

Introduction to the Special Section: Perspectives on Sibling Relationships: Advancing Child Development Research

Katherine Jewsbury Conger¹ and Laurie Kramer²

¹University of California, Davis and ²University of Illinois

ABSTRACT—*For the vast majority of individuals, relationships with siblings provide a context for life experiences, yet the influences of these relationships are rarely reflected in studies of child and adolescent development. To encourage researchers to take the role of siblings into account in their studies of child development, this Special Section of Child Development Perspectives presents 3 articles that summarize emerging issues related to how siblings are defined in a world of increasingly diverse family forms and multiple cultures and to the unique role of siblings during the transition to adulthood. The Special Section concludes with a commentary that frames sibling issues within the larger context of research on social relationships and child development across the life course.*

KEYWORDS—*sibling relationships; child development; culture; family forms; transition to adulthood*

The importance of sibling relationships for the promotion of the health and well-being of individuals throughout the life span is becoming increasingly well documented (Dunn, 2007; Kramer & Bank, 2005). Yet, despite providing the backdrop for many life experiences for the vast majority of individuals, the influences of children's relationships with siblings are only rarely addressed in studies of child development. Because 80%–85% of children

worldwide grow up with at least one sibling, and because the sibling relationship is usually the longest lasting one of a person's life, the failure to consider sibling status when studying child development is a significant omission. We argue that the inclusion of sibling factors in child development research will significantly advance the understanding of a vast array of developmental processes. After all, it may be an older sibling who, in certain settings, serves as a secure base (i.e., attachment figure) for an infant sibling, who protects a younger sibling from a playground bully at school, who is the confidant when an adolescent sibling's romance goes sour, and who coaches a brother or sister in negotiating the multiple challenges of high school, dating, and work. Of course, the contributions of siblings are not always positive or benign. A sibling could be the opposite of a secure base, creating anxiety in a sibling, or taunting a sibling for being a cry-baby when bullied, or revealing confidences to parents about a sibling's problems with a romantic relationship, or encouraging an adolescent sibling to use alcohol and drugs to deal with certain challenges. Even the absence of a sibling can have developmental implications. The diversity of sibling relationships, in their form, nature, and quality creates large variation in the ways in which sibling relationships operate and potentially influence the course of development. Understanding the effects of these variations could substantially advance the understanding of seemingly unrelated developmental processes.

It is quite challenging for researchers to access and stay abreast of the growing sibling literature that is spread across multiple disciplines, including family studies, sociology, psychology, human development, genetics, anthropology, and psychiatry. During the past 25 years, sibling research has expanded into a vibrant field that encompasses a broad range of societally relevant topics, including the role of siblings as agents of socialization and support; the effects of parents' differential treatment of siblings and of nonshared environments on child and family well-being; the cross-cultural differences and similarities of

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Katherine Jewsbury Conger, Department of Human and Community Development, University of California, Davis, CA 95616; e-mail: kjconger@ucdavis.edu.

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sibling roles, responsibilities, and relationships; the development of strategies for promoting sibling relationship quality and conflict management; and the interplay between genetic and environmental effects on individual behaviors and social processes (see Dunn, 2007; Kramer & Bank, 2005; Kramer & Conger, 2009; Sulloway, 1996). Given this complexity, this Special Section of *Child Development Perspectives* is intended to encourage researchers (who may not at all identify themselves as “sibling researchers”) to incorporate sibling factors into their investigations and to gain an appreciation of why this approach is important.

This Special Section presents some of the latest thinking about the interpersonal dynamics of siblings’ relationships, about how siblings are defined in a world of increasingly diverse family forms and multiple cultures, and about the role of siblings during the transition to adulthood. The articles that this section comprises discuss the need for multidisciplinary research to address the complex issues associated with studying the full spectrum of sibling relationships in context. Furthermore, we propose that there is a need for integration across diverse fields of developmental psychology, child development, anthropology, sociology, psychotherapy, behavioral genetics, and health sciences to fully represent the nature and consequences of experiences with siblings across the life span. Toward that end, the following three articles and concluding commentary provide a framework for broadening the discussion of siblings across disciplinary lines and life stages.

In the first article, Shirley McGuire and Lilly Shanahan (this issue) review the complexity of sibling experiences in diverse U.S. family contexts, focusing on families that vary in ethnic background and family structure. They address an intriguing question: How can sibling status best be defined in the increasingly diverse family forms found around the world? For many, the immediate assumption upon hearing the word *sibling* is that the term is referring to a biological brother or sister. But in the era of cohabitation, high divorce rates, in vitro fertilization, and recombined family forms, a central question may be: Who is a sibling? The authors address this question along with a succinct examination of issues related to ecological contexts that influence both sibling relationships and individual development.

McGuire and Shanahan highlight the complexity that ensues when siblings are included in studies of family dynamics, which all too often have been simplified to examine either mother–child or romantic–dyad relationships. They briefly summarize three main lines of research on European American siblings—structural characteristics, relationship dynamics, and ecological contexts. They then present key findings from research on siblings in African American and Mexican American families and provide a cogent discussion of sibling experiences in immigrant families, including the attempt to balance the culture of their family of origin with immersion in their adopted culture. All scientists will benefit from the authors’ urging that sibling processes be studied “within contexts defined by structure, ethnicity, and

culture” and that findings not be overgeneralized beyond the population under study. They conclude by drawing attention to four particular family contexts in which research is emerging: ethnicity and culture, lesbian and gay families, adoptive families, and assisted reproductive technology. Greater knowledge of sibling factors and relationships in these diverse family contexts promises to expand both theoretical and practical knowledge of siblings and families.

In the second article, Laurie Kramer (this issue) proposes a framework for advancing theory and practice that seeks to facilitate cooperative relations between siblings by promoting social competence and reducing conflict. She suggests that theory, research, and practice would benefit by shifting away from a focus on conflict toward a more direct and positive focus on the social processes that serve as a foundation for prosocial forms of sibling engagement. Her list of essential ingredients or competencies needed to achieve positive, constructive relationships between young siblings provides an important template for the design of both prevention and intervention strategies, as well as for future research aimed at elucidating the determinants of quality sibling relationships. Her discussion of the role of both parents and siblings in promoting positive sibling relationships will be news to many researchers, as well as parents, unfamiliar with this literature.

Kramer draws upon an intriguing body of research to challenge the widely accepted notion—commonly expressed in popular parenting resources—that conflict among siblings is inevitable and is motivated, at least in part, by the desire to draw parents’ attention. This notion typically is accompanied by advice to parents to refrain from intervening in sibling confrontations and to leave siblings to their own devices to resolve their differences. Kramer provides evidence that following this advice will not necessarily lead siblings to interact prosocially, nor will it necessarily reduce conflict. She suggests that researchers and practitioners must be “intentional” in efforts to assist children in not only reducing conflict but also in learning and practicing the social competencies, such as emotion regulation, that are needed for successful close relationships. Her thoughtful observations on interventions designed to reduce sibling conflict and promote positive social interactions will be of interest not only to researchers and professionals but to parents as well.

The third article, by Katherine Conger and Wendy Little (this issue), summarizes the emerging research on siblings in transition to adulthood and presents directions for future research in this area. Aquilino (2006) contended that one task for emerging adult siblings is “to maintain relations. . . strong enough to form the basis of a long-term relationship” (p. 208). However, very little is known about how siblings may best accomplish this critical task. Research to address this question is vital, particularly in that current research confirms that as people in their 20s focus on the developmental tasks of adulthood such as education, marriage, children, and career, contact decreases and the

importance of sibling relationships appears to diminish during this time (e.g., Cicirelli, 1996; Mouw, 2005).

Conger and Little make the case that the nature of the sibling relationship established during childhood and adolescence sets the stage for the amount and type of contact siblings experience during early adulthood. They show that rivalries and relationship styles established in childhood and adolescence may persist and lead to more or less close relationships in adulthood. Research in clinical populations also indicates that issues such as social support, power imbalance, favoritism, jealousy, and family difficulties figure prominently in individuals' efforts to understand their siblings or to mend broken relationships with them. Consistent with Goetting's (1986) view that emotional support and companionship are key functions of siblings across the life span, Conger and Little conclude that siblings may need to resolve conflicts and rivalries from childhood and adolescence before they can develop more supportive relationships that would facilitate carrying out the tasks of adulthood.

Conger and Little offer a reminder that the transitions and life events that families encounter also shape the nature of sibling relationships. Sibling relationships are transformed as older adolescents increasingly establish their independence from parents and siblings and orient their lives toward friends, romantic partners, and others in the greater social world. Transitions such as entering college, parental divorce, or the onset of a depressive disorder can contribute to a change of course for sibling relationships at any point in development. Thus, in addition to clarifying the roles that siblings play in family life during the transition to adulthood, Conger and Little show that research on the transition to adulthood promises to help bridge the gap between the rich findings on siblings in childhood and adolescence, and those on the later years of adulthood.

The Special Section concludes with a thoughtful commentary by Martha Cox (this issue) that takes a family systems perspective and provides a useful heuristic for studying siblings and their relationships within the context of families and society. Cox suggests that this perspective should have stimulated more research on the unique contributions of siblings to individual development and family life, and the recent increase in research on siblings supports this view. The author's summary of key elements in this set of articles demonstrates that research on this important lifelong relationship is moving forward and, concurrently, laying the groundwork for the next generation of researchers. Cox concludes with a series of questions designed to stimulate future research on the complex, interconnected nature

of sibling relationships and their importance for child and adult development across the life span.

For social scientists unfamiliar with the breadth of research involving siblings, we hope that the articles in this Special Section provide a tantalizing introduction to the wide-ranging developmental topics being addressed by current sibling research. We encourage you to include sibling issues into your future studies. For "veteran" sibling researchers, we hope these articles provide inspiration for renewed efforts to keep siblings and their relationships integrated into studies across multiple disciplines and across the life span.

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