

## ABSTRACT

### Turning Points of Closeness in the Sibling Relationship

Paige Herrick, M.A.

Thesis Chairperson: Mark T. Morman, Ph.D.

The sibling relationship is an important relationship within the family system because it greatly affects the intellectual, emotional, and social development of these family members; as a result, the sibling relationship is considered to be the most prolific and enduring of all personal relationships. However, not many studies have investigated this important family relationship (Connidis, 2001). In an effort to advance the literature on sibling relationships, the current study explored the most important moments in sibling relationships where levels of closeness changed. An increasingly popular research method used by many family scholars to study relationships called “Turning Point Analysis” (Baxter & Bullis, 1986) was used to capture the critical moments that impacted closeness within the sibling relationship. Six primary turning points of closeness emerged in the analysis and are described and explained from a “gendered closeness” (Floyd; 1995; Wood & Inman; 1993) perspective.

Turning Points of Closeness in the Sibling Relationship

by

Paige Herrick; B.F.A

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William B. English, Ph.D., Interim Chairperson

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Mark T. Morman, Ph.D., Chairperson

---

David W. Schlueter, PhD.

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Sally L. Askins, M.F.A.

Accepted by the Graduate School  
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J. Larry Lyon, Ph.D., Dean

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

Understanding the sibling relationship is not only crucial, but valuable to our knowledge of intimacy within family relationships. Since the early 1900s, family size has decreased, and consequently, children are more likely to have only one sibling instead of four or five as in past centuries where families were much larger. While American families are generally smaller than they were a hundred years ago, Bank and Kahn (1997) concluded that smaller family sizes contribute to more interdependence and intensity in sibling relationships. Moreover, in 1974, Minuchin, a family systems theorist, conceptualized the family as being made up of several subsystems such as the parent to parent subsystem, the parent to child subsystem, and the child to child subsystem. As a family systems theorist, he concluded that all members within a family system, including the sibling subsystem, are interdependent and equally cooperative and responsive to each other. Nonetheless, even though the sibling subsystem is important to the family unit, many researchers have historically ignored the sibling dyad. Instead, when siblings are researched, they are seen in respect to the “parental subsystem” (Bank & Kahn, 1997).

Even though families in America are smaller now than they were one hundred years ago, research consistently reports that 96% of all Americans have at least one sibling (Natural Opinion Research, 1998). Moreover, people not only grow up with their siblings, but they typically have continued interaction with their siblings throughout adulthood and old age. In fact, researchers have estimated that around 80% of the

American population spends at least one-third of their lives with their siblings (Fitzpatrick & Badzinski, 1994). Overall, sibling relationships are considered the longest lasting personal relationship any of us will ever have (Connidis, 2001), involve more history of shared experiences than other peer relationships, and are considered more egalitarian than any other kin relationship (Connidis, 1992). While the sibling relationship is involuntary, it is also permanent because individuals have no choice as to whom their siblings are; furthermore, due to a host of genetic and legal issues, the sibling relationship is hard to terminate. Because of this, it is rare that siblings end their relationship, and in fact, most siblings voluntarily commit to their relationship (Cicirelli, 1991).

Another meaningful aspect of the sibling dyad is that many individuals see the connection with their sibling as a relationship that is just as important as any other personal relationship. For example, one study found that individuals between the ages of 50 and 80 claimed that their sibling relationships were as important as their relationship with their parents and their children (Cummins & Schneider, 1961). Moreover, even if there are many conflicts within the sibling relationship, due to an inability to dissolve the sibling status, siblings are more likely to maintain their relationship, while other friendships with significant amounts of conflict might dissolve (Floyd & Morman, 2006).

Sibling relationships are also important because they are increasingly being recognized as having a bond as strong as a child has to a parent (Ponzetti & James, 1997). One study found that college women perceived their sibling relationship to be as significant as the relationship with their mother (Cicirelli, 1980). Additionally, Kobak & Hazan (1991) found that the relationship between siblings affects the quality of a

person's *other* relationships across the life span, much like the parent-child relationship; for example, siblings often take on the role of a parental figure when there is a lack of parental emotional support (Bank & Kahn, 1997). The authors explain that when siblings exist in a family in which parents do not treat them fairly, ignore them, or do not nurture them, siblings are forced to form their own supportive social structure with each other. Although the sibling relationship can be fraught with feelings of rivalry (Ross & Milgram, 1982), it can also be an important source of social support in times of need (Cicirelli, 1995). Moreover, many studies have found inverse relationships between parent-child and sibling relationships. For example, when mothers are very attentive towards firstborns, firstborns treat their younger siblings poorly, most likely due to jealousy (Dunn & Kendrick, 1982).

Siblings are also said to strongly influence each other. One study found that middle school aged children have been shown to spend more time with their siblings than with their own parents, thus giving siblings a greater opportunity to influence each other. Furthermore, siblings from a variety of age groups believe that disclosure with siblings is appropriate (Howe, Aquan-Assee, & Bukowski, 1995), and Cicirelli (1994) found that siblings are even willing to discuss confidential information and taboo topics with each other, private information they might not discuss with any other family member.

However, despite the research supporting the life-long significance of the sibling relationship, a recent communication article on families found that siblings were the focus of only 24 out of 908 articles reviewed and were found to be the *least studied* of all immediate kin relations (Allen, Blieszner, & Roberto, 2000). Moreover, with siblings' daily interactions, familiarity with one another, and connections to shared parents and

experiences, the historically understudied sibling relationship can potentially provide us with much insight into how individuals develop and mature within the family dynamic and further our understanding of other types of peer-relations. Additionally, the sibling relationship is worthy of study due to its widespread nature and its relational importance. Although considerable research literature from other disciplines such as psychology and sociology address the sibling relationship, much of this research has focused on issues of birth order, family size, and sex differences with intellectual and personality characteristics (Cicirelli, 1995). More recently, research in the social sciences has focused more on the interpersonal relationships between adult siblings and the factors that influence those relationships such as closeness and intimacy (Mikkelson, 2006; Floyd 1996). Intimacy has been shown to be critical because of its positive effect on physical and mental health (O'Bryant, 1988) and its effect on social and identity development (Cicirelli, 1977, 1989).

In an effort to increase our understanding of the interpersonal closeness within the sibling relationship, the present study explored the nature of closeness within the sibling dyad. First, the study argues for the importance of closeness in the sibling relationship. Next, sex of siblings is discussed in regard to levels of closeness. Finally, the research questions are offered focused on the events that brother-brother, sister-sister, and mixed-sex sibling relationships believe change the level of closeness between them. The analysis of the findings and a discussion of their implications will follow.



### *Importance of Closeness in the Sibling Relationship*

In general, sibling research has progressed relatively slowly in comparison to research on parent/child relationships and marital relationships (Fingerman & Hay, 2002). Some researchers have suggested that the lack of research on adult siblings is due to the assumption that siblings have little contact and/or little influence upon each other in later stages of life (Cicirelli, 1995). However, studies examining the topics of closeness, contact, and support have found this assumption to be false and have demonstrated the significant influences of adult sibling relationships (for review, see Mikkelsen, 2006). For example, Connidis (1989) reported that 77% of adult siblings considered at least one of their siblings to be a close friend and that closeness greatly affects the impact that one sibling will have on another. Additionally, “the familiarity of siblings, coupled with the emotional power of the relationship, means that the potential for siblings’ influence on one another is high” (Dunn, 2002, p. 224). Not only short-term, but longitudinal studies have found that the quality of sibling relationships is directly related to closeness (Dunn, 2002).

Strong sibling ties can have many important benefits for individual development including physical and mental health, cognitive development, social development and identity development. First, siblings can greatly influence their siblings’ mental and physical health. Previous research, especially research examining elderly siblings, has indicated benefits in physical and mental health for those with strong sibling ties (Cicirelli, 1977, 1989; O’Bryant, 1988). Specifically, Cicirelli (1989) found that having close bonds with a sister was related to fewer symptoms of depression later in life. Moreover, Shortt and Gottman (1997) found that siblings who reported being close to

each other were more affectionate, positive, and maintained lower heart rates, while Ponzetti and James (1997) found that the level of closeness felt between siblings can have positive mental health effects, such as reducing feelings of loneliness. Furthermore, siblings can be an important source of support in times of need (Cicirelli & Nussbaum, 1989; Goetting, 1986; Kahn, 1983). Wellman and Wortley (1989) found that siblings were the second-most likely source of support after parents, with 84% of respondents receiving emotional support from their parents and 68% of respondents receiving emotional support from siblings. Cicirelli (1995) argued that siblings who are emotionally closer provide more emotional support for each other than siblings who are not as emotionally close.

Another important benefit of strong sibling ties is their affect on cognitive development. For example, younger siblings learn more readily from their older siblings than from their friends (Azmitia & Hesser, 1993), and will therefore increase their knowledge with the help of an older sibling. On the other hand, while many studies suggest that older siblings are more likely to influence younger siblings than to be influenced by them (Newman, 1991), other studies have shown that older siblings also benefit. For example, one study found that seventh to ninth grade students who spent time teaching their young siblings had higher reading and language scores than those students who did not help their younger siblings (Slomkowski, Beardsall, & Rende, 1994; Smith, 1993).

Third, while siblings affect each other's cognitive development, they also affect each other's social development. For example, Bedford (1989) discovered that siblings can positively benefit each other by providing support and affection for one another when

the other sibling is making a life transition, such as getting married, raising a family, or developing a career (Bedford, 1989). Siblings can also mentor each other and offer companionship, which often positively contributes to each other's social development. However, just as there are advantages for each other, there can also be disadvantages. For example, Patterson's (1984) coercive theory suggests that some siblings teach each other coercive behaviors such as teasing, disapproving, and humiliating actions; these coercive behaviors have been associated with negative behavior and unconstructive communication in individual's later lives. Another way that siblings can negatively affect one another's social development is through a profusion of negative sibling conflict that can lead to poor peer relationships, academic difficulties, conduct problems, and aggressive behavior in late adolescence and early adulthood (Wolke & Samara, 2004). Moreover, sibling conflict is correlated with children's depressed mood, loneliness, and poor self-esteem (Dunn, 1983). Erikson (1963) and Piaget (1932) also argue that children's early experiences of conflict affect their knowledge of social rules and interpersonal processes that play a part in a sibling's social development.

Finally, siblings can affect each other's identity development. Since siblings develop many dialectical tensions, such as love and hate, care and abuse, loyalty and betrayal, siblings shape each other's perceptions, expectations, and feelings of self-worth. Consequently, many people learn who they are as individuals, parents, and peers through their relationships with their siblings (Watanabe-Hammond, 1988). Moreover, siblings also develop a sense of identity by mimicking their siblings in order to form their own identity, i.e., siblings often carry "frozen images" of each other throughout life. These simplifications and representations of one another as "good," "bad," "unreliable,"

“loyal,” “fair,” etc., are often connected to a child’s character later in life (Kahn 1988, p.10).

Many studies show that the closer the sibling dyad, the more likely that they will affect each other’s identity development. In example, studies have shown that it is beneficial for a younger sibling to have a close relationship with an older sibling because the younger sibling will show higher self-confidence and better adjustment in life (Dunn, 2002). Furthermore, Cicirelli (1985) found that siblings that are close are more willing to listen to each other’s problems and provide support in time in need. Additionally, studies have found that the closer the sibling dyad, the more likely they are to participate in the same activities, whether negative or positive (Khoo & Muthén, 2000). Rowe and Gulley (1992) found that siblings’ behavior towards drugs and sexual activity is highest in sibling relationship that are very close.

Although communication is essential for strong sibling relationships and is influential to physical and mental health, cognitive development, identity development and social development, little is known about the actual communication of support in adult sibling relationships. Moreover, even as two-thirds of respondents in two large national studies reported feeling close to their siblings, it is unclear as to which times or events in the relationship actually influenced this closeness (Bowerman & Dobash, 1974; White & Riedman, 1992). In order to further our understanding of the events that influence sibling closeness, the current study investigates the moments or events that are perceived to influence closeness within relationships.

### *Sex of Sibling*

Although siblings may affect each other's cognitive, emotional, social, and identity development, the sex of the sibling can greatly affect the degree of influence and closeness between siblings. In fact, sex is the most important aspect that influences sibling relationships (Walzer, 1997). Two leading theories, the "femaleness principle," and the "sex commonality assumptions" (Akiyanma, Elliott, & Antonucci, 1996), help to explain why sex plays such an important role in the sibling dyad.

The femaleness principle assumption claims that the more women that are involved in a relationship, the closer and more supportive the relationship will be because of the belief that women disclose more than men and that disclosing signifies closeness (Akiyama, Elliott, & Antonucci, 1996). This infers that sister-sister dyads are the closest, followed by mixed-sex and brother-brother sibling dyads. Many other scholars have found that there is much support for the femaleness principle. For example, White (1994) found that being female and having sisters was positively correlated with contact, support, and having a sibling as close as a friend. Additionally, women not only telephone their siblings more than men (Eriksen & Gerstel, 2000), but both men and women receive more emotional support from sisters than they do from brothers (Akiyama et al, 1996). Other studies have found that women have more contact with their siblings, help each other more (White, 2001), and typically feel closer to their siblings than men (e.g., Connidis, 2001; Connidis & Campbell, 1995; White, 1994; Wilson et al, 1994).

Accordingly, claims that women are closer than men have been supported with the data that shows women disclose more than men. (e.g. Griffin & Sparks, 1990; Hays, 1984). In addition, studies have not only concluded that women disclose more in

friendships, but that they disclose more in a sibling relationship, reinforcing the findings that fraternal dyads contain less disclosure than sororal dyads (Gold, 1989). Sisters often discuss family members, significant others, and future hopes more than brothers (Pulakos, 1989), and sisters believe that their siblings respect, understand, and guide them more than brothers do (Moser, Paternite, & Dixon, 1996).

As there is much evidence supporting the femaleness principle assumption, there is one inconsistency in the theory: the femaleness principle suggests that verbal self-disclosure is *the* important indicator of closeness. However, many theorist have found that men do not assess closeness according the amount of verbal self-disclosure in their relationships (Parks & Floyd, 1996b; Swain, 1989; Wood & Inman; 1993). Unlike women, men judge closeness of a relationship by the ability to depend on one another and the amount of joint activities that they share (Floyd, 1994). Floyd also found that closeness among brother-brother siblings was dependent on siblings' commitment to "being there for each other" (1995; 1996d). He argued that closeness among fraternal dyads should be seen as close if brothers have a strong feeling of interdependence rather than high levels of self-disclosure.

While there has been mixed findings regarding the femaleness principle, another leading assumption is the sex commonality assumption. This assumption claims that same-sex siblings, pairs of sisters and pairs of brothers, are closer than mixed gendered siblings and are more willing to help each other (Akiyama et al., 1996). Supporting this claim, Stocker, Lanthier, and Furman (1997) found that there is often more conflict between same-sex siblings than opposite-sex siblings which they argue is an indicator of closeness. Additionally, men see their relationship with their brother as the most intimate

male-male relationship that they have (Floyd, 1996b). In 1996, Akiyama found that even though siblings receive more emotional support from their sisters than from their brothers, same-sex siblings still felt closer than opposite-sex siblings.

Research on gender within sibling dyads has obviously been inconsistent. While the femaleness principle argues that sister-sister pairs should be closest and that female based issues are the only way to assess closeness (Wood & Inman; 1993), the sex commonality assumption claims that sister-sister *or* brother-brother pairs should be closest assuming that likeness of sex determines closeness. This inconsistency is potentially due to sample design, i.e., surveys have asked about participants' siblings as a *group* instead of siblings individually (e.g., Akiyama, Elliott, & Antonucci, 1996). Moreover, to fully understand the unique relationship within the sibling dyad, it is vital that siblings be studied in relation to one another, and not as a group.

### *Turning Point Analysis*

A growing research method that is often employed by family scholars to study closeness in relationships is turning point analysis (Baxter & Bullis, 1986). Turning point studies have been shown to be insightful because not only do these studies allow researchers to capture critical moments that impact closeness in relationships, but they also show how closeness in relationships changes over time. In fact, Baxter and Bullis (1986) claim that “turning points are the substance of change.....growth and decay” (p. 470). These studies are conducted by examining perceptions of events that cause a relationship to dramatically change or shift directions in important ways. Moreover, turning point analysis helps researchers to be able to identify developmental patterns that

cause a dyad to look at their relationship differently and to detect if individuals will continue to invest in their dyadic relationship (Graham,1997).

The idea that individuals attend to a particular event revolves around the issues of interruption and change. More specifically, events become significant when either expectations or anticipated outcomes are not met to the individuals' liking (Jett & George, 2003; Weick, 1995). Such discrepancies are made obvious because they interrupt the natural flow of the relationship. Additionally, they make those involved in the relationship search for explanations which act as turning points that in some way change the nature of the relationship (Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, 1999; Baxter & Erbert, 1999).

Past studies have found that much can be learned within the key components of turning points. For example, social cognition theory argues that we interpret and predict others' behaviors by looking at past events or tuning points within the relationship (Kundra, 2000). Yet turning points are an individual-level phenomenon because two individuals may interpret the same event differently (Kundra, 2000). For example, while one sibling might see leaving for college as a positive turning point in their relationship, the other sibling might see this as a negative turning point in the relationship. Still, turning points are also self-reflective because individuals must think about and interpret the event with their own cognitive abilities (Lories, Dardenne, & Yzerbyt, 1998). Thus identifying specific turning points is valuable to our knowledge of sibling closeness because specific events that increase or decrease the closeness between siblings can be identified.



Another helpful characteristic of turning point analysis is that it focuses on the communication aspect of relational closeness and development. Floyd & Parks (1995) argue that closeness is at the heart of most personal life relationships and that it is an essential element in the development of relationships. Turning points analysis allows complex examinations of events that are full of relational meaning (Baxter and Bullis, 1986). Moreover, an understanding of how closeness changes over time allows a glimpse into the developmental processes across the life-span of a relationship and helps to identify the significant points of transition that affect relational closeness for better or worse. Since turning points show how levels of closeness within a relationship change and how individuals perceive this change, Baxter and Pittman (2001) claim that the analysis of turning points provides a “window into the relationship’s history of change” (p. 4).

For example, Golish (2000) conducted a turning point study by examining changes in closeness between adult children and their parents. She was able to identify ten primary turning points when the perceived level of closeness between a parent and child was essentially changed (e.g., physical distance when the child moved away from home, time of crisis within the family, attempts to improve communication, teenage rebellion, and marriage of the child). While this study provides insight into the parent-adult child bond, only the child’s perception was considered.

Fisher (2005) performed an analysis on turning points of closeness within the mother-daughter relationship. However, Fisher examined both women’s perceptions of relational closeness. The daughters in her study identified nine categories of turning points of closeness in the relationship with their mother (e.g., adolescence, altering

physical distance, and treating daughter as an adult). The nine turning points of closeness reported by the mothers in the study included when the daughter entered adolescence, when the daughter matured and the relationship became more like a friendship, and when the daughter married. Fisher found that the most central themes for both the mother and the daughter were turning points depicting separation-connectedness dynamics and/or daughter's growth and development. Additionally, Fisher concluded that communication and relational renegotiation was crucial in affecting how the women viewed these transitions.

Still, others have assessed turning points within blended families (Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, 1999), romantic relationships (Baxter & Bullis, 1986), and post-divorce relationships (Graham, 1997). This type of research is indispensable to those interested in family relationships because it establishes not only significant points of transition that affect relational closeness, but it gives insight into how a relationship strengthens or weakens over the course of time. Additionally, it is clear that turning point analysis can be used on many different kinds of family relationships. However, to date, turning point analysis has not been used to evaluate the sibling relationship. The current study will examine how turning points in relational closeness serve to shape siblings' perceptions of closeness over time, if the sex of the sibling affects levels of closeness, and how communication relates to degrees of closeness. Therefore, this study will be guided by two research questions (RQ):

RQ1: What are the turnings points that siblings perceive affected the level of closeness in their relationship with their sibling?

RQ2: Are the types of turning points different for sister-sister relationships, brother-brother relationships, and brother-sister relationships?

Using turning point analysis, the remainder of this paper will argue for the importance of a deeper understanding of closeness within the sibling relationship.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Methods

#### *Participants*

Participants ( $N = 263$ ) were 112 (42.6%) male and 151 (57.4%) female undergraduate communication students currently enrolled in a medium-sized private university in the south-western United States. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 45 years ( $M = 19.3$  years,  $SD = 4.3$ ). A majority (77.6%) were Caucasian, whereas 9.95% were Hispanic, 4.9 % were Black, 4.2 were Asian, 1.9% were Native American, and 1.5% were of other ethnic origins. (Note: The percentages add up more than 100% because participants were allowed to check all that applied.) At the time of the study, 94.6% had a high school education, 3.0% had an associate's degree, 1.9% had a bachelor's degree, and 0.4% had a graduate degree.

Each participant also reported demographic information on their sibling. Of the 263 participants, the majority lived in the same household with their siblings for an average of 16 years ( $M = 16.0$  years,  $SD = 3.2$ ). Of the siblings reported on 139 (52.9%) were male (i.e., brothers) and 124 (47.1%) were female (i.e., sisters). Participants' siblings ranged in age from 6 to 50 years ( $M = 19.66$  years,  $SD = 4.3$ ) Although many participants had more than one sibling ( $M = 3.1$  siblings,  $SD = 1.3$ ), participants were asked to report on their relationship with the sibling closest in age to themselves.

### *Procedure*

In order to be eligible to participate in the current study, participants had to be at least 18 years old and have one sibling with whom they lived with in the same household for at least five years. And again, participants with more than one sibling were asked to answer questions based on the sibling closest to his or her age.

After being briefly told the nature of the current project and advised of their rights as a participant in the study, participants were given a questionnaire and were asked to identify their ethnicity, age, sex, sex of sibling, education level, and number of years that they lived in the same household with their sibling. Next, they were asked to answer this question:

Think about the most dramatic time or event that you and your sibling shared which changed your relationship. Maybe after the event, there was a turning point. Maybe you both were closer, making your relationship stronger, or you both were more distant, making your relationship weaker. Describe this dramatic event.

After completing their questionnaires, participants immediately returned their surveys to the researchers. To ensure anonymity, participants were not asked to provide their names or any other personally identifying information to the researchers.

### *Measures*

In order to assess other variables that have been found to influence the sibling relationship, relational closeness, relationship involvement, and relational satisfaction were measured (Floyd & Morman, 2000).

Relational closeness was assessed with the Inclusion of Other in the Self (IOS) Scale (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992). The IOS scale asserts that in a close relationship,

an individual acts as if there is a degree of inclusion of the *other* within them; close dyads believe that they are interconnected with each other. The IOS scale consists of a set of Venn-like diagrams, each representing varying levels of overlap. One circle in each pair is labeled “self” and the other circle is labeled “other.” The participants were instructed to select the pair of circles that best depicts the nature of perceived closeness in the relationship with their sibling. If a participant was close to their sibling, they would choose more overlapped circles; if they were not as close to their sibling, they would choose more separated circles. The IOS scale has been extensively validated in both experimental and correlation research paradigms (see Aron et al., 1992).

Positive relationship involvement was measured with a series of seven Likert-type items developed by Floyd and Morman (2000). This scale includes items that assess how much time siblings spend with each other, how involved they feel in each other’s lives, and how positive their interactions are as demonstrated with such comments as, “I am always spending time with my sibling” (alpha = .94).

Relationship satisfaction was measured with a series six Likert-type items developed by Floyd and Morman (2000). This scale measures the extent of participant’s satisfaction and contentment with the nature of their relationship with their siblings as demonstrated with such comments as, “My relationship with my sibling is just the way I want it to be” (alpha = .93).

### *Data Analysis*

To identify the turning points within the sibling dyad, a grounded theory approach to analyzing participants’ written descriptions (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was employed. To construct an initial coding scheme, my advisor and I acted as the two primary coders

of the data. Independently, we conducted open coding on approximately one half of the written narratives. During this review, we identified segments of information (phrases or sentences) into categories by inductively giving labeled names to data. The formulation of categories followed a linear pattern whereby new categories were added when, and only when, the existing categories were insufficient to capture the ideas being offered in a narrative.

After constructing coding schemes independently, we met to combine our efforts into a single coding scheme. This process involved axial coding, an approach wherein the instances of each code are compared to define the properties and characteristics of that code. Conceptually similar categories identified independently by the coders were combined, and categories that were identified by only one of us were discussed until consensus was reached as to their utility. Throughout this process, the categories were continually compared and contrasted, and were adjusted as necessary to accommodate discrepant cases (see Creswell, 1998). The result of this iterative process was a scheme of 7 categories representing turning points in the sibling dyad. The researchers then coded the other half of the written turning point narratives according to this coding scheme and reached acceptable levels of inter-coder reliability.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Results

Analyses of participants' written responses to the question of turning points of closeness in the sibling relationship produced a total of 263 turning points. Most individuals reported one turning point; but some reported many and some none. Six major categories of sibling's turning points were inductively derived using the data from the survey; a seventh category "other" was used to reflect random turning points that did not fit well with the existing six major categories. Below, these turning points are described in order of frequency.

*Support.* (n = 48) The most frequently mentioned turning point for siblings was supporting one another. Many suggested that their sibling positively helped them through a hard event or crisis, while others insisted that they were "all that they had." One sister stated that the event that made them closest was the "death of their parents because we both experienced a loss and were able to depend on each other," One sister said, "whenever anything dramatic or emotional occurs; we always turn to each other. Therefore, we are always building our relationship because we are either struggling together or helping each other through a hard time in each other's life." Many noted the importance of the sibling being there for them. One brother stated, "My sister took care of me when I was sick. This let me know that she really cared." One sister said that when her "brother gave up a football game to be with me in the hospital, that she began to realize what a great brother he was." Other siblings noted that times when one of their



parents lost a job or were sick in the hospital, that they were more able to “depend on each other and were able to lean on each other for moral support.” Thus, siblings seem to be very important sources of social and emotional support during family crises.

*Physical distance.* (n = 39) The second most mentioned turning point was when physical distance between the siblings was altered. For a majority of the siblings participating in the survey, this occurred when they left for college. Increases and decreases in physical proximity were reported. In cases where physical distance increased, siblings noted a decrease in closeness because they saw their sibling less. Less time together caused an emotional distance to develop. Others also noted that the physical distance caused them to communicate less or have less in common, and thus they shared less with their siblings. However, a majority of siblings indicated an actual strengthening of intimacy and closeness within their sibling relationships when physical distance increased. One noted, “when my brother left for college we definitely became closer. We became more of friends and did not really fight anymore.” These participants also recalled that communication increased often by being more deliberate in their communication. One sibling reported that “when he left for college, we became closer because I actually realized how much he meant to me and how much I took him for granted.” Many noted that when they did see their sibling that they made an “extra effort to spend time with my sibling----more that I did before I left for school.” Others insisted that, “once they began talking on the phone, the closeness was restored.” One other participant reflected that when “my brother and I had to share the same room while living at my grandmother’s house---this forced us to be closer”

*Shared activity.* (n = 23) The third most frequently mentioned turning point was participating in activities together. This includes working together, extra-curricular activities at school, traveling together, and participating in sports. One brother noted, “We get closer when we go on trips together,” while another brother mentioned that he became closer to his sister when they “went to high school together because they were able to experience the same things.” Siblings seemed to believe that the more activities that they did with their sibling, the closer they would be. Many insinuated that a “shared activity blended us together and showed how we work together.” Participating in shared activities together allowed the siblings a chance to connect without the distractions of other family members. Moreover, shared activities not only gave them something in common to do, but to talk about as well, which was able to open the lines of communication for other subjects.

*Maturation.* (n = 18) The fourth turning point noted was when siblings perceived a change in closeness with their brother or sister when they or their sibling “grew up and matured.” Those that reported maturing themselves often noted that they were able to realize the importance of their sibling. One sister stated, “I realized my friends were not true friends. After this point, my sister became the most important thing in my life.” Those that mentioned that the other sibling matured often emphasized that they had more in common. One brother stated, “She is really starting to grow up and is no longer my baby sister.” As a result, maturity in either of the siblings increased the levels of closeness, and many said, “I discovered that my sibling and I were so much alike, it was scary....I never felt closer to anyone before.” Siblings also began initiating mutual respect in order to make the relationship more equal. Some siblings mentioned as part of

this perceived maturing process a letting go of old grudges or anger in order to move into this stronger and closer relational dynamic. One sibling stated, “We learned to communicate better, to work well as a team, learned individual respect for each other, and really began to value each other.”

*Parents get a divorce.* (n = 11) Siblings participating in this survey also mentioned that when their parents got a divorce that the closeness within their own relationship changed. Many siblings reported that “After my parents got a divorce, we became more distant.” Another said that “when my parents divorced and our family moved, everything about our life changed which made us both very distant from each other.” Others mentioned that they their sibling “blamed me for the divorce---because of this we are not very close at all now.” Nonetheless, others believed that the divorce actually strengthen the sibling relationship. One sister said, “After my parents got a divorce, my sister, my mom and I all felt closer---we felt we all had to stick together more than we did.” Another sibling wrote that “when our father left the household, we trusted only each other.” Others thought that they became closer because they spent more time with each other than with either of their parents. One brother stated, “My sister and I grew closer because our parents would play tug of war with us; also we spent more time with each other than with either of our parents”

*Fight.* (n = 9) Another perceived turning point was fighting with their sibling. Any increases and decreases of closeness reported usually were dependent upon siblings able to forgive each other. Those that held on to grudges claimed that after the fight their relationship was never the same. One said, “I will never be able to forgive my sibling for lying to me. Because of this, I completely stopped trusting him.” However, those that

were able to forgive each other believed that their relationship became closer. One sibling stated, “My sister didn’t like my boyfriend, so she told me if I didn’t break up with him, she wouldn’t talk to me. So, she and I didn’t talk for 2 ½ weeks. Finally, our mom made us sit down and work out our problem.” Another sibling said, “there was tension and conflict between us all summer. Finally, we sat down and talked about misunderstandings and how we felt, we ended up forgiving each other and are now closer.” Forgiving each other after a fight seemed to greatly influence the outcome of the relationship; when forgiveness was present, siblings noted that “there was something about it that made us closer.”

As noted above, in order to investigate more deeply into the interpersonal dynamic of these sibling relationships, the additional variables of relational closeness, involvement, and satisfaction were assessed using statistical methodology. In the assessment of closeness levels between brothers, sisters, and the brother-sister sibling dyad, an ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for relational closeness,  $F(2, 263) = 7.75, p = .001$ . A post-hoc Tukey HSD follow up test revealed a significant difference between the sister-sister dyad ( $M = 5.31, SD = 1.57$ ) and the brother-sister dyad ( $M = 4.50, SD = 1.53$ ). Additionally, the brother-brother dyad ( $M = 5.09, SD = 1.29$ ) was revealed to be significantly different in closeness levels than the brother-sister dyad ( $M = 4.50, SD = 1.53$ ). However, no statistically significant differences were determined between the sister-sister and brother-brother sibling dyads in relationship to perceptions of closeness.

Relational involvement was also assessed through the use of ANOVA statistics resulting in a significant main effect for involvement,  $F(2, 263) = 9.79, p = .000$ . A

post-hoc Tukey HSD follow up test revealed a significant difference for involvement between the sister-sister dyad ( $M = 5.02, SD = 1.49$ ) and the brother-sister dyad ( $M = 4.18, SD = 1.38$ ). Furthermore, a second significant difference was found between the brother-brother dyad ( $M = 4.79, SD = 1.17$ ) and the brother-sister dyad ( $M = 4.18, SD = 1.38$ ). No significant differences were found between the sister-sister and brother-brother dyads for relational involvement.

Finally, a third ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for relational satisfaction,  $F(2, 263) = 4.11, p = .017$ . A post-hoc Tukey HSD follow up test revealed a significant difference for relational satisfaction between the brother-brother sibling dyad ( $M = 5.32, SD = .92$ ) and the brother-sister dyad ( $M = 4.78, SD = 1.39$ ). No significant differences were found between the other combinations of sibling dyads for relational satisfaction.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Discussion

The goal of the current project was to investigate the perceived events that affected levels of closeness within the sibling dyad. Through the use of an inductive and qualitative methodology, a scheme of six turning points of closeness emerged that were perceived to have been pivotal events during the life-course of the sibling relationship. These findings generate some intriguing implications for understanding and explicating the nature of closeness within the sibling relationship. Specifically, five key points concerning the findings of the current project merit some consideration.

First, the siblings in this study were in considerable agreement concerning their perceptions of turning points of closeness within the sibling relationship. Regardless of the unique composition of the sibling dyad (e.g., brother-brother, sister-sister, or brother-sister dyads), participants appeared to be of a similar mind-set in referencing pivotal moments in their relationships that affected levels of closeness. Due to research on gender differences regarding the creation and maintenance of intimacy within personal relationships, I initially believed that each unique sibling dyad would report different types of turning points. A body of extant literature argues for assuming a more gendered approach to closeness (Floyd, 1996, 1997; Swain, 1989; Wood & Inman, 1993), primarily contending that women form “closeness in the dialogue,” (i.e., through simply talking to each other) while men form “closeness in the doing,” (i.e., through engaging in activity with each other) (Wood, 2001). However, results from the current study indicate

that many siblings, regardless of sex, perceived very similar types of turning points within their sibling relationships, with only six primary turning points emerging from the analysis of more than 260 individually mentioned moments or events perceived to have affected levels of sibling closeness.

Second, participants frequently revealed that participating in activities together was an important turning point of closeness within the sibling relationship. As noted above, participating in activities together is a primary way in which men create and maintain closeness in their same-sex relationships, constructing a more masculine and/or gendered form of maintaining closeness (Wood, 2001). As Wood and Inman (1993) and others have argued (e.g., Floyd & Morman, 1997; Morman & Floyd, 1998; Swain, 1989), men create and maintain closeness and intimacy with other men in uniquely different ways than do women. While we might expect these gendered forms of closeness to manifest themselves in the brother-brother relationship, clearly they also appear to be significant within the relationships between sister-sister and brother-sister. For example, many of the sisters reported that when they started to play some type of sport, this became a turning point of closeness with their sister or brother, and for the most part, this was perceived to be mainly a positive change, i.e., increasing perceptions of closeness within the dyad.

Third, many of the siblings mentioned supporting one another during hard times as a primary turning point in their relationship. Evolutionary psychology argues that a fundamental motive of human behavior is to maximize fitness either by producing children oneself or by investing in a person who shares genetic material. One form of such investment is the provision of social and emotional support between genetically

related family members with the inherent goal of increasing the chances of survival or the possibility of procreation for the person receiving it. Social support has been argued to be an evolutionary resource because of its mental and physical health benefits (Cohen, 2004; Cunningham & Barbee, 2000). Moreover, literature supports the notion that people invest more in those with whom they are more genetically related compared to those they are less genetically related (Burnstein et al., 1994; Floyd & Morman, 2001; Segal, 1984; Smith et al., 1987). Because the majority of the participants in this study were biologically related to their sibling, and the genetic fact that full biological siblings share 50% of their DNA, providing social support in both good and bad times could clearly be framed as a possible explanation for the frequency with which the siblings in the current study reported this particular turning point of closeness.

Fourth, a change in physical distance was noted as being a significant turning point in the sibling relationship, primarily when one sibling left home for college. While an intuitive argument could be made supporting the notion that distance makes the heart grow fonder, Stafford (2006) reported in her study of long-distance dating partners this very finding, i.e., that physical distance did not decrease, but instead actually increased closeness and satisfaction between the long-distance dating partners. In the same manner, many sibling participants in the current study reported that they became closer when they moved away from each other. As Stafford noted in her study, perhaps distance actually helps long-distance dating partners to focus on the more positive and attractive characteristics of their companions while disregarding or ignoring the more bothersome or annoying traits that close contact tends to enhance over the course of time. Distance affords the opportunity to set such negative traits aside and focus on the more



positive features of a dating partner (or family member) and the limited amounts of time spent in long-distance interaction lessens the desire to focus on the negative in favor of the positive. Moreover, in the case of the current study, distance also might relieve the pressure family members feel to negotiate or engage the more negative qualities of their siblings because being apart lessens the frequency with which a sibling is forced to encounter or interact with the negative personality characteristics of a brother or sister.

Finally, many participants mentioned fighting or interpersonal conflict with a sibling as an important turning point. Although fighting is often perceived to be a negative interpersonal event, Gottman & Krokoff (1989) found that in romantic relationships, fighting indicates higher levels of involvement, investment, and caring about a partner and the relationship. In other research, Gottman (1994) has argued that four key negative communication behaviors (chronic criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and withdrawal) actually predict divorce because these types of negative communication indicate a high level of apathy and/or a lack of concern, respect, or care for a relational partner. On the other hand, more positive and constructive conflict engagement indicates a willingness to work hard to save or repair a relationship, a deeper sense of commitment, involvement, and investment to the relational partner, i.e., positive conflict indicates you care enough to fight for the relationship. Thus, a possible explanation for the importance of conflict and fighting within the sibling relationship as a major marker of change in closeness is that fighting can be framed as a positive indicator of long-term care and concern for the quality of the sibling relationship.

### *Limitations*

As with every study, the current project faced some limitations that should be noted. First, a more ethnically and socioeconomically diverse sample would be desirable. Approximately 77.6% of the survey participants were Caucasian, thus this study would have potentially benefited from a more culturally diverse sample of participants. Although siblings in the study were required to be at least eighteen years old, overall the limited range of age found with the study's participants may have been somewhat restrictive because there might not have been enough life experiences for some of the younger men and women to relate to some of the later occurring turning points like getting married or having a child. The vast majority of the participants in the current study were college students; a wider range of age may have potentially identified other key moments of change within the sibling dynamic. Finally, because turning points rely primarily on the memory of the participants, issues of social desirability and accuracy of events are always possible sources of tension within the data; however, with a qualitative methodology of this nature, it is difficult to control for such effects.

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