effects of divorce on individuals who experienced parental divorce in childhood and adolescents. This section also reviews findings in recent research on the adjustment of children and adolescents in divorced families, as well as the risk and protective factors that contribute to their adjustment, development, and overall well-being. Section two explores what we know thus far about the influence of siblings on individual development and adjustment. Lastly, section three examines the impact of divorce on sibling relationships as well as the potential for sibling relationships to buffer and mitigate some of the stressful effects of parental divorce.

Impact of Divorce on Children and Adolescents

There is conflicting evidence about whether divorce rates are rising, declining, or remaining the same over the last twenty years (Kennedy & Ruggles, 2014; Miller, 2014). However, regardless of the trends, parental separation and divorce is a common phenomenon that impacts large numbers of children. Some divorces occur in childless marriages, thus not involving children, while others may occur when children are adults, after they have left the home. However, many divorces occur in families with children and adolescents. Regardless to whether divorce rates have gone up or down, there remains a significant amount of people affected by divorce each year. For the purpose of this section of the review, the focus centers on the impact of divorce on persons who experienced parental divorce in childhood or adolescence. It is important to note that for the purpose of this study, "divorce" reflects the child's subjective experience of parental separation rather than the legal reality.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2009), over half of all divorces in the United States involve children under the age of 18, affecting around 1 million children every year. Further, studies show the likelihood of divorce is higher in remarriages, leaving some children to experience not only one but multiple parental divorces throughout their lives (Amato, 2000; Hetherington, 1989; Wallerstein, 1985). While parental divorce is a common phenomenon, research on how this stressful life event impacts children yields many diverse and at times conflicting findings.

Divorce marks a time of great strain, challenging transitions, and often increasing conflict within the family system. Spouses are forced to redefine parenting roles while children must work to adjust to stressful changes and challenges within family structure and overall lifestyles (Sheehan, Darlington, Noller & Feeney, 2004). Various researchers have documented the

stressful impact of parental divorce on children, overall reporting a variety of immediate and for some children, even long-term effects (Amato, 2000; Amato & Sobolewski, 2001; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999; Wallerstein, 1985; Wallerstein, 1991; Wallerstein, & Lewis, 2007). Despite the large amount of research dedicated to this topic, findings are at times confusing and even conflicting due to the diversity of outcomes (Amato, 2000). Perhaps much discrepancy and variability in findings can be attributed to the constantly evolving complexity and uniqueness of each family system across time. Thus, in order to study and understand the impact of divorce on children, divorce should not be looked at as a single event. Instead, according to Wallerstein (1991), divorce is best viewed as a complex series of changes, "a multistage process of radically changing familial relationships which begins in the failing marriage, continues through the often chaotic period of marital rupture and its immediate aftermath, and continues further, often over several years of disequilibrium within the family" (p. 350).

Overall, the accumulation of research on children of divorce suggests that divorce can create considerable turmoil and distress in the lives of these individuals, thus putting children at risk for developing various behavioral, social, academic, developmental, and adjustment problems (Amato, 2000; Amato & Keith, 1991; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999; Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004). However, the diversity in findings has also proven that individuals vary greatly in their reactions and responses to parental divorce (Amato, 2000). For some children, divorce may be beneficial and even yield positive consequences, such as the development of exceptional competency, independence, and resiliency following divorce (Amato, 2000; Hetherington, 1989). For others, it may lead to temporary declines in well-being, even forcing some children on a downward path in which they may never fully recover (Amato, 2000). Nevertheless, the wide range of outcomes shed light on the diversity of situational,

individual, and environmental factors, such as age, gender, and familial relationships, which impact the ways children cope and adjust to parental divorce.

Unfortunately, despite numerous studies and years of research on this topic, our understanding of the contingencies under which divorce leads to these diverse outcomes amongst children is still very limited (Amato, 2000). However, much research, specifically longitudinal studies, have been able to highlight some important potential effects of divorce while taking into consideration some of the many other factors that help determine the individual's vulnerability to immediate and potential long-term effects of divorce (Amato, 2000; Amato & Sobolewski, 2001; Wallerstein, 1991).

Immediate impact of divorce on children and adolescents. Regardless of circumstance, research has found most children experience problems immediately following divorce (Amato & Keith, 1991; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). According to Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan (1999), after divorce, children are often depressed, anxious, angry, demanding, noncompliant, anti-social, and struggle to perform academically. Further, Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan (1999) suggests the most severe immediate effects of divorce on child adjustment are seen in externalizing disorders. These involve antisocial, aggressive, and, noncompliant behaviors as well as lack of self-regulation in social responsibility, and diminished cognitive agency and achievement (Kempton, Armistead, Wierson, & Forehand, 1991; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999).

To a less harmful degree, divorce has also been associated with internalizing disorders shown in some children's increase of anxiety, depressive symptoms, and difficulties in social relationships (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1979; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999; Shaw & Emery, 1987). Nevertheless, for many children, immediate problems following divorce often

decrease and eventually diminish with time, as the family restabilizes with new defined roles, structure, and relationships (Amato & Keith, 1991; Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington et al., 1992).

Long-term impact of divorce on children and adolescents. For children who had greater difficulty adjusting to their parents' divorce, problems in childhood may continue into adolescence (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999; Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004). Even for children who initially displayed fewer adjustment problems or who coped fairly well with their parent's divorce, for example, issues may emerge down the road as they are forced to take on new developmental tasks, challenges, and demands (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). In adolescence, research has shown certain developmental demands to be especially difficult for children of divorced parents, such as an increase in independent behavior, self-regulation, academic and vocational achievement, and the formation of intimate relationships (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). These developmental demands often exacerbate problems in adjustment to divorce, shown in increased familial conflict, acting out, externalizing behaviors, and problems in school (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Further, adolescents in divorced families are two to three times more likely to drop out of school, become pregnant, engage in anti-social behavior, associate with anti-social peers and be referred for clinical treatment (Achenbach & Edelbroch, 1983; Amato & Keith, 1991b; Hetherington et. al., 1992; McLanhan & Sandefur, 1994).

Unfortunately, these difficulties often continue into adulthood for children who exhibited problematic adjustment to parental divorce (Amato & Keith, 1991; Glenn & Kramer, 1985; Kulka & Weingarten, 1979; Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004). For young adults who experienced parental divorce in childhood or adolescence, problems in adjustment are often seen in their level

of achievement and ability to form close personal relationships (Amato & Keith, 1991b). For instance, studies have found these individuals are more likely to have problems forming and maintaining close stable relationships, specifically in marriage (Mcleod, 1991; Webster, Orbuch, & House, 1995). In addition, adults who experienced parental divorce in childhood or adolescence are less likely to attend or complete college, are more likely to be unemployed, and overall have fewer financial resources (Keith & Finley, 1988; McLeod, 1991; Mclanahan & Sandefur, 1994). In general, the accumulation of research suggests children of parental divorce are less socially, emotionally, and academically well-adjusted than children in non-divorced families and for some, the impact of divorce has lasting effects, often emerging and reemerging at different points throughout their lives (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999).

Diverse effects of divorce on children and adolescents. It is important to remember that the effects of divorce are not always adverse. When parental divorce alleviates familial conflict, abuse, or neglect to create a more stable, functional environment, problems can diminish following divorce (Amato, Loomis, & Booth, 1995). In addition, much research agrees that the large majority do not exhibit severe or enduring behavior problems (Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington et al., 1992). Furthermore, according to Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan (1999), over time most children show resiliency in eventually adapting to parental divorce.

Although there is considerable consensus throughout research that children of parental divorce exhibit more problems than those in non-divorced families, there is much debate as to the size and severity of these differences (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Some studies show the differences are small and diminish as families re-stabilize and divorce becomes more accepted (Amato & Keith, 1991a). Others report considerably larger differences, specifically around externalizing behaviors, social responsibility, and cognitive agency (Hetherington, 1991;

Hetherington, 1992; Simons & Associates, 1996). Thus, perhaps, the degree to which parental

divorce impacts the individual may be contingent on a variety of external factors. More recent

research has begun to explore some of these external factors, such as financial resources, parental

conflict, and familial relationships, with hopes of determining the role they may play in

undermining or promoting positive adjustment in children of parental divorce (Hetherington &

Stanley-Hagan, 1999). In essence, research suggests that the severity of the impact of divorce on

the child has the potential to be mitigated by certain external factors that may buffer and ease the

course of adjustment for the individual.

Many studies have devoted their efforts to uncovering underlying protective and risk

factors for children of divorce, with hopes of helping families in both clinical and legal settings,

mitigate and buffer the stressful immediate and long-term effects of divorce (Amato, 2000).

Research on this topic has focused on the role age, gender, personality, parenting style, access to

resources, financial stability, and parent-child relationships plays in exacerbating or buffering

children from the negative effects of divorce. While research on these specific factors has gained

important insights into risk and protective factors for children of divorce, there are still many

important underlying factors left understudied, specifically around the importance of sibling

relationships.

Sibling Relationships

The majority of individuals in the United States grow up with at least one sibling. In

2010, national data found that 82.2% of youth age 18 and under lived with at least one sibling,

which was an even higher percentage than those living in a household with a father figure

(78.19%) (King et al., 2010). Thus, sibling relationships are both ubiquitous and unique, being

the only relationship that extends across life course often changing throughout our lives, and

impacting individual development as well as the family system as a whole (Kramer & Bank, 2005; Kramer & Kowal, 2005; McHale, Updegraff, & Whiteman, 2012).

Despite the high prevalence of siblings in the U.S., the sibling relationship remains one of the most neglected in terms of research (Abbey & Dallos, 2004; McHale et al., 2012; Noller, 2005). While most research focuses on the parent-child relationship, there is only a small, slow growing body of research highlighting the important role siblings play in one another's development and adjustment. The paucity of research in this area reflects the relative lack of research on sibling relationships in all dimensions of child development and propelled this particular study.

Sibling influence on adjustment and development. Research suggests that sibling relationships are uniquely important to children and adolescent's development above and even beyond the benefits of parenting (Chriss & Shaw, 2005; Dunn, 2000; Pike, Coldwell, & Dunn, 2005; Windle, 2000). Through their extensive contact, interactions, and companionship during childhood and adolescence, there is much opportunity for siblings to shape one another's behavior, social emotional development, and adjustment (McHale et al., 2012). Thus, by virtue of their continuous everyday involvement and interactions, siblings have the potential to promote positive and negative adjustment and development in one another's lives (McHale et al., 2012).

Various studies document the important role that siblings play in each other's adjustment and development (Parke & Buriel, 2006; Noller, 2005). For example, children who have a positive sibling relationship are less likely to be victimized by peers, show a greater amount of emotional control in academic settings, are less likely to exhibit externalizing behaviors and have stronger peer relationships (Bellanti & Bierman, 1996; Kramer & Gottman, 1992; Kramer & Kowal, 2005; Lamarche et al., 2006; Stormshak, Bellanti, & Bierman, 1996). Siblings also

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influence one another's social, cognitive, and emotional development (Dunn, 1992; Noller, 2005). Furthermore, warm sibling relationships are positively associated with the development of cognitive skills, emotional regulation, and cooperativeness (Noller, 2005). In general, the reciprocal nature of the relationship provides children with numerous opportunities to learn about themselves and how they are perceived by others (Dunn, 2000). Thus, siblings have the ability to act as teachers/learners and helpers/helpees (Brody, Stoneman, & MacKinnon, 1982; Dunn, 1998).

In terms of adolescence, research shows siblings contribute to positive developmental outcomes, such as prosocial behavior, empathy, and engagement in academics (Bouchey, Shoulberg, Jodl, & Eccles, 2010; Tucker, Updegraff, McHale, & Crouter, 1999; Whiteman, McHale, & Crouter, 2007). Specifically, sibling support has been tied to healthier adolescent adjustment (Branje, van Lieshout, van Aken, & Haselager, 2004). Overall, research suggests closeness, affection, and warmth within a sibling relationship is linked to positive adjustment in children and adolescents, warranting a closer look at these underlying factors (Kim, McHale, Crouter, & Osgood, 2007; Pike et al., 2005).

However, not all of what siblings learn through their interactions is positive. Some studies found sibling conflict and hostility to be positively related to adolescents' negative adjustment as well as their anti-social behavior, and depression (Criss & Shaw, 2005; Kim et al., 2007; Stocker et al., 2002). According to Bank, Burraston, & Snyder (2004), sibling conflict in childhood is associated with concurrent and later problems with school, bullying, substance use, and internalizing symptoms. Thus, coercive interaction styles, learned in the context of sibling conflict, provide a setting for practicing and reinforcing delinquent and antisocial behaviors (Bullock & Dishion, 2002). Furthermore, siblings, specifically older ones, may act as role

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models, which can encourage and reinforce risky activities, impulsivity, and bad behavior (Rowe & Gulley, 1992; Windle, 2000).

However, overall findings are conflicting, with some researchers arguing that sibling conflict and interactions may promote the development of important skills in perspective taking, empathy, negotiation, persuasion, and problem solving (Bank, Burraston, & Snyder, 2004; Stocker, Burwell, & Briggs, 2002). Furthermore, sibling closeness has a greater influence on positive outcomes of adjustment than does sibling conflict on negative outcomes (Pike et al., 2005).

According to Davies (2002), siblings can be "attachment figures, antagonists, playmates, protectors, and socializers" (p. 94). Due to their shared history and strength of bonds, siblings can also provide each other with support, guidance, companionship, and intense emotional experiences (Noller, 2005). Overall, despite limited research around this topic, findings have begun to shed light on the important influence of siblings on individual adjustment and development, however we still have some distance to go in understanding these complex relationships given the conflicting findings regarding the impact of divorce on children and sibling relationships.

Impact of Divorce on Sibling Relationships

Research on the impact of divorce on sibling relationships yields considerable variability between families (Garcia, Shaw, Winslow, & Yaggi, 2000). For example, certain life adversities, such as divorce and family conflict, can have a negative impact on the quality of the sibling relationship (Dunn, Slomkowski, Beardsall, & Rende, 1994). However, Jenkins (1992) who documented an opposite bonding effect, suggest that siblings are actually drawn closer together by certain life challenges, such as separation and divorce. Other researchers argue the

effects of a parental separation and divorce are associated with the quality of the sibling relationship prior to the event, suggesting that divorce may intensify rather than fundamentally alter the nature of the relationship (Abbey & Dallos, 2004; Dunn, 1984; Dunn, 2000). Despite conflicting findings, research agrees siblings often have increased conflict immediately following divorce (Dunn et al., 1994; Noller, Feeney, Sheehan, Darlington, & Rogers, 2008; Young, & Ehrenberg, 2007). The diversity of findings have led some to suggest that although divorce may increase immediate levels of conflict amongst siblings, in the long-run, a generally positive overall sibling relationship, which may include both high levels of conflict and warmth, can lessen negative effects of divorce (Bush & Ehrenberg, 2003; Hetherington, 1989).

Affect-intense sibling relationships in divorced families. Mcguire, McHale, and Updegraff (1996) developed an empirically confirmed four-group typology of sibling relationships based on dimensions of warmth and hostility within the relationship (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985). Specifically, they determined that four types of sibling relationships could be defined based on these two dimensions: harmonious, hostile, affect-intense, and uninvolved (Mcguire et al., 1996). Out of the four sibling relationship types, studies found affect-intense relationships, characterized by both high levels of warmth and high levels of hostility, are overrepresented amongst siblings in separated or divorced families (Sheehan, Darlington, Noller, & Feeney, 2004). This is congruent with research that suggests siblings often experience greater conflict but also greater closeness following divorce (Bush & Ehrenberg, 2003; Noller, Feeney, Sheehan, Darlington, & Rogers, 2008).

Several studies have explored the underlying reasons for this high prevalence of affect-intense sibling relationships in families of divorce. According to Noller (2005) these relationships may be attributed to the desire for older siblings to try and compensate for parental

conflict by providing extra nurturance to their younger siblings. Support for this was found in Sheehan et al. (2004) qualitative study, which determined that parental conflict before, during, and after divorce, as well as parental absence, are all aspects of divorce that can cause older siblings to take on nurturing roles towards younger siblings (Sheehan et al., 2004).

In addition, Noller (2005) found that these caretaking and nurturing roles played by older siblings were at times met with feelings of ambivalence and hostility by younger siblings. Often, younger siblings showed resentment towards controlling aspects of their older siblings' behavior (Noller, 2005). Noller (2005) argues this combination of nurturance and resentment in the relationship explains the high prevalence of "affect-intense" sibling relationships in divorced families; characterized by high levels of warmth and hostility within the sibling dyad.

Overall, these findings are consistent with past research that indicates sibling relationships often become more conflicted when children experience high parental conflict, common in families of divorce (Hetherington, 1989; Jenkins, Smith, & Graham, 1989). In response to anger among parents, older siblings tend to increase caregiving, nurturance, and prosocial behavior toward younger siblings (Hetherington, 1989; Jenkins et al., 1989). According to Brody (1998) this caregiving role of the older sibling is perhaps a way of buffering younger children from the distress associated with parental conflict.

Despite limited research on this topic, studies have uncovered some important aspects of sibling relationships in families of divorce. First, sibling relationships are overall more positive in divorced families compared to non-divorced families (Kunz, 2001). Second, studies suggest sibling conflict and negativity are higher amongst divorced and separated families than non-divorced families (Noller, Conway, & Blakeley-Smith, 2008). However, according to Pike et al. (2005), high conflict is not a significant predictor of the closeness and importance of the

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relationship. In fact, high levels of warmth serve as a more salient influence on positive outcomes than high levels of conflict (Pike et al., 2005). Together, these findings provide support for the overrepresentation of "affect-intense" relationships amongst siblings of parental divorce. In addition, accumulating research has linked other factors in the family system, such as the parent-child relationship, parental conflict, and parenting behaviors to predictors of sibling relationship quality (O' Connor, Hetherington, & Reiss, 1998).

        Potential for siblings to help one another deal with parental divorce. According to Kempton, Armistead, Wierson, & Forehand (1991), children with siblings may adjust better to parental divorce than children without siblings. In support of this, Jacobs and Sillars (2012) qualitative study found that the mere company of a sibling provided reassurance and promoted resilience amongst individuals who experienced divorce in childhood or adolescence. Furthermore, research suggests siblings may provide psychological, psychosocial, and emotional support, often looking to one another during distressing times of parental divorce (Brubaker, 1985; Scott, 1983; Garmezy & Rutter, 1983; Johnson, 1986). Conversely, Brody (1998), suggest that parental conflict and families that lack stable relations are associated with less positivity and more negativity in sibling relationships. Therefore, although studies are at times conflicting, overall, the accumulation of research on sibling relationships in families of divorce sheds light on the potential siblings have to help each other cope with and adjust to this challenging life experience (Riggio, 2001). Further, these relationships may serve as a buffer and protect children from some of the harmful effects of divorce (Riggio, 2001). Yet, despite the potential for siblings to help mitigate the effects of divorce and assist with individual adjustment, only a handful of studies have begun to explore this topic.

Kempton et al. (1991) for example, took interest in this issue by examining whether the presence of a sibling had the potential to protect young adolescents from some of the adverse effects of parental divorce. Much of the study focused on evaluating externalizing behavior problems, which previous research has found to be greater in adolescents from divorced families than their counterparts from intact families (Emery, 1982). According to Kempton et al. (1991), following divorce, adolescents with no sibling appeared to act out more than adolescents with a sibling. In addition, the study found that regardless of marital status, adolescents with siblings tended to resemble one another in terms of behavior difficulties. These findings suggest that the presence of a sibling may buffer the negative effects of parental divorce, however, which specific components involved in having a sibling are responsible for buffering adverse effects of parental divorce is still much unknown (Kempton et al., 1991).

Jacobs and Sillars (2012) also took interest in this topic, specifically focusing on the support siblings provide to one another in families of divorce. Thus, a common theme they found was that across most accounts, children found comfort from the mere presence of a sibling and in knowing they were not going through this experience alone (Jacobs & Sillars, 2012). Further, the study indicated that although sibling conflict may increase following parental divorce, support overshadowed conflict in participant's accounts of their sibling relationships (Jacobs & Sillars, 2012; Noller et al., 2008). Empirical evidence has also supported the view that siblings are more likely to rely on one another in difficult situations, specifically with adolescence providing mutual support for one another during separation or divorce (Kier & Lewis, 1988; Wallerstein, 1987). Lastly, in a longitudinal study of sibling relationships and adolescent adjustment to parental divorce, Sheehan et al. (2004), found support for the past propositions that in times of crisis and difficult change, the natural support system previously

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existing among certain groups of siblings can serve to strengthen and protect children against adverse consequences of parental divorce.

Summary

The accumulation of research on the impact of parental divorce on children and adolescents yields a wide range of diverse outcomes. Overall, findings suggest children of parental divorce are more at risk for both immediate and/or long-term behavioral, adjustment, and developmental problems, however, the severity and degree to which divorce impacts children is still unknown. For example, some researchers have found positive effects, such as the development of resiliency in children of divorce, while others have found more adverse effects, such has developmental and adjustment problems that may continue into adulthood (Amato, 2000; Hetherington, 1989). Despite conflicting findings, what is clear is that the severity of the impact of divorce on children and adolescents is contingent on the role numerous external factors play in undermining or promoting the positive adjustment, development, and overall well-being of the child.

Due to the complexity and uniqueness of each family system, research has only begun to uncover how certain external factors contribute to lessening or increasing the effects of parental divorce on children and adolescents. Thus far, the majority of research interested in understanding these external factors with hopes of discovering ways to mitigate the effects of divorce for children and adolescents has focused mainly on parent-child relationships, parental conflict, economic resources, and access to support. However, widely overlooked by researchers is the role that siblings may play in undermining or promoting positive adjustment for children and adolescents of parental divorce.

Despite limited research on this topic and sibling relationships, researchers who have taken interest have highlighted the important influence siblings have on one another's development and adjustment. Research suggests that through siblings' extensive contact, interactions, and companionship during childhood and adolescents, siblings have the potential to promote positive and negative adjustment and development in one another's lives (McHale et al., 2012). In addition, Pike et al. (2005) found sibling closeness to have a greater influence on positive outcomes of adjustment than does sibling conflict on negative outcomes.

In terms of siblings in families of parental divorce, studies suggest that the mere presence of a sibling during this difficult time, allows a child to gain comfort from knowing they are not going through this experience alone and may help buffer the negative effects of divorce (Jacobs & Sillars, 2012; Kempton et al., 1991). Furthermore, research suggests that in times of crisis and difficult change, the natural support system existing among certain groups of siblings can serve to strengthen and protect children against adverse consequences of parental divorce (Sheehan, 2004). Overall, the small body of literature on siblings and divorce suggests positive sibling relationships have the potential to mitigate the effects of parental divorce. However, the specific components involved in having a sibling that are responsible for buffering adverse effects of parental divorce is still largely unknown (Kempton et al., 1991).

Due to limited research on this topic, this current study explores the ways in which having a sibling may help children in adolescents deal with parental divorce, with the goal of providing a greater understanding of the sibling relationship and the significant role siblings may play in one another's lives when coping with the stressful effects of parental divorce. Further, I hope this research will help social workers understand the importance of sibling relationships in

hopes of incorporating this knowledge into their clinical work, as well as any involvement they

may have in custody arrangements for siblings of parental divorce.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

Research Purpose and Question

The purpose of this study was to gain a greater understanding of how siblings may help one another deal with parental divorce. The research question was: *In what ways can having a sibling help children and adolescents deal with parental divorce?* From this study I aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the importance of sibling relationships and the significant role that siblings may play in one another's lives when coping with the stressful effects of parental divorce.

My hope is that this research will inform social workers of the importance of sibling relationships and provide a better understanding of how to incorporate the sibling relationship into clinical practice in order to mitigate the stressful effects of parental divorce for their clients. Further, I hope that these findings provide a helpful guide to clinical practice with families that are struggling with divorce and help social workers make informed recommendations when dealing with custody arrangements.

Design

To answer the above-noted research question, I conducted a qualitative exploratory study that used semi-structured interview questions to collect data both in person and over the telephone (see Appendix F). A qualitative method was chosen because the interest of the study was to explore the nature and quality of experience. The strength of qualitative research lies in its

ability to provide the complex reality of a given situation in order to better understand how people experience specific issues within their individual context (Engel & Schutt, 2012).

As discussed in the literature review (see Chapter II), research on the impact of divorce on children and adolescents yields a wide range of findings that are at times inconsistent and conflicting, due to the complexity and uniqueness of each individual and their family system. Despite numerous studies and years of research on this topic, our understanding of the contingencies under which divorce leads to these diverse outcomes amongst children is still very limited (Amato, 2000). Through the use of qualitative research methods, I was able to take into account underlying factors, such as social norms, financial stress, familial relationships/roles, and overall complex family dynamics that may have impacted the participant's relationship with their sibling when dealing with parental divorce. Further, a qualitative approach provided the potential for a subjective analysis, which can often be overlooked and oversimplified by quantitative methods.

Sample

This study recruited a non-probability sample of 14 participants comprised of seven adult sibling dyads. All participants were at least 21 years of age, were between the ages of six and 18 during the time of parental separation, and had a sibling who also participated in the study. Participants in the study were recruited from advertisements sent out over Facebook (see Appendix A) and e-mail (see Appendices B and C).

Recruitment. The study used a non-probability method of sampling collection known as convenience sampling (Engel & Schutt, 2012). Within that framework, a snowball method was used to identify other potential participants when direct outreach did not yield the required numbers.

The recruitment process consisted of three advertising sources to recruit potential participants: (a) online list serve (AAPCSW); (b) social media networking tool (Facebook); (c) outreach to my professional contacts. The Facebook advertisement, e-mail to the AAPCSW listserv, and outreach to my professional contacts all consisted of a brief synopsis of the study, eligibility requirements, and instructions on how to contact me to set up a time for a telephone screening to determine eligibility. Following the screening questions (see Appendix D), potential participants were given information about the study and the opportunity to ask any questions. After both siblings were screened and deemed eligible for the study, I contacted each participant in the dyad to schedule a formal individual interview. Interviews were conducted done either in-person or by telephone, depending on geographic logistics.

Before engaging in the interview, individuals who were eligible and had agreed to participate in the study were mailed an Informed Consent form (see Appendix E) along with a stamped self-addressed envelope to return a signed copy. For in-person interviews participants were given a copy of their signed Informed Consent at the beginning of the interview. For telephone interviews, they were mailed a signed copy of their Informed Consent for their records immediately after I received their form. Further, I made sure that each person to whom the signed copy had been returned had in fact received his or her signed copy before the telephone interview took place.

Ethics and Safeguards

In order to address ethical concerns of consent, confidentiality, and the potential for psychological distress, several measures were built into the study design, recruitment, data collection, analysis, and reporting process. Outlined below are the measures I took to address any safety and ethical concerns of the study.

Due to the nature of the research topic, I foresaw the possibility that some participants might become agitated or upset while discussing their parents' divorce and/or their sibling relationship. To reduce the likelihood of psychological distress all participants were informed of the potential for distress and told that they had the right to decline to either answer a specific question or to continue the interview. Further, I made sure to discourage participants from sharing any experiences that they were not comfortable discussing by stating the potential for emotional distress before beginning the interview.

To address ethical concerns of consent I made sure all participants read and signed the Informed Consent forms approved by Smith College School for Social Work before participating in the study. When the in-person or telephone interview began I reminded participants that I was recording the interview and asked if they were ready to proceed. No recording of interviews took place without the consent of the participant as noted on their individual Informed Consent forms.

Various methods were also used to protect the confidentiality of participants. First, I was the only person with access to the audio recordings and notes taken during interviews. These recordings and notes were stored in a lockable file drawer during the thesis process and will continue to be so locked for three years beyond the completion of the study in accordance with federal regulations. Second, upon transcription I took the necessary steps to de-identify all participants from the information being transcribed. Third, I did not under any circumstance discuss information or issues arising from an individual interview with others in ways that might identify the individual. Last, I ensured participants through the Informed Consent form that any information published in the thesis would protect their confidentiality by not using any real names and by only identifying their geographic location broadly. In addition to being informed

of all these precautions in the Informed Consent, participants were also given the opportunity to ask any questions regarding confidentiality before participating in the study.

It is hoped that participants benefited from the opportunity to share their experiences regarding parental divorce and sibling relationships. For example, just by telling their story participants may have gained some insight into their experiences with divorce and their sibling relationship in both childhood and as an adult. Further, it is hoped that participants gained a sense of satisfaction from knowing that their experiences and story may contribute to insight on shaping clinical work with children and adults of parental divorce and on identifying important areas for future research.

Data Collection

For this study I used semi-structured interviews to collect qualitative data about the ways in which having a sibling may have helped the members of this sample deal with parental divorce. The qualitative data were gathered using individual interviews conducted both in-person and over the telephone. Although the use of strictly in-person interviews would have been ideal, telephone interviews provided a viable option for participants whose location/s created geographic constraints. The interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed for qualitative data analysis.

Interviews lasted anywhere from 25 to 60 minutes depending on the quantity of narrative presented by the respondent. Demographic and familial information was collected at the start of each interview (see Appendix G) after which participants responded to a semi-structured interview guide, which consisted of 13 questions exploring participants experiences with their sibling before, during, and after their parents' divorce (see Appendix F). The guide was divided

into two themes: (a) experience with parental divorce (six questions); (b) ways in which having a sibling impacted how they dealt with parental divorce (seven questions).

The first set of questions provided a deeper understanding of the nature of the divorce within each participant's specific environment. Thus, I was able to gain valuable information regarding the context and reality of each person's experience. Further, these questions helped set the stage for the second half of the interview, allowing me to effectively explore how each participant's specific experience with parental divorce may have affected their interactions and involvement with their sibling around this difficult life event.

The second set of questions aimed to explore the ways in which having a sibling may or may not have helped them deal with the distress of parental divorce. The focus of these questions was to understand the dynamics and quality of participant's current and past relationship with their sibling and how these dynamics might become useful tools for clinical social work practice.

Overall, the use of a semi-structured interview consisting of open-ended questions gave participants the opportunity to describe the reality of their experience freely. This allowed participants to be in control of their story and what they did and did not want to share. It also gave me, as the researcher, the opportunity to gain an in-depth understanding of their experience and any external factors that affected this experience. Further, through exploratory open-ended questions I was able to get specific examples of why and how participants found that having a sibling was helpful or not helpful when dealing with the stress of parental divorce. By listening intently to their story I was able to understand the context and nature of the divorce, which helped me to better understand their unique family dynamics and overall experience.

In addition to transcribing the interviews from the audio recordings, I also used a notebook to take field notes during and after each interview. This notebook served as a research

log and as a self-reflection journal for bracketing. According to Tufford and Newman (2012), who write about qualitative data analysis, bracketing is a way of putting aside researcher subjectivity. Thus, it has been used to increase the validity of studies by lessening the likelihood of researcher bias (Tufford & Newman, 2012). Along with reducing researcher bias through bracketing, this notebook allowed me to critically explore my thoughts and reactions to interviews and to keep a log of important events during interviews. To maintain the confidentiality of the participants I used pseudonyms in the notebook, choosing them carefully in order to remember which notes belong to which interview.

Data Analysis

All of the semi-structured interviews were audio recorded and transcribed in full. I used some descriptive statistics to analyze demographic and contextual data collected in the study, creating a framework for understanding the characteristics of the sample. I then conducted content analysis, including the use of coding as directed by grounded theory in order to make sense and meaning of the qualitative data gathered, focusing on patterns and themes of apparent importance (Strauss & Corbin, 1980).

CHAPTER IV

Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore if and how siblings may help one another deal with the effects of parental divorce. In cases where participants found their siblings to be unhelpful or to have a negative impact on their ability to deal with their parents' divorce, data were analyzed further to identify underlying factors that helped to explain why participants felt this way. This chapter outlines the findings of this exploratory, qualitative study based on 14 individual interviews consisting of seven adult sibling dyads that experienced parental divorce from ages six to 18.

The data presented in this chapter were collected through a combination of in-person and telephone interviews. Interviews were fully transcribed and then coded and analyzed for patterns and themes by the researcher. The interviews centered on two broad areas of inquiry with several questions in each area: (a) participant's experience with parental divorce (six questions); (b) ways in which having a sibling impacted their ability to deal with the divorce (seven questions). Demographic data were also collected at the start of each interview.

Three main themes emerged from the data with each theme encompassing several subthemes. This section will explain the three main themes along with their subthemes, using examples from the interviews in order to maintain the authenticity of the participants' voices. The three main themes addressed in this section are:

1. Positive impact of sibling relationships on ability to deal with parental divorce.

2. *Sibling relationship dynamics.*

3. *Negative impacts of sibling relationships on ability to deal with parental divorce.*

I now describe the sample and its characteristics, followed by a discussion of the substantive findings.

The Sample and its Characteristics

A total of 14 individuals consisting of seven sibling dyads participated in either in-person or telephone interviews and answered all demographic questions. Almost all participants identified as female except one who identified as male. Out of the seven sibling dyads, there are two sets of twins. All study participants identified as white (implications of this sample bias can be found in the next chapter).

The participants' average age at the time of study was 38.07 with a range of 21 to 65 years old. At the time of their parents' divorce, their ages ranged from six to 16 years old, with an average age of ten. Twelve out of the 14 participants resided in the Northeast United States at the time of study, while two resided in the Midwest.

Participants were asked to describe their socioeconomic status growing up. Ten out of the 14 identified themselves as "middle class." The other four described themselves as "upper middle," noting a financial downturn after the divorce and highlighting the financial stress of the divorce.

In order to assess any support networks, respondents were asked if they had any extended family members who were a significant part of their lives growing up, and four of the 14 did identify specific members as such, while all others reported no such support networks.

The next sections discuss the three main themes and their subthemes that emerged during the data analysis. For purposes of this document all participants were given pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality.

Substantive Findings

Positive impact of sibling relationships on ability to deal with parental divorce. Ten participants (five dyads) stated that their relationship with their sibling had a positive impact on their ability to deal with their parents' divorce throughout their childhood and adolescence. The following subheadings try to capture the different ways in which they found their siblings helpful.

Comfort derived from the mere presence of a sibling. For all ten participants the mere presence of a sibling provided comfort and reassurance when dealing with their parents' divorce, although the ways in which they felt comforted varied. For example, for many participants comfort came from knowing they were not going through this experience alone, as was the case with Amy who said,

> I think if I were an only child I may have not survived -- at least not survive in the way that I did. It was just so important to have somebody like my brother there, so I wasn't going through everything alone.

Participants were not only comforted and reassured by not having to go through it alone, they were also comforted by the idea that they shared this experience with their sibling. This was conveyed by Bob who said,

> The fact that she was just there really helped a lot. Just knowing I had someone to share my experience with, you know, some one who was really in it with me, and grasped it in a way that most people didn't helped reassure me that everything was going to be okay.

Those who experienced parental divorce at the very young age of six or seven reported an inability to fully comprehend the implications of their parents' divorce at the time due to their young age and developmental level. Yet, despite their limited understanding, they were still comforted by the presence of a sibling, even when they were not able to communicate it expressly. For example, as Ashley stated,

> Whether or not we were really able to talk about it, we were just there, in it together. Just that -- knowing that I had someone to share my experience with -- really helped and comforted me.

For others, the mere company of a sibling provided not only comfort and reassurance but also promoted resilience. This was captured by Sarah when she said,

> I think it was a resiliency thing, just being able to have each other going through the same thing. You know, just knowing we had each other to lean on made us stronger.

Lastly, some participants gained comfort from having a sibling to look to during these times of great distress, as was the case with Diana who said,

> I remember the conversation where we had to choose which parent we wanted to live with. My sister and I kind of bound together that day, our common thread being how difficult it was to literally sit there and have to make a choice. But for me it wasn't really a choice, for me it was the sense that I was going to go wherever my big sister went.

Stability. All of the participants who found having a sibling helpful when dealing with their parents' divorce noted stability as a major contributing factor. In some cases, the stability that they found was in response to the familial chaos going on around them, as was the case with one Hannah, who stated,

When everything was changing and I couldn't really be certain of how my   parents

related to each other or what was going on, she was always there to be a constant edge.

In other cases, the stability of the sibling relationship was in response to the emotional loss of a

parent during the divorce. In these instances participants tended to turn to one another for the

parental stability they felt that they lost during the divorce. For example, Stacey stated,

My mother completely fell apart after the divorce. She was probably clinically depressed

for a good five years after my dad left. She was unable to really parent us anymore. So

my brother was pretty important to me as being a stabilizing influence in my life.

Lastly, some participants noted that just having their sibling with them throughout the experience

provided a stabilizing influence in their lives. As Margaret stated,

It's interesting because she's been this common thread throughout my life. And you

know, as she became a teenager, obviously that changed a little bit because I became the

annoying younger sister but for the most part, consistently she's been the one that's been

there for me.

Support. The majority of participants who felt that their sibling had a positive impact on

their ability to deal with the divorce identified support as one of the main contributing factors.

However, the concept of support was extremely diverse within narratives, with respondents

experiencing support in different forms and at different stages of adjustment. In many cases, for

example, they reported instances of instrumental support, most commonly help with homework,

preparing meals, and transportation. In all of these cases, increased instrumental support was

seen as a response to seeming parental unavailability following divorce. In the following

passage, Maggie discusses the role that her brother played in her life following her parents'

divorce,

I remember my brother was the one who helped me move into college for the first time. We bought some really cheap curtains that I could put up over the window, and he helped me do that; so he was (supportive), I guess. I never looked at him as my parental figure but he certainly was a support in my life when my parents just weren't there for me at all because they were too preoccupied with the divorce and hating each other. He helped me with my homework, drove me places, and all that kind of stuff.

The majority of participants also reported time together as a source of support, simply appreciating that their sibling was there with them when dealing with the changes and effects of the divorce. Participants described this kind of support as "playing with each other," "hanging out," or just "having someone around." For those who reported time together as a source of support, there was no specific reference to comfort or direct help. Instead, they focused on their appreciation of having someone there who could relate to their situation. This idea was conveyed by Sally who said,

My sister and I were all fairly young when my parents got divorced, and we were still playing with each other and hanging out together a lot, and so that support didn't change. After the divorce my life continued as far as I knew it other than the fact that my dad just didn't come home at night. So just having my siblings there as people I could relate to because we were going through the same thing was very supportive even though we were too young to communicate this to each other at the time.

In other cases, participants perceived that support was available from siblings whether they received it or not. Participant responses included statements such as, "If I needed someone to talk to, I knew they were always there." As Holly stated it,

Just knowing I had her to lean on if I needed anything made things easier. We were really

there for each other through it all and I knew if I needed her she would be there for me.

As noted above, these participants could not remember specific actions of support but still felt

sibling support was always there if they needed it.

Older siblings take on caregiving roles toward younger siblings. Out of the 10

participants (five dyads) who reported their sibling relationship had a positive impact on their

ability to deal with their parents' divorce, eight of them noted the emergence of a parent-child

sibling relationship both during and after separation and divorce. In all cases, this parent-child

sibling relationship consisted of the older child taking on a caretaking role toward the younger

child. The two who did not report this kind of emerging relationship are twins who expressed a

very close consistent bond before, during, and after the divorce. The following section is divided

into two subheadings to capture the ways in which this parent-child sibling relationship helped

participants deal with parental divorce.

Protector. Out of the eight participants who experienced this kind of relationship, all of

the older children noted feelings of protectiveness over their younger siblings, a role that

involved two dynamics: 1) the older sibling having more information pertaining to the divorce

than their younger sibling, and 2) being able to filter this information when trying to help their

younger sibling deal with the divorce. In most cases, this role of older sibling as protector

seemed to come as a response to parental conflict, familial instability, and/or parental neglect

following divorce. Upon reflection of parental conflict in childhood, Tony stated,

When they were fighting before they separated I really kind of took care of my little

brother and sister. I tried to keep them away. I mean they would fight in their room, there

was no physical anything; there were just horrible screaming fights… and I just

remember really trying to protect them. I would tell them to go into our room, and if they were sitting outside my parent's door listening, I would be at the top of the stairs kind of being the shield.

For most participants, this role as protector for their younger sibling served to help older sibling participants deal with the divorce by providing them with a sense of purpose and duty, as was the case for Claire who stated,

My little sister gave me a purpose...to protect her. I felt like I was there to protect her and make sure she was okay. I wanted to shield her from, you know, their craziness, the craziness of the divorce, and just protect her. I think if my sister hadn't been there I would have... I mean it's hard to know what I would have done, but I just really feel like having her gave me a purpose, which was to protect her.

The majority of the participants who had been the younger sibling in the dyad also spoke to the protectiveness of their older sibling. For them, having a protective older sibling often shielded them from experiencing all of the negative effects of divorce. For example, as Krista stated,

Since she was the oldest she bore the brunt of a lot of the ugly stuff around the divorce and shielded me from so much I'm probably still not even aware of. So because of that, my experiences of the divorce were way more limited, partially because of my age at the time and also because my sister tried to protect me from everything. My parents were both very abusive, and unfortunately my sister, because she was so much older, bore the brunt of it. She more than anything would stick up for me and bare the brunt both physically and emotionally to protect me from everything that was going on.

Caretaker. Out of these five sibling dyads all participants made reference to either being taken care of by their older sibling or being the caretaker for their younger sibling. Based on

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participant responses, this caretaker role was characterized by high levels of instrumental

support, comfort, and protection. This caretaking role is conveyed by Molly who stated,

> I just wanted to shield my little sister from all my parents' craziness. I mean she was just
>
> adorable and soooooo sweet. I remember when we were trying to wean her from her
>
> bottle and she and I slept together and I would try and distract her by reading her stories.
>
> I just wanted to make sure she was okay. And as we got older, like when I was in high
>
> school and I got a job and was making money, I would take her shopping and buy her
>
> clothes and just try to make sure she was okay.

For the majority of older sibling participants, this caretaking role seemed to be a way of

compensating for the emotional loss of a parental role(s) during the divorce. This was captured

by Stacy when she said,

> I had already done a lot of taking care of her while my parents were together a lot due to
>
> the fact that I was so much older. After the divorce I began taking care of her a lot more. I
>
> fell into the role of the second parents in two different households. I remember just a lot
>
> of nights taking it upon myself to make dinner for the two of us.

For the majority of younger siblings, the caretaking role of their older sibling seemed to provide

them with a sense of stability and security throughout the divorce. These participants commented

on the reliability, stability, and security that they gained from their older siblings' caretaking

role. The following response from Kathy captures this idea eloquently:

> She was very motherly. She was like my big sister/caretaker. We spent a lot of time
>
> together, especially when we were young…That was the point in our lives when we were
>
> together significantly… And you know, as she became a teenager, obviously that
>
> changed a little bit, because I became the annoying younger sister, but for the most part,

consistently, she has been the one that has been there for me. She took care of me, gave me security, and was the stable force throughout my life.

Negative impact of sibling relationship on ability to deal with parental divorce. In contrast, four participants found their sibling relationship to have a negative impact on their ability to deal with their parent's divorce. All of them felt that their sibling had had a positive impact before and during the separation process but that this was followed by a negative impact immediately following the divorce, attributing it to the complexity, chaos, and stress of the divorce. The next section is divided into subheadings that identify different factors found to negatively affect the sibling relationship.

Parental favoritism amongst siblings. All four participants fitting this profile noted parental favoritism of one child over the other following the divorce, resulting in distancing and separation. For example, amongst one sibling dyad, parental favoritism caused one sibling to join with the mother while pushing the other one away:

> My sister was really somebody that I leaned on. In beginning when my parents were fighting and we didn't know what was happening, I really relied on her. But after the divorce we became so polarized due to our mother. I was the "good kid," because I was easier to handle and my sister became the "bad kid," so my sister felt rejected and in turn went off and began acting out in her own way. I think our split -- you know, her going off in a different direction -- made it much harder for me to deal with things because I looked to her all the time for how she was reacting to what was going on; and when she kind of needed to go off on her own I was really pretty lost. I think that's what really made me join with my mother even more and you know take on more of that role of being the good one. I think if she hadn't gone off, I would have been much better off.

Physical separation. Two of the four participants reported physical separation following the divorce as a major factor in the distancing from each other. As Sally stated,

My mom took me and my sister away to a friend's house to live for a while following the divorce. For the first time in our lives me and my sister had separate bedrooms. When we really should have pulled together, we were for the first time physically separated in this strange new place and didn't know how to help each other.

Lack of parental support and communication. All of these participants also noted lack of parental support and communication during and following the divorce as having a negative impact on their relationship and ability to deal with the divorce. As Elana stated,

In today's world I think my sister and I would have had a much better ability to talk to each other and help each other. But back then it just didn't exist. Our parents didn't tell us what was going on and didn't really comfort us either. So we had no real modeling of how to support and comfort each other. It was just this known fact that we were all miserable, but none of us knew how to help the other.

Summary

The three main themes that emerged from the qualitative data in this study exploring the ways in which siblings may help one another deal with parental divorce are (1) *positive impact of sibling relationships on ability to deal with parental divorce*, (2) *sibling relationship dynamics,* and (3) *negative impact of sibling relationships on ability to deal with parental divorce.* These themes and supporting evidence by way of direct quotes from the participants suggest that positive sibling relationships have the potential to help children and adolescents cope with and adjust to parental divorce by acting as a source of comfort, stability, and support in times of familial stress and change. Further, these findings suggest that parental favoritism, separation,

and lack of parental communication/support during parental divorce can negatively affect the sibling relationship, thus undermining children and adolescents adjustment to parental divorce. The implications of these findings for social work practice follow in the next chapter. The next chapter also contains a full discussion of the findings in respect to past literature on this area of study as well as an outline of study bias, limitations, and areas for future research.

CHAPTER V

Discussion

Past research on siblings and divorce suggests that positive sibling relationships have the potential to mitigate the effects of parental divorce. According to Bush and Ehrenberg (2003), a generally positive overall sibling relationship, which may include both high levels of conflict and warmth, can lessen negative effects of divorce. This idea is supported by Riggio (2001), who found that positive sibling relationships may serve as a buffer and protect children from some of the harmful effects of divorce (Riggio, 2001). Empirical evidence has also supported the notion that siblings are more likely to rely on one another in difficult situations, providing mutual support for one another during parental separation and divorce (Kier & Lewis, 1988; Wallerstein, 1987). Lastly, in a longitudinal study of sibling relationships and adolescent adjustment to parental divorce, Sheehan et al. (2004), found that in times of crisis and difficult change, the natural support system previously existing among certain groups of siblings can serve to strengthen and protect children against adverse consequences of parental divorce. Overall, the accumulation of research on sibling relationships in families of divorce sheds light on the potential that siblings have to help one another cope with and adjust to this challenging life experience (Riggio, 2001).

Given that the research indicates that sibling relationships can help, the purpose of this research study was to explore *how* siblings can help one another to deal with parental divorce. The findings of the study reported in this document confirm the importance of sibling

relationships as noted in the literature. However, it extends the picture by identifying specific

ways in which siblings can help one another as they navigate the changes and challenges of

divorce. The framework outlined in this discussion arose through the analysis of qualitative data

collected during semi-structured interviews with 14 individuals consisting of seven sibling dyads

who experienced parental divorce between the ages of six and 18 (see Chapter III on methods).

Three major findings emerged from this study. First, siblings often positively impact one

another's ability to deal with their parents' divorce by being a source of comfort, stability, and

support to one another. Second, in response to parental divorce, a parent-child sibling

relationship commonly emerges, characterized by an older sibling taking on the role as caregiver

and protector toward his or her younger sibling. Third, physical separation of siblings, parental

favoritism, and lack of parental communication and support during and following divorce all

contribute to negative sibling relationships and nature of adjustment to divorce.

The following sections discuss in some detail how the three themes from this study

compare with the existing literature on sibling relationships in times of parental divorce. The

positive impact of sibling relationships on ability to deal with parental divorce is considered

first, followed by the *emergence of the parent-child sibling relationship*, and finally there is a

discussion of the *negative impact of sibling relationships on ability to deal with parental divorce.*

Following this discussion are the following sections: *this study's strengths and limitations;*

implications for social work practice, and last*, recommendations for future research.*

Positive Impact of Sibling Relationships on Ability to Deal with Parental Divorce

This study found that siblings often have a positive impact on one another's ability to deal

with parental divorce. This finding lends support to the accumulation of research on sibling

relationships in families of divorce, suggesting that siblings have the potential to help one

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another cope and adjust to this challenging life experience (Riggio, 2001). From this vantage point, a positive sibling relationship can be viewed as a protective factor, helping mitigate adverse affects of parental divorce for children and adolescents.

However, the purpose of this study was not only to explore whether participants found their sibling helpful when adjusting to the changes of parental divorce but more specifically why and how. Thus, this study explored the specific ways participants perceived that having a sibling had been helpful when dealing with the divorce. Their responses indicate that such relationships were often found be a source of comfort, stability, and support. Further, although sibling conflict may increase following divorce (Noller et al., 2008), comfort, stability, and support greatly overshadowed conflict for this sample.

As referenced above, this study found that sibling relationships are often a source of comfort for children and adolescents dealing with parental divorce. However, rather surprisingly, participants shared no accounts of their directly comforting one another. Instead, they reflected on subtle and indirect forms of comfort, rarely discussing the divorce itself. The common thread across most accounts was comfort derived from the mere presence of a sibling. Thus, respondents found comfort from knowing they were not alone and that they had someone to share their experience with, a theme echoed in research by Bush and Ehrenberg (2003) as well as in the more recent research of Jacobs and Sillar (2012). This finding seems to reflect the "taken-for-granted" nature of the sibling relationship. That is, these relationships may be unique in that they are non-voluntary and commonly our longest lasting relationships, but as a result, siblings may expect one another to "just be there" rather than fulfill specific needs.

Siblings also provide one another with a sense of stability following parental divorce. This finding supports a study by Jacob and Sillars (2012), which suggests that supportive sibling

relationships provide a sense of continuity during familial dissolution and reorganization. Further, according to Bank and Kahn (1997), through the sibling relationship children of divorce gain a sense of constancy through knowing a sibling as a predictable person (p. 15). Even when the relationship is contentious or uncomfortable, they may derive a sense of familiarity, helping to make connections between the past and present. Thus, it is possible to presume that a function of the sibling relationship is to provide a sense of continuity throughout the changes inherent in divorce. Additionally, having a constant companion may become more important to children and adolescents as they adjust to having to travel between households.

Lastly, sibling relationships are commonly a source of support for children and adolescents during parental divorce. This finding is consistent with the research of Noller (2005) and of Jacob and Sillar (2012), all of which highlights the supportive nature of the sibling relationship in divorce. Specifically, these researchers identified sibling support as extremely important in helping children and adolescents cope with and adjust to the chaos of parental divorce (Jacob & Sillars, 2012; Noller, 2005).

Furthermore, this study found the concept of support to be diverse within narratives, with respondents experiencing support in different forms and at different stages of adjustment. Major sources of support included instrumental support, spending time together, and perceived support, which were all forms of support also found by Jacob and Sillars (2012) and by Noller (2005). Although participant accounts of support were diverse in this study, one consistent benefit of sibling support according to this sample is the reassurance provided by the presence of a sibling in stressful times.

Overall, the importance of sibling support in this study was evident by the fact that the majority of participants characterized their sibling relationship as supportive. However, there

was also evidence of more parental support and communication amongst these participants compared to respondents who did not characterize their sibling relationship as supportive. Thus, one may wonder if parental support and communication have a broader impact on individual adjustment than sibling support.

Emergence of Parent-Child Sibling Relationship

Clearly, divorce disrupts any family system. It forces both parents and children to adjust to new familial roles, relationships, and changes, while working to re-stabilize the family unit in some or other way. During this stressful time, not only are parental roles redefined, but sibling relationships may change as well (Sheehan, Darlington, Noller, & Feeney, 2004).

This study found that following parental divorce, a parent-child sibling relationship often emerges, characterized by an older sibling taking on the role of caregiver and protector toward his or her younger sibling. At least for this sample, this re-defined sibling relationship provides stability, comfort, and support for siblings when dealing with the changes and challenges of divorce. It is important to note that the emergence of these parent-child like sibling relationships did not take the place of parental support but rather, served a complementary role to parental support. However, in situations where parental support was limited or unavailable, caretaking and protectiveness of older siblings toward a younger sibling was found to be more extensive and direct. Thus, it seems plausible that the intensity of the parent-child sibling relationship following divorce is in part contingent on parents' ability to be physically and emotionally available for their children amidst the distress of divorce. In other words, the emergence of these parent-child sibling relationships may serve to help compensate for parental unavailability, neglect, or absence due to the divorce.

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As stated above, these parent-child sibling relationships consisted of increased caregiving and protectiveness of an older sibling toward his or her younger sibling following parental divorce. According to Brody (1998) this caregiving role may be a way of buffering younger children from the distress and challenges of parental conflict, an idea that is supported by other researchers who have found that in response to anger among parents, older siblings tend to increase caregiving, nurturance, and prosocial behavior toward younger siblings (Hetherington, 1989; Jenkins et al., 1989).

While some participants in this study reflected on high levels of parental conflict before, during, and after divorce, others reported minimal awareness of parental conflict, stating things like, "my parents fought behind closed doors, so we never knew anything was wrong." However, even amongst participants who reported minimal parental conflict, a parent-child sibling relationship -- characterized by the older sibling taking on the role of caregiver and protector -- still emerged following the divorce. This finding suggests that parental conflict may account for part of the reason that such relationships emerge but does not entirely explain this re-defining of the sibling relationship and its role expectations.

In exploring the emergence of a parent-child sibling relationship following divorce, this study found the level of protectiveness that older siblings felt toward a younger sibling to be higher in families with greater parental conflict. However, an increase of caregiving toward a younger sibling was not a reflection of parental conflict. Instead, it seemed to reflect an attempt to create stability and compensate for a decrease in parental physical and emotional availability. This finding lends support to a study by Sheehan et al. (2004) that determined that parental conflict before, during, and after divorce (as well as parental absence) are all aspects of divorce that can cause older siblings to take on nurturing and caregiving roles toward younger siblings.

Thus, while Sheehan et al. (2004) attributes parental conflict and absence to why older siblings may take on these nurturing and caregiving roles, there is no mention of increased feelings of protectiveness following the divorce. Surprisingly, little was found on this dynamic of older sibling becoming a protector in the literature reviewed for this study. Below I will discuss the implications of this finding for this sample while referencing the few studies that did touch on this dynamic.

As stated above, in this study the extent to which older siblings felt protective over their younger siblings seemed to reflect the level of parental conflict before, during, and following divorce. Thus, siblings who experienced higher levels of parental conflict reported stronger feelings of protectiveness over their younger sibling following divorce; and the role involved two dynamics: (a) having more information pertaining to the divorce than the younger sibling; (b) being able to filter this information when trying to help a younger sibling to deal with the divorce. This finding lends support to a study by Jacob and Sillars (2012), which also found the emergence of the role of older sibling as protector in response to parental divorce. However, no other literature reviewed for this study addressed this aspect of sibling relationships amongst divorced families.

In this sample siblings' increased feelings of protectiveness toward younger siblings came as a response to parental conflict, familial instability, and/or parental unavailability during and following divorce. Thus, participants who reported feeling extremely protective over their younger sibling all referenced high levels of parental conflict, recalling ongoing and intense fighting amongst their parents before, during, and after divorce and often reflecting on how frightened they felt during these times.

Based on this finding, it is possible that intense continuous parental conflict common in families of divorce may not only induce fear in children but also help to explain why siblings may become increasingly protective over younger siblings. Since parental conflict often induces fear in children, older siblings may feel the need to protect and shield a younger sibling knowing that their parents are unavailable to do this at this time and are perhaps the source of the fear. In essence, whether they are aware of it or not, older siblings may feel that it is up to them to ensure the safety and protection of a younger sibling. At least for this sample, it appears that for older siblings, this role as protector served to also help them to deal with the divorce by providing them with a sense of purpose and duty amidst familial chaos and instability. For younger siblings, having a protective older sibling often shielded them from experiencing the full spectrum of negative effects of parental divorce.

Not all is positive about these relationships, however. For example, research by Noller (2005) found that these caretaking and nurturing roles by older siblings were at times met with feelings of ambivalence and hostility by younger siblings, with the younger sibling feeling resentment toward the controlling aspects of caretaking. Noller (2005) argues that this combination of nurturance and resentment in the relationship may explain the high prevalence of "affect-intense" sibling relationships in divorced families, relationships that are characterized by high levels of warmth and hostility in the sibling dyad. However, findings from this study lacked support for the prevalence of these "affect-intense" sibling relationships in families of divorce. For example, participants in this study who reported high levels of warmth and closeness in their relationships with their siblings following parental divorce did not report increased levels of conflict and hostility immediately following divorce. Some stated that they could not recall any increase in conflict, but that said, they also had some trouble remembering this period in their

lives. Since this study consisted of adults reflecting on childhood experiences, it leaves one to wonder if participants were more inclined to remember and reflect upon positive aspects of their sibling relationships rather than negative ones.

Overall, the emergence of the parent-child sibling relationship following parental divorce is supported by past research in this area and confirmed to some degree by this sample. However, while the role of older siblings as caregivers and nurturers toward younger siblings is discussed frequently in literature on this topic, the role of older siblings as protectors remains an area for further study.

Negative Impact of Sibling Relationship on Ability to Deal with Parental Divorce

As discussed in the literature review (see Chapter II), research on the topic of sibling relationships as they relate to parental divorce suggests that through siblings' extensive contact, interactions, and companionship during childhood and adolescents, children of divorce have the potential to promote both positive and negative adjustment and development in one another's lives (McHale et al., 2012). While some researchers suggest that certain life adversatives, such as divorce and family conflict, can strengthen the relationship and cause siblings to bond, others suggest that divorce can have a negative impact on the quality of the sibling relationship (Dunn, Slomkowski, Beardsall, & Rende, 1994). Overall, the findings from this particular study support this notion that divorce can both positively or negatively impact sibling relationships depending on many different variables in the family system.

In this study, only a small number of participants found their sibling relationship to have negatively affected their ability to deal with their parents' divorce. They all felt that their sibling had a positive impact before and during the separation process but then also reported a deterioration of the relationship following the divorce, characterized by increased conflict and

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hostility and loss of warmth and closeness. The also all expressed feelings of sadness and great loss when reflecting upon the deterioration of their sibling relationship. Finally, they all stated in one way or other the belief that they might have adjusted better in the long term had they not lost that sibling closeness.

In taking a closer look at this deterioration, it seems that a few factors were particularly important: physical separation of siblings, parental favoritism, and lack of parental communication and support. This finding lends support to accumulating research that has linked such factors as the parent-child relationship, parental conflict, and parenting behaviors to predictors of sibling relationship quality (O'Connor, Hetherington, & Reiss, 1998). Although some researchers have begun to explore factors that negatively impact the sibling relationship, there remains very limited study, reflecting, perhaps, the complexity of studying the sibling relationship within the family system as a whole. Hopefully, this study begins to highlight the importance of facilitating positive sibling relationships in working with families of divorce in order to promote healthier adjustment. Clearly, further research is needed to inform clinicians on ways in which to incorporate the sibling relationship to help children deal with this traumatic life event.

Although some researchers have begun to try and understand factors that negatively impact the sibling relationship, in general, there remains very limited information within this area of study. The neglect around this topic may reflect the complexity of studying the sibling relationship within the family system as a whole. Although there is a lack in this area of research, this study along with past research highlights the importance of facilitating positive sibling relationships in families of divorce in order to promote healthier adjustment to parental divorce.

Thus, further research in the area is needed to inform clinicians on ways to incorporate the sibling relationship as a tool for helping children deal with parental divorce.

Strengths and Limitations

Overall, the research question and study design were successful in collecting participant reflections of the ways in which their sibling affected their ability to deal with parental divorce. Unique to this study was the recruitment of sibling dyads as opposed to individual participants. Because of this approach, this study was able to gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which siblings helped each other to deal with parental divorce by exploring and comparing each individual experience and perspective with that of their sibling.

Through the use of qualitative research methods generally and content analysis, in particularly, I was able to take into account underlying factors, such as parenting behaviors and support, financial stress, familial relationships/roles, and overall complex family dynamics that may have impacted both participants. Further, this qualitative approach provided the potential for a subjective analysis, which can often be overlooked and oversimplified by quantitative methods.

The study employed semi-structured interviews consisting of open-ended questions, allowing the findings to remain close to participants' voices and emphasizing the meaning that participants made of their experiences. It also gave them an opportunity to describe the reality of their experience freely, allowing participants to be in control of their story and what they did and did not want to share. Finally, this approach granted me as researcher an opportunity to gain an in-depth understanding of respondents' experiences. Through open-ended questions I was able to get specific examples of why and how participants found their siblings to be helpful or not during a time of enormous stress; and by listening intently to their story I was able to understand

the context and nature of the divorce, which helped me to better understand their unique family dynamics and overall experience.

The major limitations of this study are in the sample bias, including a small sample size, self-selection, and lack of sample diversity. The sample size of 14 participants used for this study does not allow findings of the study to be generalized and therefore limits the applicability of the study. However, since the study was both qualitative and exploratory, the intent was to explore and understand participants' unique experiences by looking for themes and patterns as opposed to generalizing this data to the larger population.

All study participants self-selected for the interviews, which may indicate that when participants volunteered they had a relatively good or at least decent relationship with their sibling. Thus, the sample in the study may overly reflect individuals who at the time of the study had positive relationships with their sibling.

The study also demonstrated an extreme racial sample bias due to the fact that all participants identified as white, with a few identifying as white and Jewish. Thus, the findings from this study may mostly reflect racial and cultural norms of white and/or Jewish families regarding sibling relationships, coping styles, and parental divorce. The racial homogeneity of this study means that many important themes may be missed that could have emerged had the study sample been diverse.

Not only did all participants identify as white, but the majority of participants also identified as growing up in a middle to upper-middle class household, with a few noting an economic downturn following parental divorce. Last, the study included all female participants with the exception of one male. Therefore, the study only included one brother-sister sibling

relationship. Therefore, the sample's gender bias limits findings to sister dyads as opposed to brother dyads or brother-sister dyads.

Implications for Social Work Practice

Findings from this study lend support to the idea that in times of family challenges, crisis, stress, and transition due to divorce, the sibling relationship can serve to strengthen children against the adverse effects of parental divorce. Although siblings are not a substitution for parents, they can provide one another with comfort, stability, and support to help adjust to and cope with parental divorce. This research has important implications for social workers who work with divorced families; these are addressed below.

It is important to note that due to the limited amount of research on sibling relationships and divorce, it would be premature to try and create any reliable set of clinical interventions that would be successful in diverse family contexts. What has been presented throughout this research report offers valuable information and insight into the importance of sibling relationships in families of divorce rather than successful therapeutic interventions; this remains an area for further research. Nevertheless, research around this topic does make it possible to offer some preliminary indications of how clinicians might go about helping families through the changes and challenges of divorce, with a specific focus on facilitating a positive sibling relationship to ease adjustment in times of parental divorce.

Since the adjustment of separated and divorced parents is strongly related to the adjustment of their children, it seems reasonable to assume that the therapist's first task is to assess how the children are dealing with and adjusting to the separation or divorce (Eno, 1985). This assessment allows the therapist to gain an understanding of the needs of the children within the context of their individual family system. According to Eno (1985), "….the goal of therapy

with families of divorce is to assess how children and parents are functioning and to help facilitate changes which are needed for healthy adjustment" (p. 153). Since naturally, children have the least control over their environment, interventions at this level require the involvement of other family members in order to most effectively help children adjust to this challenging life experience.

Throughout this discussion, I offer ways for clinicians to help children adjust to parental divorce through strengthening and promoting a positive sibling relationship. I begin by providing suggestions for how clinicians can work with parents to help mend, facilitate, and/or strengthen their children's relationship. Following, I offer guidance for clinicians when working with children around this same issue.

Before beginning, I feel it is important to point out that therapeutic work around improving and strengthening the sibling relationship is most effective when the therapist engages both parents (or caregivers) and children in this process. However, despite the therapist's efforts, at times the active participation of both parents and children is just not possible. In these cases, the therapist needs to adjust the way he or she approaches facilitating a positive sibling relationship to fit within the confines of the family system.

Working with parents. When working with divorced families, it is important to remember that families of divorce become two families and that the therapist for the most part should try and reflect this reality in sessions (Eno, 1985). In order to do this, it may be helpful for clinicians to consider meeting with the mother and the children separately from the father and the children. By doing this, the therapist can assess structural characteristics of each family and possible parent-child coalitions. This also allows therapist to explore the role each parent may play in promoting or undermining the sibling relationship through paying attention to parenting

behaviors, communication patterns, parent-child coalitions, and parental support. The therapist may then use this information to guide how he or she will approach the work with each parent to help facilitate positive relationships.

In addition to assessment, therapists can also help families ease the stress of divorce by assisting parents in supporting their children's "sibling world." When doing this, therapists may want to consider working with parents around any of the following areas: parenting behaviors, parental support, how to improve communication with their children around the divorce, and last, facilitating their children's access to one another. However, at the end of the day, as it were, the therapist should use his or her assessment of the sibling relationship as well as the ways in which parents support or undermine this relationship when deciding how to most effectively help parents to support and strengthen their children's relationship.

There are several important factors pertaining to the sibling relationship that therapists should take into consideration when assisting families with the divorce process and post-separation parenting arrangements. First, when formulating custody arrangements and guiding parenting behavior when dealing with divorce, facilitating siblings' access to one another and maintaining and/or promoting quality of the relationship are both important factors to consider and should be appropriately explored with parents. Depending on the family, clinicians may need to help parents realize that arrangements to reduce sibling contact may weaken the potential for a supportive sibling relationship (even if siblings are experiencing some degree of conflict). In such cases, clinicians should help parents understand the importance of sibling relationships and help them facilitate a more positive sibling relationship. It is also important for clinicians to remember that ongoing conflict in the sibling relationship does not negate the possibility that the relationship is a source of support, comfort, and stability. With this in mind, clinicians should

help parents to focus not so much on the conflict and hostility within the sibling relationship but on the levels of warmth and closeness that is possible between the siblings.

Overall, assisting parents in facilitating a positive sibling relationship involves the use of clinical judgment and a thorough assessment of familial functioning and needs. To reiterate what was stated previously, effective assessment of familial functioning and needs requires the therapist to treat divorced families as two newly re-structured families. Therefore, the therapist must pay specific attention to how structural characteristics, parenting behaviors, parental support, and siblings access to one another within both family systems impacts the sibling relationship. Once the therapist is able to gain a deeper understanding of these dynamics within each new family context, they can then use their clinical judgment to choose how best to proceed in assisting parents to support their children.

Last, it is important to acknowledge that not all families seeking help around separation and divorce enter into therapy with two parents who are willing to participate. As a result of divorce, many families are torn apart, resulting in the loss of a father and/or mother figure. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, or other family members may step into parental rolls to help assist during these challenging times. Extended family members may even gain custody over children following a divorce proceeding. These examples represent a mere snapshot of the variety of families that engage in clinical help around separation and divorce. Thus, therapists navigating the complexities of divorce and separation must maintain flexibility, openness and competency when working with the multifaceted nature of family dynamics.

Working with children. As previously stated above, the therapist's first obligation is to assess how children are dealing with and adjusting to parental separation or divorce both individually and as siblings. One way to do this is by arranging a session or part of a session to

see siblings without their parents present. During this session the therapist can explore different dynamics of the relationship as well as perceptions of how the parents are involved in that relationship. When doing this, the therapist should keep in mind important areas for exploration such as conflict, rituals, play, communication patterns, and expressed reactions to the separation or divorce. Skills and techniques for gathering this information should be based on clinical judgment of the parents along with an understanding of each child's developmental level, his or her knowledge about the separation and/or divorce, and his or her ability to feel comfortable in the therapy room.

In cases where parents may have sent only one child to therapy (perhaps because that child was exhibiting greater problems adjusting to the separation/divorce), therapists should still explore the child's relationships with his or her sibling(s). Through this exploration, the therapist will gain a better understanding of the quality of their relationship with their sibling(s) and in what ways this relationship (or these relationships, as the case may be) may be affecting their adjustment to their parents' separation/divorce. The therapist can then work with the child or adolescent to help mend and/or strengthen the sibling relationship.

When working individually with the child around a sibling relationship, the therapist should consider asking each sibling to attend a session, or at least part of a session. In cases where there is a large age difference between siblings and the therapist is working with the younger sibling, the therapist may want to consider arranging a time to meet with the older sibling separately. If there is a large age gap between siblings, the therapist may find it more effective to meet with the older sibling alone to discuss the relationship. An example of when this might be appropriate is presented below and is not indicative of one specific case but is instead based loosely on a constellation of different cases.

Maria, a seven-year-old child was brought to therapy by her father who was concerned about her increase in temper tantrums immediately following his separation with his wife. Maria had one older sister, Kate who was 16-years-old and not involved in therapy. During play therapy sessions, the therapist began to notice that Maria constantly expressed a longing and desire to hang out with her older sister, Kate. When the therapist tried to explore this with Maria, Maria responded angrily, stating that "My big sister never wants to play with me!" As the therapy progressed, it becomes clear to the therapist that Maria felt a deep loss of her mother as a result of her parent's divorce and in response, often sought the attention of her older sister Kate, in a needy and clingy manner.

After thinking about this issue for some time, the therapist called Maria's father to discuss bringing Kate in for an individual therapy session with the therapist. During the individual session with Kate, the therapist gave her an opportunity to express her frustration and annoyance with Maria's clinginess and constant need for attention. After, the therapist conveyed to Kate that Maria's annoyance and need for attention, stemmed from deep admiration and desire to be just like her big sister. The therapist then explained that Maria's increase in neediness may be due to feeling a loss of comfort, stability, and support following their parent's divorce. However, since she is so young, she is unable to articulate and understand these feelings and in turn looks to her older sister whom she deeply admires.

By re-framing Maria's neediness, the therapist allowed Kate to see her little sister's annoying behaviors instead as deep admiration and a longing for warmth and closeness. This realization allowed Kate to gain understanding and empathy for her little sister, allowing her to let go of some of her anger and frustration go. In response to this discussion, Kate began to

devote more time to play with Maria at home, thus improving their sibling relationship as well as Maria's ability to adjust to their parents' divorce.

In the case of Maria, if the therapist had tried to bring Kate into a session with Maria without arranging to meet with her individually first, it is very likely that this important conversation would not have occurred due to the fact that a seven year old would have also been in the room. In fact, bringing Kate into a session with Maria could have potentially worsened things because Maria most likely would have spent the entire time annoying and frustrating Kate by trying to get her attention. Thus, in order to make the appropriate clinical decision in the case of Maria, the therapist had to take into account the large age gap between the sisters in order to choose the most effective way to help facilitate more warmth and closeness in the sibling relationship.

Clearly, for clinicians who work with children or adolescents dealing with parental divorce, the answer is never simple and requires the consideration of many factors, such as age difference between siblings, gender, family dynamics, and so forth. Hopefully, however, the above suggestions can help guide their practice with divorcing families in which children are involved.

Conclusion

In the United States, parental separation and divorce is a common phenomenon that impacts large numbers of children. Overall, the accumulation of research suggests children of parental divorce are more at risk for both immediate and/or long-term behavioral, adjustment, and developmental problems. Despite the plethora of research on this topic, the degree to which divorce impacts children is still unknown. However, what remains clear is that the severity of the impact of divorce on children and adolescents is strongly contingent on the role of numerous

external factors on undermining or promoting the positive adjustment, development, and overall well-being of children.

As of today, research has only started to uncover how certain factors contribute to the adjustment to parental divorce by children and adolescents; and thus far, most of the research has focused on parent-child relationships, parental conflict, economic resources, and access to support. At the same time, and unfortunately, widely overlooked by researchers is the role that siblings play in undermining or promoting positive adjustment for children and adolescents of parental divorce – a gap in knowledge that has driven this study.

This study helps to fill that gap by providing important information on the ways in which siblings may affect one another's ability to deal with and adjust to parental divorce. The findings and discussion presented here suggest that positive sibling relationships have the potential to help children and adolescents both cope with and adjust to parental divorce by acting as a source of comfort, stability, and support in times of familial stress and change. Further, these findings suggest that parental favoritism, separation, and lack of parental communication/support during parental divorce can negatively affect the sibling relationship, thus undermining the adjustment of their children to the new reality.

Due to the exploratory nature of the study as well as sample biases and homogeneity, findings from this study are not generalizable to the larger population. However, despite its limitations, this research provides valuable insights into the importance of promoting strong and positive sibling relationships for children of divorce and offers some guidance in the ways in which clinicians can facilitate positive sibling relationships when working with divorcing or divorced families.

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Appendix A

Facebook Advertisement

RESEARCH ASSISTANCE NEEDED: I am a student at Smith College School for Social Work MSW program and am conducting a study about children of divorce for my thesis and am looking for people to interview about their experience. Participants must be over 21 and parents must have divorced between the ages of 6-18. Participants must also have at least one sibling who is available to be interviewed and be a participant. Researcher is looking for siblings who are both available to be research participants. This is part of the criteria for participants. All personal information will be kept completely confidential. Message me if you are interested or know someone who might be.

Thanks!

Appendix B

E-mail to AAPCSW Listserve

Subject: Research Assistance Needed for Smith Student, Please Read

Hi,

My name is Jessica Hallberlin and I am currently a second year in Smith's MSW program in the beginning stages of my thesis process. I am conducting a study about the impact of sibling relationships for children of divorce for my thesis and am looking for people (specifically sibling dyads) to interview about their experience. Participants must be over 21 and parents must have divorced between the ages of 6-18. Participants must also have at least one sibling who is available to be interviewed and be a participant. Researcher is looking for siblings who are both available to be research participants. This is part of the criteria for participants. Interviews will be done via telephone or in-person depending on the participant's geographic location. All personal information will be kept completely confidential. Please contact me via e-mail (Jhallberlin@gmail.com) or on my cell (XXX) XXX-XXXX if you are interested. Further, if you know anyone who may be interested, please forward this message along!

Sincerely,

Jessica Hallberlin

Appendix C

E-mail to Professional Contacts

Subject: Research Assistance Needed for Smith Student, Please Read

Hi,

My name is Jessica Hallberlin and I am currently a second year in Smith's MSW program in the beginning stages of my thesis process. I am conducting a study about the impact of sibling relationships for children of divorce for my thesis and am looking for people (specifically sibling dyads) to interview about their experience. Participants must be over 21 and parents must have divorced between the ages of 6-18. Participants must also have at least one sibling who is available to be interviewed and be a participant. Researcher is looking for siblings who are both available to be research participants. This is part of the criteria for participants. Interviews will be done via telephone or in-person depending on the participant's geographic location. All personal information will be kept completely confidential. Please contact me via e-mail (Jhallberlin@gmail.com) or on my cell (XXX) XXX-XXXX if you are interested. Further, if you know anyone who may be interested, please forward this message along!

Sincerely,

Jessica Hallberlin

Appendix D

Screening questions

1. Are you an adult age 21 or older who was between 6 and 18 when your parents separated and/or divorced?

2. Are you fluent in English, both spoken and written?

3. Did you have at least one sibling who lived with you during the divorce?

4. Was your sibling between the age of 6 and 18 during the time of parental separation and/or divorce?

5. If you have more than one sibling, is the sibling you feel closest with willing to participate in the study?

If the potential participant responds "no" ask the following:

6. Do you have another sibling willing to participate in the study?

Appendix E

Informed Consent

SMITH COLLEGE

Consent to Participate in a Research Study
Smith College School for Social Work ● Northampton, MA

…………………………………………………………………………..

Title of Study: Siblings Coping with the Effects of Parental Divorce

Investigator(s): Jessica Hallberlin, Smith College Master's in Social Work student, (C) XXX

XXX-XXXX (E-mail) Jhallberlin@gmail.com

…………………………………………………………………………..

Introduction
- You are being asked to be in a research study exploring the ways siblings may help one another cops with the effects of parental divorce.
- You were selected as a possible participant because you are an adult age 21 or older who was between 6 and 18 when your parents separated and/or divorced, you are fluent in English both spoken and written, and you had at least one sibling living at home at the time of the separation who also agreed to participate in the study.
- We ask that you read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Purpose of Study
- The overall purpose of the study is to explore how siblings may help one another cope with parental divorce, both as children and in adult life.
- This study is being conducted as a research requirement for my master's in Social Work degree.
- Ultimately, this research may be published or presented at professional conferences.

Description of the Study Procedures
    If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to participate in either a telephone or in-person interview with myself, the researcher. Each interview will follow the same structure: 1.) introduction to study and interview procedures, 2.) collection of demographic information, 3.) and 3.) engagement in semi-structured interview questions. It is anticipated that it will take 15 minutes to introduce the study and the interview process, 5 minutes for you to complete the demographic questions, and 30 minutes to respond to the interview questions, leaving about 10 minutes at the end of each interview for a debriefing to make sure that you are comfortable with the process and results.

Risks/Discomforts of Being in this Study

It is possible some participants may become agitated or stressed while discussing their parents' divorce. Due to the fact that this is an exploratory study, you will not be pushed to discuss experiences you are not comfortable discussing. I, the researcher/interviewer am a clinician in training and am aware of both verbal and nonverbal signs of discomfort or distress. Although, I appreciate your participation and hope you will be able to complete the interview with me, you have the right, should you become uncomfortable at any time, to decline either to answer a specific question or to continue/finish the interview.

Benefits of Being in the Study

- Participants will be given an opportunity to tell their story regarding parental divorce and sibling relationships. By telling their story, participants may gain some insight into their experiences with divorce and their sibling relationship in both childhood and as an adult. Further, participants may gain a sense of satisfaction from knowing that their experiences and story may contribute to future research and insight on how to deal with children and adults of parental divorce.
- Due to limited research on this topic, the research will help expand our current understanding of sibling relationships and how they help both children and adults utilize that relationship to cope with the effects of parental divorce. I hope this will lead to a better understanding on how to mitigate the negative effects of divorce for families in the clinical setting. Finally, I hope this research helps to shed light on the potential importance of sibling relationships in order to promote other researchers to take an interest in this overlooked topic.

Confidentiality

- Various methods will be used to ensure your participation will be kept confidential. First, I (the researcher) will be the only person who has access to the audio recordings and notes taken during interviews. These recordings and notes will be locked and stored in a safe and secure place only accessible by myself, the researcher. Second, I will be transcribing the audio recordings from the interviews along with one other person I select to assist. The selected research assistant will be required to sign the *Transcriber Confidentiality Form*, committing them to hold all information in confidence. Upon transcription, the research assistant and myself will take the proper precautions to de-identify the participant from the information being transcribed. This will be done by changing names of participants and any other specific identifying information such as; names of family members, past schools attended, past jobs, etc. Third, the research assistant and myself will not discuss any information or issues arising from an individual interview with others in ways that might identify the individual. Last, I will ensure any information published in the thesis protects the confidentiality of the participants by not using any real names and by identifying location of participants broadly, such as being located throughout the northeast region of the United States, or in other ways that protect identity. Participants will be given the opportunity to ask any questions regarding the terms of confidentiality to the researcher before participating in the study.
- All research materials including recordings, transcriptions, analyses and consent/assent documents will be stored in a secure location for three years according to federal regulations. In the event that materials are needed beyond this period, they will be kept secured until no longer needed, and then destroyed. All electronically stored data will be password protected

during the storage period. We will not include any information in any report we may publish that would make it possible to identify you.

Payments/gift
- You will not receive any financial payment for your participation.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw
- The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you. You may refuse to take part in the study *at any time* (March 15, 2015) without affecting your relationship with the researchers of this study or Smith College. Your decision to refuse will not result in any loss of benefits (including access to services) to which you are otherwise entitled. You have the right not to answer any single question, as well as to withdraw completely up to the point noted below. If you choose to withdraw, I will not use any of your information collected for this study. You must notify me of your decision to withdraw by email or phone by [April 1, 2015]. After that date, your information will be part of the thesis, dissertation or final report.

Right to Ask Questions and Report Concerns
- You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered by me before, during or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact me, Jessica Hallberlin at Jhallberlin@gmail.com or by telephone at XXX-XXX-XXXX. If you would like a summary of the study results, one will be sent to you once the study is completed. If you have any other concerns about your rights as a research participant, or if you have any problems as a result of your participation, you may contact the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Committee at (413) 585-7974.

Consent
- Your signature below indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study, and that you have read and understood the information provided above. You will be given a signed and dated copy of this form to keep.

....
Name of Participant (print): _____

Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Researcher(s): _____ Date: _____

....

[if using audio or video recording, use next section for signatures:]
1. I agree to be [audio] **taped for this interview:**
Name of Participant (print): _____

Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Researcher(s): _____ Date: _____

2. I agree to be interviewed, but I do not want the interview to be recorded:

Name of Participant (print): _____

Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Researcher(s): _____ Date: _____

Appendix F

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. I want to begin by trying to get an overall picture of what your parents' divorce was like for you. Can you begin by telling me about your experience of your parents' separation and divorce?
    - Probes:
        - What do you remember seeing and or thinking during this time?
        - Was it very difficult for you and/or your family or was it relatively easy?
        - Did the divorce come as a surprise to you or did you see it coming? Why?

2. How challenging and stressful was the separation/divorce process for you and why?

3. Did you ever feel torn between your parents? If so, what do you think made you feel this way?

4. What were the custody arrangements and how did this affect you?

5. Did either of your parents re-marry? If so, how old were you when they re-married?

6. Do you have any other siblings besides the one involved in the study? If so please tell me how many, their gender, and age.

7. How would you describe your current relationship with your sibling who is participating in the study?

8. What was your relationship with your sibling like before the divorce?
    - Probes:
        - Were you close to your sibling?
        - How much time did you spend together?
        - Did you argue a lot?
        - Did you trust your sibling?
        - Did you confide in him/her?
        - Did you spend a lot of time playing together, etc.?

9. What was your relationship with your sibling like during the separation/divorce process?

    - Probes:

        - Were you close to your sibling?

- How much time did you spend together?
- Did you argue a lot?
- Did you trust your sibling?
- Did you confide in him/her?
- Did you spend a lot of time playing together, etc.?

10. Can you give me some examples of conversations you have had with your siblings about your parents' relationships, divorce, custody and visitation arrangements growing up?

11. How did your relationship with this particular sibling evolve in the years after the separation/divorce?

12. How would you say overall you dealt with the separation/divorce?

13. Do you think your relationship with your sibling had an impact on your ability to deal with your parents' divorce/separation? If yes, how so? If no, why not?

Appendix G

Demographic Screening Questions

1. How old are you?

2. How old were you when your parents got separated/divorced?

3. What is your gender?

4. What is your racial or ethnic identity?

5. How would you describe your socioeconomic status growing up?

6. Who lived in your house growing up, both before and after the divorce?

7. Did you have any other family members (ie. Extended family members) who were a big part of your life growing up?

8. Did you continue to live with your sibling after the divorce?

Appendix H

HSR Approval Letter

SMITH COLLEGE

School for Social Work
Smith College
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063
T (413) 585-7950   F (413) 585-7994

January 24, 2015

Jessica Hallberlin

Dear Jessica,

You did a very nice job on your revisions. Your project is now approved by the Human Subjects Review Committee.

Please note the following requirements:

Consent Forms: All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

Maintaining Data: You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

Renewal: You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

Completion: You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Congratulations and our best wishes on your interesting study.

Sincerely,

Elaine Kersten, Ed.D.
Co-Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Dominique Steinberg, Research Advisor