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Sibling Relationships during the Transition to Adulthood

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Abstract

Recent research has shed new light on individual development during the early adulthood years, yet few investigators have examined sibling relationships during this stage of life. These relationships undergo transformations as individuals enter adult roles and orient their lives towards friends and romantic partners and establish independence from parents and siblings. This review examines major life events and role transitions such as leaving home, completing school, obtaining employment, getting married, and having children that influence individuals and their sibling relationships. In addition, the review considers how sibling relationships may affect individuals during the transition to adulthood, and considers the context of family and culture. The article concludes with suggestions for future research on sibling relationships during early adulthood and beyond.

Research on sibling relationships and development during the transition to adulthood has converged to produce a new line of inquiry into the nature and relevance of sibling relationships in early adulthood. Just as individuals undergo multiple changes on their journey toward adulthood, sibling relationships undergo transformations as older adolescents establish independence from their natal family and acquire adult roles. These role transitions often promote a *recentering* of major life relationships, such as those with family, friends, and romantic partners (Tanner, 2005). However, few researchers have followed siblings as they, one by one, leave their natal family and move into the wider world (Cicirelli, 1996; Dunn, 2007). A host of research questions, ranging from the practical to the philosophical, remain unanswered. For example, what happens when older siblings leave home after high school or college? More philosophically, what purpose do siblings play in family life during the transition to adulthood? As Dunn (1992) stated, “The question of how normative life transitions affect siblings’ relationships is an interesting one, on which we have, as yet, little systematic information” (p.3). It is this stage of life, the transition from adolescence to adulthood, where the largest gap in research on sibling relationships exists (Bedford, 1998; Cicirelli, 1996; Connidis, 2001). This article identifies meaningful events and experiences during the transition to adulthood that may affect the nature of sibling relationships and discusses how sibling relationships may affect this transition.

Life Transitions and Sibling Relationships during Early Adulthood

A prime time for change in sibling relationships occurs in late adolescence and early adulthood. Consistent with identity development research, Arnett (2004) suggests 18-25 years of age is a time of self-exploration as individuals face three primary tasks that define adulthood: taking responsibility for oneself, making independent decisions, and establishing financial independence. These tasks largely take place in the context of establishing romantic relationships and entering the workforce (Larson, Wilson, Brown, Furstenberg, & Verma, 2002). However, these tasks and contexts do not capture the diversity of change or the age by which individuals typically make this transition (Lawson & Brossart, 2004; Larson, Wilson, & Mortimer, 2002). Cote (2006) suggests the transition to adulthood may extend until age 30 as individuals increasingly pursue additional education, explore different jobs, and postpone long-term commitments such as marriage and childbearing. We propose

the systematic examination of meaningful transitions in the lives of young adult siblings can provide insight into the changing nature of these relationships as well as individual health and well being.

The literature on adult role transitions is too vast to review here (see Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 2000; Settersten, Furstenberg, & Rumbaut, 2005); however, Mouw's research on transitions provides a framework for examining this issue. Using cluster analyses to examine the nature, sequence, and timing of life transitions, Mouw (2005) found individuals, 22 to 35 years of age, follow several pathways to adulthood based on five transitions commonly experienced by American youth: leaving home, completing education, being employed, getting married, and childbearing. Mouw (2005) sought to understand how alternate pathways led to various outcomes in middle adulthood (age 35), such as poverty and social-emotional health. Our paper uses this framework to examine the connection between adult role transitions and sibling relationships.

Leaving Home

Establishing an independent residence is one traditional marker of adulthood for Western populations (Furstenberg, Kennedy, McLoyd, Rumbaut, & Settersen, 2003), however, how home leaving influences sibling relationships has largely been unstudied. We speculate the nature of the relationship would affect the reaction to an older sibling leaving home; individuals with warm and supportive relationships may experience a sense of loss as older siblings move into adult roles. In contrast, adolescents with highly conflictual sibling relationships may feel relief that a source of daily hassles is gone. Freed from daily contact, siblings might be able to develop a renewed appreciation for one another (Cicrelli, 1995), which could have long-term implications for relationship quality (White, 2001). Furthermore, older siblings who make an on-time, successful transition to independent living can serve as models for siblings still at home or in school.

Studies of contact between adult siblings contain mixed findings (e.g., Suggs, 1989). White (2001), in a longitudinal panel analysis of over 9000 individuals ages 18-83, found sibling social support (as measured by proximity, contact, giving and receiving help) declined in early adulthood. However, proximity and contact stabilized in middle adulthood, and sibling exchanges of giving and receiving help rose slightly after age 70. Stocker, Lanthier, and Furman (1997) found sibling warmth was positively correlated with contact in a sample of college students. Although siblings who lived closer to one another were more likely to have contact, there were *no* significant associations between proximity and relationship quality. Thus, we need studies comparing college and non-college siblings to examine how proximity, as well as differences in life experiences, affect relationship quality and contact. Research could also examine how siblings utilize technology (e.g., email, texting, social networks) to maintain their relationship ties. Finally, these issues should be examined among siblings from a wide variety of racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds for whom home leaving may not be an important marker of adulthood, or may not occur until marriage, particularly for women (see Beals & Eason, 1993; Riedmann & White, 1996).

Completing Education

One common reason for leaving home is to pursue education beyond high school; however, experiences of siblings within the same family may vary widely in this regard (see Conley, 2004). For example, siblings may differ in type of education pursued (if any), academic capabilities, and their long-term goals. Differences also occur in parental support for education. The resource dilution model suggests that larger sibships dilute the amount of resources a family can invest in a given individual (Steelman, Powell, Werum, & Carter, 2002). If one sibling receives financial support and another does not, this may generate hurt

feelings and perceptions of differential parental treatment; this, in turn, can promote conflict between siblings (see Conley, 2004; Dunn, 2007). The life stage of the family also may influence the availability of resources; Steelman and Powell (1989) found later born siblings are likely to receive more financial assistance as parents improve their financial situation over time. Sibling relationship quality could deteriorate if this financial inequity continues a pattern of preferential treatment from childhood. In contrast, older siblings who obtain their associate or baccalaureate degree can serve as positive role models or even provide support for younger siblings, thus enhancing the likelihood of the latter's educational achievements as well as strengthening sibling bonds (see Connidis, 2001; Volling, 2003)

Many individuals make the transition to adulthood by entering the work force without the college experience (Osgood, Ruth, Eccles, Jacobs, & Barber, 2005). However, this population of young adults is rarely included in large numbers in social science investigations (Aquilino, 2005; Arnett, 2004). Another route to adulthood is entering the military either as an occupation or to increase resources for additional education. Conley (2004) provides evidence from WW II that the GI Bill provided more equal access to education for male siblings in the same family, thereby diminishing the role of parental investment and socioeconomic status as sources of differential experience. Similarly, the new GI bill, effective August 1, 2009, may equalize educational opportunities for male and female siblings (gibill.va.gov). Further, increased access to resources for advanced education may reduce negative social comparisons and increase the likelihood of positive sibling relations during adulthood (see McHale & Crouter, 2005).

Being Employed

Obtaining full time employment has typically been one viable pathway to adulthood. This is especially true for individuals who take a non-collegiate pathway to adulthood, often referred to as the *forgotten half* (Arnett, 1998; William T. Grant Foundation, 1988). Entry into the workforce may differ across siblings for reasons such as family expectations, economic conditions, and job availability (see White & Rogers, 2000). Patterns of employment or unemployment also may be affected by gender and race (see Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2000; Conley, 2004). Older siblings who are self-supporting serve as positive role models for younger siblings entering the workplace, and siblings with similar work interests may develop closer relationships. Regardless, the timing and nature of work force participation may vary widely among siblings in the same family (e.g., Conley, 2004, Downey, 1995), and these differences can affect their relationships as siblings compare their situations. For example, relationship closeness may suffer when one sibling is very successful and another flounders (i.e., changing jobs frequently, periods of unemployment). However, some siblings may have a sense of obligation to assist one another based on family and cultural expectations (see Fuligini and Pedersen, 2002).

Marriage and Childbearing

Two role transitions that often accompany leaving home and workforce participation are marriage and childbirth, roles with the potential to enhance closeness in sibling relationships or exacerbate previous difficulties. When siblings create their own natal family units, the social fabric of the original family changes to accommodate new relationships (see Bryant & Conger, 2002). However, we know very little about how young adult sibling relationships are affected by the formation of romantic relationships, or how sibling relationships affect romantic relationships. Researchers should examine how marriage impacts relationship dynamics between siblings as well as the unique issues related to getting along with sibling in-laws (see Prentice, 2008).

Different role transitions usually are experienced simultaneously across multiple family members. For example, younger siblings may transition into higher education or the work force just as older siblings are transitioning into marriage or parenthood. New adult roles also reduce the amount of leisure time (see Raymore, Barber, & Eccles, 2001). For example, young adults with children typically have less time and money for leisure activities with siblings; this could strain relationships between siblings used to spending free time together. And, as adolescents are transitioning into adult roles, their parents may be transitioning into late life roles such as grandparents or retirees, and thus may be less available to referee interactions between young adult siblings.

Once considered the final markers of adulthood, marriage and childbearing are no longer bound inextricably with education and employment, and childbearing often occurs prior to or without marriage (Coontz, 2005; Furstenberg et al., 2003). In fact, Mouw (2005) reported that the normative or 'standard' sequence of completing education, starting full time work, getting married, and then having children, was experienced by only 25 – 29 % of men and women in the 1980s, a significant decline from the 37 - 40% in the 1960s. Further complicating any examination of role transitions is that siblings, unless twins and thus the same age, likely experience role transitions at different points in time and under different circumstances.

Moving Out, Moving On, New Roles, New Relationships

Our review has illustrated how adult role transitions affect both individuals and their sibling relationships and how these transitions may be affected by relationships with siblings. Tanner's (2005) re-centering framework describes how individuals alter their focus toward new social relationships and less so on family relationships. Similarly, social convoy theory describes the dynamic system of relationships that develop and change over the life course (Bertram, 2000; Kahn & Antonucci, 1980). We propose that a "dynamic re-centering" approach may be useful in describing some of the changes observed during the transition to adulthood. That is, as young adult siblings negotiate new roles and responsibilities within new contexts, such as higher education and work, they also incorporate new relationships (e.g., romantic) into their primary social sphere. As a result, family relationships, including those between siblings, become less central to everyday life. Indeed, Scharf, Shulman, and Avigad-spitz, (2005) found individuals in the transition to adulthood reported spending less time with their siblings than during adolescence. Young adults also reported less conflict and more warmth with their siblings than adolescent respondents. Finally, Scharf et al. (2005) reported that sibling relationships in early adulthood seemed to be less tied to the quality of parental relationships as compared to their adolescent respondents. Next we consider factors, such as gender, timing, and culture, which may affect this "dynamic re-centering" of siblings and their relationships.

Other Factors Affecting Life Transitions of Siblings

The timing of transitions may influence siblings and their relationships. With the possible exception of twins, siblings are often at different stages on the pathway to adulthood – sometimes being 'in sync' with one another and 'out of sync' at other times. The sense of being in-sync may be influenced by individual and dyadic characteristics (e.g., age spacing) as well as context and life events. Research has identified many factors that affect siblings' sense of being in-sync throughout the life course such as changes in power and equality within the relationship (Shortt & Gottman, 1997), maturity of individual siblings (Stewart et al., 2001), decreased daily interaction (Cicirelli, 1996; White, 2001), as well as ethnic and cultural factors (Riedman & White, 1996; Suggs, 1989). In addition, structural variables, such as sibling age, gender composition, birth order, and family characteristics affect

relationship properties such as satisfaction, support, or competition (see Connidis, 2001; Riggio, 2006; Sullaway, 1996; Tucker et al., 2001). Even who is considered a sibling may vary by ethnicity and culture (see McGuire & Shanahan, this issue; Riedman & White, 1996; Walker, Allen, & Connidis, 2005). We briefly consider how factors such as individual and dyadic characteristics and differential timing of role transitions affect sibling relationships.

First, the *age spacing* between siblings may affect the timing of various transitions. Siblings close in age may experience transitions around the same time, thus producing positive connections around shared life experiences (e.g., childbirth, parenting), or continuing negative comparisons rooted in childhood rivalries. Some may take alternate pathways to differentiate themselves from their siblings as predicted by sibling deidentification theory (see Whiteman, Becerra, & Killoren, 2009). Looking back, middle-aged siblings attributed changes in their relationship from adolescence to the ‘general upheaval at that stage of life’ (Cicirelli, 1995, p. 45). As siblings take on similar adult roles related to marriage, parenting, and work, feelings of equity or equality may emerge. New opportunities afforded individuals as adults may defuse long-standing tensions in the relationship (Cicirelli, 1996; Conger et al., 2004; Gold, 1987), leading to feelings of equity within the relationship. However, research earlier in the lifespan demonstrates that younger and older siblings often hold different perceptions of equality and satisfaction in their relationships (Riggio, 2006). Thus, systematic research on equity within sibling relationships and its relation to timing of adult roles, sibling status, and interpersonal interactions could help clarify the role of age spacing during the transition to adulthood.

Second, *gender composition* of the dyad may affect the timing and sequence of life transitions (Bedford et al., 2000; Conley, 2004). Although Mouw (2005) did not find gender differences in the five pathways to adulthood between individuals from different families, there may be differences between brothers and sisters within the same family. For example, do sisters marry at an earlier age than their brothers; are relationships closer between same-sex siblings who follow similar pathways to adulthood? Culture may also interact with gender expectations to produce differences within and between families (see Nuckolls, 1993). Longitudinal research is needed to examine gender’s effect on within-family differences in role acquisition and life transitions for siblings.

Third, *individual characteristics* may influence the timing and outcomes of transitions; for example, siblings with a more conscientious personality style (i.e., planful competence) may move through transitions in a more orderly fashion (e.g., child-bearing following marriage) whereas less planful/more impulsive individuals may enter marriage, parenthood, or work roles at non-conventional times and sequences. Personality characteristics, such as agreeableness, also may play a role in shaping the nature of the ongoing relationship between siblings (see Furman & Lanthier, 1996). Stocker and colleagues (1997) found individuals with better mental health were less likely to report conflicted sibling relationships (see also Cicirelli, 1989). Fourth, the *number of siblings* within a family may influence the nature of sibling relationships; Riggio (2006) found that individuals, in their 20s, from larger families recalled more positive childhood recollections than those with only one sibling. Thus, there may be important individual and family characteristics that moderate qualities of the sibling relationship.

Next, we briefly consider the context of sibling relationships focusing on family and culture. The quality of sibling relationships is affected by family interactions (e.g., parenting behaviors, Furman, 1995; McHale & Crouter, 1996) and structure (e.g., parents’ marital status, Conger & Conger, 1996; Milevsky, Smoot, Leh, & Ruppe, 2005). Family transitions, such as divorce and remarriage, can have lasting effects on sibling relationships

(Hetherington, 1988; Jenkins, 1992). Siblings from divorced families report less warmth in early adulthood than those from intact families; siblings from intact families, with high levels of interparental conflict, also reported less warmth with their siblings (Milevsky, 2004). Other stressful life events (e.g., economic hardship, illness) may also affect siblings and the quality of their relationship (Conger, Stocker, & McGuire, 2009). These findings speak to the potential reciprocal effects between families' social-emotional climate and sibling relationship quality.

Family influences must be examined within the larger cultural context. Research on sibling relationships has focused primarily on European-American siblings; however many cultures have different expectations for the roles and relationships between siblings across the lifespan (e.g., Beals & Eason, 1993; Weisner, 1993). Research is needed on the continuity between childhood roles and relationships and those observed during the transition to adulthood. For example, older sisters who served as caregiver for younger siblings in Mexican-American families, a common expectation, may serve as confidant and advisor during the transition to adulthood (Cauce & Domenech-Rodriguez, 2002; Vega, 1990). Research finds that Mexican-American adolescent siblings spend more time together, on average, than comparable European-American siblings (see Tucker et al., 2001; Updegraff, McHale, Whiteman, Thayer, & Delgado, 2005). Updegraff et al. (2005) found closer relationships with sisters and among same-sex dyads; "This pattern highlights the important role of sisters and same-sex siblings as confidantes and daily companions in Mexican-American families (e.g., Jaramillo & Zapata, 1987; Valenzuela, 1999)" (p. 520).

Studies of adult relationships provide some ideas of how cultural expectations shape sibling relations. For example, adult brothers across South Asia "are ritually obligated to provide services and gifts to their sisters with no thought of a return in kind" (de Munck, 1993, p. 147). However, adult sisters provide 'nurturance and cooking' to adult brothers in a pattern established in childhood. In another example, Hindu brothers in north India are able to develop lifelong harmonious relationships by focusing on cooperation and compromise despite a cultural expectation of hierarchy among brothers (Derne, 1993). Weisner (1993) suggests that research needs to compare sibling roles and relationships within and across cultures, as well as within and between families, in order to understand the influence of family and culture on these lifelong relationships (see also McGuire & Shanahan, this issue).

Siblings in Early Adulthood and Beyond: Future Directions

This review highlights the complexity of examining sibling relationships during the multiple transitions of early adulthood while taking individual, family, and cultural characteristics into account. In their twenties, people focus on the developmental tasks of adulthood such as marriage, children, and career (see Roisman, Master, Coatsworth, & Tellegen, 2004), and not surprisingly, contact decreases and the importance of sibling relationships appears to diminish (e.g., Aquilino, 2005; Cicirelli, 1996). However, positive sibling relationships in adolescence have been associated with higher self-esteem, academic competence, and empathy (Volling, 2003) suggesting that involvement in new developmental tasks does not necessarily mitigate the positive influence of sibling relationships. Certainly, siblings are not required for assuming adult roles, but supportive relationships can be beneficial during this time of change (Conger et al., 2004). For example, perceived closeness to an adult sister is related to less depression for both women and men (Cicirelli, 1989), consistent with Goetting's (1986) view that emotional support and companionship are important functions of siblings across the life span.

We illustrate this point by considering depression during early adulthood as one example of future research directions. Given the risk for depression among college-age students (see

Costello, Swendsen, Rose, & Dierker, 2008; Kessler & Walters, 1998; Schulenberg & Zarrett, 2006), early adulthood is an important time of life to understand the role of sibling support in promoting mental health. For example, social support, identified as critical for individual well-being, may alleviate depressive symptoms for siblings coping with living away from home for the first time (see Robinson & Garber, 1999). Further, individual well-being may affect change in the sibling relationship. Stocker and colleagues (1997) demonstrated poor psychological well-being was related to lower relationship quality between young adult siblings. And, relationship quality during adolescence likely influences the level of sibling support provided during life transitions (Bedford, Volling, & Avioli, 2000; Conger, Bryant, & Brennom, 2004; Tucker, McHale, & Crouter, 2001).

Another issue facing researchers interested in young adult sibling relationships is that of identifying appropriate reference groups. Some argue that sibling relationships become voluntary relationships in adulthood (Aquilino, 2005; Connidis, 2001; Stocker et al., 1997), (i.e., individuals can regulate their contact with siblings). For siblings living at home, contact may decline, but remain an inevitable part of daily life (Scharf et al., 2005). Others conceptualize sibling relationships as involuntary throughout the lifespan, due to the biological relatedness of the individuals (Collins & van Dulmen, 2006) or to family obligation (Fulgini & Pedersen, 2002; deMunck, 1993). We suggest that voluntary close relationships, such as friendships, could serve as logical reference groups for understanding sibling relationships during the transition to adulthood (see Buhrmester, 1992; Connidis, 2001). Researchers could explore what factors keep individuals connected to siblings, compared to friends, in adulthood. This notion is partially supported by Milevsky's (2005) finding that highly supportive sibling relationships in early adulthood were more likely to compensate for low peer support than highly supportive parental relationships. However, not all investigations of siblings and peers find such compensatory effects, suggesting that our understanding of the nature and meaning of sibling relationships in early adulthood is far from complete (Sherman, Lansford, & Volling, 2006).

We conclude as we began, with a series of questions regarding future research on siblings, and their relationships, as they take on the multiple roles of adulthood. One area deserving further consideration is the social context of these lifelong relationships. What are parents' feelings about the relationships between their adult children? Given the importance of social support during times of stress, is the transition to adulthood a prime time when individuals need social support from siblings? And how do families facilitate the likelihood of such supportive exchanges? Similar questions could be explored regarding the perceptions of romantic partners, extended family members and close friends. Considering the role transitions and instabilities during early adulthood, consistent support from family and significant others in one's social network might moderate individual responses to such transitions.

Finally, recent research examining lives over time suggests it is important to understand the complex interplay between individual characteristics, family dynamics and social factors that influence health and well-being (e.g., Conger, Lorenz, & Wickrama, 2003; Levitt, 2000; Schulenberg, Sameroff, & Cicchetti, 2004). Given the demonstrated importance of siblings for health and well-being in adulthood and old age, longitudinal examinations of sibling support and individual resilience during the transition to adulthood should add to our understanding of adaptive functioning across the life course (Antonucci & Jackson, 1987; Connidis & Campbell, 1995; Milevsky, 2005). Indeed, if social support is one of the key functions of siblings in adulthood, the ability of siblings to provide support may depend on experiences with family stress (e.g., alcoholic parents, divorce), the quality of childhood relationships, and the psychological well-being of individual siblings (e.g., Connidis, 2001). Future research should study sibling relationships over multiple points in time, under

varying conditions, and across multiple cultures to better understand the developmental course of social support during the transition to adulthood and its association with successful and satisfying sibling relationships in adulthood. Studies designed with this framework in mind will start to provide answers to Dunn's (1992) question of how normative life transitions affect sibling relationships.

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