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BOOK CHAPTER

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Taking account of siblings—a view from child psychotherapy[1]

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Psychoanalysts have given far less attention to the fantasies and affects relating to brothers and sisters than to those concerning the parents even though siblings, whether real or imagined, are just as much a constituent of the family constellation that shapes the child's psyche.

(Houzel, 2001)

Introduction

This paper attempts to explore an area of our emotional lives which has been relatively neglected in the literature of child development, family dynamics, and psychoanalysis, although not, in my view, within child psychotherapy practice or, as Mitchell (2006) has pointed out, in the group analytic tradition. In both these contexts awareness of the importance of siblings seems

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inescapable. However, theoretical attention to sibling relationships in psychoanalysis has not been extensive until a more recent flurry of publications and conferences on this theme. There are probably quite complex explanations for this phenomenon and some will be suggested in this paper, but within child psychotherapy there are a number of background factors to bear in mind. These include the impact of family work and family therapy on the thinking of child psychotherapists. One might perhaps say that our frame of reference tends to extend Winnicott's dictum about the impossibility of conceiving of a baby without a mother much more widely. There can, after all, be no mother without a father, in some sense, however limited his active presence may be in the increasing numbers of one parent or alternative families (Trowell and Etchegoyan, 2002). Most certainly we encounter paternity as a fact of life in the internal world in clinical practice (Money-Kyrle, 1978). Grandparents, too, are very frequently in the frame when we take into account the inter-generational unconscious transmission of beliefs about fundamental relationships, as has been a powerful source of deeper understanding from Fraiberg's seminal work onwards (Fraiberg, 1980), particularly evident in the field of Infant Mental Health. So, too, with siblinghood. The sibling aspect of a child's identity is present obviously enough in those families where siblings are present, but I shall argue that we also have evidence that a child without brothers or sisters is concerned with their external absence and dealing with this in his inner world. The importance of imaginary siblings as a replacement for missing siblings is one thread in the world of imaginary companions, a theme recently explored in Adamo (2006).

I shall mention four other factors highlighting sibling issues for child psychotherapists. The first is the dual impact of the lengthy training process, in which peers are so vital a feature (often becoming life-long friends) and the joint work so characteristic of our practice; when one therapist sees a child and another works with the family, there is a couple at work who can perceive themselves (or be perceived) as a quasi-parental couple, but also potent is the idea of two siblings collaborating. The second is the small but creative tradition of group work within child psychotherapy. The analytic exploration of mixed children's groups (even more obviously in the case of work undertaken with sibling groups as such) always produces rich

material about both conscious and unconscious aspects of sibling relationships (Canham and Emanuel, 2000). The third comes from the troubled preoccupation in the case of looked after children with the issue of whether and how to place siblings together. The evidence from long term outcome studies suggests that maintaining birth family relationships is a protective factor, although as with any generalization, such a trend in policy and practice needs to attend to the individual case which may not always be best served by general principles. In this journal, Hindle's research work on this topic is reported (2007). A fourth is the investigation of the fate of "replacement" children, when the lost sibling who remains alive and unmourned in the mind of the mother can cast a shadow that threatens the life-space of the subsequent baby. This theme has been extensively described by Reid (2003) and more recently explored in research work using participant infant observation as a methodology (Gretton, 2006).

Finally, the fact that the theoretical education of child psychotherapists is solidly rooted in the reading of the classical clinical papers of Freud and later analysts and child psychotherapists ensures a vivid awareness of sibling life. Sherwin-White's scholarly demonstration (2007) of Freud's attention and interest in sibling themes serves as an apt counterweight to the claim that siblings had to be discovered by psychoanalysts in the 21st century! The ongoing re-evaluation of the place of siblings in psychoanalytic theory (Mitchell, 2003; Coles, 2003, 2006; Lewin, 2004) is welcome, but child psychotherapists may feel some puzzlement.

The one widely accepted assumption about sibling relationships that dominates the field is the importance of sibling rivalry, an idea theorized by Freud in relation to his broader theory about emotional and sexual development. This concept leaves out the dimension of sibling love and places the emphasis firmly on hostility, destructive competition and the idea of there never being enough love to go round, an unavoidable Lacanian lack, one might say. Recent writers have begun to revisit these quite basic questions. But in our consulting rooms, it seems to me that it has always been obvious that the ambivalence (the mixture of love and hate) characteristic of other intimate relationships was also characteristic of sibling relationships. Clinical experience with children repeatedly reveals the vital significance of real, lost and imagined siblings.

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Sociological factors

Before going on to present what I hope will be a recognisable picture of child psychotherapy's approach to understanding siblinghood, I want to raise another question; why might it be that sibling relationships have become a renewed source of both professional and wider public interest at this time? The press features such topics as the importance or not of birth order, the desirability or not of one-child families; the siblings of public figures become objects of interest (e.g. Lord Spencer emerged as a public figure because he was Princess Diana's brother); political clans cluster around bands of brothers (the Bush family is an example to rival the Kennedys in the U.S.); and Hollywood too is fascinated by siblings. Part of this is just the cult of celebrity, but the fact of siblinghood, the sense of the shared intimacy of childhood, does seem to be a special source of public fascination.

There are probably significant social-historical factors at work here. First there is the lifespace of late adolescence and early adulthood. At this crucial point in the life span, sibling relationships or sibling-like relationships have acquired greater centrality since the very long educational experience of our adolescents and young adults often serves to delay marriage and the choice of sexual partner seen as long-term companions. Instead of our 20–30 year olds setting up family, in the more highly educated sectors there tends to be a protracted period of living something more like an adolescent group life, a sort of extended student existence for many 30 somethings, as some of the popular sitcoms record, or sometimes a return to the parental home for the post-college young people who cannot afford independent living. This means that instead of moving from being the adolescent children of our parents into adult partnerships in which we are potential parents, there is often a protracted period in which our identity may be defined by our families of origin, including our sibling relationships.

Then there is the extended span of life in the developed world and our extraordinary geographical mobility. We are living longer than earlier generations and we are also much more itinerant and much less likely to sustain life-long partnerships. Perhaps our adult siblings are becoming more important as sources of continuity and support over a lifetime in these increasingly complex life-worlds. The death of our parents often does not take place until we are well

on into our middle age, but prior to that there can be long periods of time during which their care becomes a major preoccupation. It is siblings with whom we can share the practical, emotional, and financial burdens of caring for elderly parents. This can be an important period of coming closer again or not, as the case may be. The general tendency for some reduction of social welfare provision in the Western world throws greater responsibility back onto the family where it is a functioning system, and those without such resources are at risk of marginalization. The growth of old-age communities, another modern phenomenon, may, of course, bring in sibling-like experiences for their inhabitants, since these are uni-generational communities in which one's neighbours may well be experienced as more like siblings at an unconscious level.

One final and obvious point about the wider social context is that the rate of maternal employment outside the home has enormously increased. This has at least two relevant consequences. First, mother as the primary focus for the young child's emotional life is less available. Nannies, childcare and nursery workers and babysitters become important people. Possibly this new framework for the early years may also heighten the dependence of little children on the siblings in the family. They may become the most steadily available attachment figures (to use Bowlby's term), something one sees very strongly indeed when families break down and children are taken into public care, when a child's identity can be focused intensely on membership of the sibling group. Secondly, vast numbers of young children are now in group day-care from early on in their lives. While not actual siblings, the other children in the group are undoubtedly experienced as quasi-siblings, since they share the attention offered by the day-care maternal and paternal substitutes. The evidence from large-scale studies of day-care often points to two aspects of the children's experience. The children are described as more able to engage in social play and peer relationships than family reared children, and this is valued positively as part of early education and socialisation. By contrast, it is also frequently noted that children placed before about two years of age in extensive large group day-care tend to be more aggressive and less co-operative. There is a vital debate to be had about the optimal age for entry into full-time group day-care but also a most interesting range of theoretical questions raised by this data. The point I want to underline, however, is that millions of

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children now grow up spending large amounts of time in a group care situation, where their feelings about the other children probably reflect variations on sibling-like themes.

The psychoanalytic contribution to theorising siblinghood

I shall turn now to the pictures of sibling relationships that psycho-analytic theory makes available to us. I want to address this not by giving a historical account of the development of theory, but rather by describing the place of siblings in the growing child's mind and linking that to the contribution of particular theorists. To address the very beginning, we need to consider the unborn infant. Here I am relying on imaginative speculation that is in line with clinical experi-ence. Unless the foetus is part of a twin or multiple pregnancy, we might imagine that the foetus has an experience of blissful uninter-rupted possession of mother's internal space. This is, however, an idealised oversimplification, since we know that the foetus has an awareness of sounds from outside mother's body (voices, music, etc.) and of disturbances from the body if mother is ill, hurt or distressed during the pregnancy, and that it experiences all kinds of variations in the flow of nutrients depending on mother's diet and lifestyle. So the idea of a wholly protected inner sanctum does not accord with the facts. Attempting any such description raises the interesting question of what level of development of mind there is pre-birth. Might the foetus have some preconception, some sort of as yet unre-alised idea, of mother as potentially having other babies, or would that be restricted to those babies who have actually shared space in the uterus? In unconscious phantasy, the baby whose sojourn within mother has become uncomfortable in later pregnancy due to position, size or other factors might perhaps imagine that the pressure of the diaphragm or pelvis is evidence of the presence of rivals for space. Certainly the foetus whose mother is subjected to domestic violence might construe this external assault as evidence of hostile invasion of an inner safe place if mind has developed to the point where such a thought-in-feeling might be registered.

More obviously, once the baby is born, the baby's awareness that a transition from inside mother to outside mother has taken place does imply that the inside-mother space is now vacant and could house

someone else. The growing evidence of the sophisticated mental capacities of tiny babies makes this a much less improbable hypothesis than it once seemed. Even if we do not locate the germ of this idea at birth, we can certainly see evidence in the close observation of babies a few months old of a preoccupation with what is going on inside mother's mind and body. The familiar early toddler play of emptying mother's handbag of precious contents, of the fascination with Russian doll-type toys, of the innumerable variations of containing shapes into which things can be put, attest to the young child's intense interest in a maternal space in which things can grow. Watching children's play sparks off vital questions, and the detailed observational material studied in Young Child Observation undertaken in pre-clinical courses is a rich source of conviction about the meaningfulness of play and its capacity to illuminate the inner world of the child shared by child psychotherapists (Adamo and Rustin, 2001).

It was just this sort of observation that started Melanie Klein's investigation through clinical work with very young children of the unconscious picture the child has of the fundamental relationship links of the family. What she discovered was that her young child patients showed her a very complex picture of mother's body and of mother's relationship to others in the family, both real and imagined. She proposed that this picture was constituted through the child's physical and emotional experience of maternal care. Mother was made from the baby's point of view, of feeding, holding, looking, listening, cleaning, and vocalising elements. She was sometimes there and sometimes not. The baby's initial total dependence on her meant that all experiences of babyhood contributed to the early picture of mother. Klein emphasised the relationship to mother's breast because of the centrality of the infant's feeding relationship, but she also described the baby's feeling of depositing his urine and faeces directly into mother, as if the nappy were also felt to be part of mother's body. All the elements of infant care very gradually come to cohere in the baby's mind as parts of a whole. So instead of having a lovely warm nice-milk Mummy which is not linked up with the horrible absent Mummy that the cold or hungry baby might be screaming about, there is a joining up of the features and a picture of a whole Mummy appears in the child's mind, in which the beloved aspects and the hated and disappointing features can be integrated.

The more integrated mother figure is one from whom the baby is able to feel separate. At this point the idea that some other baby might displace him becomes part of the picture. Of course, this sense of there being a space between mother and baby is enormously amplified by the actual experience of being weaned. If one is not drinking the milk in mother's breast oneself it is certainly an immediate question as to whom else might do so. Sometimes difficulties in weaning on the baby's side seem to be linked with an unconscious belief that he or she can hold onto possession and thus prevent the appearance of rival babies. Similarly, some sleeping problems are connected with an unconscious desire to prevent Mummy and Daddy having any chance to make any new babies (Daws, 1989). The terribly painful situation we have probably all observed when a young child is faced with a new baby feeding and really cannot bear it and tries to interrupt, intrude and attack either baby, mother or both, is always a vivid reminder of just how desperate things can be for the child who feels displaced from mother's lap.

The Contribution of Infant Observation

Klein's thinking about very early development has been taken further by later writers (Bick, 1968; Tustin, 1972; Houzel, 2001; Briggs, 2004) who have been greatly influenced both by naturalistic observation of infants and by work with children with early emotional difficulties. Their crucial discovery has been that the infant's sense of identity is fundamentally relational. One is *mother's* baby, at depth, and, therefore, if mother has another baby, one loses one's known position in the family and the world. The level of anxiety the displaced young child feels is, therefore, existential—a time of catastrophic change, in Bion's terms (1970).

A recent reading of a number of accounts of infant observation brought this feature vividly to life. It is striking how often infant observers find themselves observing a new baby and a confused, displaced young child, sometimes desperately struggling to hold on to his place with mother and to cope with the fact that he has become one of two. Most Infant Observation seminars find themselves with at least one such story unfolding. There is a compelling

account of the dynamics involved in Cooper's chapter in "Intimate Transformations" (Magagna et al., 2005). The observer in such situations experiences the struggle going on in mother's mind to make a space for each child as she, too, feels the pull of intense identifications of each child's position. Because of the special place of the training in infant observation in British Child Psychotherapy trainings (Sternberg, 2005) this ensures that exposure to the existential importance of siblings is a core part of a child psychotherapist's state of mind. Cooper discusses the triangle of mother, toddler, and baby as potentially excluding the place of father. This idea can, however, be counterposed to the familiar fact of the quartets which emerge in many families at this time, toddler turning to father, or maybe grandmother, in the face of mother's preoccupation with the new baby. These two pairs can be a very comforting structure, either offering the pleasures of splitting-off the unwanted complexities of threesomes or providing a breathing space from the exposure to sibling rivalries and oedipal intensities.

The intergenerational element in the new mother's response to the arrival of a second or subsequent baby is also highlighted by infant observational material. In Cooper's example, she quotes mother's decision not to breast-feed baby Anna, which reversed her previous intention: "I decided to give her formula. I just couldn't do breast-feeding and look after James. I couldn't have her literally attached to me. I wouldn't be able to keep up with him." As James (18 months) furiously attempts to interrupt the baby's feed, mother remarks, "I feel so bad for him. He had me all to himself."

Cooper suggests that mother's experience of having an older brother underlay this overwhelming identification with James and made it difficult for her to shield Anna from his intrusions (Cooper, pp. 44–45). By contrast are those observations where one sees a family culture in which siblings are expected by and large to enjoy each other's company, and to see a new baby more as precious companion then deadly rival, and where there is space for the different needs of individuals. We might possibly suggest that the larger families not now so frequent in western societies give rise to a strong sense of the sibling bond as a central organizing fact of life. Briggs' fascinating account of the band of brothers of whom the little boy he observed was the youngest member is a memorable example of this (Briggs, 1997).

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An everyday story and a clinical example

Nonetheless the devastating loss of security is probably an inescapable aspect of the displaced child's experience of a new baby's birth. One three-year-old responded thus. She announced that she was now the big sister, that is she believed she had to enter into a new identity at once—otherwise she would be nobody. This gave rise to great practical problems. She was not yet reliably dry at night and had been continuing to wear nappies. But big sisters don't wear nappies, she explained, and insisted she could not do so—it was babies who did that. Unfortunately for the poor parents, this big sister self couldn't actually persist through the night, so endless wet beds ensued. Feeding the new baby in the small hours would be mixed up with looking after the rejected baby-self of the three year old and the mother felt that the reality for her was that she had two babies at night time for some weeks.

A similar picture seemed to be the basis for the clinical problem I was faced with in my work with a psychotic child when I became pregnant. I had already seen this child for some years, and her treatment was planned to continue after my maternity leave. One day well on in my pregnancy she had a particularly extreme tantrum in her session, screaming loudly and desperately for a long time. When she had recovered herself, she looked at me very anxiously and explained that she was worried she had woken the baby up and that the baby would come out too soon and be angry with her (she was herself a premature baby). For weeks she begged me about "seeing the baby" after the birth. I came to believe that this was her way of asking about whether she as my patient-baby at the clinic could trust me to return to her, that is that she would go on seeing me, and this is how I interpreted to her, but I wasn't sure I was right. When my baby was born, I had arranged with my little patient's mother that she would be able to telephone me so that she could hear my voice. She said only two things after I had told her that the baby and I were both well. "Is it a girl or a boy?" (I told her it was a girl) and "What is her name?", which I told her. This conversation obviously raises large issues of technique which I cannot pursue here, but which require debate. When we resumed work some time later, she never spoke further about this actual baby of mine and instead did indeed seem to be primarily concerned about the safety of herself as the baby, that

is the belief in the continuing place she had with me in treatment, that I had returned as the therapist-mother for her ill baby self. She did not seem to have hostile feelings towards my home-baby to any great extent—on the contrary, the safe arrival of a new baby seemed to give her some confidence that babies could be looked after.

Affection between siblings

This brings us to the question of positive feelings between siblings. I shall return to the three-year-old and her baby sister described earlier. What was fascinating to observe was the mutuality of passionate affection that grew between these two. The big sister regarded herself as the champion of her little sister from early on in life. For example, the arrangements for her first birthday party were a topic of enormous interest—who was to come, what the one year birthday girl would wear, where she would sit at the table, what sort of birthday cake she would have, what games and toys a one-year-old and her baby friends would like. All these were things on which the four-year-old had a lot to say, not primarily in the spirit of competition or of controlling the event, but based on identification with the baby's point of view and an effort to imagine what that might be. This sense of presiding benignly over the experiences of a younger sibling is particularly marked when new demands from the wider world impinge. Going to playgroup or nursery and later school or to the dentist or hairdresser can, of course, be occasions on which the older child can patronise, tease, and indeed torment the younger one. But just as significant is the wish to protect and comfort the beloved sibling by sharing the worry and by demonstrating that one survives quite well.

From the perspective of the younger sibling, the older one is part of the structure of the primary human environment. "Me and Poppy" was the way one small boy habitually referred to doing anything that involved himself and his older sister and it sounded pretty much like a fixed unit, a twosome that certainly rivalled in its importance the twosome of the parents. We might think of it as a sort of "we" ego. This is a very important function of siblinghood. The single child who has to share parents with a new arrival in the family does have to deal with rivalry, but at the same time gains a partner, and this mitigates

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the loneliness that a singleton can also experience. The sharing of what it is like to be at the centre of parental attention can also sometimes be a considerable relief. Not only does the child gain a companion, and one who will at times certainly be an ally in mischief and rebellious discontent with parental demands, as well as a playmate with whom a shared imaginary world can be created, but also it can lift a burden when one is not the only repository of the family's expectations and projections. The responsibility to please parents and grandparents, or more troublingly, for example, to cheer up a depressed mother, or protect a vulnerable parent, or witness and worry about parental quarrels or domestic violence can be very heavy.

The friendship that develops in Pullman's *The Subtle Knife* (1997) between Will and Lyra, the hero and heroine of the trilogy, is a beautifully realised initially sibling-like relationship that rescues each of them from the pressures of being an only child. Will has a mother who has lost a husband and is depressed, confused, and helpless to a psychotic degree. He has become the carer of a broken-down parent. Lyra is the child of narcissistically warring parents, simultaneously neglected, unpredictably spoilt, and wilful. In finding each other on their journeys into other worlds, which represent the growing-up process and the building of more durable internal structures based on being able to depend on and to respect other people appropriately, they recover from their difficult beginnings (Rustin and Rustin, 2003). The enrichment of the world of play and the whole life of the imagination when a child acquires a sibling is almost impossible to overestimate. The shared games, imaginary characters, secrets and adventures of childhood are remembered and referred to over a lifetime and provide a model for intimacy that informs later friendships and love relationships. There is no doubt that siblings can also sometimes make up for deficiencies in the relationships with parents through what they create with each other (Anna Freud's famous research study of a group of war orphans made this point in a situation of quasi-siblinghood (1974).

Groups and Gangs

I have been discussing the transition from one to two children in a family but, of course, often (though less so nowadays when families

are smaller) there are more, and the siblings constitute a group. This creates new tensions and opportunities for psychological growth. Learning to function as a member of a group, and for the group to cope with issues of leadership, equality of and respect for its members, allowing for differences—for example of age and gender—is a large task. There is valuable psychoanalytic writing about the distinction between group life and gang life (Waddell and Williams, 1991; Canham, 2002), and it is in sibling groups that these dimensions can first be explored. Children who have had no such experience before they go to nursery have to meet the demands of group life there for the first time.

What are the essential differences between group and gang formations? By 'group' in this context is meant a collection of people with a recognisable boundary (eg. siblings, a school football team, or indeed a CAMHS [Child and Adolsecent Mental Health Service] team) whose relationships are predominantly determined by commitment both to particular values (e.g. fairness, concern to protect weaker members) and to the larger aim which is the group's raison d'être. In the case of sibling groups this larger aim includes the development of all the individuals in the group, the enrichment of the group's culture, the support of the members of the group and the encouragement of their linking to those beyond its boundaries in wider friendships and activities. By contrast, gangs exist to override the interests of individuals by subjecting them to a primitive or pathological authority working in the direction of cutting gang members off from intimacy with anyone outside, and asserting that the gang is the structure that protects its members from the hostility by which it claims to be encircled. In psychoanalytic terms, a pathological and cruel or confused and perverse superego dominates the gang in contrast to the more benign and supportive superego of what I am defining as group culture (Canham & Emanuel, 2000).

A very interesting literary example of a sibling group that deteriorated under pressure is the subject of Ian McEwan's excellent novel *The Cement Garden* (1996) from which a film was later made. It concerns a group of four siblings. Their father dies at a point when his state of mind lacks creativity and warmth, symbolised by his plan to concrete over the garden. The mother is overwhelmed, becomes ill and also dies soon afterwards. The children decide to hide the mother's dead body in order to avoid being taken into care, in other words to behave

as if there were still parents around and that they could reconstitute the family on their own. The older sister has to "become" mother, and this leads to intense confusion for all of them in different ways. The narrator, the oldest boy, who is in the throes of adolescence, is filled with incestuous longings for his sister whom he cannot now distinguish from the lost and not-yet-mourned mother. There are no parents present to set limits to this, and once his jealousy is roused by the appearance of his sister's older boyfriend, incestuous *enact-ment* takes place. It is quite clear that an ordinarily complicated family has been catapulted into catastrophe by the intensity of painful loss, the children's unconscious guilt about the death of their parents and their desperate efforts to deny the reality, which involve ever greater isolation from the wider society. A group of ordinarily ambivalent siblings has become a deeply disturbed parody of a family in which the psychological needs of each of them are misunderstood and great damage is inflicted. This reminds us that sibling relationships necessarily imply parents in the background, whether present or not. If the link to parental figures is attacked, the nature of the sibling connection is distorted and basic differentiation undermined.

Imagined Siblings—unconscious phantasies

So far I have been discussing in the main real-life sibling experiences or their representation in literature. I now want to turn to the babies imagined to inhabit mother's mind and body. These are the babies we believe our mother is busy thinking of when not attending to us, the babies that may be born in reality and that in any case are occupying some of the inner spaces of mother's mind and body in our unconscious phantasy. Children's dreams and drawings quite often include reference to these ideas, and in psychotherapy the theme often becomes explicit. Different versions of this phantasy appear according to the child's stage of development and of course influenced by actual experience. One very early version is what Tustin referred to as "the nest of babies" phantasy (Tustin, 1972). This is an idea she found particularly prevalent in her work with autistic children and it has been developed in important work by Houzel (Houzel, 2001). The child's belief is that inside mother are a whole lot of babies, just like a nest full of baby birds all waiting to be fed. This

nest is sometimes felt to be located in mother's breasts, where they are greedily drinking all the milk, but can also be located in mother's head (a mind full of noisy rivals) or mother's womb (all enjoying perpetual warmth and peace).

The developmental importance of siblings in the internal world—a clinical example

The child whose material I am drawing on demonstrated a particularly interesting link between a dawning capacity to imagine a world peopled by siblings and the concurrent development of symbolic capacity and playfulness.

Sophia is the daughter of a highly educated Moslem Arab father and a Welsh working class mother with a history of familial sexual abuse. Both parents have considerable long-term mental health difficulties. She is in weekly therapy. Her most serious problems are linked to a failure to separate from mother in any meaningful way, consequent identity confusion, and enormous difficulties in relating to other children. She frequently claims to have been bullied at school, while all the evidence points to her attempting to manipulate and control other children in the same way that she does her mother and her large collection of pets at home, and her *rage* when they object.

In her sessions with me, she at first seemed extremely disturbed, as she was unable to play and talked non-stop in a jumble of past and present, reality, fantasy, and dreams. It was almost impossible to remember the sequence of what she said as there was no apparent logic or sense of temporality. As she gradually became aware of the structure of the therapy, the regularity of her sessions, of my attempt to understand her and of my persistence in staying outside the confusional world she inhabited, a more normal side of her began to appear. She became less interested in the idea that she knew everything about the Tavistock (unfortunately this idea was nurtured by mother's boundaryless relationship to the building) and less convinced that she had seen me in all sorts of other places—on the bus, at the shops, in the park, etc. She would in fact succeed in making me feel quite unsure whether she might actually have done so, and it was eerie to feel I was perpetually under her gaze. Instead, she began

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to feel very curious. Were the other drawers in the chest of drawers of which she had one for her play materials used by other children? Did I live in my room at the Tavistock (after all there was a couch which might be my bed she remarked) or did I live somewhere else? Did I know J.; another child from her school who she thought came to the clinic? She began to squint out of the waiting room window and try to see into my window, which was at a right angle to it. As she left the clinic, she would gaze up at the row of windows and try to identify mine and see who might be in the room with me after her. Despite the discomforting intrusiveness of her curiosity, the situation now felt much more real, with a palpable distinction between inside and outside.

She seemed to me to be working through a move from an idea that she was in complete possession of me, representing the internalised mother in her mind, to one in which she took her place among my other children, that is the other patients she was now so interested in. As this shift took place, the play with the small animals and dolls that had developed after the initial months of verbal outpouring took a very different turn. Earlier play had focused on total oedipal confusion—the baby horse would always turn out to be marrying the mother, following some mysterious catastrophe occurring to the father horse, for example, or, less obviously, all the animals would be arranged in odd-assorted couples and the baby animals were in couples in exactly the same way as the adult ones—family groups simply did not exist, and all partnerships were perpetually dissolving and reforming. In this animal world, there were frequent wars and natural disasters so that no one seemed safe. Some order began to appear when she grew keen on the idea that an animal king and queen were in charge overall. At first, the royal couple might be an adult/child combination, but after much interpretation of her wishes not to see the differences between grown ups and children, the king and queen were represented by two grown up and matching animals, one of each sex.

Soon after this, a new game began to take shape and this game turned out to be very relevant to my theme. She arranged a school, with a nursery, reception class, grade 1, 2, 3 and 4, and a headteacher's office with a secretary who could arrange access. In each imaginary classroom that was set up in a different part of my room, the teacher was given the appropriate materials for the children. For

example, tiny tissues were provided for the reception children, so that they could learn to blow their noses. A small animal was sent from the reception class to take a message to the headteacher. This was shown as a very long journey, but completed successfully, but on returning, the little animal could not manage to climb up the very last step into the classroom and was at risk of tumbling downstairs. This echoed innumerable earlier games in which animals would always be falling unnoticed to the ground from great heights, but on this occasion the teacher eventually noticed the child's struggle and helped him back in.

For Sophia, it is quite clear that there is a link between being a child kept in mind and being one of a group of children for each of whom there is a proper space. Her therapy sessions with me have helped to build a mental structure in which she can safely move out of the position of being the baby inside mother, that is not being born psychologically as a separate person but remaining terribly confused with mother. Her original presentation as the prematurely aged and overweight child of her obese mother had underlined the extent of this pathological identification. Now she can instead visualise the world as one in which there is a separate appropriate space for each child, herself and the imagined sibling group, and learning and development can take place as in her imaginary school. Not continuing to live inside mother seems to coincide with the recognition that she is *one* of the children, not the one and only one. I anticipate that this will gradually enable her to make friends in a more ordinary way with other children. She has weathered psychological birth.

Lost siblings

There is one more theme I want to touch on, and that is the impact on a child of the death of siblings. The most frequent situation in which this becomes a vital matter is when there are maternal miscarriages either before or after a child's birth. Considerable clinical research work has and is being undertaken on this theme of the "replacement" baby (Reid, 2003) and it elaborates the risk to the child who is born following late miscarriage or especially perinatal death. Where the mother has not been able to mourn the death of the baby adequately, there can be a confusion in mother's mind between the dead and the

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live baby, compromising her recognition of the live baby's individuality and needs. For example, if the baby is of a different sex, this may not be easy to acknowledge, or the mother may be over-anxious about the baby's health and convey fears about survival that interfere in infant feeding and sleeping.

One striking clinical example of the impact of this kind of experience was work done by a colleague of mine with a surviving triplet. The other two babies had died in utero. This child proved very difficult to make contact with in therapy, and she and her mother seemed trapped in a chilly and unrewarding relationship, sadly without the potential help from the father who had abandoned them. However, Sandy, the surviving child, could convey something of her states of mind in drawing, and on one occasion drew a graveyard with three headstones which she clearly identified as belonging to herself and her siblings. This image helped her therapist to imagine the extent to which Sandy felt her life invaded by the reproachful ghosts of her siblings, seen as envying her the life denied to them and holding her prisoner in a place of death. This insight allowed the patient perhaps for the first time to realise that her guilt about being the survivor played a large part in her masochistic submission to these horrible, resentful, imagined siblings and set in train a less unequal struggle between the life and death instincts within her.

When a child dies in the family later on in life, the bereaved siblings have very complex feelings to bear. The balance of loving and hating feelings between the siblings before the death is the decisive factor in enabling such bereaved children to recover, alongside the resilience of their parents in coping with such a tragic loss. It is usually easier for children to deal with such losses, however painful the loss may be, than with the invisible babies of miscarriage or early infant death because the reality of their sibling's life will be acknowledged in the family and there will be memories, photographs and a spoken history which make the loss a shared and shareable experience.

Conclusions

The overview of the psychological significance of sibling relationships has inevitably not covered all aspects. For example, I have not focussed on the matter of gender — what difference does it make if we

have brothers or sisters? What about the significance of sexual play and exploration between siblings? How can we distinguish between developmentally appropriate brother/sister feelings and more pathological features? As so often, literature serves to provide a resonant contrast: studying the sibling relationship in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* in comparison with that of the twins in *Twelfth Night* proved to be a fruitful way to explore this question. What became evident was the inner relationship to the parental couple that, in my view, provides the context for sibling relationships, a matrix in which the horizontal and vertical family relationships have a necessary connection (Rustin & Rustin in Coles, 2006). Klein wrote at one point about childhood sexual activity between siblings as having a creative potential, a stepping stone towards adolescent sexual development and a context in which sexual expression can be free from guilt, but such views are at odds with much current anxious preoccupation with the idea of any sexual activity between children being abusive. Coles (2003) and Mitchell (2003) have both aimed at theorising lateral relations of siblinghood which add to the oedipal parent–child structuring of the internal world, and which they argue are independent of oedipal dimensions. As will be evident, I am not persuaded of this despite strong agreement about the importance of siblings in our lives.

I will now attempt to summarise fundamental themes explored here. First, the idea that the existence of siblings is innate, a preconception (in Bion's terminology 1962) awaiting its realisation. They are always present in the mind, whether existing in external reality or not. Secondly, siblings are the object of passionate feelings of love and hate, and this is not only in connection with the context of sibling rivalry for parental affection and attention, a part of the wider oedipal drama, but also a site of our emotional lives with its own sources of energy. Thirdly, living with our siblings provides opportunities for shared experiences of many kinds—the sharing of the impact of parental pressures, the sharing of creative play and fantasy where long-term intimacy can be a preparation for both later friendships and love relationships, the sharing of family history and so on. Fourthly, the opportunity provided by siblings for multiple identifications and for the expansion of psychic life—we can, for example, move between being the baby and being the big one and we explore our bisexuality through relationships with our brothers

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and sisters. Fifthly, I have touched on some factors which introduce special risks and vulnerabilities such as the impact of a lost sibling, to which one should add the impact of a sibling with a disability, the meaning of multiple births, and the particular demands of relating to step-siblings and half-siblings in the many complex modern families. Linked to the issue of step-siblings are the experiences of children who are fostered or adopted which I have not discussed.

Whether we have actual siblings or not, our inner world is peopled by both friendly and unfriendly sibling figures. In psychotherapy, these can emerge in relation to thoughts and feelings about the therapist's other patients, and in an experience in the transference of the therapist as a sibling. I wondered, for instance, about Sophia's relationship with me being partly based on my being felt to be the longed-for absent sibling who could have been a playmate and could have shared the heavy load of her troubles with her parents. Intense feelings can also be experienced and worked through in relation to the therapist's own real family. When the patient becomes aware of the therapist's children as realities, by observing a pregnancy or by a chance meeting outside the clinical setting, this can become an all-too-real fact of life that may be very difficult to accommodate.

While sibling rivalry is an unavoidable element in our lives, the companionship of siblinghood is frequently felt to be a precious resource that overcomes our inescapable ambivalence. The intimacy of siblings and quasi-siblings (sometimes cousins, for example, can seem to be very close to sibling status) is for most of us the crucible in which we first learn how to make friends, how to get over quarrels, how to share, how to give and receive, and how to control our hatred and destructiveness with our peers. As with all intimate relation-ships, things can go wrong. From Jacob and Esau, and Cain and Abel onwards, the mental or physical violence that can erupt between siblings has been part of our human story. However, it seems to be evident that while siblings' feelings for each other are profoundly influenced by the parental context, there is also an independent factor. Our brothers and sisters are persons of value to us in their own right and are not only competitors for parental love. The facts of life in a family of whatever sort include the necessary acknowledgement of real and potential siblings and of our complex feelings about them; maybe the global facts of life in our 21st century interdependent world require some similar leap of imagination in the wider public sphere.

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Note

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