

THE SIBLING COMPLEX: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

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The topic of the sibling complex emerged naturally as a subject of interest to our group. In fact, in creating “Bridges,” our original intention was to reach out to our “psychoanalytic siblings” and to offer what Ricoeur called a “linguistic hospitality,” a form of welcoming from both sides to the language and world of the other. It is in this spirit that the study of this subject attempts to create bridges between two or more diverse experiences and ways of seeing and understanding psychoanalytic concepts. We present the conference report of the panel offered at the annual general meeting in June 2012 in Montreal. The AGM provided a context of geographical and cultural conditions that seem optimal to foster a dialogue amongst the different branches of the Canadian Psychoanalytic Society. The panel illustrated how three authors—Renné Kaës (France), Luis Kancyer (Argentina), and Juliet Mitchell (England)—converge and differ in their way of studying the sibling complex. This allowed us to appreciate the diversity, richness, and importance of this concept both theoretically and clinically. In order to enrich the dialogue even further, we asked the three authors to read the Panel Report and to comment on the others’ perspectives, and their comments are included here.

THE SUBJECT OF INTEREST

Psychoanalysis has not traditionally been very interested in siblings as a subject in its own right. Lately, however, the topic has been approached from a variety of new perspectives (Vivona, R. Balsam, Robertson, Coles, Edwards etc.). For a number of years, members of the Canadian Psychoanalytic

Society, in different study groups, have been very interested in the specificity of the sibling relationship and its unconscious significance. There is an ongoing study group in the Quebec English Branch (Montreal) and, in particular, Brian Robertson has presented a very clear and thoughtful paper entitled, "Siblings: Some Observation on Their Role in the Internal World" in October 2010. Dr. Robertson conducted an extensive review of the literature, which suggests that the concept of a sibling complex has aroused significant interest only in the last decade. We became intrigued by this and began to study the contributions of three authors who not only have been interested in the subject of siblings relationships but have also focused on the concept of a "sibling complex": Luis Kancyer (Argentina), René Kaës (France), and Juliet Mitchell (Great Britain).

We asked why this topic aroused so much interest in recent years. Is it possible that this may be a reflection of cultural and social changes? In a time when technology and communication change at a frightening speed, we have access to rapid gratification and ways of communicating that were unimaginable ten years ago. Could it be that the arrival of the Internet, Skype, and reproductive technology, to mention a few of these changes, have affected the laws regulated by the Oedipal structure (the vertical axis) that have now become increasingly interwoven with the structure, fantasies, and laws of the sibling complex (the horizontal axis)? If this is so, it becomes important to understand the unconscious manifestations of the two complexes in order to expand our theoretical and clinical perspectives.

It was surprising to note that none of these authors were familiar with their colleagues' work, despite the fact that there are important and striking similarities amongst the three. For example, they all state that the sibling complex is as important as the Oedipal complex and that it has its own specificity in structuring the psyche. There are also important differences. Each of these authors came to the subject of sibling complex from their unique perspective, methodology, and area of interest. Luis Kancyer came to develop an interest in the sibling complex as an extension of his study of resentment as well as his attempt to more fully understand friendship. René Kaës's ideas on the sibling complex emanate from his study on groups and intersubjectivity. Juliet Mitchell became interested in the issue of siblings as part of her work on feminism.

The panel illustrated how these three authors converge and differ in their way of studying the sibling complex. This allowed us to appreciate the diversity, richness, and importance of this concept both theoretically and clinically.

THE THREE AUTHORS

Rene Kaës is a psychoanalyst, emeritus professor of psychology and psychopathology at “Université Lumière” Lyons 2. He has contributed significantly in group and couple psychoanalysis. He has published both papers and books extensively.

Luis Kancyper is a training analyst of the Argentinian Psychoanalytic Association who has published books and articles (translated into several languages) on different subjects. Apart from his interest in the sibling complex he has also explored resentment, regret, and friendship.

Juliet Mitchell is a professor of psychoanalysis and gender at the University of Cambridge and a member of the International Psychoanalytic Association. She has published extensively on feminism, literature, and psychoanalysis.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE NOTION OF SIBLINGS IN PSYCHOANALYTIC LITERATURE

We would like to mention briefly the contribution of Freud to the study of siblings. His experience with his own siblings, such as the death of his brother Julius, as well as his having a sibling who was close in age to his mother, was very important in his life. It was part of his self-analysis and it contributed to his conceptualizations of psychoanalytic theory. Freud did recognize the significance of the subject of siblings, but he did not see the need to develop a concept of the sibling complex.

From very early in Freud's work, we can identify his interest in studying the effects of siblings in the organization of psychic life. Since 1895, he paid attention to the psychopathological effects of sexual relationships amongst siblings. He observed that the arrival of a sibling—of a rival—represented a threat to the elder sibling and instigated jealousy, hostility, and hate against the intruder as well as resentment towards the mother.

Freud highlighted the narcissistic injury and the traumatic impact implicit in the arrival of a sibling. He also understood the role of fraternal links in structuring social relationships. In *Totem and Taboo* (1912–1913) he proposed the “primal horde” as a hypothetical model of the prehistory of organized human society. In the horde, the primal father reserved exclusive control of the women, particularly sexual access to them, leading to internecine strife and repeated acts of fratricide. From this he conjectured that there eventually developed a system of fraternal alliances, the totemic system, in which the brothers agreed to partition the women amongst themselves, to exchange them between separate groups or clans, and to bind these alliances through the worship of a symbolic father. The totemic

ceremony of the clan re-enacted the original killing of the father in a ritualized form, expressing, and simultaneously binding, the now-prohibited homicidal and fratricidal desires, while at the same time affirming the collective guilt of the brothers and the need to atone for their sins. Thus we can see how Freud's early thinking about siblings was interwoven with the Oedipus complex, and more particularly the problem of malignant narcissism within the group, as represented in fantasy by the absolute power of the primal father, who controls sexual contact, castrating, killing, and raping his own children. In the primal horde, men fight anarchically over women in a vertical relationship with this primal father, while women themselves have no social status other than as concubines and nursing mothers. These problems are resolved, according to Freud, through the institutional regulation of envy and jealousy in the process of identification with the similar other (sibling) and the formation of the rule of law. The resolution of rivalry through transforming hate into a sibling alliance against the father underlines the strength of "being together" that is found in every group under the model of fraternity. It is this perspective that sheds light on the notion of sibling complex in the work of Freud.

The fraternal relationship was mentioned in many of his writings: *The Interpretation of Dreams*, *A Child Is Being Beaten*, *Gradiva*, and *The Case of Little Hans*. It was only in 1922 that Freud used the terms *sibling complex* in his paper "Some Neurotic Mechanisms of Jealousy and Paranoia in Homosexuality." In the passage where he analyzes the normal feelings of jealousy, he states, "These jealous feelings find their root in the depths of the unconscious. The feelings of jealousy perpetuate the first movements of the emotional life of the child and they go back to the Oedipal Complex and the Sibling Complex of the first sexual period of life" (1922, p. 223).

The three authors share theoretical concepts of the sibling complex:

1. The sibling complex has paramount importance in structuring individual psychic life as well as social life. It plays a major role in the identity formation, psychosexual development, and the process of individuation. The sibling complex is more than a collection of fantasies or a simple displacement or avoidance of the Oedipus complex. It has a specific structure, with its own economic elements (its own instinctual forces) and dynamic components.
2. Highlighting the importance of the sibling complex does not diminish the importance of the Oedipal complex (vertical axis). The authors' goal is to articulate the interconnections of the Oedipal and fraternal complexes as well as the specificities of the fraternal structure (horizontal axis). The unique identity of each

individual is constructed in the interrelationships between these two structures.

3. Following the definition of Laplanche and Pontalis (1988, p. 72), the term *complex* means an “[o]rganized group of ideas and memories of great affective force which are either partially or totally unconscious. Complexes are constituted on the basis of the interpersonal relationships of childhood history; they may serve to structure all levels of the psyche: emotions, attitudes, adapted behavior.” The sibling complex is independent of real relationships with siblings. However, sibling relationships are organized psychically by the sibling complex.
4. The sibling complex manifests unconsciously in fantasies, object relations, defensive style, counter-transference reactions etc., referred to as “the double,” twinship, fratricide fantasies, etc.
5. There is a socio-cultural dimension of the sibling complex.

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