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**Siblings -  
a meaningful and influential  
aspect of our self formation  
and psychic life**

## Introduction

In this paper we wish to emphasize the crucial impact that relationships between siblings – both real and in phantasy – have on the formation of the self, including the formation of conscious and unconscious behavioral patterns, external and internal object-relations, the organization of defenses and even the constitution of sexual phantasy. Although Freud<sup>1</sup> mentioned the complexities derived from the existence of siblings and Melanie Klein<sup>2,3</sup> also emphasized that our existence is essentially oedipal, traditionally, psychoanalysis has treated siblings mainly as rivals for parental love and attention, not as unconsciously meaningful beings in their own right. In the last decade, we see more concern and interest regarding the subject of siblings and their influence in shaping our conscious and unconscious world. Based on Juliet Mitchell's theory<sup>5,6</sup> as well as Jeanine Vivona's thoughts<sup>7</sup>, we would like to suggest a sibling-based model, which includes four dimensions through which one could observe sibling relations. We will demonstrate our theoretical thinking through a detailed case presentation.

It is in the most profound discipline – that which explores the psyche – that the place of siblings in our inner world seems somewhat pale and restricted. It is as if almost all our internal representations are parental, while those very significant figures, with whom we grew up, quarreled, competed and cooperated – have been marginalized. Indeed Freud<sup>1</sup>, in discussing the Oedipal array, mentioned the complexities derived from the existence of siblings; and Lacan<sup>4</sup>, relying on and developing Freud's thought, emphasized that the Oedipal structure introduces the Third into our world. This Third could stand for culture, the father imago, language and/or siblings, and signifies, in fact, the infiltration of the experience of the lack into the psyche. In this sense, the entry of siblings, whether into our concrete reality or into our consciousness, initiates an experience of injury and of being expelled from the Garden of Eden. This entry facilitates the transition from our self-perception as exclusive to our parents to developing awareness to Otherness, to our existence as separate from our Mother, to her own separate existence and to the existence of additional significant others in her world. We shall only note one place out of many in which Freud refers to the presence of siblings in the Oedipal array and the emotional complexity it engenders. In his *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*<sup>1</sup> Freud discusses the firstborn's experience of the birth of a new sibling –

*“When other children appear on the scene the Oedipus complex is enlarged into a family complex. This, with fresh support from the egoistic sense of injury, gives grounds for receiving the new brothers or sisters with repugnance and for unhesitatingly getting rid of them by a wish... A child who has been put into second place by the birth of a brother or sister and who is now for the first time almost isolated from his mother, does not easily forgive her this loss of place; feelings which in an adult would be described as greatly embittered arise in him and are often the basis of a permanent estrangement”.*

Later on in the same article he states: *“As a rule there is only one person an English girl hates more than she hates her mother; and that's her eldest sister”* (p. 205).

Melanie Klein<sup>2,3</sup> has also emphasized that our existence is essentially Oedipal: from very early on, the object is Oedipal; There is no mother who is not utterly connected to a father (at least in her thoughts, and because she received the semen from him) and inside the mother's body there are other babies: the task of the developmental process is to find this out. If the mother contains no babies it means we have killed them in phantasy. Therefore, she claims, an only child might feel a great deal of guilt because of his omnipotent phantasy – having murdered his siblings or having extinguished the creativity of the combined parental couple – as he fails to achieve reparation through the birth of a sibling in reality. And still, psychoanalysis is hooked on the mother-father-child triad and doesn't give enough consideration to the fact that Oedipus is also related to siblings. That is, whenever the theme of siblings comes up in psychoanalytic literature, it is often seen through the perspective of parent-child relations, which reduces sibling dynamics to a displacement or substitution of the parent, especially in cases where siblings functioned as caretakers or love-objects. Thus: *“Traditionally, psychoanalysis has treated siblings mainly as rivals for parental love and attention, not as unconsciously meaningful beings in their own right. This paper describes some ways that Juliet Mitchell's theory as well as others' have inspired clinical interventions that would not have come into focus through a lens of parent-child relatedness.”*

Juliet Mitchell wrote two books on the subject of siblings in 2004<sup>5</sup> and 2006<sup>6</sup>. Therein she indicates that

alongside the vertical dimension, associated with the child's relation to his parents - what I will term the "Oedipal-parental dimension" – there exists another dimension, a lateral one, associated with processes of identification and differentiation among our equals, that is, our siblings. The vertical parental axis, as we all know, is characterized by attraction and seduction towards one parent and aggressive competition and identification towards the other. This dimension highlights the challenge of desire, handled by the child, while competing with those that are above him. The child contends with one parent over possessive love for the other parent; identification being the effect rather than the cause of this vertical competition. The lateral dimension highlights the challenge of identity, which coalesces with the competition with our peers. The child competes with his siblings in order to become the kind of person mother or father would love the most, while discovering his uniqueness and distinguishing himself from his siblings. Mitchell, in fact, posits two independent axes, stating that the bonds between siblings produce meanings and internal representations which are not necessarily dependent on the vertical, parental axis. She arrives at this conclusion as a result of her clinical experience.

In *The importance of Sibling Relationships In Psychoanalysis by Prophecy Coles* (2004)<sup>5</sup>, she depicts the distinctive qualities of sibling-transference in addition to Oedipal/parental one. Coles and Mitchell<sup>5</sup> stress the significance of identifying sibling-transference in the therapeutic process as this allows progress and development when therapy gets stuck. Recognizing and working through sibling-transference could play a crucial role in understanding unconscious conflicts. This is demonstrated through many examples in the book, from which I shall present only two: Coles began thinking about and dealing with sibling-transference and the role siblings play in our internal world due to a feeling of being stuck which she had with several of her patients for a long time. One analysand, Mrs. K, talked about her elder sister in a way that made Coles realize that the two were trapped in a transference enactment, in which she took the place of the despised elder sister. Due to this revelation, they were able to open up and expose a toxic cruelty that was hidden and obstructed in a particularly harsh super-ego. For all these years, the patient lay on the couch and instead of talking about her vengeful hatred toward the therapist (who took the sister's place in the

patient's mind) she hated herself, turning her poison inward. Because of this case and others, Coles believes that a particularly vicious super-ego is often a warning sign, signifying potential sibling conflicts. In these cases, more often than not, one finds a fundamental inability to cope with and encounter personal sadism and cruelty. It is highly likely that sibling cruelty could have been directed towards the person who later developed a cruel super-ego, which might be related to the internalization of siblings as authority figures, as the internalized cruel sibling usually lacks the nourishing and supportive qualities parents naturally possess. It goes without saying that not every vicious super-ego is related to sibling-relationships nor is every sibling-transference based on hate. At times it can be highly seductive, even erotic, or founded on love and cooperation and, naturally, contains varying combinations and intensities of all these emotions. In another example, that of Mr. Y, Coles describes a sibling-transference which exhibits an equal degree of intensity, this time she was situated in the patient's inner world as the beloved sister. The patient, as he did with his sister, expected her to merge with him, being a secret accomplice against the adults. In this context, Coles raised the question: when a therapist is getting sexually involved with his or her patient could she, in fact, in some cases be trapped in an unconscious and unidentified sibling-transference? In the case of Mr. Y, there was neither sexual temptation nor any evolving romance, yet there was great mutual love, in a way which correlated to his special relationship with his sister. Coles often felt embarrassed about what was going on between them as he soon became her favorite patient. He and his sister were very much absorbed in one another in a way that renounced everyone else. Their parents were devoted to their careers and were not very present at home; nannies changed often and his relationship with his sister was the most stable, reliable relationship that he knew. According to Coles, we will be missing out on something by saying that they simply parented each other, although this relationship did compensate for parental absence. The live experience made a difference, manifesting special qualities that would later determine his relationships with all women, including hers as his analyst. There was something in her mutual game with him that belonged to the domain of child play rather than to child-parent-games. He played from within himself, without being hindered by oedipal anxieties such as fear of temptation or anxiety about the therapist's state of mind. It was not always like that, of course, these were

several moments within sessions. These two cases stand out in their stability and the durability of the manifested sibling-transference. In most cases, we shift during therapy from parental transference to sibling-transference and vice versa. That is why there is a frequent tendency to misidentify it and blur the distinction between the two. Sometimes a patient's certain behavior, such as not paying on time, can derive from sibling-transference, in which the patient would like to be the one receiving the money, and at other times, to be the result of parental transference, being an expression of anger towards the therapist as a mother figure with too many babies and not enough time for him or her.

Mitchell was criticized for remaining in the oedipal world – that is, emphasizing internalized sibling relations that are based on actual sibling experiences. In this sense, she failed to take into account phantasmatic or pre-oedipal dimensions.

In her article *Siblings, transference and the lateral dimension of psychic life* (2010), Jeanine Vivona<sup>7</sup> a psychoanalyst writing a few years after Mitchell, supports Mitchell's two-dimensional model – the vertical and the lateral – while further developing the complicated interaction between these two axes. Vivona's contribution lies in her notion of the formation of relationships on the sibling axis as composed of what she terms 'developmental requirements' that are mutually intertwined: identification, separateness, and intimacy. The notion that exclusive relations exist between siblings, which are considerably independent or only partly dependent on relations with the parents, indicates a new and important clinical and theoretical emphasis, which we would like to propose in this presentation. We would like to suggest a sibling-based model, which includes four dimensions through which one could observe sibling relations. This is an elaboration of Vivona's conceptualization: she spoke of three 'developmental requirements'. We prefer to use the term 'structural and innate sibling-related developmental processes'. We believe that one could identify four developmental processes, or vectors, in relation to siblings. These components are mostly unconscious, occurring simultaneously and are fundamental to the internalizations which form our internal sibling representations. The components are:

**Identification** - in the sense of being like, resembling, incorporating parts of a significant Other, which then becomes a part of us.

**Uniqueness and Separateness** – the need to be special, different and therefore prominent and visible to both parents and siblings, but mostly to the developing self, even at the cost of negative identity.

**Attraction** – impulsive/instinctive zones which attract people to each other, whether on a sexual basis, on a narcissistic basis, or as a need for security. We replaced Vivona's concept of 'intimacy' with the word attraction, since it seems to us that intimacy belongs to a more conscious layer.

**Murderous Rage, Envy, Aggression** – Aggression here means the extermination of the rival, whether in the service of survival or of envy.

These four components operate much like Freud's description of the Unconscious: as four vectors that operate simultaneously and often unconsciously. They are interwoven and there is constant tension among them. This is not a linear model as the connections and conflicts between the various components occur simultaneously. Each subject manages this tension in his own way, using these components to create a unique bond with each sibling, with siblings as a group and with phantasy siblings. The classic mechanisms discussed by Freud and Klein, mainly reaction formation and projection, act upon this model. Reaction formation leads to having something and its opposite. For example, love and/or identification might conceal emotions such as envy and the need for separateness (a variation that will be illustrated in the clinical example we will discuss further on). Projection will help us deposit these emotions in the sibling rather than contain them within ourselves. The outcome is endless variations of sibling relations.

It seems to us that a pathological organization in the sibling layer means being stuck in a one-dimensional emotional experience towards a sibling, while ignoring our emotional complexity towards them. In therapy, we hope that the patient will gradually reveal and acknowledge his variety of emotions regarding the sibling, even those that are contradictory and difficult to handle. As we will see through the following clinical example, Orly's patient was stuck in a single emotional dimension towards her brother (one of conscious love and admiration), which concealed the unconscious emotions she felt towards him (those of attraction, envy, competition and hatred). For this, she paid a heavy price, especially in her

relationship with her husband and in her social relations. Of course, in my understanding, there are various interactions between the sibling and the parental axes which create a unique and complicated psychological web for each individual.

We will demonstrate our thinking through a case presentation from Orly's private practice – Maya – a woman who was in psychoanalytic psychotherapy with Orly twice a week for nine years. She is an example of someone who was deeply affected by the sibling aspect. Of course, this went hand in hand with the influence the entire Oedipal constellation had on her psyche, in which siblings, in my understanding, are an important and integral part. We are talking about a patient in her late-fifties, the elder daughter, who was five years old when her brother was born. Her experience of his entering the family was like an expulsion from paradise: from being the "princess", the only child, her parents' sole beloved (who was indeed cast in the role of an ideal love-object); to a girl that needed to share her parents' love with a rival. Furthermore, in her experience, she also lost her mother to a demanding child, who knew how to demand and have his way, who spent long hours as an infant, as she remembered, in her mother's arms while she, caught in the role of the good pleasing girl, looked on from without, feeling envy, hurt and helpless. In her mind, not only was she left without a mother, but her mother had been spoiled - another aspect of the expulsion from paradise - mostly because of her own anger and jealousy towards her, and perhaps also since the mother, in her experience, had become more impatient and agitated in her struggle to raise two children, one of them, in her opinion, especially difficult. Another reason was the formation of a constellation that engendered a toxic inter-generational transference - one which has been repeating itself for three generations on her mother's side, in relation to sibling relationships - as only the birth of her brother provided the appropriate conditions for this constellation to become active. Her mother's mother, having lost her mother at the age of five, grew up with her father and his new spouse who, according to her, treated her as a fairy-tale step-mother, acting cruelly and discriminating against her in favor of her half-brother (the woman's biological son), who, in contrast, received much love and affection. The patient's grandmother, as the family memory portrayed her, was on good terms with her half-brother, at least on the surface, but hated her step-mother and even broke off all

contact with her later on in life. She created a split which enabled her to sustain good sibling relations, while turning all her hate towards her mother. The bond between Maya's mother and her brother also seemed to be a positive and loving one, at least on the surface. Yet her mother, who refused to acknowledge or couldn't acknowledge the harsh aspects of her relationship with her brother, created a split in which, alongside of her good relationships with him, she actively revived and nourished a relationship based on jealousy, competition and hatred between Maya and her brother: unconsciously and automatically, she constantly stimulated jealousy and competition, discrimination and hurtful comparisons. For example, Maya recounted how in every single conversation she had with her mother, as soon as Maya started telling something about one of her children, her mother, like a robot, would immediately barge in, without even listening to her story, and begin to talk about one of her brother's children. The same held true each time Maya mentioned her husband: in response, the mother interrupted her with an anecdote about her brother's wife. Despite all this, Maya recalls that through her childhood and even during many years of being a wife and a mother of four, she loved her brother dearly: she admired him, (while he was also married and a father of three), sometimes to the extent of utterly neglecting and ignoring her own husband. All this was obviously done completely unconsciously and she understood it only gradually and in retrospect during therapy. Unconsciously, the brother was her love-object and through reaction formation she exchanged potential hatred and envy towards him with tremendous admiration, desire and love. Every weekend she would have him and his family over, adjusting herself to his schedule, doing her best to indulge, while extremely enjoying it. The rupture which exposed all the hatred and envy that were hitherto suppressed, occurred when her brother divorced his wife (who found out she was a lesbian): his family was torn apart and he entered a relationship with another woman. This triggered a revival of the expulsion trauma of the past. Maya and her brother's new spouse did not accept one another, and this was aggravated into a boundless hate, tinged with envy and wickedness that were well-hidden, until now due to splitting and denial. Maya realized in retrospect that instead of envying her brother and going mad (in her words) seeing her own nothingness in light of all that he had, she probably chose to join forces with him and thereby to feel that everything he had is also hers, thus finding no reason to be jealous.

Because in her phantasy, when she was expelled from paradise, her brother stayed there and won all of Eden's treasures – unlimited love and attention. Through her solution, a part of her stayed there with him. Since his innate character, in her experience, was also blessed with all the gifts that she felt she was lacking, such as high self-esteem, assertiveness, the courage to confront others over things that mattered to him, even at the cost of being shouted at and beaten by their mother – something she did not dare to do and later on, in adolescence, he had highly developed social skills and charisma. All this intensified her notion that “he has much more than I do”. Despite the fact that her explicit relationship with him, as mentioned before, manifested intense love, admiration and even unconscious desire, in a dissociated manner, the emotional complexity described here was given prominent expression in her social relations. She had more male than female friends, and whenever an object appeared which fulfilled certain criteria that could establish a resemblance to her inner representation of her brother, she would automatically, in an instinctive manner, develop strong feelings of envy and competition, aggrandizing what ‘he had’ and underestimating what she had. Such magnitudes of envy, competition and misery, together with unconscious instinctual desire produced, during the sexual awakening of adolescence, an unconscious instinctual sexual attraction. This preoccupation with anyone who took up the sibling spot that belonged to her brother in her inner world obtained an instinctual character and would overwhelm her, sabotaging her social relations again and again. Maya would enter into intense rivalries with these men (mostly), while underneath lay denied sexual attraction, concealed and obscured by jealousy and competition. This pattern of preoccupation with those who took the part of her sibling became a very dominant trait in her behavior, in a way that made her ignore her self-concern in favor of this pattern, often making her feel like someone who “lives the life of others”. (this pattern was also related to the dynamics of her relationship with her mother, which was likewise influential on her self-formation, though we will not elaborate on this in this presentation). Furthermore, Maya's relationship with her husband exhibited a dynamic of two individuals who lived through one another whatever each was incapable of living on their own. Her spouse also had complicated and sensitive issues with his siblings and parents, in a way that made him cooperate with and even intensify Maya's behavior patterns (living, through

her and through her relationships, his own emotional difficulties with his family and, through splitting, leaving his siblings and parents seemingly free of his overflowing emotional drama). While these patterns were still in formation, presumably during adolescence, when Maya and her brother shared a room due to financial difficulties at home, she noticed her brother masturbating under the blanket, and she, five years older than him, without yet knowing how to sexually satisfy herself, did not use this incident as an opportunity to curiously discover her body and sexuality, but, clinging to her habit, continued to be concerned with ‘his’ and neglected herself. This has become a formative event which created her sexual fantasy. Sure enough, it strengthened her experience of lacking whatever he had – penis envy – he had something to masturbate with, and as it was doubtlessly intolerable for her to experience all that he had while she herself felt utterly lacking she utilized a cognitive reaction formation to endow herself (through the constitution of fantasy) with an omnipotent capability to pleasure him and teach him about his sexuality – a fantasy which was in direct opposition to reality. In it, she is the one who has and her brother is the one who lacks - and she is willing to teach him and provide him with what he is missing (a complete projection of herself on him, as well as a complete reversal of their roles). By means of her dreams it became apparent that in fantasy she has a penis: she had a dream of herself with a penis. In a second dream, there was a man who was, as was understood from her associations, a combined figure both of her father and her husband. His penis was made of wood, and through association it reminded her of Pinocchio, the wooden doll whose nose grew in length when he lied. This association reinforced her experience that the penis of the men in her life was false and fake. In Maya's experience it was the mother rather than the father who was perceived as possessing a penis, as being ‘the man in the house’ – and therefore a rival to Maya. She identified with the masculine aspect in the family, she identified with her penis envy, and, hand in hand with this identification with the masculine aspect she was also attracted to it.

In conclusion, this clinical example supports our argument that relationships between siblings – real and in phantasy – hold a crucial place and an essential influence over the formation of the self, over conscious and unconscious behavioral patterns, over the formation of concrete and internalized object-relations, over the

organization of defenses and even over the constitution of the sexual fantasy. Needless to say, relationships and emotional dynamics with the parents are extremely influential as well, as we have stated before, and at times the multi-dimensional meeting-points among the different relationships in the family create manifold internalized variations, diverse and unique to each particular individual. In Maya's case, some of the components which originated exclusively from her relationship with her parents (even in her sexual fantasy), chiefly with her mother, were integrated in the general dynamics of her psyche, but we won't explore this further here. In fact, we would like to propose that sometimes a major component in the pathology or the formation of our patients' symptoms is related to the sibling bond rather than the parental one. Until recently, the connection between the symptom and the question of siblinghood seldom occurred to us or to our patients. We offer this new perspective as another point of view which can enrich and illuminate our clinical observation.

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