Methodology of Bonding Studies to Evaluate Sibling Attachment Bonds: Interface with Social Psychology

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Background of the Problem
The often cited problem of keeping the siblings together in permanent placement in foster homes or alternate placements.
Stewart (1983) research is quite relevant to child maltreatment issues with siblings. He investigated older siblings potential to act as subsidiary attachment figures, found that 52% of the older siblings acted to reassure and comfort younger siblings in the absence of mother. Older brothers were most active in caring for younger sisters and older sisters in caring for younger brothers. Older brothers tended to match equitably the infants requests for care whereas older sisters tended to give far more care than was sought. These boys served to use a strategy that previous researchers found to be common for fathers and girls and common for mothers.

Definition of Sibling Relationship
Biological relatedness found to not be associated with young children’s perceptions of closeness to siblings; be it a full, half or step-sibling did not change their perception of closeness (Dunn, et al., 2001).
Children in foster care may live with and develop ties to children with whom they may or may not be in a biological relationship. In child welfare, the term “fictive kin” has been introduced to recognize types of relationships in a child's life where there is no legal or biological tie, but a strong, enduring bond exists (Casey Family Programs, 2002).

Types of Sibling Relationships
- Full or half siblings, including any children relinquished or removed at birth.
- Step-siblings
- Adopted children in same household, not biologically related
- Children born into the family and then foster/adopted siblings
- Foster children in same family
- Orphanage mates or group-home mates with a close, enduring relationship
- Children of the partner with other partners of the child's parent
- Individuals conceived from the same sperm or egg donor

Legal Framework For Protecting Sibling Connections
California W & I Code, Section 16002
- Recognized by many as offering the strongest statutory protections for the needs of siblings in foster care and adoption among existing statutes
- Defines a sibling as a child relocated to another person by blood, and adoption or affinity via a common legal or biological parent
- California Law allows any person, including a dependent child, to petition the court to request siblings visitation, including post adoption sibling contact or placement with or near a sibling (Patton, 2009), (McCormick, 2008), (Christian, 2002).
Fostering Connections Act
Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoption Act of 2008. (PL 110-351)

- National CASA Association worked with CASA Network and Child Welfare Organizations
- Landmark Foster Care Legislation
- Requires states to make reasonable efforts to maintain sibling connections in order to receive federal funding
- Provides that
  - (a) reasonable efforts shall be made to place siblings removed from their home in the same foster care, kinship guardianship or adoptive placement, unless the State documents that such a joint placement would be contrary to the safety and well being of any of the siblings.
  - (b) in the case of siblings removed from their home who are not so jointly placed to provide for frequent visitation between the siblings, unless the state documents that frequent visitation and other ongoing interaction would be contrary to the safety or well being of any of the siblings.
- Clear message that sibling relationships are important to preserve

Attachment Bonds and Placement Disposition

- Calif W & I Code 366.26 (2) (v), Provides for court finding compelling reason for determining termination of rights as detrimental to the child where there is close and enduring bonds with a sibling.
- Applies to adjustment and development of children of the Juvenile Court
- Interference with siblings relationship, with primary caretaker (existence of bond) may preempt termination of parental rights if court finds interference detrimental to the child

Importance of Siblings

- Child’s first peer group
- Spends more time with one another than with anyone else
- Children learn social skills especially managing conflict from negativity with brothers and sisters
- Research has demonstrated that warmth in sibling relationships is associated with less loneliness, fewer behavior problems and higher self worth
- (Kosonen 1996) found that when siblings needed help, they would first seek out their mothers but then turn to older siblings for support, even before they would go to their fathers. For isolated children (foster care) sibling support is especially crucial, for these children, as older siblings were often their only perceived source of aid and support.

Sibling Relationships in Abusive or Neglectful Families

- Sibling relationships became more important because they provided the support and nature that are not consistently provided by parents

For children entering care

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Siblings ←−−−−−−−−→ Traumatic Circumstances
  Buffer
**Sibling as Protective Factors**

- Promote resilience - secure attachment to older siblings can lessen impact of adverse circumstances (Gass et al. 2007, Kittmer, 2005, Sanders, 2004)

**Risk Factors**

For
- Mental Disorder
- And SUD with Comorbid Psych Disorder

**Parental Mental Illness**

**Protective Factors**

- Family Support

**Substance Abuse**

- Siblings helping each other through increased attachment - is an aid in coping with attachment adversity eg, divorce

**Longitudinal Study of Placing Siblings Together**

- 168,000 foster youth with siblings in care in New York City over 15 years.
- Mutual Placement Status- strong determination of sibling placement over time
- 78% of siblings entering care together were placed off together.
- Those entering care longer than six (6) months apart = highest risk of being separated (Wulczyn & Zimmerman, 2005).

**Assessment Protocol**

- Individual Assessment Sessions for Each Sibling
- Seen Separately

**Individual Assessment**

- Life History
- Current Stressors
- Family Relationships; especially sibling relationships
- Trauma History
- Parent-Child Relationships
  - Parent being emotionally unavailable increases the chance of an insecure bond
- Mental Status Examination
- Attachment History
- Kinetic Family Drawing Assesses the Importance of Family Relationships
Examiner's Role and Function*

- Data Collection
- Note Taking
- Behavioral Observation
- *Cooperative Interactive Tasks - Developmentally Specific Tasks
- Measures engagement, nurturance,
  - Kinesthetic
  - Tactile
  - Non-Verbal
  - Eye Contact

*Adopted from the Marschak Interaction Method *(Perrotti, 2015)

Emphasis in Measurement

Mileau → ← Group Interaction; Group Dynamics

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Measurement of Inter-Attachment and Inter-Relationships Between Siblings

Mileau Analysis

- Siblings Setting Boundaries
- Dominant Leader Role
- Acting Out
- Cooperative Play
- Nurturance Encouragement Structure Challenge
- Behavior with Interactive Games
- Conflict Management
- Group Members Hierarchy
- Group Positioning Themselves

Thematic Analysis

- Healing effect of siblings group, on sibling with history of acting out, feeling unwanted
- Lowers anxiety = Play
- Higher group structure around older siblings - parental roles
- Unifying effects of competitive play
- Real time observance of conflict management by siblings
- High compliance with other siblings in cases of siblings with history of extreme acting out

- Increased compliance in part may be related to group conformity (ASCH, 1951) construct
- Also may be explicable in terms of Kaplan’s Model of Small Groups as dynamic, equilibrium seeking social systems

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**Account for Extraneous Factors:**
- Removal of children by CPS from caretaker my result in disruption to bond → Anxious attachment → Difficulty Forming Intimate Relationships
- Situational and Milieu Based Assessment and Bonding Attachment Assessment

**Assess Strength and Quality of Bond**
- Tactile Contact
- Eye Contact
- Physical Proximity
- Use of other sibling as a secure base → Imprinting
- Need to R/O conformity in group setting as a factor interspersed with attachment
References


