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Surfacing the sibling in self psychology: exploring the potential developmental functions of siblings

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Abstract

The significance of siblings has largely been unexplored in psychoanalytic theory and practice. While sibling studies are becoming established, the parent-child relationship remains central in psychoanalysis. As such, there are gaps in understanding the ways in which sibling relationships may be developmentally significant. This thesis proposes a self psychology model for conceptualising the development of self that includes both the vertical and lateral functions that are first experienced in the family milieu and then continue into adulthood. The focus of this study was on sibling relationships in clinical and non-clinical settings, using methodologies that acknowledged the importance of subjective experiences. Data was obtained through the use of a clinical case study and 18 psychoanalytic research interviews with South African adults who grew up with high-access siblings and parents. Based on the subjective experiences of the participants in this study, this thesis shows how the selfobject needs of idealising, twinship, and mirroring were provided by siblings and provided by parents in distinctive and adjunctive ways in early childhood. For this study's participants, early sibling dynamics continued to operate and recapitulated unresolved vertical and lateral functions in later development. The discussion considers how subjective experiences of these vertical and lateral functions shaped the participants' experiences of themselves and others through the process of transmuting internalisation. This study extends the focus of psychoanalytic inquiry by including siblings constellations in the clinical and non-clinical contexts, as well by examining sibling tensions and dynamics that emerged in adulthood. Continued exploration of vertical and lateral functions in research, clinical, and social contexts is necessary to generate more comprehensive and nuanced understandings of the contribution of siblings to development.

Key words: lateral function, psychoanalysis, selfobject needs, self psychology, sibling developmental functions, vertical function.