

Sibling Relationships in Old Age

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The relationship between siblings is unique among family relationships in that sibling relationships have a dimension of equality. In other words, they do not necessarily share the same obligations toward each other as a married partners or parents and child may, especially in Western cultures. Durkheim (1933) described sibling relationships as a “mechanical” bond rather than an “organic” bond, which would better characterize a complimentary relationship, such as that between married partners or a parent and child. This mechanical bond results in ambivalence and rivalry towards one another during childhood and early adulthood, as siblings are often forced to compete for parental attention and resources, as well as contend with differences in varying levels of privilege and responsibility. However, over the course of the lifetime, and especially in older age, sibling bonds often move towards a less competitive relationship.

As older adults tend to experience decreases in social relationships for a variety of reasons, one major factor in the well-being of this population is the degree of social support which they have access to. While older adults have access to a wide range of resources to provide assistance, immediate family members (e.g. children) continue to function as a major source of assistance in this population, while extended family members and siblings, in addition to children, provide a major community tie. In a longitudinal study of continuity and change in social support among the “old-old” population (Individuals aged 74-84) and the “very-old” population (Individuals 85 and above) spanning from 1969 through 1983, Field and Minkler (1988) demonstrated a high degree of continuity and stability in frequency of contact within family relationships. While the overall frequency of contacts with siblings decreased as a result

of expected mortality rates, the frequency of contact and feelings of involvement among siblings did not change among those with living siblings at the end of the study. Sibling relationships in older age may be of particular importance for males and the very-old, as social relationships beyond those of family members were observed to decline in these populations.

Gold (1989) examined the various types of relationships between siblings among older adults and their contributions to the social and psychological needs of the older adult population. The author outlined five types of sibling relationships in older age. These included the *intimate* (A relationship characterized by devotion and psychological closeness), the *congenial* (characterized by friendship and caring, but not an especially strong sense of intimacy), the *loyal* (Characterized more as a social norm involving a set of responsibilities or familial obligation), the *apathetic* (Characterized as indifferent, with minimal contact), and the *hostile* (Characterized by disdain and resentment. These individuals not only provide zero support for their siblings, they also state that any request for support from their sibling would be met with rejection).

The results of the study found that the gender of the participant did not influence the type of sibling relationship in older age. However, brother-sister and sister-sister sibling dyads tended to cluster in the positive relationship types (e.g. *intimate* or *congenial*) and brother-brother sibling dyads tended to cluster in the types with less involvement (e.g. *loyal* or *apathetic*). Participants in the study who endorsed a relationship with a high degree of psychological involvement (i.e. *intimate* or *hostile*) also endorsed an intensification of these feelings as they aged. It is also important to note that intimate or hostile relationships in older age did not necessarily require frequent contact or physical proximity. The author speculated that these feelings may actually be maintained more easily without such contact.

The implications of studies like these are that sibling relationships play a strong role in the psychological well-being of the older adult population. Further, the role of the sibling relationship in old age may take on an increasing importance in the social support systems of older adults as new generations show a preference for raising decreasing numbers of children. As a result, older adults will have less children to rely on for assistance and social support in old age. Along the same lines, strengthening sibling relationships in old age can help to fulfill the increasing vacuums left by retirement and adult children with increasing responsibilities of their own.

Further Reading

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Durkheim, E. (1933). *The Division of Labor in Society*. Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press.

Field, D. and Minkler, M. (1988). Continuity and change in social support between young-old and old-old or very-old. *Journal of Gerontology*, 43(4), 100-106.

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Shanas, E. (1979). The family as a social support system in old age. *The Gerontologist*, 19(2), 169-174.