"It's Just the Abuse that Needs to Stop":

Professional Framing of Sibling Relationships in a Grounded Theory Study of Social Worker

Decision Making Following Sibling Sexual Behavior

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Abstract

Sibling abuse is a global problem, arguably the most prevalent form of family violence, and as harmful as other familial abuse. There is evidence internationally that sibling abuse often goes unrecognized or is minimized by professionals from education, health and social care. The responses of social workers are of particular interest as key decision makers in child welfare, yet research has focused on concerns about parental abuse rather than risks presented by children within a family. This paper presents findings from research examining social worker decision-making in cases involving sibling sexual behavior. Interviews were conducted across six Scottish local authorities with twenty-one social workers having responsibility for such cases. Forty-five hours of in-depth interviews regarding 21 families and 54 children involved in sibling sexual behavior were audiotaped, transcribed verbatim, and analysed using constructivist grounded theory. The study found that social workers frame sibling relationships as non-abusive and of intrinsic value, and when faced with contradictory evidence engage in a number of mechanisms to maintain this frame. This paper makes a significant contribution to the sociology of siblinghood and provides an explanation that is more profound than existing theories for the internationally recognized problem of the marginalization of sibling abuse.

Keywords: Sibling abuse, Sibling incest, Harmful sexual behavior, Inappropriate sexual behavior, Child sexual abuse, Sibling relationships, Decision making, Constructivist grounded theory

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The abuse of children by their siblings is a global problem and arguably the most prevalent form of family violence (Meyers, 2014). From a detailed analysis of the National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence involving 4,000 children conducted in the United States between 2013-14, Finkelhor, Turner, Shattuck, and Hamby (2015) reported that 21.8% of the sample had been assaulted by a juvenile sibling in the study year, compared to 15.2% who had experienced child maltreatment by a parent. Sibling sexual abuse is estimated to be up to three times as common as sexual abuse by a parent (Krienert & Walsh, 2011; Stroebel et al., 2013). In a recent sample of 590 Portuguese students, 11% of males and 5% of females self-reported sexually coercing a sibling during their childhood (Relva, Fernandes, & Alarcao, 2017).

As well as prevalent, sibling abuse may be as harmful as other familial abuse including by parents. Sibling sexual abuse may be more likely to involve anal or vaginal penetration than abuse of daughters by fathers (Cyr, Wright, McDuff, & Perron, 2002; O'Brien, 1991). Rudd and Herzberger (1999) and Cyr et al. (2002) compared the effects of father-daughter and brother-sister sexual abuse and found the latter to be at least as harmful. van Berkel, Tucker, and Finkelhor (2018) summarise the impacts associated with sibling victimization, which include depression, anxiety, self-harm and delinquency. Likewise, sibling sexual abuse has the potential for significant, long-term consequences for physical health, mental health and relationship difficulties, and may be at least as damaging as sexual abuse by a parent (see Yates, 2017 for a discussion).

The Marginalisation of Sibling Violence

Nonetheless, there is considerable international evidence, including from the U.S., U.K., Australia and Israel, that sibling abuse often goes unrecognized or is minimized by parents and professionals from law enforcement, education, health and social care (e.g. Khan & Rogers, 2015; Meyers, 2015; Tener, Lusky, Tarshish, & Turjeman, 2018).

There are a number of possible explanations. The marginalization of sibling violence as a harmless form of family aggression may be due to its being normalized as an expected and inevitable part of growing up (Caffaro & Conn-Caffaro, 2005; Khan & Rogers, 2015), with no clear definition to distinguish it unequivocally from sibling rivalry (Perkins, Coles, & O'Connor, 2017). Sibling rivalries, jealousies and quarrels may perform useful developmental functions (Sanders, 2004), but an analysis of power is often absent (McIntosh & Punch, 2009), which belies the lived experiences of sibling violence victims (Meyers, 2015).

Sibling sexual behavior, whilst expected for very young children (T. C. Johnson, 2015), is not considered appropriate for older children (T.C. Johnson, Huang, & Simpson, 2009). Indeed, abhorrence at the thought of sibling incest, the incest taboo, is one explanation given for sibling sexual abuse being overlooked, unrecognized or disbelieved by parents and professionals (Ballantine, 2012; Tidefors, Arvidsson, Ingevaldson, & Larsson, 2010). Nonetheless, sibling sexual abuse may be normalized as experimentation (at least by the boy) (Rowntree, 2007), and there is no universally agreed definition to differentiate abusive from mutually initiated sibling sexual behavior (Caffaro, 2014). Typical indicators would be large age gaps between the siblings or the use of force or other coercion, but abuse may still occur between siblings close in age without the use of coercion (Cyr et al., 2002; Krienert & Walsh, 2011), whereby an exploration of the sibling relationship dynamics may be required to assess the nature of the sibling sexual behavior (Allardyce & Yates, 2013). Even where sibling sexual behavior is identified as abusive, it may still be minimized due to a prevailing belief that it is relatively harmless (Adler & Schutz, 1995; Sanders, 2004). From focus group

interviews with 19 women survivors, Rowntree (2007) found that responses also included regarding it as mutually initiated, as the victim's fault, or that it could not be abuse because it involved a brother.

Social Worker Responses to Sibling Abuse

The responses of social workers to sibling abuse are of particular interest for two reasons. First, the perspectives of social workers may often reflect, legitimize and normalize a 'folk logic' of culturally-shared values and attitudes (Morris, White, Doherty, & Warwick, 2017). Second, social workers are often key decision makers with regards to whether the behavior is reported to law enforcement, whether and what treatment is provided for the children and their family, and in particular regarding children's living and contact arrangements, their recommendations often accepted routinely by other professionals (Vernon & Fruin, 1986; Wade, Biehal, Farrelly, & Sinclair, 2011; Ward, Brown, & Westlake, 2012). Given the potential for ongoing significant harm, it may not be safe for siblings to continue living together or having face-to-face contact following sibling abuse.

Conversely, there may be value in maintaining the sibling relationship. Most of the research regarding sibling relationships since the 1980s has stressed their positive and potentially lifelong value, especially in the context of other familial abuse and neglect (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013; Settlemire, 2011). Removing a child from their family (and sometimes therefore from their school and local community) may have devastating consequences (Fahlberg, 1991; Winnicott, 1986). How social workers think about and respond to sibling abuse may therefore have significant long-term consequences for children's and families' safety and well-being.

Social workers' decision making generally takes place within the context of complex, uncertain and changing information (Taylor, 2010), requiring intuitive skills (van de Luitgaarden, 2009), but with consequent concerns that it is idiosyncratic and flawed

(Gambrill, 2005). Studying social workers' thinking processes is urgent (D. Platt & Turney, 2014). However, despite evidence of the prevalence of sibling abuse and the harm it may cause, research regarding social worker decision making has focused almost exclusively on situations where there are concerns about risks presented by a parent rather than by another child within the family.

The methods and theoretical model derived from the first and only known study of such a nature are reported in Yates (2018). This research aimed to explore social workers' thinking processes behind the decisions they were involved in making following sibling sexual behavior becoming known. From rigorous grounded theory analysis of the social workers' accounts, Yates (2018) found that under conditions of uncertainty, social workers make largely intuitive decisions, influenced by their relationships with children and families, and influenced in particular by a practice mindset 'siblings as better together'. This mindset comprises three underlying perspectives: Parents as well-intentioned protective; Children as vulnerable and intending no sexual harm to others; and Sibling relationships as non-abusive and of intrinsic value (See figure 1).

Figure 1. The Social Workers' Practice Mind-Set 'Siblings as Better Together' (Yates, 2018, p.181)
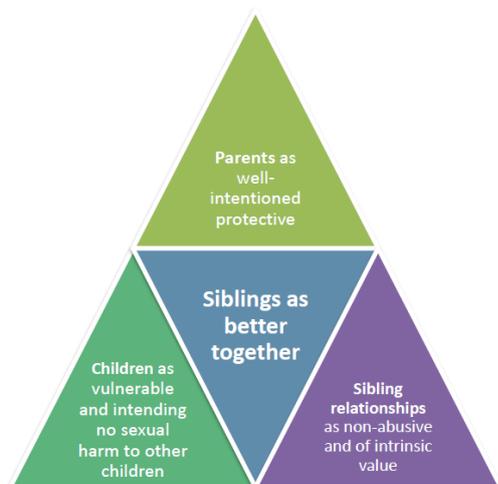
This current paper continues to report from this original study by expanding and adding depth to the particular findings related to the underlying perspective of Sibling relationships as non-abusive and of intrinsic value.

Sociology of Sibling Relationships

Whilst there has been a growing psychological literature on the nature of sibling relationships since the early work of Bank and Kahn (1982) and Dunn and Kendrick (1982), a sociology of siblinghood remains under-developed (White & Hughes, 2018). Tabor (2016) has summarised the extant sociological literature as focusing on how siblings describe their own relationships, resulting in a typology of sibling relations as intimate, congenial, loyal, apathetic, or hostile; factors influencing outcomes for individual children, such as birth order, birth spacing, and family size; and the changing nature and value of sibling relationships at different life stages. What is largely missing from this literature is a clear understanding of the wider societal ideals and expectations of sibling relationships.

This current paper addresses this gap, making a significant contribution to the sociology of siblinghood, and in so doing provides an explanation that is more profound than existing theories for the internationally recognized problem of the marginalization of sibling abuse. The research was guided by the research question: How do social workers account for the decisions they have made regarding separation, contact and reunification of siblings following sibling sexual behavior becoming known?

Method

Constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) provided the overarching methodology. Grounded theory was introduced to social research by Glaser and Strauss (1967), who set out an inductive methodology for generating new theory from data. Tentative hypotheses are generated through initial analysis of preliminary data, such as from unstructured interviews or observation. Further participants are sought to extend and refine

the hypotheses, a process known as theoretical sampling. Data analysis is undertaken through a process of constant comparison, with each incident of a phenomenon being compared to another in order to develop the emergent theory, which is therefore always grounded in the data from which it was induced. Data collection and analysis are continued in dialogue until new data do not add anything to the theory, known as theoretical saturation.

Grounded theory in its original positivist form has been challenged and revised by Charmaz (2006), recognising that the researcher and research methods affect what is observed and interpreted. The importance of researcher reflexivity is introduced; the concept of theoretical saturation is replaced by theoretical sufficiency; and coding methods are modified in order as far as possible to avoid forcing the data.

Ethics and Funding

The study was funded by the ESRC (Grant number 1096204) and approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Edinburgh School of Social and Political Sciences. Participants gave written consent prior to interview, having received both written and verbal information. It was agreed that pseudonyms be used throughout and that any reporting of the study would not include identifying information about participating local authorities, participants, or the families discussed.

Trustworthiness

Research trustworthiness is established through researcher sensitivity to context, reflexivity, supervision, clear explication of the methods and providing sufficient extracts to allow independent assessment (Charmaz, 2006; Yardley, 2000). Sensitivity to context was achieved through the researcher's prior experience as a social worker in this field. Reflexivity has been defined and practised in different ways (D'Cruz, Gillingham, & Melendez, 2007; Finlay, 2003), but broadly refers to the need to be constantly aware of the dynamic and mutually influencing relationship between the researcher, participants, and the research

process (Yates, 2013). Positionality (Fook, 2012) was kept under review, and scrutiny of a reflexive journal maintained throughout the research helped to recognize and mitigate the influence of the researcher's background (Finlay & Gough, 2003; Roulston, 2010). The careful process of data analysis (outlined below) further guarded against personal bias (Charmaz, 2006). Discussion in research supervision supported reflexivity and performed some functions of peer de-briefing through reviewing of data extracts and interrogating the processes undertaken to arrive at the coding and final analysis (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013). Member-checking was limited to e-mail contact, due to the availability of participants. Those who responded did so positively saying that the findings resonated well with their experiences.

Sampling

Local authority social workers, who had had case management responsibility for a case involving sibling sexual behavior, were recruited through e-mail adverts distributed by senior managers within participating authorities and through direct approach by specialist agencies with whom the author maintained professional contact. Sibling sexual behavior was defined as any sexual behavior taking place between full- or half-siblings under the age of sixteen. The definition was kept broad to understand how social workers made sense of the behavior. Recruitment proved challenging, resulting in a convenience rather than a theoretical sample. Nonetheless, the rich variation that naturally occurred in the cases still allowed for comparative analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

A final sample was obtained of 21 social workers at main or senior grade across 6 local authorities in Scotland. The demographic characteristics of the sample are similar to those of the Scottish workforce in terms of age, sex and ethnicity (The Scottish Government, 2010). The participants ranged in experience from being qualified for one to 27 years. All but one had had involvement with the cases within five years prior to the interview, the majority

within two years, and nine maintained some ongoing connection. Some participants discussed more than one case, while others discussed their involvement at different stages of the same case.

Interviews

Twenty-six in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted, which entailed talking retrospectively through 21 cases involving 21 families and 54 children involved in sibling sexual behavior. Decision making was traced throughout the process of the case (Benbenishty, 1992). Interviews lasted between one hour and three and-a-half hours, totalling just under forty-five hours. The interviews were guided but not restricted by a schedule including the following questions:

- How would you describe this family, their circumstances, and the main issues they were faced with?

- How did the sexual behavior come to light?

- How did you decide whether or not the sexual behavior was OK?

- What did you consider needed to happen as a result of the sexual behavior?

- How did the case proceed from here?

- Taking each of the decisions that you made in turn, what influenced you to take the decisions as you did?

There are a number of precedents for using retrospective interviews to explore social workers' decision making (e.g. McLaughlin, Rothery, Babins-Wagner, & Schleifer, 2010), but the method comes with limitations. Memories may be false (Gambrill, 2008), so participants were asked to prepare by reading through case files to produce a chronology of events. Nine participants referred to case files during the interviews. Preparation might allow participants to emphasize justifying factors while downplaying others (Crandall, Klein, & Hoffman, 2006). However, scrutiny of the reflexive journal suggested that the researcher's

background offered something akin to a peer relationship (J. Platt, 1981), which mostly

facilitated the interviews to be approached in a spirit of learning rather than defensiveness.

The Cases

The children's ages ranged from one to 15 years, with a variety of age differences and

types of sexual behavior involved, including the touching of genitals, oral sex and rape. There

were three examples of sibling sexual behavior being regarded by the participants as mutually

initiated; otherwise the participants were clear in identifying the children in the roles of

victim and perpetrator[1]. An overview of the cases is provided (Table 1).

Table 1.

Summary Information about the Sibling Sexual Behavior Groupings Discussed by the Social

Workers

Pseudonym of social worker	Sex (M/F) and Age of perpetrator (Mutually initiated)	Sex (M/F) and Age of victim(s) (Mutually initiated)	Full or half siblings	Examples of Some Behaviors Involved
James	M13	F8, F6	Half	Touching genitals, Attempted penetration
James	M12	M11	Full	Anal sex
James	M15	F1	Half	Touching genitals
James	M15	M3	Half	Touching genitals
Emma	(M8)	(M7)	Full	Attempted anal sex
Emma	M9	M6	Full	Oral sex
Emma	M9	M5	Full	Oral sex
Jenny	M14	F9	Half	Digital penetration, Masturbation
Annette	M15	F10	Full	Digital penetration

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[1] Labelling young people as 'perpetrators' and 'offenders' can be stigmatizing, resulting in their being treated inappropriately like adult sex offenders. Referring to children 'who have harmed' or 'have been harmed' may generally be more helpful, but 'perpetrator' is used here for convenience on the understanding that 'to perpetrate' is taken in a non-judgemental sense to mean "to perform or be responsible for" (Collins Concise Dictionary, 1999:1102).

Fiona and Ruth	M12	M7	Half	Anal rape
Lisa	M15	M10	Full	Anal rape
Lisa	M10	M7, F5	Full	Digital penetration
Laura	M14	M12	Full	Masturbation
Brian and Angela	M14	F5	Half	Masturbation
Scott	M13	M6	Half	Anal rape
Mary	M12	F4	Half	Oral sex
Kate	M7	F5	Full	Touching genitals, Oral sex
Gordon	(M12)	(F12)	Full	Unknown
George	M15	F7	Half	Touching genitals, Digital penetration, Simulating sex
Penny and Sharon	F7	F6, F3, M1	Full	Touching genitals, Masturbation, Oral sex
Melanie	(F5)	(F4)	Full	Touching genitals
Melanie	M10	F2	Full	Penetration, Touching genitals
Barbara	M7	F4	Full	Touching genitals
Barbara	F10	M8 M6	Full / half	Masturbation, Simulating sex
Karen	M12	M7	Half	Anal rape
Liz	F14	F12, F8, M6	Full	Penetration with objects

Data Analysis

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim using some basic conventions (ten Have, 1999). Data were analysed throughout and beyond their generation using NVivo 10 software. Initial line-by-line and segment-by-segment coding was undertaken *in vivo* as much as possible to stay close to the data and to begin analysis from the participants' perspective. Focused codes were selected from initial codes with most analytic value, which synthesised and explained larger segments of data (Charmaz, 2006).

Emerging categories were developed using constant comparative analysis (Charmaz, 2006) across and within interviews of codes, incidents, decisions, and case and participant characteristics. A continual process was followed of rehearsing and refining the codes, re-coding and uncoding (Bazeley, 2007), and revisiting earlier interviews as new codes emerged. A theoretical model was developed through memo-writing, an iterative process of

mapping and clustering of codes into core categories, and repeated reconfiguring of the structure and relationships between categories (Charmaz, 2006). Analysis was suspended once theoretical sufficiency was achieved and no new insights emerged.

Results

Under conditions of uncertainty, social workers were influenced in their decision making by an underlying perspective of sibling relationships as non-abusive and of intrinsic value. They engaged in a number of mechanisms that maintained their perspective. There was a reluctance to consider sibling behaviors in abusive terms. When behaviors were considered abusive this did not define the sibling relationship as abusive. Abusive sibling sexual behavior was regarded in isolation of the relationship, not as a symptom of an already abusive relationship, nor as something that would have implications for the ongoing quality and value of the relationship. Almost no matter what the quality of the relationship, it was assumed to be of intrinsic value, and its maintenance would be supported either through shared living arrangements or face-to-face contact.

To be clear, the actual decisions made by the social workers are not the subject of critique here; rather it is the thinking processes behind these decisions that are being examined. No assumption is made that, with appropriate intervention, children who have displayed harmful sexual behavior cannot remain safely in the same home or in direct contact with each other.

Sibling Behaviors as Non-Abusive

Within the boundaries of what they considered normal, participants expressed an awareness in keeping with the literature (e.g. White & Hughes, 2018) that sibling relationships might entail complex dynamics, including caring, companionship, rivalry, fighting and arguing, "In lots of senses they were normal siblings, you know, they had sibling rivalry, but they also had a connection where they wanted to care for each other" (Melanie).

There was a reluctance, however, to consider sibling behaviors in abusive terms. Physical violence, even between siblings with large age and size differences, was construed as fighting between equals. While it was not always considered 'appropriate', it did not test the boundaries of normal sibling behavior:

> I wouldn't even know if I would call it physical abuse. There was certainly physical aggression between the two of them…and he's bigger…and he's older, so he partly should have known better and he shoul-, there was power issues that he, didn't really take into account because, I mean you see it amongst siblings all the time well it's my sister and they're doing my head in and I'm going to, do you know what I mean, so there was certainly inappropriate physical aggression, but I think it was two-way. (Jenny, discussing a case involving a 15 year-old boy and his 10 year-old sister)

Likewise, Emma regarded physical aggression between a 15 year-old boy and his 11 year-old brother as fighting:

> They fight like nothing else…That kind of usual sibling…roughing each other up and…you're this and you're that…boys will fight, you know, and we needed to be mindful of that. You know, there's a degree of, this is what families do. (Emma)

The elision that Emma makes between siblings and families is pertinent, and is a leitmotif throughout the participants' accounts, as discussed below.

The reluctance to think about physical aggression as potentially abusive did not extend to unrelated children. Five participants spoke about physical aggression between children at school in terms of 'bullying', one using the term 'abusive' in this context.

Differentiating Normal from Concerning Sibling Sexual Behavior

While sibling violence did not seem to test the boundaries of normal sibling relationships, this was not so for sibling sexual behavior. In keeping with the literature (e.g. T. C. Johnson, 2015), it was expected that very young siblings might engage in some playful exploration of each other's bodies, but as children became older any sexual behavior was considered inappropriate and of concern:

> Yeah, like kind of you show me yours, I'll show you mine type of
> thing…when children are a little bit younger as well I think…it's
> quite innocent, whereas when you're older it's all a bit…it's not just
> about bodies, it's about kind of, sex and, it's less kind
> of…appropriate…but, yeah I think with younger siblings I don't
> really see it as, I think it's kind of like a way people learn and a way
> people kind of explore themselves and that kind of thing…I think
> that's much more normal, and sort of doesn't really signify anything
> kind of risky or unhealthy. (Laura)

All of the participants expressed confidence that they were able to differentiate normal sexual behavior from behavior that would raise concerns. In all but three cases they were clear in identifying one of the siblings in the role of perpetrator and one or more others as the victim in their examples of sibling sexual behavior. However, they often remained uncertain as to quite how concerned to be and engaged in a number of mechanisms which served to maintain the underlying perspective of sibling relationships as non-abusive and of intrinsic value.

Doubting what Happened and Resisting Labelling the Behavior as Abuse

As reported in Yates (2018), the perspective was maintained by social workers sometimes doubting whether any sibling sexual behavior had indeed taken place. Where it was believed that it had occurred there was often a resistance to labelling the sexual behavior

as abusive. Most of the participants referred to the behavior as 'inappropriate', 'exploratory' or 'experimental', even when clearly identifying the children in the roles of victim and perpetrator and where there were large age and size differences between them. This may be simply a matter of semantics; however using language in these circumstances which is also used to describe harmless and playful behavior risks understating its seriousness and impact upon the victim, and serves to maintain the perspective of sibling relationships as non-abusive.

Even when the sibling sexual behavior was labelled as abusive, however, this did not mean that the sibling relationship was considered to be abusive. Further mechanisms operated to maintain the perspective even in the face of evidence of abusive sibling sexual behavior.

Looking for Reasons

The participants looked for reasons to explain the kind of sexual behavior they would not expect to be displayed by children, their explanations generally invoking hypotheses about responses to trauma or other childhood adversity. This is in keeping with many theories in the literature (see Allardyce & Yates, 2018 for a summary), but it is notable that family systems theories which include a consideration of the power dynamics of sibling relationships (e.g. Caffaro, 2014) are largely absent. Only three of the 21 participants explored the possibility that the sexual behavior might in part be explained by, or symptomatic of, the nature and quality of the sibling relationship. Two participants concluded that it was not, but a third participant, Karen, provided a notable exception, discussed later.

Requiring a Second Incident

For most participants the sibling sexual behavior did not signal the possibility of an otherwise already abusive relationship. Furthermore, it did not seem to be regarded as something that might then define the relationship as abusive or adversely affect the ongoing quality and value of the relationship. It was assumed that the sibling relationship had intrinsic

value and should be maintained. Irrespective of the type of sexual behavior involved or of any other factors, the participants provided no examples of siblings being separated through discontinuing existing living or contact arrangements on the basis of a single incident. A second incident seemed to be required. This may also relate to wanting to give well-intentioned protective parents a second chance, and the social workers finding it hard to make sense of the sibling sexual behavior based upon what they believed to be a single incident, but it also served to maintain the perspective of sibling relationships.

It should be noted, however, that a second incident was not required if the older sibling was an adult, even when there was uncertainty about whether any sexual behavior had taken place. In these cases, participants were clear that the alleged perpetrator would need to be removed from the household or for contact to be stopped:

> His parent was very upset about it saying, oh he is a vulnerable 18
>
> year-old and she was told well this is a vulnerable…eight year-
>
> old…And he can't protect himself against an 18 year-old and we are
>
> moving forward on the basis that something might have happened.
>
> (Gordon)

The sibling relationships perspective applies to sibling children but not to adults.

Focusing on Safety

Following additional incidents of sibling sexual behavior, the perspective of sibling relationships was further maintained by focusing on safety, which most participants conceptualised as immediate physical safety - on preventing the recurrence of any further sexual behavior - rather than considering the emotional impact of the sexual behavior in any decision making. If living or contact arrangements could be made safe in those terms, then the sibling relationship was assumed to be valuable and would be maintained:

> There was a [mother] here who ticked all the boxes in terms of…the
>
> immediate safety for both boys but especially [victim]…so I kind of
>
> think…on balance certainly over the next few days up until the case
>
> conference, let's keep the boys…at home. (Fiona, discussing a case
>
> involving a 12 year-old boy and his seven year-old brother)

Neglecting consideration of the emotional impact of the sexual behavior became a source of regret for Fiona:

> I certainly was very kind of mindful of trying to maybe minimize
>
> the…not let the boys lose each other, therefore I think we emphasize-,
>
> maybe too much emphasis looking back on maintaining contact
>
> between the brothers…Now…I would feel, why expose these boys to
>
> this trauma all because they're brothers. And, you know, think more
>
> about the impact on both these boys coming into the same visual
>
> contact, and what that would trigger. (Fiona)

The participants' general position was captured nicely by Penelope:

> You wouldn't put a child in a household with a Schedule 1 offender
>
> [an adult convicted of sexual offences]. But then we know the danger
>
> of separating siblings as well, and…it's just the abuse that needs to
>
> stop. (Penelope)

There was scant evidence of the participants' taking account of the possible emotional impact of the sibling sexual behavior in their decision making. The voices of the sibling victims were remarkably absent from the participants' accounts, an observation also made by Hackett, Balfe, Masson, and Phillips (2014) in their examination of case files in relation to 117 young people who had sexually abused others. This did not mean that the participants regarded the behavior as harmless - there were a number of examples of victims being

referred for therapeutic help – but any harm caused did not seem to be a factor taken into account in the decision making regarding living and contact arrangements.

Making Rules

As a corollary to this focus on safety, when siblings did remain living together or in contact with each other, the participants often reported going to considerable lengths to maintain immediate safety by making a number of rules. These rules might include not allowing the siblings to be left alone in the same room together; having separate bathrooms or bathroom times; conditions around standards of dress; locks and alarms being put on bedroom doors; and the functions of rooms being reconfigured so that siblings no longer shared or had an adjacent bedroom:

> He sleeps in the lounge, that was another part of the safety plan is, he had a bedroom upstairs that he shared with his younger brother, but because both the bedrooms were on the same level, he now sleeps downstairs…she's got a lock on her room door now, they've talked about, you know rules around undressing in the house…she's got her own room, she's got her lock on her door, she's got her safe place, she's got a shower upstairs, so, you know she can go in and out of her room without having to worry about things like that, and then…the addition of, you know, adding the neighbours and the partner to do, to make sure the children weren't on their own, by themselves at any point. (Annette, discussing a case involving a 15 year-old boy and his 10 year-old sister)

Guidance in the literature supports many of these rules (e.g. Worling & Langton, 2012); however these rules did not include any support for the sibling relationship, such as consideration of the respective siblings' roles and responsibilities and the need to avoid the

perpetrator assuming any positions of trust or authority in respect of their younger siblings (Worling & Langton, 2012). Only a small minority of the participants said that they had introduced any rules about how the siblings should relate to each other, and even fewer (three participants) said that they had undertaken any work with the siblings (separately or together) to repair any harm caused to the relationship by the sibling sexual behavior. Apart from preventing recurrence of the sexual behavior, most of the participants did not express any need to intervene in how the siblings related to each other.

Separation is Not a Long-Term Solution

There were occasions that the participants decided that the siblings needed to be separated, principally for reasons of safety and rarely with the additional concern about the emotional impact of the sibling sexual behavior. Where the siblings were separated, all but two of the participants expressed the desire to work towards reunification. Separation was not a long-term solution.

Several participants invoked the concept of family in remarking that it was inevitable that siblings would want contact with each other, no matter what the history between them:

> They are family members and there's only so long that you can go
> without introducing them back together. (Angela, discussing a case
> involving a 14 year-old boy and his five year-old sister)
> No matter how long…how bad things get for kids they still want
> contact with their family, no matter what they've done. (Liz,
> discussing a case involving a 14 year-old girl and siblings aged 12, 8
> and 6)

This was not always the view when discussing abusive parents. No matter what the desires of the children, participants at times expressed trying to do their utmost to keep them away from their parents (especially fathers) for as long as they were able.

Challenging the Perspective of Sibling Relationships as Non-Abusive and of Intrinsic Value

There was evidence of the sibling relationships perspective being more influential where siblings lived and had grown up together and where the social worker was acquainted with the children as siblings. Its influence could be mitigated by taking an assessment-based approach rather than making decisions predominantly intuitively. Such an assessment-based approach was taken mostly by more experienced social workers in terms of training and prior experience of working with cases involving children's harmful sexual behavior. The perspective did not apply to adult siblings and did not seem to be affected by whether the siblings shared one or both parents.

There were two examples of the perspective being successfully challenged, whereby the participants expressed that they considered the sibling relationship to be abusive. One of these participants, Lisa, nonetheless later supported contact between the siblings, involving a specialist service to help supervise the contact:

> That's probably partly due to my own experience of potential triggers, and…kind of underhand messages that are being, so just to have somebody who's a bit more experienced in that…[Specialist service for children who have been sexually abused] had said that they would be happy to do that with me, just in case there was more subliminal sort of messages or things that they were able to pick up through their working relationship with [the younger sibling]. (Lisa)

Karen was the only other participant to describe the sibling relationship in abusive terms, thinking that the sexual behavior at least in part was an expression of an abusive sibling relationship:

> I kind of always see it as a kind of power thing…That this was [the
>
> abusing sibling], for whatever reason, taking, trying to take control of
>
> the situation…with his brother. Using sex, for want of a better phrase,
>
> to do that. (Karen, discussing a case involving a 12 year-old boy and
>
> his seven year-old brother)

Like Lisa, Karen was open to contact being arranged between the siblings if this is what they wished. In both cases the perspective of sibling relationships as non-abusive appears successfully to have been challenged. Both examples shared the following features: The social workers were allocated only to the victim; there was a five-year age-gap between the siblings; the sibling sexual behavior involved rape; and the perpetrator expressed no remorse. Challenging the perspective of sibling relationships as non-abusive appears to require quite an extreme set of circumstances, and even then, does not necessarily challenge the perspective of sibling relationships being valuable.

Sometimes, however, the assumption of the value of the sibling relationship was not borne out by the experience of sibling contact. Participants said that persuading other professionals to stop contact would be extremely difficult, suggesting that the sibling relationships perspective may be shared more widely. Melanie said that stopping contact would require not only evidence of it being traumatic, but the support of a psychologist's assessment, "They'll impose contact unless we're saying, and usually have to have the backing of psychologists to say, no this child is really traumatised by this." (Melanie) Penny similarly said that an independent assessment would be required:

> If you're going to be doing something, that's as big as that, with a
>
> family…there needs to be something else…do you know, we've done
>
> this assessment, we've felt that this was what was happening with the
>
> kids…was detrimental to them, but in order to evidence some of that,

> we passed it on to this agency, who did an independent assessment
>
> and this is what they've come back with. (Penny)

Even with such independent evidence, defending a decision to stop sibling contact exhorted a considerable emotional toll:

> There were a whole load of people who were of a different view, and
>
> to sit there making those decisions…saying, this child can't see
>
> another, you know, can't see their sibling…emotionally, that, that
>
> takes its toll on you…I, I literally came out and I was, I was dry, um,
>
> you know, having spent like an hour and-a-half trying to explain…but
>
> when you've got somebody who consistently says it's the wrong
>
> decision…it's really draining. (Penny)

Discussion

For the participants, behaviours regarded as bullying or abusive when taking place outside of the family are regarded as normal and as fighting between equals when occurring within the family, and specifically within the context of a sibling relationship. Harmful sibling sexual behavior is not regarded as normal but does not seem to define the sibling relationship as abusive or to have implications for the perception of its ongoing quality and value. When confronted by reports of such behavior, the participants engaged in a number of mechanisms, which served to maintain the underlying perspective of sibling relationships as non-abusive and of intrinsic value: Doubting what had happened; Resisting labelling the behavior as abuse; Looking for reasons; Requiring a second incident; and Focusing on safety. Where siblings were separated this was not regarded as a long-term solution. Any harm caused by the behavior was seen to result from the incident, or a series of incidents treated in isolation of the relationship, and for most of the participants the emotional impact of the sibling sexual behavior was therefore simply not relevant to their decision

making. There is evidence in the study that the perspective is more widely shared, and that an extreme set of circumstances is required in order successfully to challenge the perspective.

The concept of 'frame' applies well to this idea of an 'underlying perspective' and may be a useful term to deploy. Terms such as 'frame', 'schema', and 'gestalt' share many similarities and broadly refer to "conceptual abstractions that mediate between stimuli received by the sense organs and behavioral responses" (Casson, 1983:430). In other words, the world is not perceived directly but through a mental filter, this filter comprising of cognitive templates made up of interpretations of prior experiences, concepts and constructed knowledge. How one person perceives a situation may differ from another's perception depending upon their respective mental filters, or 'frames'. One of the features of frames is that when confronted with evidence that does not fit the frame, there is an inclination either not to perceive the evidence at all, or to interpret it in such a way as to confirm and maintain the frame. 'Frame' is therefore quite a different concept from beliefs about what may be generally the case but with an understanding that there will be exceptions.

Frames act as mental filters through which the world is perceived and interpreted, and social workers have their own frames through which they perceive their 'case-worlds' - the vast array of information and stimuli presented in relationship with the family, their home and community environment, other workers involved with the family, notes and reports in case files and so on. Social workers do not perceive this case-world directly and then apply a disinterested analysis to this 'evidence'; rather, the information that social workers seek, perceive, and pay attention to, what counts as evidence and how this evidence is interpreted, is influenced by the social workers' frames. In case-worlds involving sibling aggression or sexual behavior, social workers are influenced in particular by their framing of sibling relationships as non-abusive and of intrinsic value.

This frame offers a more profound account of the marginalization of both sibling physical and sexual violence than existing explanations. Inadequate responses are not simply a matter of this behavior being normalized as an expected part of growing up or a consequence of a lack of clear distinction between harmless and harmful sibling behaviors. Instead, it may result from a fundamental underlying perspective of what sibling relationships are like. Notwithstanding other possible explanations in individual cases, the findings from this study support Rowntree's (2007) comment, that this could not be abuse because it involved a brother. The question arises as to the origins of this frame, and why conditions need to be so extreme for the frame to be successfully challenged.

As highlighted, the participants often invoked the concept of 'family' when referring to sibling relationships. There is a wealth of evidence that the family has the capacity to be violent. In addition to the sibling abuse already discussed, a large-scale population survey in the UK conducted by Radford, Corral, Bradley, and Fisher (2013) found that almost a quarter of young adults self-reported having experienced physical, sexual or emotional abuse or neglect by their parents or caregivers during their childhood. The lifetime rate of child maltreatment (comprising physical abuse, emotional abuse, neglect and custodial interference) for 14-17 year-olds in the National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence conducted in the United States in 2013-14 was 38.1% (Finkelhor et al., 2015). Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois (2004) have concluded that the family is among the most violent of social institutions.

Nonetheless, while there is no such thing as 'the family', families being highly varied, complex and fluid social groupings (Allan, 1999; Gittins, 1985), a dominant ideology of the family has persisted in the late 20th and early 21st centuries as one involving two heterosexual parents as equal partners who carefully and lovingly raise two or three children (Gittins, 1985). McCarthy (2012) explored through published research what meanings are invoked

when people talk about 'family', arguing that despite attempts by some commentators to introduce alternative terminology to describe the complex matrix of modern 'intimate relationships' (Chambers, 2012) or 'personal lives' (Gilding, 2010; Smart, 2007), 'family' remains "a stubbornly pervasive point of reference in everyday language" (Gilding, 2010, p. 774) with profound symbolic significance denoting togetherness and belonging (McCarthy, 2012), care and trust (Murray & Barnes, 2010), and a place of stability, security and harmony (Gittins, 1985). Many leading politicians have invoked the family as the very foundation of a strong and secure society (Chambers, 2012).

The concept of 'family' is often used interchangeably with 'parents' (Murray & Barnes, 2010); indeed, most of the sociological literature regarding the family has concerned adult partner relationships or parent-child relationships rather than sibling relationships (e.g. Chambers, 2012; Dermott & Seymour, 2011). In keeping with the ideology of family and despite all the evidence of family violence, the operation of a so-called 'rule of optimism', whereby parents are assumed to be 'honest, competent and caring' (Dingwall, Eekelaar, & Murray, 1983), has been a consistent finding of public inquiries into the deaths of children (e.g. Brandon et al., 2012; Sinclair & Bullock, 2002).

In this study, however, the concept of family was elided with siblings. It is argued that in today's more fluid and unstable social relationships, it is children, as innocent, as symbols of hope, trust and love (Gittins, 1998; Jenks, 2005), who hold privileged status and who transform 'intimate relationships' into a family, taking a central place in its emotional life (Chambers, 2012). The relationship between these innocent children, the sibling relationship, therefore, lies at the heart of what it means to be a family.

In addition, the language of siblinghood, of fraternity and sorority, is in itself incommensurate with abuse, and historically has been used extensively to affirm a sense of alliance, devotion, friendship and, in particular, equality, among non-related individuals and

groups (Calvi & Blutrach-Jelin, 2010). Sibling relationships are often described as 'lateral' rather than 'vertical' relationships (referring to parent-child relations), implying an equality that disregards the power relationships between siblings (McIntosh & Punch, 2009; Mitchell, 2003). Sanders (2004) further contends that, whilst there has been evidence for some time that sibling relationships may be abusive, the archetypes of sibling relationships include siblings as allies (e.g. Hansel and Gretel); siblings as (even murderous) rivals (e.g. Cain and Abel); siblings as different (e.g. Cinderella); and siblings as all-sisters or all-brothers (e.g. Pride and Prejudice). They do not include siblings as abusive.

The sibling relationships frame may therefore result from a potent confluence between ideologies of family and of children, and the language and archetypes of sibling relationships that have been dominant over the centuries, giving the sibling relationship powerful symbolic significance. Allowing the possibility of, not just sibling sexual or physical behavior, but the sibling relationship itself as being abusive, threatens simultaneously not only our sibling archetypes but also our ideals of childhood and our ideology of family. The very core of the family is threatened.

Children and families social workers are exhorted to preserve the family wherever possible (see, for example, Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights). If modern families are not defined by biological or legal ties (Pylyser, Buysse, & Loeys, 2018) but by "interactional work and activities" (Sarkisian, 2006, p.804), it is a considerable challenge to the social work role and identity to accept the possibility of sibling abuse and potentially be involved in bringing about the ceasing of the family altogether.

Limitations

The study is exploratory and reports from retrospective accounts by social workers in Scotland of their decision making. Further research could usefully include case file analysis, contemporaneous interviews and direct observation of the decision-making processes, also

involving other professionals and the perspectives of family members, and international or cross-cultural studies.

Conclusions and Implications for Practice

Sibling abuse may be the most prevalent form of family violence, more prevalent than abuse by parents, and may have consequences at least as harmful. Sibling relationships are nonetheless framed as non-abusive and of intrinsic value, a number of mechanisms operating to maintain the frame in the face of contradictory evidence. In social workers' decision-making regarding sibling living and contact arrangements following harmful sibling sexual behavior, the potential emotional impact of the behavior is mostly overlooked and the voice of the sibling victim largely absent. The sibling relationships frame is powerfully supported and provides a profound explanation for the internationally acknowledged phenomenon of sibling abuse not being recognized, eliciting inadequate responses to disclosure, and its harm being minimized. A large number of children may remain unsupported and in abusive situations as a result.

This is not to suggest that the majority of sibling physical and sexual behaviors are not normal and expected aspects of growing up, which may have developmental benefits. It is vital not to start pathologising normal and healthy behaviors. However, it is also important to recognize the possibility for sibling relationships, and not just sibling behaviors, to be abusive. Awareness-raising and space for critical reflection regarding the existence of the sibling relationships frame and our resultant tendency for constrained ways of thinking is required. It is imperative to assess carefully and take seriously reports of sibling sexual behavior and physical aggression, including the views of the child who has been harmed, the potential emotional impact of the behavior, and the nature and quality of the sibling relationship. Sibling abuse may signal an already abusive relationship and/or may damage the ongoing quality and value of that relationship. This may not necessarily negate any possible

future value in that relationship, and does not suggest that sibling children need necessarily to

be separated in the immediate aftermath of sibling abuse. That is a separate debate. What is

clear, however, is that following sibling abuse it is vital to work individually and together

with the siblings in order to support and repair their relationship if there is any intention for

living and contact arrangements to be maintained or restored.

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