

Chapter 1

Introduction

Many people have siblings and there are innumerable references to siblings in literature and history. However, there is little exploration of the diversity of sibling relationships and investigation of how people make sense of the complexity of these relationships.

1.1 Rationale

Siblings are prominent in children's lives as they share parents, homes, families and life experiences (Ross, Woody, Smith & Lollis, 2000). The sibling relationship is likely to be the first important relationship with autonomous structure, subsequent to that with the primary caregiver, that a person experiences. In addition, as siblings outlive parents it is frequently a person's longest lasting relationship, and in many cases children spend more time with their siblings than with their parents or any other people (Bank & Kahn, 1982; Coles, 2006; Updegraaf, McHale & Crouter, 2000). This is also frequently a relationship that is multifaceted and is one that has no uniform explanation.

Despite, many references in psychological literature to the importance of the sibling relationship there appears to be a scarcity of research which explores the nature of these relationships. Sibling relationships are often described as being rivalrous and competitive (Bank & Burraston, 2004; Kettrey & Emery, 2006; Mitchell, 2000; Mitchell, 2003; Sulloway, 2001) and research in the field of siblings is for the most part based on developing an understanding of the conflictual nature of sibling interactions, with sibling relationships frequently being seen to be discordant. Thus, it seems little emphasis is placed on how and why deep and long lasting bonds develop between siblings (Bank & Kahn, 1982). Many authors suggest that besides being conflictual, sibling relationships are often warm, satisfying, positive and supportive relationships (Bank & Kahn, 1982; Coles, 2006; Furman & Buhrmester, 1985; Lockwood, Gaylord, Kitzman & Cohen, 2002; Mitchell, 2000; Mitchell, 2003; Shapiro and Ginzberg, 2001).

There seems to be little research which addresses the wide range of experiences that siblings encounter and the importance and role of these interactions. Mitchell (2003) and Shapiro and Ginzberg (2001) emphasise that these relationships are important. They suggest the way people react and deal with a wide ranging number of group experiences and relations in later life is likely to be influenced by the way they experience and manage their sibling interactions. This argument is supported by Charles (1999) who reports that siblings appear to play a vital but unrecognized role in individuals' development. It is likely that this is at least in part due to the emphasis placed on the role of parents and other adults on children.

To date psychological theories rely heavily on vertical models to explain people's behaviours and actions. These models stress the role that parents and other adults have on children and their development. Sibling interactions are also explained by this vertical model and psychological theories largely ignore and exclude the impact that siblings have on each other. Presently birth order theories play a large part in explaining these relationships.

Current explanations of sibling relationships have been influenced by Sulloway's birth order theory. This theory with its evolutionary focus concentrates on explaining variation in sibling interactions as being due to the need for children to access optimal parental resources. Competition and rivalrous contact results between siblings as they vie for the resources parents are able to provide (Steelman, Powell, Werum & Carter, 2002; Sulloway, 2001). Another avenue of research has viewed siblings as a subsystem of the larger family system. The focus of this latter research has been to identify how parental involvement and family experiences influence siblings and also how sibling relationships impact on the parent-child interactions (Steelman et al., 2002). However, Mitchell (2003) suggests that in the past two decades developmental psychology has investigated intersibling interactions and it has identified a great deal of contact between siblings which is independent of parent involvement. She proposes that the sibling structure should therefore be conceptualised separately from the parent-child relationship removing the emphasis from the vertical parent-child relationship to explain sibling

interactions. Much existing research, including birth order and family system theories, bases findings on quantitative data obtained by researching large sample groups

Steelman et al. (2002) identify that there is an over-reliance on research which utilises quantitative interpretation of self-report questionnaires or collateral reports of these relationships when studying siblings. Much of the existing research into sibling relationships identifies broad trends and focuses on conflict and rivalry. This type of research provides information on general tendencies but is unable to explain the diversity of sibling relationships. There is a noticeable lack of data which provides thick or detailed descriptions of individuals' perceptions of their sibling relationships and the importance they attach to these relationships (Aguilar, O' Brien, August, Aoun, Hektner, 2001; Epkins & Dedmon, 1999).

Increasingly researchers are suggesting that the neglected area of the diversity of sibling relationships needs attention (Brody, 1998; Bullock & Dishion, 2002; Coles, 2006; Dunn, Slomkowski & Beardsall, 1994; Mitchell, 2000; Mitchell, 2003; Steelman et al, 2002; Yeh & Lempers, 2004; Stormshak, Comeau & Shepard, 2004). To date researchers have not explored lateral sibling-sibling interactions adequately. Existing studies investigate and identify broad general trends of behaviour that attempt to predict sibling interactions, but little research has focused on what these relationships mean to the individuals concerned. Furthermore, much of the research into siblings focuses mainly on negative aspects, such as sibling rivalry and aggression, and does not provide a balanced view of these relationships.

Sibling relationships are complex and there is no homogenous way to explain them and there is little emphasis on more positive aspects of sibling relationships, such as mutual affection, care and support. In addition, little is known about children's perceptions of their sibling relationships and how they make sense of these relationships. Finally, current theories do not provide insight into what meaning the siblings attach to their relationships and does not tell us how these relationships impact on the siblings concerned.

1.2 Research Aims

This research project set out to identify and explore how urban, middle class, preadolescent South African boys experience their sibling relationships. Firstly, it explored the diversity in the nature of their sibling relationships by examining how the boys spoke about and described these relationships. Secondly, by exploring the boys' perspectives about their sibling relationships, a textured understanding and insight into the importance and meaning of these relationships was obtained.

1.3. Qualitative Research

Research into siblings and their relationships is mainly quantitative in nature. However, reliance on this form of research is limited to identifying broad trends, which are unable to provide in-depth information or rich, complex or textured explanations (Stormshak et al., 2004). Steelman et al., (2002) claim when dealing with the complications of family and sibling interactions it is of particular importance for social scientists to obtain rich and textured data. Thus this study, wishing to explore the complex relationship dynamics found between siblings, employed a qualitative research method.

Parker (1994) (in Banister, Burman, Parker, Taylor & Tindall, 1994:50), argues that qualitative researchers concentrate on the “*context and the integrity*” of the data to develop an argument. This form of research expressly forfeits the formal and neutral tone and precisely quantified statistical interpretations of large sample groups. On the contrary qualitative research methods focus on an individual's feelings and responses about the topic being researched and emphasise her/his experiences (Neuman, 1994). Elliot, Fischer and Rennie (1999:216) explain that qualitative research aims to

“understand and represent the experiences and actions of people as they encounter, engage and live through situations”.

Qualitative research methods enable the researcher to obtain a rich explanation of individuals' experiences as the participant is encouraged to describe her/his distinctive point of view (Dana, 1999; Elliot, et al., 1999; Neuman, 1994; Potter & Hepburn, 2005).

Thus qualitative thematic analysis was used in this research project to explore how preadolescent boys perceive their sibling relationships. The emphasis was on investigating the boys' reports of their day to day experiences of having and being a sibling. It relied on their subjective accounts.

Gergen (1994 cited in Wetherell, Taylor & Yates, 2006) indicates that data collected by means of interviews does not necessarily provide an objective account. Therefore these boys' reports did not reflect an objective reality but rather their creatively constructed subjective accounts. Thus this study explored their feelings about what it is like to be and/or have siblings. The accounts reflected the boys' understanding of their relationships. Gergen (1994) (as cited in Wetherell, et al., 2006) suggests that people tell stories about their life events and so link and "*render intelligible*" these events. Therefore, by documenting the boys' experiences in their own words and analysing their accounts I was able to extract themes that provided me with insight as to how they feel about their relationships with their siblings.

In order to address the complex interactions found in these relationships, the boys' interview transcripts were analysed by extracting some of the most pertinent themes (Banister, Burman, Parker, Taylor & Tindall, 1995; Bauer & Gaskell, 2000; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Mason, 1996; Roth, 2005; Steelman et al., 2002). The manner in which the themes were identified will be discussed in the Method Chapter of this report.

A particularly effective way in which to gain insight into the inner world of people is by speaking to them and exploring their verbal accounts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Therefore to obtain insight and an understanding of the boys' accounts, themes were identified. Themes characterize a "*patterned response or meaning within the data*" (Braun & Clarke, 2006:82) and they exhibit the essence of what the person is talking about. The themes were extracted in order to scrutinize and give an account of the patterns that were observed in the boys' interview texts.

This study argues that current understandings of sibling relationships is hampered by the limitations of quantitative research methods. The lack of a deep and rich explanation of how individuals make sense of their sibling interactions impedes our understanding of these important relationships. The existing research provides hypotheses about the typical behaviour patterns in sibling relationships, but it is unable to elaborate on the individual's perceptions of their siblings or their relationships. Literature has emphasized the importance of obtaining material which is rich in detail when exploring sibling relationships (Steelman et al., 2002). Thus, by firstly identifying and then investigating and interpreting the themes prevalent in the boys' interview material, it was possible to obtain a sense of how they perceive their relationship with their siblings. Although this study is largely descriptive in nature discussion of the themes resulted in insight about how these boys felt about their siblings being gained.

Fundamental to this form of research is the understanding that the findings are particular to a specific context and reflect what the particular sample group feels at this particular time. Furthermore, in thematic analysis it is particularly important to organise the material into a coherent and consistent description so as to make it an authentic study with valid findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The themes identified, reflected and encapsulated important features of the boys' explanations and descriptions of their sibling relationships and reflected how they make sense of these relationships.

1.4 Outline of Chapters

This chapter serves to introduce the aims of this research project and to outline the rationale in focusing on this particular topic.

Chapter Two will address and discuss literature on siblings and their relationships. Thereafter a review of previous research in this field will be carried out as well as a discussion of how some current developmental and psychological theories explain siblings. The discussion will include reference to the contributions made by Sulloway's birth order theory and a review of the criticisms levelled at his proposals. It will then explore how siblings are seen as a subsystem of the family system. Mitchell (2003) has

suggested that there is limited attention paid to siblings in psychoanalytic theories. Therefore the review will discuss briefly how Freud, Klein and Winnicott explain the importance of siblings as well as Mitchell's contribution to our understanding of siblings. This chapter ends with a discussion on the role of gender in preadolescent children.

Chapter Three examines the research method that was utilised by this study and discusses the research questions, research paradigm, and the sample group. The manner of data collection and method of data analysis is also addressed. This chapter concludes with a section on what is required for good practice in qualitative research and an examination of ethical issues.

Chapter Four discusses the results of this study which revolve around the four main themes identified in the boys' accounts. These themes are hierarchy, brothers and sisters, conflict and competition and finally how the boys feel close to their siblings as well as having a need to be separate.

In their accounts about hierarchy, the boys referred to birth order, how they make sense of age differences and the power differentials that these produce. The section on brothers and sisters explores how the boys feel about gender and gender stereotypes. It also explores their understanding of the differences between having a brother and having a sister. Sibling relationships are frequently seen as conflictual and characterised by high levels of rivalry. This study was not an exception and so the third section deals with the boys' stories about competition and conflict. The final section is devoted to discussing how the boys feel close to and also separate from their siblings and how they make sense of these contradictory, complex and ambivalent feelings.

The final chapter consists of a discussion and attempts to fuse the results found in this research with previous research and theoretical explanations. It also considers future research.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Research on siblings tends to pay attention to birth order position and construction of the family constellation, but not to the quality of sibling relationships and their effect on development. Thus this chapter presents research out of which the need for this project was identified rather than locates the study in an already existing body of theory. This chapter includes a review of historical and current literature about siblings. Firstly it will address current and available theoretical explanations of siblings after which it will discuss how gender impacts on preadolescent children.

There is much attention in the popular and academic literature to birth order theories in explaining differences in sibling behaviour and personality and thus Adler's (1992) and Sulloway's (2001) accounts will be examined. In addition, the family system theorists' contribution to our understanding of the nature of sibling relationships will be addressed. Finally, the literature reviewed suggests that the major psychoanalytic theories remain largely silent about the significance of these relationships (Bank & Kahn, 1982; Charles, 1999; Coles, 2006; Furman & Buhrmester, 1985; Mitchell, 2000; Mitchell, 2003; Shapiro & Ginzberg, 2001; Tyson & Tyson, 1990). Therefore, the section on theoretical explanations will be concluded by a concise discussion of some psychoanalytic theorists' contributions to our understanding of sibling interactions. The review ends with a brief evaluation of the role that gender plays in sibling relationships.

Introduction

Historically, the importance of the sibling relationship has been largely accepted or, as Steelman et al. (2002) argue, it has been overlooked without critical questioning. They suggest that new avenues in the debate about these relationships are opening up. There are often accounts of siblings in the literature. However, in leading psychological theories the influence of the sibling relationship is largely ignored or relegated to playing a minor role (Aguilar et al., 2001; Charles, 1999; Coles, 2006; Mitchell, 2000; Mitchell, 2003;

Shapiro & Ginzberg, 2001; Stormshak et al., 2004). In addition, and of particular importance for this study, Stormshak et al. (2004) argue that there are few studies which investigate sibling relationships, particularly those of siblings in middle childhood, and they suggest that little is generally known about the continuity of sibling relationships across developmental stages.

Siblings together with parents and other family members are integral to the family unit. It is likely that siblings play a distinctive role in one another's social, emotional and cognitive development. In many families siblings serve as surrogate parents, providing protection, physical care, emotional support and guidance for other children in the family (Charles, 1999; Coles, 2006; Rathus, 2006). For many a child this is the first social relationship besides that with his¹ primary caregivers that he has. Thus the contact with a sibling exposes the child to social interaction which impacts on his social competency (Rathus, 2006). For some people the relationships between brothers and sisters provide powerful emotional bonds. These emotional interactions are frequently conflictual and rivalrous but can also be close and warm (Bank & Kahn, 1982; Coles, 2006; Furman & Buhrmester, 1985; Lockwood et al., 2002; Mitchell, 2003; Shapiro & Ginzberg, 2001).

However, in spite of the frequent reference to siblings it is interesting to note that of all the literature reviewed little mention or attempt was made to define what a sibling is. Davidoff (cited in Coles, 2006) suggests that this concept appears to be deceptively simple and that the lack of definition is due to the difficulty of explaining the concept. It is clear that social and family structures are currently undergoing considerable changes and the conventional understanding of families as consisting of parents and children and extended family members might no longer apply. With the changes, it is clear that siblings do not necessarily grow up in the same family system, with divorce often resulting in children living away from their family of origin (Mitchell, 2003). Davidoff (cited in Coles, 2006: 35) suggests that sibling relationships are "*peer generational relationships ...[which] mirror the self ...[and rely on] social kinship*". This study

¹ As the research participants are boys only the masculine gender will be used. However all references are intended to refer to both males and females unless it has been specifically noted that a boy was speaking about his sister

suggests that a sibling relationship occurs when two, or more, people have a shared environment (not necessarily home environment), which leads to some form of role identification and affiliation. Thus it is clear that within families there is an increasing variation of full, step and half siblings as well as parents and step-parents. It is debatable if this has changed significantly throughout history. However, it is not debatable that there is a lack of cohesion in understanding and theoretical explanation of sibling relationships (Coles, 2006; Mitchell, 2000; Mitchell, 2003; Kettrey & Emery, 2006; Stormshak et al., 2004).

Birth Order Theories –Adler and Sulloway

Adler (Shapiro & Ginzberg, 2001; Sulloway, 2001) was the first researcher to study the impact of birth order in children. He suggested that the birth of a new sibling places the older child in a new ordinal position or birth order. The birth of a sibling results in the firstborn feeling dethroned (Steelman et al., 2002; Sulloway, 2001). When the older child observes his mother showing his sibling affection, he will feel alienated and isolated. Adler (1992) proposed that a feeling of deprivation develops which results in the child perceiving the world as inhospitable and fraught with difficulties. He views occurrences with suspicion, which impacts on how he relates to others. Therefore as his instinctual need for tenderness has never developed, he alienates himself from the world.

Adler (1992) also identified that the sibling relationship is characterised by intense insecurities and competition which impact on the dynamics within the family (McHale, Updegraaff, Helms-Erikson, & Crouter, 2001; Rohde, Atzwanger, Butovskaya, Lampert, Mysterud, Sanchez-Andres & Sulloway, 2003). Sulloway (2001) suggests that firstborns are power hungry and conservative, middleborns are seen to be competitive and other younger children are spoilt and idle. He also suggests that in order to distinguish himself from his sibling the child will deidentify with his siblings and so will develop different qualities and interests. The child behaviour corresponds to this position. This then influences how his parents treat and react to him (Adler, 1992; Sulloway, 2001). Adler (1992; Shapiro & Ginzberg, 2001; Steelman et al., 2002) focused on the role of parent-child interaction and his proposals have been influential. They provide insight into the

importance of sibling relationships on the development of personality, but there are a number of concerns about his suggestions.

Adler's focus was mainly on the interplay between parent and child, with siblings viewed as a subsystem of the larger family system. He saw the sibling subsystem as helpful because it provided insight into how the parental subsystem was functioning. In addition, his proposals concentrate mainly on the negative interactions of siblings and how this impacts on the dynamics of the family. His theory does not adequately explain or provide necessary insight into the strong and lasting sibling bonds that develop between siblings (Bank & Kahn, 1982; Shapiro & Ginzberg, 2001). Adler's proposals made a considerable impact on Sulloway's understanding of the fundamental role of competition in relationships. Sulloway's research elaborated on and developed Adler's train of thought (Beer & Horn, 2000; Rohde et al., 2003).

Sulloway's theoretical explanation of siblings is frequently referred to both in the popular press as well as in psychological literature (McHale et al., 2001; Rohde et al., 2003; Steelman et al., 2002). His proposals have also sparked considerable debate. Sulloway's evolutionary theory has as its foundation a natural science model. It highlights the prevalence of sibling competition in bird and animal species and emphasises the importance of environmental factors on sibling relationships (Sulloway, 2001). He provides many examples and uses historical figures to support his argument.

In reading Sulloway's (2001) proposals, it is clear that he bases his birth order argument on a review of social history. He argues that there is compelling historical evidence for his theory and uses numerous examples of people who were influential in changing theoretical understanding of their times. For example, he refers to Copernicus, Einstein and even leaders in the feminist movement and suggests that their achievements are due to the order of their birth (Beer & Horn, 2000; Rohde et al., 2003; Steelman et al., 2002; Sulloway, 2001). Sulloway relies on a Darwinian framework and an evolutionary model to support his claims and argues that children have "*a biological propensity to engage in sibling rivalry*" (Sulloway, 2001:40).

Sulloway (2001) uses sibling conflict as the basis of his biologically based argument of explaining differences in siblings' relationships. He emphasises the important role that survival of the fittest plays. Sulloway uses numerous instances in the animal and insect kingdom to illustrate cases of fatal sibling competition "*siblicide*" (siblings harming their rivals for parental favour). Sulloway extrapolates his biological model and uses it to explain sibling relationships in humans.

Sulloway (2001) argues that the birth of a sibling is a traumatic life event. The resultant development of an order of birth plays a significant role in the nature of the sibling relationship, which influences how the individual's personality develops. Fundamental to all sibling relationships is the individual's fierce competition for scarce parental resources and investment. Humans, like their animal counterparts, compete with their siblings for parental favour in order to survive. Underlying all sibling relationships is intense rivalry which is based on the child's awareness that he needs to compete for parental resources and favour. The birth of siblings results in children developing strategies to win and sustain this favour. With the birth of a new sibling there will be disparities in age, size and status, creating a hierarchy. Children compete with each other for parental resources in order to improve the chances of their survival. Each following child identifies the ways that his siblings gain favour and adapts his behaviour. Sulloway (2001) claims that this results in competition and that each child develops and exploits "niches" within the family structure. Sulloway indicates that his research has identified that there are specific behaviours which are typical of those niches (Beer & Horn, 2000; Steelman et al., 2002; Sulloway, 2001).

Sulloway's (2001) claims provide clear cut explanation and examples of behaviour that is typical of birth order positions. He suggests that in order to best access parental resources which are essential for survival, all children behave in ways that optimise their potential for parental attention and care. Therefore as the firstborn child has no siblings he models himself on his parent's behaviour and is thus diligent, ambitious, dependable and organised. As he identifies with parental authority he will adopt behaviour patterns to

maintain that order and does not challenge his parent's authority so that he preserves the status quo. Sulloway maintains that children's behaviour depends on their birth order position and he has identified behaviour which is specific to middle born children.

The middle born child will never receive the same resources as the oldest or youngest child. Unlike the oldest, who was at some time the only child, the middle child has always had to share resources. Therefore the middle born child adopts behaviour that is more peer-orientated and he withdraws and so is less dependent and less closely attached to his family of origin. According to Sulloway younger children exhibit behaviour which differs from their older siblings.

Sulloway also identifies that there are specific behaviours which are typical for later born or younger siblings. These children realise that they are at a disadvantage and so develop different strategies of survival. They identify that the oldest sibling has occupied the responsible and domineering niche, the middleborn is largely separate from his family, and therefore the youngest child adopts a different "*niche*". Sulloway maintains that their behaviour is more "*agreeable*" than their older siblings and that they are more "*tender minded, accommodating and altruistic*" (Sulloway, 2001:46). As the later born children have an existing family structure, with its well established dynamics, they behave in different ways that optimise their access to parental resources. He suggests that this explains why they frequently resort to whining, pleading and humour in their interactions with others (Sulloway, 2001). In contrast to their older siblings, these children also often resort to risk-taking and daring behaviour, they are "*born to rebel*" (Sulloway, 2001). Sulloway claims that the specific behaviours of each niche are largely due to size differences which are related to differences in age and birth order.

Sulloway (2001) argues that the development of different interaction styles is due to the older child, at least initially, being larger and more powerful. The firstborn feels threatened with the birth of siblings and so resorts to intimidation and aggression in order to protect his status. Therefore the eldest sibling is dominant, ambitious and conservative whereas the younger children use more subtle social skills to gain parental attention. The

younger children, as they are initially smaller, use other strategies to gain favour. Therefore they are not as domineering as their older siblings and are usually more amenable (Rohde et al., 2003; Sulloway, 2001). Sulloway's theory has considerable appeal and is frequently used to explain anecdotal examples, such as how after the birth of a sibling the oldest child exhibits bossy behaviour.

There is widespread support of Sulloway's claims that birth of the new sibling results in a change in the child's environment and this impacts on the nature of the sibling relationship (Knight, Elfenbein, Capozzi, & Easton, 2000; Shapiro & Ginzberg, 2001). Sulloway's findings have stimulated new interest in this field (Rohde et al., 2003; Steelman et al., 2002). Rohde et al.'s (2003) research findings concur with Sulloway's claims. Their study, which was based on statistical interpretation of two thousand and twenty-four questionnaires from participants in six European countries, indicates that they support Sulloway's theory of birth order differences. They argue that they were able to demonstrate several birth order effects and conclude that their findings are in agreement with Sulloway's. They state that their data allows them to infer that within the family, birth order effects are "*robust and [their findings are] generally in good agreement with Sulloway's [claims]*" (Rohde et al., 2003:274). However, these claims appear to be ambitious as the only birth order effect that their report conclusively refers to is that the last born is the child most likely to be the rebel in the family.

Knight et al. (2000) also support Sulloway's claims, suggesting that firstborn children are more distant or separate from their siblings than laterborns. Sutton-Smith and Rosenberg's (1968, cited in Barnes & Berghout, 1995) research findings correspond with Sulloway's claims that older siblings assert more power than their younger siblings. Abramovich, Corter and Lando's research (1979, cited in Barnes & Berghout, 1995) found that oldest children initiate more interactions, both aggressive and prosocial, than the younger siblings. This study also identified that eldest siblings are not likely to rely on harmonious forms of interaction and communication. Sutton-Smith and Rosenberg (1968, cited in Barnes & Berghout, 1995) also identified that eldest siblings are less likely to be agreeable and suggest that this is due to the first born having more power

than his laterborns and therefore he does not need to placate his siblings. However, Bukowski and Aquan-Assee's (1997) research results partly support Sulloway's findings. They support Sulloway's claims and suggest that birth order contributes to the quality of the sibling relationship and state that older siblings are more rivalrous than younger ones who are in turn more cooperative.

Notwithstanding the considerable support for Sulloway's claims there is also criticism from a number of different fronts. Many of Sulloway's critics base their arguments on his research methods. His research is based on large samples of adult participants who respond to questionnaires and self-report ratings. In one study, Sulloway (2001) asked business leaders to evaluate their business associates and then later to compare themselves with their siblings. His conclusion in this study was that the first born business leaders were more domineering, unhelpful, stubborn and conservative than their siblings. There were similar findings in follow-up study, which involved six thousand and fifty-three participants aged eight to ninety-five years and that addressed thirty aspects of the NEO PI-R personality test (Sulloway, 2001). Despite these impressive statistics there are many criticisms focussed on his research methods.

The most serious criticisms of Sulloway is based on the validity and reliability of his research claims which uses large samples and aims to give underlying causal explanations (Beer & Horn, 2000; Steelman et al., 2002). Ernst & Angst's (1983, cited in Beer & Horn, 2000) meta-analytic study highlights psychometric problems in Sulloway's research. They suggest his research neglects to take into account the effects of demographic changes, age and sex of the siblings. Sulloway responded to their criticism by conducting his own literature review of one hundred and ninety-six birth order studies. He claimed that his research indicated strong support for his birth order predictions (Beer & Horn, 2000; Dalton, 2004). These claims have subsequently been criticised by another researcher, Dalton, who made serious allegations about Sulloway's unethical research practices.

Dalton (2004) argues that Sulloway may have selected and manipulated data to validate his proposals about the impact of birth order. He claims that Sulloway's research is characterised by evasiveness and data discrepancies and he suggests that there is an urgent need for an independent review of Sulloway's research methods. Townsend (1998, cited in Dalton, 2004) implies that Sulloway selected data to produce figures that support his argument and that he misused and inaccurately reported on his research results. He is charged with selection bias (Dalton, 2004; Steelman, et al., 2002). Furthermore, as his research findings demonstrate insufficient analysis of alternative explanations they are not generalisable (Steeleman, et al., 2002).

Steeleman et al. (2002) also claim Sulloway's birth order findings are based on research which they are unable to replicate. They do not deny any existence of birth order effect but claim that the effects are more modest than those that Sulloway documented. They also indicate that the findings are not consistent and that the results merely reflect the specific sample studied (Steeleman et al., 2002). Nyman (1995) suggests that the many differences in the populations that Sulloway examined, as well as the various measurement procedures he employed have made it difficult to reproduce descriptions of the birth order characteristics that Sulloway suggests. Furthermore, they question the generalisability of Sulloway's findings as his research utilises sample groups based in the United States of America and or other highly industrialised countries. In addition to these criticisms Sulloway's research has been criticised for his definition of birth order.

Beer and Horn (2000) suggest that Sulloway's research findings are problematic as he bases his argument on order of birth rather than rearing order. Their criticisms are based on a study which examined two separate samples of adopted twins who are biological firstborns but who were reared in varying ordinal positions. Therefore, they were able to separate birth order from rearing order and they suggest that Sulloway's theory reflects rearing order, a postnatal environmental factor, and not a birth order difference, as he claims. The findings of Beer and Horn's (2000) study conflicts with Sulloway's claims and they suggest that birth order exerts very little influence on personality development. They suggest that a more plausible explanation would be that prenatal biological

processes, that is the child's rearing order environment, would affect the development of personality traits. These concerns raise serious questions about the reliability and validity of Sulloway's claims.

Furthermore, besides Sulloway's research being criticised for lacking validity and reliability, his theory is criticised as it provides a simplistic explanation of sibling relationships. Rodgers (2001:9) argues that Sulloway's theory with its reliance on position in the family creates a "*trap*". The attractiveness and appeal of birth order is based largely on the fact that all people who have siblings necessarily have a birth order. This is a very accessible concept, which is systematic and appeals to common sense explanations and understanding. Sulloway's theory pleases the lay person's understanding of siblings as it provides a straightforward explanation which can easily be supported by anecdotal evidence. Rodgers (2001) argument suggests that Sulloway's theory is able to provide user-friendly explanations of general and obvious trends. These trends do not address or offer explanation of the dissimilarities found in sibling relationships.

Sulloway's theory is unable to explain adequately the wide disparity of individual's experiences of their sibling relationships. This suggestion is supported by Dunn et al. (1994) who report on a small-scale study (Stillwell & Dunn 1985, cited in Dunn et al., 1994) which addressed the stability of the quality of sibling relationships when accounting for birth order effects. They report on research which highlights considerable individual differences in some sibling relationships. Some children, in their sample group, reported supportive and affectionate sibling relationships while others spoke about extremely hostile relationships with their siblings. Their findings indicate that life events (such as the birth of a sibling) do not necessarily result in rivalrous sibling relationships or rifts between siblings. Instead, they suggest that harmony and cohesion develops between children, as many children in their sample described that siblings provide support. Abbey and Dallos (2004) report on their research that explored the impact of divorce on siblings. In their study they found that subsequent to divorce siblings reported a supportive and close relationship with their siblings. However, they caution that it

might be difficult to generalise these findings as different life events might influence different siblings differently. Dunn et al.'s (1994) findings identify and emphasise the variations in sibling relationships. Although Sulloway (2001) acknowledges that there are individual differences in sibling relationships his theory is nevertheless based on studies which assess large sample groups. He makes claims which are based on research findings which merely identify broad trends. In contrast to Sulloway's research there are studies which also explore the sibling in relation to his family. It seems that Sulloway understands personality to be influenced by a person's position as a younger or older sibling. However, little attention was given to sibling interaction and its influence on personality formation, besides rivalry and competition. From Sulloway's perspective personality is relative to a person's lot in the hierarchy of the family and not to his relationships within the system. Interactions between family members is however central to the family systems theory.

Family Systems Theory

In family systems theory, the family is seen to be a social system consisting of different subsystems with the sibling relationship being an integral component of the family system (Bank & Burraston, 2004; Yeh & Lempers, 2004). Howe et al. (1997) identify the lack of importance placed on the role of siblings and argue that while most sibling research has little theoretical explanation, the family system theory provides a theoretical framework which accounts for family dynamics. It places the sibling relationship within the larger family context. They add that this theory suggests that specific characteristics of family relationships reflect the dynamics of the family environment. Bullock and Dishion (2002), Howe et al. (1997) and Yeh and Lempers (2004) highlight the lack in theoretical explanations for sibling relationships and suggest that it is likely that these relationships play an important part in the child's development. Furthermore, Sroufe and Fleeson (1986, cited in Brody, 1998) report on research which suggests that the nature of the sibling relationship is largely dependent on the dynamic interaction between the family environment and each sibling's attachment and relationship with his primary caregiver. This view is supported by Howe et al. (1997) who suggest that the sibling relationship is a subsystem within the family.

Furman and Buhrmester (1985) Graham-Berman (1994) Howe et al. (1997) and Yeh and Lempers (2004) refer to research which explores the role of siblings within broader family relationships. Howe et al. (1997) identified that when mothers were actively engaged in sibling interactions rivalry was reduced and also that sibling cooperation was associated with maternal attentiveness and praise. In addition, sibling dyads were more cooperative than rivalrous when there was maternal involvement. Significant support is given to the proposal that positive relationship with parents correlates with prosocial sibling relationships (Brody, 1998; Yeh & Lemper, 2004). Abbey and Dallos (2004) examined the impact of marital discord and divorce on the quality of sibling relationships and their findings suggest that siblings experienced an increased closeness as a result of sharing the experience of their parents' divorce. Dunn et al. (1994) report different findings with their study identifying increased sibling conflict in families where high levels of marital discord is reported. Yeh and Lempers (2004) argue that the over-emphasis by family systems research on the parent-child subsystem and the marital subsystem is problematic. They identify that research ignores the role of the people who are often the child's most regular companions, that is, his siblings.

Bank and Kahn (1982) and Updegraaf et al. (2000) suggest that during early and middle childhood children spend the majority of their free time with their siblings. They add that siblings rely on each other for support in school and with social problems. This is substantiated by Gass, Jenkins and Dunn's (2007) research which identified that positive sibling relationships are an important source of support for children who have experienced stressful life events. This research highlights the importance of the role that siblings play within the family system.

Dunn et al. (1994) have made considerable contributions to our understanding of the continuity of sibling relationships from childhood into adolescence. They suggest that siblings' positive and negative behaviours and feelings about each other in childhood are correlated with the quality of their later relationships. Dunn et al. (1994) identified that adolescent sibling relationships are to some extent predicted by the nature of the early

sibling relationships. However, when they enter adolescence these relationships tend to change. This change is due to some extent to the varying age related competencies that occur. Rathus (2006) suggests that as children enter adolescence their interaction with their siblings decreases as they develop new friendships. Although Yeh and Lempers (2004) also identify that sibling interactions tend to decrease when the children enter adolescence they add that this does not mean that the relationship is less important at this time.

Yeh and Lempers (2004) suggest that for adolescents the sibling relationship is an important source of emotional support as the child in attempting to establish his identity and autonomy tends to rely less on parental influences and so turns to his sibling instead. Thus the siblings become an important and additional source of protection and support. Gass et al.'s (2007) research findings support these claims. In addition, Yeh and Lemper's (2004) research findings emphasise the important role that siblings play in preventing adolescent adjustment problems. They suggest that siblings provide important resources for their adolescent siblings and a warm and supportive sibling relationship could assist in preventing later deviant behaviour.

Stormshak et al. (2004) propose that the theoretical models be expanded in order to incorporate the role of siblings in the development of anti-social behaviour. They suggest that developmental models of deviant behaviour typically focus on the development of behavioural problems in the context of the early parent-child relationship which then predicts the development of deviant behaviour in siblings and peers. Stormshak et al. (2004) suggest that there is an association between the development of deviant behaviour and the quality of sibling relationships with their research exploring the dynamics of sibling relationships in order to identify if there is a correlation between problem behaviour and sibling interactions.

Stormshak et al. (2004) investigated sibling relationships as a predictor of later substance use. Their research indicates the importance of the sibling relationship in the development of deviant behaviour. Their results indicated that association with siblings

who display deviant behaviour plays a more important role in predicting later substance use than association with peers does. Bullock and Dishion (2002) suggest that collusion between siblings in conjunction with genetic factors and individual differences in temperament create a context within families which fosters sibling maladjustment. It is suggested that fundamental to these findings is difficulty in distinguishing between the role of the family experiences and the individual's temperament.

Brody (1998) argues that it is difficult (if not impossible) to isolate the temperament of the child from the context in which he lives, thus difficult sibling relationships can be exacerbated or improved by the primary caregiver-child relationship. However, Brody (1998) did not directly assess how the individual children experience those relationships. Graham-Berman (1994) argues that individual siblings experience their relationships, within their family system, in distinct ways. Each sibling will have a unique interpretation of their relationship even when they live together. Thus it is necessary to explore the individual children's perceptions of these relationships.

Furman and Buhrmester (1985) also stress the importance of the family constellation in sibling relationships. They suggest that sibling relationships are highly complex and it is unlikely that the nature of sibling relationships is solely a product of the family system. They propose that these relationships require an explanation which incorporates multiple perspectives and multiple forms of data collection in order to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the nature of sibling relationships.

The sibling subsystem is complex and is constituted of different characteristics. This is reflected in the diversity of studies which address the impact of sibling spacing (the age gaps between the children) and sex composition (the number of boys and girls in the family) (Steelman et al., 2002). Epkins and Dedmon (1994) report on findings that suggest conflict and aggressive behaviour occurs more frequently when the age gap between siblings is less than three years. Furman and Buhrmester's (1985) research results indicate that the size of the age gap between children influences the relative power and status between siblings and, in particular, how the siblings support and nurture each

other. A large age gap, in excess of four years, indicates that the older child will exert considerably more power than the younger. Siblings with this age gap also engaged in more nurturing and caretaking behaviour while children with a small age gap reported more conflictual relationships with their siblings.

Family systems theory therefore suggests that the quality of the sibling relationship is influenced by the family members' interactions and the family's inherent dynamics. However a criticism of family systems theory is that it is unlikely that the nature of sibling relationships is entirely dependent on the influences of the family system (Brody, 1998; Furman & Buhrmester, 1985). Bank and Burraston (2004), Brody (1998) and Furman and Buhrmester (1985) explain that there are considerable differences in sibling relationships which are evident even when the same family composition exists. They suggest that it is likely that the individual's temperament and environmental factors will determine how he responds to his parents and siblings. Bullock and Dishion (2002) argue that although much research has been done on how marital and parent-child subsystems influence the child, it is clear that parenting does not occur in a vacuum and the sibling subsystem has not been adequately investigated. They emphasise that the sibling subsystem can form a distinctive context within families and that this area needs further research.

Thus far literature has been presented that explores contextual influences on sibling relationships (such as birth order) and social influences (such as family interactions). These might be considered to be more conscious and overt determinants of development. The discussion now turns to consider unconscious factors and how siblings might shape development more symbolically.

Psychoanalytic theories

Despite siblings being fundamental within the family structure, psychoanalytic theories largely disregard the significance of these relationships (Coles, 2006; Charles, 1999; Mitchell, 2000; Mitchell, 2003; Shapiro & Ginzberg, 2001; Tyson & Tyson, 1990). Shapiro and Ginzberg (2001) identify this as a problem and suggest that in spite of the

amount of time spent on siblings while patients are in psychotherapeutic analysis there is little theoretical explanation of their role. In this section I give a brief overview of general aspects of psychoanalytic theories and thereafter I will address how some contemporary psychoanalytic theorists explain siblings. There is little mention about siblings by the established and well recognised psychoanalytic theorists however I will explore what some theorists suggest the role of the sibling is.

Central to psychoanalytic explanations of development is the important role that the unconscious plays. Psychoanalytic models highlight the discrepancy between rational aspects of the mind and other more primitive and unconscious aspects. A person consists of rational and conscious abilities but his unconscious, an area of instinctual functioning, influences his behaviour and is fundamental in how he relates to people. This area of psychic functioning is constituted of a large store of memories, impulses and desires, which influences a person's daily life and his behaviour. Psychoanalytic theories suggest that a person's early childhood memories and his unconscious desires play a significant role in explaining the development of his sense of himself as a person. The process of development is fraught with intense feelings and fears therefore the person develops and utilises defenses in order to protect his ego from these real or imagined threats. These theorists emphasise the important role that unconscious aspects have on the person's ability to form relationships in later life as well as his later behaviour (Fonagy & Target 2003; Tyson & Tyson, 1990).

Fundamental to psychoanalytic theories is the important part that early childhood relationships play in a person's later relationships and behaviour. Many authors propose that psychoanalytic literature in general tends to focus primarily and at times exclusively on the role that the parent-child relationship plays. They acknowledge the important and influential role that a child's family of origin plays in his development, and add that siblings play an important but unrecognised role in a person's development (Coles, 2006; Charles, 1999; Mitchell, 2000; Mitchell, 2003; Shapiro & Ginzberg, 2001; Stormshak, et al., 2004; Tyson & Tyson, 1990).

An important tenet of psychoanalytic theories is the role that parents play on a child's development. Freud focused on the parent-child relationship and did not pay particular attention to sibling relationships besides suggesting that they are a duplication of vertical parent-child relationships (Charles, 1999; Mitchell, 2003; Coles, 2006). Freud was the first important theorist who stressed the crucial role that parents play in a child's development. He emphasised that fundamental to all human interaction and development is the intergenerational relationship between parents and children. Central to Freud's theory is the parent-child relationship and the vertical Oedipus complex - the child's desire for sexual access, to his, parents. Adequate resolution of this stage is crucial if the child is to be able to establish relationships with future partners. Prior to the resolution of this stage the child experiences considerable and intense feelings of rage and anxiety. If there is a satisfactory resolution of these feelings the child is able to restrain his instinctual nature and thus develops a capacity to love and work.

The important role that early childhood experiences play on a child's development is not debatable. However, many authors highlight that the role of siblings, at this formative time, is neglected (Charles, 1999; Coles, 2006; Mitchell, 2003). Charles (1999) suggests that this is a time when children develop skills for future relationships and social interactions. She proposes that living with and having siblings is important as it assists the child in adjusting to coexisting with another person. Siblings offer each other an opportunity to separate from parents. In order to be able to coexist with others in later life it is necessary that the child is able to resolve the powerful feelings he feels towards his siblings. Sharing living space and parents with siblings makes the child aware that he has to share his space and also that he has to coexist with another. This frequently results in powerful feelings developing (Charles, 1999). She suggests that this has to do with the child having to share his "*mother-space*" with his sibling, as well as having to cope with his negative feelings and the resultant guilt about feelings of wanting to eliminate his sibling.

Many theorists focus on the negative feelings that siblings have for each other. Freud's contribution to our understanding of the role of siblings was focussed mainly at these

unconscious and negative aspects. He stressed that sibling relationships are characterised by intense affect (Shapiro & Ginzberg, 2001). Rivalry is central to his explanation of siblings. Freud (cited, in Charles, 1999) suggests that sibling relationships are fundamentally conflictual as the children have an intense need to rival the new sibling for parental love. Freud (1916-1917) wrote that the older child often experiences the birth of a younger sibling as a disturbance with the younger child being seen as an interloper whom the older child wishes to eliminate. He describes children's negative and hostile feelings, emphasising sibling's intense jealousy and rage. The focus of the children's competition and the primary rival is the child's sibling, with both older and younger siblings feeling these intense feelings about their siblings. Fundamental to the nature of sibling interactions is the child's unconscious but urgent need to be unique and sustain his parents love and care.

Like Freud, Klein suggested that children have intense feelings of anger which are directed at their siblings. She proposed that sibling relationships are characterised by intense and frightening emotions that siblings feel about each other. Klein proposed that the child experiences the birth of a sibling as an attack on his omnipotence and this results in intense anger, which the child directs towards his sibling (Charles, 1999). The birth of a new sibling results in the older child feeling attacked and persecuted. For Klein the older child experiences the new sibling as instigating an attack on his omnipotence which produces intense rage (Mitchell, 1986). This results in the development of destructive impulses in the older child who then experiences considerable guilt. The child finds this profoundly anxiety provoking and dangerous to his psychic welfare. Klein (Mitchell, 1986) suggests that persecutory anxiety is related to the child's fear of losing his omnipotence after the new sibling's birth. The child utilises defences which are able to diminish his persecutory feelings and so allow him to reparate. This ability to reparate is crucial for the child in order for him to engage adequately in future relationships.

Charles (1999) recognizes the importance of intense feelings that the child has about his siblings. She also accepts that the parent-child relationship plays a role in child's development of his sense of self. However, she suggests that siblings also play a role in

the development of an autonomous self (Charles, 1999). Charles (1999:3) proposes that in many families the sibling serves as “*a proxy for the parent and may regulate or disregulate affect*”. She emphasises that siblings may evoke similar feelings as those evoked by parents and suggests that siblings are frequently called upon to fulfil gaps in parental care. It is likely that siblings are used as “*bridging objects*” for children, in order to dissipate anger and transfer hostility. Parens adds (1988, cited in Charles, 1999) it is likely that siblings become important objects of attachments in their own right.

Charles (1999:9) also stresses the essential role that siblings play in a child’s future relationships as they enable him to differentiate between “*self, mother and [sibling]*”. She suggests that siblings influence a child’s ability to identify what is “*me and [what is] not me*”. She stresses the importance of identification with a parent in a child’s future relationships, but suggests that siblings also play a part in the development of identity. Identification with siblings, although possibly less patent than identification with a parent, is nevertheless also important. The interaction with a sibling provides the child with the opportunity to identify aspects of self and other

“within the self, [the] quality which is being denied as what is seen as the other, which becomes split off from what is defined as the self” Charles (1999:10, author’s emphasis)

Thus when a child sees features in his siblings he is able to identify what is part of his self and what is not. Contact with a sibling provides the child with the opportunity to identify that there are aspects that are inherent in an “other” and they are not necessarily inherent in his self. Therefore by interaction with his sibling the child becomes aware of what his own “*self*” is and what is not (Charles, 1999).

For Charles (1999) sibling relationships provide the child an opportunity to deal with finding a sense of his self. She suggests that people have diverse aspects within their sense of self, which are flexible. In childhood the child’s sense of self is not fixed and so through interaction with siblings the child will regularly amend and change his conception of his self. The sibling relationship provides an arena where he will be able to face hurdles and so work through his sense of who he is. The struggle between both

positive and negative interactions between siblings, provide the opportunity for a child to explore facets of his self and so develop an autonomous sense of self. This struggle has both rational and unconscious facets. She adds that inflexible and rigid sibling interactions hamper the development of a sense of self. On the other hand a warm accepting and supportive relationship can be pivotal in allowing a child to develop an adequate sense of self. Thus interaction with siblings allows the child to explore, develop and maintain a sense of self (Charles, 1999).

Like Charles (1999), Mitchell (2000, 2003) suggests that insight about the complexity and centrality of sibling relationships may provide us with a new understanding of interpersonal dynamics. Without minimising the significance of the vertical parent - child relationships, such as proposed by Freud and Klein, she proposes that it is possible that the lateral relationships children have with their siblings and peers could be as important as parental relationships (Mitchell, 2003). Mitchell (2000, 2003; Coles 2006) states that lateral relationships, that is, relationships with partners, spouses, peers and friends, differ from vertical parent-child relationships. In addition, the interaction with a sibling possibly provides the child with an opportunity to function in social and later lateral or peer groups. The way the child negotiates and copes with his horizontal, sibling relationships is likely to impact on how he as an adult interacts with his peers and other lateral relationships (Mitchell, 2003).

Mitchell (2003), like Charles (1999), suggests that childhood sibling relationships is where the child learns to negotiate and so come to an understanding of self and other. Mitchell (2003; Coles, 2006) formulates her explanation of the sibling relationship by suggesting that with the birth of a new sibling the older child undergoes a psychological trauma. The new sibling's birth results in the older child being forced to acknowledge, firstly that the expected baby is not more of himself, and secondly that he has undergone a profound loss, the loss of who he was before the birth of the baby. The child's previous self has changed irreparably and so a new self has to develop (Mitchell, 2003).

Mitchell (2000; Mitchell, 2003) suggests that with the birth of a sibling the older child, who was until this birth not a “*social*” person, experiences irreversible and permanent “*trauma*”. The new sibling’s birth threatens the child’s uniqueness and he comes to the realisation that he is replaceable (Mitchell, 2003). The birth compels the child to acknowledge the universal rite of passage that he is not the sole example of his type. He is no longer the unique and valued baby and the new baby’s birth destroys his “*self*”. This leads to the development of powerful and intense feelings.

The strength of the trauma that the child experiences results in him fearing annihilation as the world is only large enough to contain him in a sense of “*manic grandiosity*” (Mitchell, 2003: xvi). As the new sibling is his equal in relation to his parents there will be insufficient space for both of them (Mitchell, 2003). Hereafter the child’s craving for parental love in conjunction with the feelings towards the new sibling result in conflicting feelings about his sibling. However, Mitchell adds another dimension to our understanding of the importance of siblings as she suggests that the child’s feelings are not only of intense rage and anger Mitchell (2003).

The older child’s acute feelings are not merely, as other psychoanalytic theories suggest, hatred for the new arrival because they are the “*other*”. Rather, the older child perceives the new sibling as not quite human but more like some other type of living thing, which he can choose to love or hate. This results in the development of the ambivalent feelings, the child realises that his sibling is the same, different and also separate (Mitchell, 2000; Mitchell, 2003). The older sibling comes to terms that his anticipation that the new baby would be more of him self is not to be. He then realises that the baby is a separate person but still much like the older sibling as they are sisters and/or brothers. They are siblings where neither needs to be annihilated, but can be valued as they belong to a sisterhood and/or brotherhood. Thus the birth of a sibling provides the child the opportunity to negotiate a crucial rite of passage which has a long lasting impact on all future lateral relationships. Later in life, if the child is able to love the sibling who usurped his position and who he initially wanted to eliminate, the sibling relationship will have endured, and a long-lasting deep emotional relationship can be established (Mitchell, 2003; Morely in

Coles, 2006). This process is core to the child developing the potential to relate to others, particularly with his peer group.

Shapiro and Ginzberg (2001) refer to their research which suggests there is a parallel between early sibling experiences and patients' experiences in group therapy. They highlight how a person's ability to interact within social groups seems to mirror in some significant ways the person's sibling relationships, and stress that these phenomenon are pervasive in a wide ranging number of situations. They examined the effects of sibling relationships on group dynamics by considering the introduction of new members into an established psychotherapy group. Their findings suggest that for the newcomer joining an existing group evokes similar emotions to those of the arrival of a new sibling. This was also apparent for the existing group members who reactions to the newcomer emulated their childhood experiences of the birth of a sibling. Shapiro and Ginzberg (2001) also identified that "*twinning*" occurred between group members. They suggest that Kohut's (1971, cited in Shapiro & Ginzberg, 2001) concept occurs between siblings. Kohut (1971, cited in Shapiro & Ginzberg, 2001) proposes that a person's representations of his self are projected into another which then results in a bond developing between the two people which prompts a sense of wholeness for them. The interpersonal dynamics when twinning occurs between siblings, lessens feelings of defencelessness and can provide them with a sense of safety.

This section has explored how unconscious aspects of a person's functioning play an important part in his later development. These theories emphasise the crucial role that a child's early childhood experiences have on his later development, experiences that have historically been linked exclusively to the child's interactions with his parents. However the authors discussed above suggest that it is likely that siblings play considerable, but unexplored, role in a child's early development.

Gender

Some authors suggest that the construct of gender is influential as an organising principle in all relationships (Beall & Sternberg, 1993; Eriksen, 2001; Kamler, 1999). It is not a static concept but a process which is constructed across a variety of practices and within different relationships. Gender does not determine behaviour or actions but is seen to be adaptable and negotiated. It is sometimes seen as manifestation of power differentials, but as with all stereotypical explanations this does not provide an adequate or satisfactory explanation (Kamler, 1999). Gender differences are explained by a wide range of different theories, ranging from evolutionary differences, to sex hormones and neuro-chemical differences in the brain and social learning theories. The field of research and theoretical explanations for gender development is extensive and thus this brief review will focus on what is relevant for this study.

Research on the influence of gender composition on sibling relationships has resulted in mixed findings (Aquilar et al., 2001; Beall & Sternberg, 1993). However, there appears to be a fair degree of consensus about the notion that when the sibling dyad, consists of an older brother/younger sister, both the brother and sister will rate the relationship negatively. Furman and Buhrmester's (1985) study found that middle childhood same-sex siblings reported more feelings of warmth and closeness than opposite sex siblings. Dunn et al.'s (1994) research findings suggest that significant gender composition effects were evident in a preadolescent sample. The adolescent boys reported less warmth and intimacy with their younger sisters than adolescent sisters with younger sisters. In addition their study identified that by late middle childhood older sisters were more apt to share confidences with their younger siblings than the boys were. Like Dunn et al. (1994) Graham-Berman (1994) identifies that younger children in same sex dyads are more cooperative. Her study identified an interesting finding. Despite the children reporting higher levels of cooperation in same sex dyads, analysis of projective tests suggested the opposite. Her findings indicate that the research participants reported that there was little conflict in same sex dyads. However, this study included an analysis of the participants' projective tests. Her results identified contradictory findings which suggest that boy-boy dyad combinations scored highest in conflict. She also highlights that sibling conflict is

not well understood. It is likely that it is a particularly complex construct without one homogenous explanation and she suggests that it might depend more on who is reporting than on that person's gender per se. The experience of conflict may be more salient to the recipient of the conflict or to the initiator than to an observer.

In addition, studies by Aquilar et al. (2001), McHale et al. (2001) and Ross et al. (2000) suggest that when the sibling dyad consists of two brothers, both brothers will evaluate the relationship as having more positive than negative features. However, there are other studies which offer contradictory results.

Epkins and Dedmon's (1999) study identified conflicting findings. Their research suggests that aggression is more common between same-sex siblings than opposite sex siblings. Aquilar et al. (2001) suggest that there may be a correlation between adjustment problems in girls during puberty if they have an antisocial older brother, whereas a younger brother of an antisocial brother is less likely to exhibit those problems. As the conflicting findings suggest there is no one theory, which adequately explains the complexity of gender and sibling relationships (Aquilar et al., 2001; Graham-Berman, 1994; McHale et al., 2001; Rathus, 2006).

The literature discussed has highlighted that much of the theoretical explanation of sibling relationships is based on conventional vertical models of the role of parents on children and vice versa how the child impacts on the parents. Despite sibling relationships being the first social relationship that people encounter and probably being the one that lasts the longest, there is a lack of attention to the role of siblings in theoretical explanations of human development. Also, when siblings have been alluded to, there is a marked lack of cohesion about the impact and the importance of siblings' roles. Understandings rely on sibling constellations and not on sibling interactions. Finally, there is a noticeable lack of consensus about understanding the complex nature of sibling relationships. This review acknowledges the considerable contribution that the birth order, family systems, psychoanalytic, and gender theories have provided about sibling relationships. They are nevertheless unable to adequately explain the complexity

and significance of sibling relationships and how long-lasting, warm and satisfying sibling relationships develop. This is likely due to two reasons. Firstly, the lack of attention to lateral sibling–sibling interaction is noticeable and it is likely that these horizontal relationships are influential. Secondly, research into siblings is generally based on quantitative results which identify broad trends. However, sibling relationships are multifaceted and thus it is likely that they will require a number of different research methods, both quantitative and qualitative, to adequately explore their complexity (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985). The qualitative method chosen for this study is presented in the method chapter that follows.

Chapter 3

Research Method

3.1. Research questions

This research project focussed on two research questions:

1. How do preadolescent boys describe the interactions they have with their siblings?
2. How do they make sense of these relationships?

3.2 Research Participants

The sample was drawn from St. John's Preparatory School in Johannesburg. The principal of this school has frequently expressed his interest in research as a means to furthering knowledge and understanding. In addition, he feels it is important that his school be part of the academic community and so encourages and supports research projects which use his school. Therefore I approached him to use a sample from his school.

The principal of St. John's Preparatory School in Gauteng, Mr. Workman, provided written permission for the research to be carried out (Appendix A). I contacted the school's psychologist, Mrs. L. Lamont, and she agreed to provide the boys with debriefing if necessary (Appendix B). Primary inclusion criterion for this study was that the boys have a sibling. After discussion with the Grade Six and Seven teachers, we identified the boys who have siblings. I gave an invitation to participate in the study to the parents of the Grade Six and Seven target boys and asked them to complete the parent consent form if they wished their child to participate in this study (Appendix C). The parents were told that the research would have no connection to the boys' schoolwork and there would be no consequences to either participation or non- participation. Furthermore the parents would be able to withdraw their child at any stage of the interview or research process. Thirty-seven invitations were sent to the parents and it was hoped that there would be at least ten boys' parents who would volunteer for them to participate. This number would be adequate to provide sufficient responses in order for

me to elicit rich data material. However, thirteen of the boys' parents returned the consent forms. So as there was much interest in this study all the boys who returned their consent forms to the school vice principal, were included in the sample. In addition, during the interviews it became apparent that the boys themselves were interested in participating in the study. During the interviews a number of the boys made specific mention of how they wanted to talk about their siblings and one suggested that this study might help people understand about how important siblings are. On completion of the parent consent to participate form each parent was sent a parent recording consent form (Appendix F) to complete.

All thirteen boys, except one, have at least one brother. This boy has two sisters and no brothers. Two other boys have a sister as well as brothers. Seven of the boys are the oldest in their families, five are the youngest and one boy is the middle child. At the time of the interviews the boys were all either twelve or thirteen years of age. This age was deemed to be appropriate for this research for a number of reasons. During the preadolescent years siblings play a significant role in children's lives (Berk, 2004; Craig, 1996; Epkins & Dedmon, 1999; Lockwood et al., 2002; Stormshak et al., 2004). Stormshak et al. (2004) suggest that at this age siblings spend more time together than they do with other family members or peers, therefore, they are ideally suited to report on their sibling relationships. Furthermore, at this age children's cognitive functioning becomes more sophisticated and their communication ability improves (Berk, 2004; Cutting & Dunn, 2006; Das, 1995). Epkins & Dedmon (1999) indicate that children in middle to late childhood are developmentally mature enough to respond to questionnaires and they are cognitively sophisticated enough to report on their sibling relationships. Therefore it was assumed that they would be able to respond to an interview situation (McHale et al., 2001). Brody (1998) and Stormshak, et al. (2004) suggest that sibling relationships remain largely stable during the middle childhood and preadolescent years. Lockwood et al. (2002) suggest that at this age the boys' peer group would be expected to be increasingly influential. However, as they were still in primary school and on the cusp of adolescence it is likely that their sibling relationships still play an important role in their lives.

The sample was limited to boys as gender differentiation plays a role in sibling relationships (Aquilar et al., 2001; Furman & Buhrmester, 1985). This was a preliminary research project, and literature has indicated there are qualitative differences in how boys and girls understand and experience their sibling relationships (Aquilar et al., 2001; Coles, 2006; Dunn et al., 1994; Furman & Buhrmester, 1985; Pollack 1998; Updegraaf et al., 2000).

It is recognized there were inherent problems in this form of sample selection: it was anticipated that the boys may have been coerced into partaking in the study by their parents and this may have influenced their responses. As they were a volunteer sample they could have been overly compliant (acquiescence bias) (Banister et al., 1995; Giorgi, Fischer, & Murray, 1999). Furthermore, middle childhood children are often unwilling to assert themselves or contradict adults. This is of specific relevance to the school, from which the sample is drawn, as discipline is highly valued and enforced. This has been discussed in the limitations section.

3.3 Data collection – interview procedure

Elliot et al. (1999), Mason (1996) and Neuman (1994) have indicated that much debate exists about the authority and soundness of qualitative research, with parallels being drawn between qualitative researchers and “*journalists or soft scientists*” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000:7).

A qualitative method was employed as I did not aim to predict or test specific hypotheses or to identify causal links (Elliot et al., 1999). Kvale (1992:57) states that qualitative research using interviews is able to provide “*knowledge of the human situation*”. He adds that this form of research is suitable for “*deepening*” our understanding. Potter and Hepburn (2005) suggest that interviews are a particularly helpful form of research for exploring how participants make sense of their experiences. Therefore, semi-structured interviews were conducted in this exploratory research project, which aimed at obtaining a thick description from the boys so as to place the boys’ everyday experience of their

siblings into perspective (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Kvale, 1992; Potter & Hepburn, 2005; Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999).

This form of research uses predetermined questions as a guide to encourage participants to talk about their experiences (Kvale, 1992; Reismann, 1993). Therefore I used set questions to encourage the boys to talk about their perceptions of their sibling relationships (Appendix G). Berg (1998) suggests that this form of research enables the researcher to explore the topic by focusing on the participants' subjective point of view and also to utilise unplanned probes which occur in the interview process itself.

I encouraged each boy to describe and explore his sibling relationships and his everyday contact with his siblings. Therefore, in order to obtain the information using the boys' normal language the interview was designed to resemble a conversation and I used standard cues such as *"tell me more about that, why do you think that is, and how did that feel"* (Breakwell et al., 1995, Furman & Buhrmester, 1985). By asking how and why questions (Giorgi et al., 1999) the boys reconstructed a range of events in their relationships, in their own words. The interview schedule limited the range of discussion topics to a certain extent. This was done deliberately in order to encourage the boys focus on different themes, for example, their understanding of positive as well as negative aspects of sibling interaction. This form of research is a conversation between a participant and an interviewer. Therefore the data collected is a collaboration of two people. By using the interviewee/interviewer interaction it is possible to obtain rich and credible material (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Neuman, 1994; Parker, 1994). My presence and input was central, both in the administration of the interviews and also of the interpretation of the data. In addition, Ross et al. (2000), Silverman (1998) and Terre Blanche and Durrheim (1999) highlight that qualitative data does not attempt to make objective truth claims. Therefore, I aimed to work in partnership with the boys so as to explore their experiences about their sibling relationship. The data collected was a reflection of how the boys felt at a particular place and time.

Based on a review of literature about sibling relationships, a qualitative, semi-structured, open-ended interview schedule was constructed (Appendix G). This schedule focused on four broad areas; background information about the participant and his family, activities that he and siblings partake in together, that is lateral or horizontal relationships, activities that the participant and his family do together, that is vertical interactions and finally, the relationship quality. In order to address and explore the research questions I encouraged the boys to speak about the following areas.

I was interested in how the boys described their family, the people they feel constitute their family, the number of siblings they have, their siblings ages and if they are brothers and/or sisters. I encouraged the boys to describe their relationships with their siblings. In order to do this I explored what activities the boys do with their siblings, and how they feel about these activities. Also we spoke about what activities the boys prefer not to do with their siblings and why. I encouraged the boys to discuss positive and negative aspects of having siblings and if they had noticed a difference in their relationships with their different siblings. If they had noticed a difference we explored what this difference was. In addressing the relationship quality I examined how the boys described dealing with positive, warm and affectionate feelings as well as with negative feelings such as anger and hostility. I asked each boy how he felt about being a sibling and if he would prefer to be an only child. Finally I encouraged the boys to discuss what the most important thing is about having a sibling. By concentrating on these aspects it was possible to explore how the boys felt about having siblings. These questions have not been tested in a larger sample for reliability or validity purposes.

Guba & Lincoln (1989) suggest that in qualitative forms of research it is important to triangulate the data collected as this enables the researcher to cross check the information collected. Therefore in addition to the interviews I provided alternative forms, drawing or using puppets, to elicit their accounts. As this research deliberately set out to establish a deep and textured understanding of the boys' experiences of their sibling relationships, it was thought important to use a second method of data collection to triangulate the information and so increase the rigor of the data collection and analysis (Neuman, 1994).

Therefore each boy completed a Kinetic Family Drawing (KFD) to add a further dimension and thus to assist me in obtaining in-depth understanding, and richness which nevertheless remained faithful to the material (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Cutting and Dunn (2006) suggests that alternative forms of data collection encourages and facilitates participant expression and this was found to be the case in this study. The boys' drawings have not been included in this paper as I assured them of their confidentiality and also in order to protect their anonymity. Although only two boys decided to use the puppets, the informality of drawing and puppets was appropriate for this group and it encouraged and aided the discussion. The children, who questioned the nature of the questions and discussion, were answered as honestly as possible.

A timetable was compiled to provide a slot for each boy to complete his interview. Particular attention was given to the timing of the interviews (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000; Mouton, 2005). This was to ensure that the boys only missed non-essential school subjects and that their school work was minimally jeopardised. For example, hymn practice, library period and break time were used.

On the day of the interview, the aims of study were explained to each boy. I provided each boy with the letter of assent (Appendix D) and consent for recording (Appendix E) which we read together. They were invited to sign the forms. Prior to the interview taking place a number of issues were discussed with the boys. These included the purpose of the tape recorder, confidentiality and anonymity. It was also explained that they should only answer questions if they felt comfortable doing so and also that they would be able to withdraw at any stage or end the interview if they did not wish to continue. I was also conscious of each boy's energy levels and the non-verbal cues he was offering (Giorgi et al., 1999; Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). On the last day of interviews two of the boys became tearful. The first boy became distressed when he spoke about his best friend leaving the school. The second boy was reluctant to discuss why he was distressed. Therefore I ended their interviews and provided the boys with the school psychologist's contact details.

As the participants are children a time limit fifty minutes for the interviews was decided upon. Cutting and Dunn (2006), Giorgi et al. (1999) and Guba and Lincoln (1989) suggest that an hour is a standard unit of time for interviews but also state that for younger participants and children it is appropriate to have shorter interviews.

Once the interviews were completed the audiotapes were played and typed transcriptions were made of each interview.

3.4 Method of data analysis

The data was analysed using thematic analysis of the boys' transcribed interview texts. This is a flexible research method (Braun & Clarke, 2006:81) which reports on the "*meanings and reality of participants*" and minimally organises the data into broad topics which highlight various core aspects of a subject under research. A theme is a "*patterned response or meaning*" which is found within data items, such as an interview with an individual person (Braun & Clarke, 2006:82). Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that this thematic analysis is useful as it is a research method which is able to provide a rich, detailed and complex account of data. Thus this form of research not only enabled me to identify patterns in the boys' accounts of their sibling relationships but it was also used to analyse and report on those patterns.

The themes were identified for a number of reasons. Firstly, a theme was thought to be important when the same theme occurred in many of the boys' accounts or many of the boys had articulated the same theme. However, it became apparent that some themes although they all were not found in all the boys' accounts were nevertheless important. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that it is not essential for every theme to occur in every report. Therefore I used my judgement in order to ascertain the relevance and or importance of a theme.

The relevance of the themes was assessed by judging how the theme captured and contributed to furthering and deepening my understanding of the boys' explanation of their sibling relationships. Therefore the four main themes extracted depicted important

elements of the sibling relationships. Thus I decided that the boys' interview responses suggested that the role hierarchy plays in the boys understanding of their relationships, the role of gender, conflict and competition and the boys understanding of closeness and warmth in their accounts were the most important areas. I concentrated on these themes in order to assess the nature and diversity of these boys' sibling relationships. The aim of this study was to attain a deep and textured insight into this topic and so it was important to use sufficient data to obtain saturation (Gergen,1994; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Hollway & Jefferson, 2000; Neuman, 1994; Reissman, 1993; Steelman et al., 2002). Therefore I used all thirteen interview transcripts for the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.4.1 Process of Thematic Analysis

The data was collected by using the transcribed text of thirteen interviews, in addition each boy's KFD test was analysed using Burns and Kaufman's (1970) instructions. As I wished to present a rich thematic report of the data collected, I aimed at ensuring that the analysis was data driven. Therefore I took care to remain faithful to the boys' reports and what they had drawn in their KFD. This was done by utilising as many direct quotes as and whenever possible, and only if the quote was thought to compromise the child's anonymity did I exclude it. So the interpretation and analysis of the themes was closely linked to the boys' transcribed interview schedules. I was aware that my presence, and so necessarily my values, interests and assumptions, were central to the research process. Therefore, I took care not to arbitrarily interject with my own opinions and ideas and I made sure that I understood what the boys meant by asking them if I was not sure I had understood correctly. It was noticeable that although the boys were very respectful and deferential, some boys corrected my interpretation of their responses if they felt it was inaccurate. I used my personal insight while being aware of the role that my prior beliefs and assumptions might play in the research process. Furthermore, the analysis was not used to describe what the boys had said and themes/patterns were identified, analysed and reviewed (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Neuman, 1994; Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). This was in order to interpret and make sense of what the boys had said.

The transcribed interviews were read and reread a number of times so that I could immerse myself in the data. The transcripts were then reread a further time so that core themes could be identified. In order to do this each interview was summarised and after discussion with my supervisor four main themes were identified. These included hierarchy, gender, competition and conflict, togetherness and separateness. Within these themes, sub-themes such as age differences, order of birth and being an only child, were identified. Once the core themes were identified the transcripts were reread a further time in order to identify if there were any contradictions in the boys accounts. This was felt to be important as it would provide a thick textured explanation and would indicate that the boys have a complex explanation of their relationships. It also became apparent that some of the boys modified their accounts during the interview process. For example, it was noticed that several participants started the interview by making a definite statement about their siblings but later qualified those statements. The qualified statements tended to provide a more textured explanation than the initial statements had done and indicated that they have an understanding of the complexity of their sibling interactions.

3.4.2 Analysis of Kinetic Family Drawing (KFD)

In order to obtain a textured understanding of the boys' experiences I included a projective test, in addition to the interviews, to provide insight into the boys' explanations of their sibling relationships. Cohen and Swerdlik (2001) indicate that the KFD is of particular value in learning about the child in relation to his family. Burns and Kaufman (1970) suggest that kinetic drawings are able to add to our understanding of children. This task provides information around the important relationships in an individual's life. The child's drawing brings to the fore the way he perceives his position in the family, society and environment. Through interpretation of the KFD one is able to explore emotional status, unconscious aspects and conflicts (Burns & Kaufman, 1970). I carried out a qualitative analysis of KFD drawings based on Burns and Kaufman (1970) guidelines. Their procedure covers four major categories; the actions being carried out by the figures the boy had drawn, the distances, barriers and positions between the people drawn, the physical characteristics of the figures and a general analysis of the boy's style of the drawing including who he had included and excluded. Therefore the boys' KFD

drawings provided information which was able to corroborate or contradict what they spoke about in their interviews (Burns & Kaufman, 1970; Cohen & Swerdlik, 2001). Of course, if one was intending to use the KFD drawings for the purposes of emotional assessment they would form one component of an assessment battery. This was not the purpose of using the test in this study. It was used as a non-verbal means of corroborating or disconfirming verbal responses.

3.5 Principles of good practice in qualitative research

Qualitative research has historically been exposed to criticism about the validity of its claims. However, there are ways to ensure that the qualitative research is able to provide information that is sound and reliable. Therefore in order to provide an account that is credible the following issues were addressed.

Parker (1994) highlights three main problems which affect the validity of qualitative research. These are firstly, indexicality - that explanations are only ever a product of a particular context. Secondly inconcludability – that accounts are always incomplete and finally, reflexivity – that accounts are subjective reports and the researcher is always part of the research process. To address indexicality concerns: at all times the researcher was aware that the boys’ explanations and discussions were dependent on how they felt on the particular day of the interview. Therefore this particular study would not be able to be replicated as in all likelihood the boys would respond differently at a different time. Furthermore, this is an exploration of a very specific sample group, already discussed, and how they reacted in a very specific situation. This was not seen to be a problem as all new and different information provides a thicker explanation and so offers more insight (Elliot et al., 1999).

The second of Parker’s (1994) concerns, inconcludability, was clearly apparent in this study. In qualitative research methods, accounts are always incomplete and the results are provisional and conditional on the specific test. In order to ensure the credibility and validity of the results my analysis was closely linked to the data and I used many quotes from the text to illustrate my interpretation. In addition, usually more than one example

of each theme was used. This has been discussed in the Method Chapter. I verified the credibility of the boys' accounts by checking with them if I understood what they had said. As previously discussed the KFD was administered to provide a means of triangulation. By analysing the data I intended to provide a plausible and believable account of how the boys feel about their relationships. However, I acknowledge that this study is unable to provide definitive results and so it aims to add to the existing body of knowledge. Future research with new findings is welcomed as it will supplement and enhance the findings of this study (Elliot et al, 1999). In addition, the analysis of the data was done in conjunction with much discussion with my supervisor who is a clinical psychologist and university lecturer. Through this discussion the credibility and coherence of the themes was checked so as to ensure that as far as possible this study reflects the boys' understandings. She assisted in verifying my analysis and reviewed the data for discrepancies, overstatements and errors (Elliot et al., 1999).

Finally, I was aware of Parker's (1994) problems concerning reflexivity in qualitative research. Therefore, I specifically aimed at accessing the boys' subjective experiences and at no time did I attempt to achieve an objective account. As previously discussed, it was impossible to exclude my impact on the research process. I am a mature woman and the oldest of four siblings. I was also a teacher and a principal of a school for many years. These factors were considered to be an advantage for two main reasons. Firstly, it assisted me in identifying the research questions and compiling the interview questions. Secondly, reflecting on my own life experiences, including those of being a sibling, provided insight into how the boys felt. Elliot et al. (1999) suggest that qualitative research highlights and mirrors the researcher's and participant's encounter. Therefore, during the interview process I kept a "*reflexive journal*" (Abbey & Dallos, 2004) in which I made notes of my qualitative observations as well as my reactions to the boys. This was in order to ensure that I was aware of my responses to them as the research process was inextricably linked to my own values, interests and assumptions. In addition I was aware that the findings of this study represents a partnership between myself and the boys.

3.6 Ethics and Ethical Considerations

To ensure that the research fell within ethical parameters, ethics approval for this study was obtained from the University of the Witwatersrand Human research ethics Committee (Non – Medical). Ethical considerations included guarantees of confidentiality, informed consent, voluntary participation and consideration of the potential risks and benefits of participation in this study.

To address confidentiality concerns, the identity of the boys was not disclosed to anyone. The information gathered was not discussed with anyone besides my supervisor. The transcripts were stored on hard copies, a printed version and on disc. There are no names or identifying details on the hard copies. The boys' names and those of other people and places were replaced with an initial to ensure confidentiality. Furthermore, no identifying details are included on the printed transcripts.

The boys were also made aware that only sections of their interviews would be used in the write up of the analysis of this study and that no one besides me and my supervisor would see the KFD drawings. Therefore the transcripts and KFD drawings have not been included in the appendices in order to limit the possibility of recognition (Breakwell et al., 1995; Hollway & Jefferson, 2000; Mouton, 2005). The researcher discussed with each boy how he would feel to have quotes included and there was no boy who expressed hesitation about having his quotes included. Many direct quotes were used and all the individual identifying characteristics and information such as names and locations were removed or disguised in order that the quote was not linked to the narrator. In addition, pseudonyms for the boys' names were used. When the boys used people's names I used initials in the transcripts which were in no way related to the person's name. Using quotes in the analysis raised an ethical issue in terms of revealing identifying details, such as number of siblings and gender of siblings which might infringe on the participant's privacy. However, a certain degree of control was provided as each boy was asked to give permission to include parts of the transcript in the write-up.

Protection of autonomy is particularly pertinent in doing research with children, as they may not fully realise the implications of participating in the research. The boys were made aware of the limits to anonymity, as the interviews were carried out at the school during school hours, but confidentiality was ensured.

I am aware that all research is at least to some extent an intrusion (Graue & Walsh, 1998). I desired to establish a respectful relationship with the participants and so I approached the school authorities and then the potential participants' parents, in order to obtain permission to carry out this research. The parents and boys completed consent forms agreeing to participate and consent to tape interview forms (mandatory for participation), (Greig & Taylor, 1999; Hollway & Jefferson, 2000; Ivey, & Ivey, 2007; Mouton, 2005). Prior to the interview I elucidated the following, the length of the interview, the type of question that would be asked, confidentiality, audio taping, disclosing identifying details, the use of the child's direct quotes in the research write up. Only once these matters had been discussed with each boy was the tape recorder switched on.

While discussing the procedure with the children, I attempted to speak in language which was targeted at their level of cognitive functioning. I was aware of the sensitivity of research on children and so attempted to ensure that this research did not, even inadvertently or unintentionally, harm the boys if they not understand what the interview process entailed (Graue & Walsh, 1998; Greig & Taylor, 1999; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). This was done by ensuring the language I used was appropriate and the instructions were not confusing and confounding. In addition, I provided them with information about their rights in participation in this study. The voluntary nature of participation was made clear to each boy. I discussed that they could stop at any time and that he would not be pressurised to carry on. They were also informed they would be able to withdraw at any time during the interview and they should only answer the questions that they felt comfortable answering. Prior to the interview taking place I discussed the implications of speaking about their families and how it might potentially make them feel. Breakwell (1990) and Breakwell et al. (1995)

suggest that when carrying out research with children the researcher should be aware that they child might need emotional support and so it is necessary to provide the participants access to professional psychological or debriefing services. Therefore I explained to each boy that the school psychologist was available to provide debriefing if necessary and provided the school psychologist's contact details to two boys who became distressed.

Fundamental to this research is my awareness of and sensitivity to the study being an intrusion into the boys' lives and that at all times I endeavoured to be respectful of this (Graue & Walsh, 1998). By addressing these issues it is hoped that the dignity and respect for the children, their parents and the school was maintained.

Chapter 4

Results

Analysis of the boys' reports indicated wide-ranging differences within the content of an account and many differences were noticed between their accounts. The accounts the boys gave about their sibling(s) fell on different continuums such as, getting along well to not getting along, wishing to have a positive sibling relationship to not wanting to have siblings, and emphasising sameness and difference. In spite of intra and interparticipant discrepancies in the boys' accounts I was able to identify four main themes.

These included hierarchy, brothers and sisters, conflict and competition and how their relationships with their siblings reflected their feelings of being close to as well as separate from them. An analysis of the boys' KFD drawings showed that in some cases the drawings corroborated what they said in the interview and for other boys it contradicted what they said about their siblings. The discussion of the results will focus on the interview transcripts, and only pertinent confirmations and discrepancies from the KFD will be incorporated.

1. Hierarchy

The boys' accounts, without exception, reflected the role that hierarchy played in their experience of their sibling relationships. They all spoke about age, number of children in the family and of competing for resources with their siblings. These concepts clearly were important for them in making sense of their experience of being and/or having a sibling. Many of them made specific reference to differences in status between their siblings while others made less definite mention of this. For example Craig² introduced age and he used this to make sense of his and his sisters' behaviour. He said

“it's cool being the oldest (.)I found out as well from some other friends that the older ones are always the bossy ones and the younger ones always the most annoying ones (.) and I am pretty bossy”

² ... indicates that only part of the text has been used and that some irrelevant material has been excluded and (.) denotes a pause in the participant's speech flow.

During the interview he made a number of references to how he enjoys having younger siblings because he “*can teach them what to do and stuff*”. He twice mentioned that he is a “*role model*” to younger children and how they are at an advantage because they “*have someone to look up to*”. Craig was very aware of the difference that age makes and reported that he and his sibling, who is slightly younger than him, frequently engaged in power struggles.

Ned, like Craig, said that he likes being the oldest. He added that “*it is nice*” for his two younger siblings as well, as he as eldest can help them. He also spoke about his very competitive relationship with his brother who is slightly younger than him. Warren, like Craig and Ned, said that although he does not get along with his younger siblings he likes having siblings as

“I can tell her to do stuff(.) She listens to me when I tell her to do something for me”

Later, he spoke about his other sibling and said “*...whatever I want to do, he’ll do with me...*” However, not all the boys who are younger siblings find their older siblings bossy or that they expect them to do what they tell them to do.

Phil, the youngest of three, said

“Sometimes you don’t get to do what you want to do because they want to do something else (...) and we will go and do [sibling’s] thing or my thing or like we will talk about it and see if the one thing is more fun than the other thing”

Phil spoke about how he and his older siblings get along well and have a close relationship. Even though he is the youngest, he admires his brothers’ achievements, and said that he finds them to be supportive and caring. He sees his brothers as experts and said “*they help me with my homework*” and they “*fetch me from school*” and is aware that they have more power than him. Phil is also conscious of the differences in their status. Despite the power differentials, he said that each sibling is able to assert himself within the sibling group. His experience differs from Craig and Warren, who feel that older children are bossy and dominant. They expect their younger siblings to do what they tell them to do and to think highly of them.

Craig also refers to the admiration that he as the eldest expects, but doesn't get, from his younger siblings

"She [sibling] doesn't really respect me, which kind of sucks I always say respect your elders [she] never appreciates what I do for her, its not like [I] get any appreciation and [I] want appreciation"

Craig's interview included a number of references to him wanting and expecting preferential treatment from his younger siblings, and he feels that they do not respect his wishes. He feels he carries many responsibilities as he is the oldest child and that he is punished for his younger sister's misdemeanours and it appeared as if he sees himself as enacting the parent-child dynamic that he experiences at home. He was not alone in talking about conflictual and rivalrous sibling relationships.

Two boys, Derek and Ned also feel that they are blamed for things as they are the eldest.

Derek explained

"I am never allowed to overreact because I am the one that is always blamed, because he is who starts it but because I am older ... and then he's always the one that is crying so then I always get in trouble"

In contrast to the boys who reported problematic relationships with their siblings there were also boys with older siblings who felt that their siblings' age meant that they had increased skills and experience. As their siblings are older, they necessarily hold more power physically and have more mature social and emotional resources. However, in spite of them being aware of differences in status and power, these boys feel their siblings rank important and helpful to them. These boys see their siblings as having more power so they feel they are their protectors, their teachers, and their friends. Steve, the youngest of five, spoke at length about how he relies on his older brothers for support and protection.

"having someone that stands up for you and like ... guys, like know, they won't cause with me... this Std Five wanted to fight with me, the guy came up to me and said, no you've got a big brother, and that was pretty cool... so I can go to them and they'll sort it out"

Like Steve, some boys feel that having older siblings is often very advantageous. They feel that in spite of their sibling relationships being difficult, their siblings support them if they get in a fight. Some boys referred to their older siblings as experts as they provide sport coaching at the school and at sport clubs. Steve noted this and remarked that as his siblings are older they train him at sport and help him with school work. Phil spoke about how he and his two older siblings have fun together and he feels that both his siblings are involved in his life. They help him with his computer games, with homework, and they fetch him from school. In addition he said

“D³ looks after me ... teaches [me] stuff about life (.) S has told me a lot about college and stuff, how the teachers are what teachers I must try and stay away from (.) what kids will tease me or will beat me up”

Later he added *“they teach you about life ... what to expect like tomorrow and stuff in the future”*. As with Phil and Steve many of the other boys said that having older siblings is helpful as their older siblings, have had more experience and so are able to guide them. Joe spoke about his older brother as being very clever, a high achiever and very strong. He said

“it is great because he helps me with sport and academics(.) because you have got an older sibling who does lots of sports and he has been there and helps [Joe]”

Steve, Phil and Joe experienced their relationship with their sibling as being reciprocal. These boys did not interpret the age difference as making their older sibling “bossy” but felt that their age differences were beneficial for both the older and younger siblings. Their perception was that although their older siblings have more status and power than they have, they did not experience this as exclusively negative. Joe, who spends a lot of time with his older brother, said that they both like doing sport for recreation together

“...I can't really help him with his academics but sometimes...for like sort of fun things like for [a sport] and stuff like that ...I can't do things that he can do for me like in academics and sport because he is older than me but [I] will be there for the [sport]and things”

Joe is realistic and realises he cannot help his brother with school work as his sibling is older and so has more skills than Joe. However, he feels that having an older brother is

³ In order to protect the boys' anonymity I have used an initial when the boys used a person's name. I then changed the initial and used an initial which is unrelated to the person's name.

valuable as he helps him both with his academic work and with sport. He also said that he contributes in their relationship by providing companionship for his older brother and he is instrumental in the camaraderie that they enjoy. Joe feels this is important for both him and for his older sibling and their camaraderie deepens their relationship. Another boy, Phil, also reported having a warm relationship with his siblings.

Phil spoke about his relationship with his brothers as being close, affectionate and supportive and did not allude at all to feeling bullied or persecuted. He admires his brothers and included many references to their skills in his account. Phil also spoke about how strong both his brothers are. He added that they try and show off and prove their strength by punching him and they “*beat [him] up*”

“[S] is also pretty strong and the way he says he loves me is like he beats me up. And I know so I don’t mind (.)I also play with him like, like punching and stuff”.

Later he added

“when my friends come over [his siblings] try and show off, my brother S tries to show how he is stronger and he like punches me and stuff(.) but it is fine because he doesn’t hurt me that much”

He does not see this as negative or that his siblings are tormenting him, unlike some other boys, who did not report having a close relationship with their siblings, and who experienced their sibling fights as pure aggression. He interprets the “*punching and stuff*” as positive. He sees his interactions with his siblings as healthy and a normal and acceptable part of his development. Phil finds their “*fighting*” to be a time where he and his older brothers interact. Despite the fact that his siblings necessarily have more power than him, he does not feel persecuted but feels their fighting is high-spirited “*playing*”. He did not report feeling shamed or belittled by their conflicts, but on the contrary, Phil explained their “*play*” fighting as a time where they are all able to express their feelings in a non-verbal way. In addition, he explained, “*[they have] taught me how to defend myself*”. Phil finds his powerful older siblings helpful as they have taught him how to protect himself. He feels that part of the function of his older siblings is to prepare him for the difficulties that lie ahead. This may be a defense of his burgeoning masculinity. However, this study is descriptive in nature and therefore possible interpretive aspects are

not of focus. Many of the boys reported that although their siblings were sometimes annoying, they have close relationships with them. Joe, like Phil feels his sibling protects and guides him he described his relationship with his brother, who is several years older than him

“It’s more like a looking after type of thing (.) it’s like close (.) two brothers, it doesn’t matter how old they are and stuff like that, they are there for each other. It doesn’t matter who is older and that. When [one is] in trouble the other one is there for the other one”

He said that age was largely irrelevant for him and added that a close and long term satisfying bond is more important for him. He and his brother have many common interests in spite of their age difference. Joe said he and his brother actively pursue their common interests in order to sustain their relationship. Together they form a close bond which he hopes will last all their lives. He anticipates that they will *“have a relationship when my parents are gone”*.

Derek, who has one younger sibling, had a different view of age and age differences. He said

“...it feels quite cool [to have a sibling] because you are not the youngest any more”

He was the only boy who mentioned being pleased to have a younger sibling as it made him *“not the youngest”* but the oldest. He is uncomfortable that he is the *“second youngest in the grade”* at school. Having a younger sibling makes him feel that he is bigger than at least one person, his younger sibling. He feels that he and his brother have a conflictual relationship:

“S [sibling] is, really annoying, little, brat, he’s like, uhm really naughty and thinks only of himself”

Although Derek feels his brother is tiresome and *“annoying”* he nevertheless values their relationship:

“the best thing I can think of having a brother is somebody that is always there to talk to or to play with or something like that”

However, not all the boys felt that they wanted siblings and one in particular experienced a more negative relationship with his older brother.

Sam was the only child interviewed who said that he would prefer to be an only child. When asked how he would find it if he had no siblings, he said *“I’d feel happy because then all the privileges would have been mine”*. He has one older brother and one younger sister, and explained that he and his brother have a conflictual relationship

“and me and him [older brother] don’t get along so well, because he is older than me, like fighting(.) we fight over stupid things like when we are watching TV”

Later he added that his sister is boring

“I just sit and watch TV with her [sister] and play with her toys ...its ok, like, I do it to pass the time”

Initially some other boys also said that if they didn’t have any siblings they would have more privileges and possessions. However all, besides Sam, felt that this in itself was not sufficient for them to want to be an only child. In spite of the difficult relationships which many of the boys spoke about, all said that they would choose to have siblings over being an only child. For example, when talking about being an only child Craig initially said

“Having [siblings] is like really cool because they can play with you sometimes (.) and ja it’s cool because they bring all their girlfriends home so I can have lots of friends”

He thought about it more and then added

“it would suck being an only child(.) they [siblings] are company (.) it would suck and it would rock ... it would rock because an only child they get a lot of presents and stuff and is would really suck because you would never have anyone to play with [he later added] and when I am an only child I would get like lots of things”

In this quote, Craig makes specific reference to his feelings of ambivalence, but in spite of this he concluded that he would not like to be an only child as his siblings are company for him. Don also said he has problems in dealing with his older sibling who is very competitive, threatening and aggressive. When asked about being an only child he said

“I wouldn’t really like it, I wouldn’t miss the fighting ... the good times that I have with him would be gone, my sport would be a lot worse and I’ll get bored, bored, bored”

Like Don, Warren said that even though he finds his three younger siblings “irritating” and demanding, he would find it boring not to have siblings. He thought carefully about his feelings about having siblings. After some time he said that if he had no siblings he could visit his peers more. However, he said “*I’d prefer them [siblings] to stay than not to have them...I’d rather have them*”. Peter’s views correspond with Warren’s. He said that his two younger brothers are irritating but it would be boring to have no siblings.

Joe discussed his very close relationship with his sibling and said he’d be “lonely” without a sibling. He added

“single children say oh its more fun to be a single, you get more attention (.) but I don’t think it’s the case because say your parents are busy or something then you’re left at the house on your own (.) like when my parents go out, me and my brother go and watch a movie or something”.

Derek and John also felt that not having siblings would be lonely as well as boring. Derek elucidated

“[having a sibling can be] quite annoying because [you] might not be able to do what you want. If you are an only child you can get lonely, and get selfish, you are not used to like, sharing with people and you would get bored and all kinds of stuff... it feels quite cool [to have a sibling]because you are not the youngest any more”

In addition to feeling that not having siblings would make him “selfish”, he also made reference to the importance of “learning to share” and the role that siblings play in this. Many of the boys’ spoke about their interactions with their siblings as being competitive and conflictual. Others said their siblings provide help, support and camaraderie. In spite of most of them feeling that their siblings were difficult at times, they still preferred having a sibling to being an only child.

Of all the boys interviewed only Craig, made direct reference to his need to compete with his two younger siblings for his parents’ resources

“They get all the clothes, the latest clothes and I never get anything and [his siblings] get so many, so ja I hate it because when I go shopping I get one pair of shoes and [sibling] gets fifty which kind of sucks”

Throughout the interview he made a number of references to how he feels left out and isolated and that he forms alliances with his parents and other adults. Two other boys also referred to their parents.

Ned spoke about feeling jealous of his brother who is very good at sport and so *“he [gets] a lot of love and attention (.) and he got a new bat”*. He later referred to how he forms alliances with his father, who is his coach and his mother who helps him with his homework. Warren spoke about his feelings about his infant sibling and how his mother is very busy now that she has to care for the new child. He mentioned that his mother is unable to take him to school and fetch him or to help him with his homework. When asked about how he felt about this he said *“I don’t really mind because even before I just did my own thing”*. Although most of the boys spoke about competitive relationships that they had with their siblings they spoke about competition as a means of resolving and coping with differences in their interactions with their different siblings.

Thus to conclude this section, many of the boys’ accounts indicated that with differences in age came hierarchical differentiation and inequality in power and status. Some said older siblings have more status and power and younger siblings have less. However this was not the case with all the boys’ reports. Certain of the boys, Steve and Joe in particular, felt that although they are younger than their siblings their relationships were not merely characterised by inequality in rank and status. Their perception was that they have status and power in different ways and that power was not merely about being domineering and “bossy”.

2. Brothers and sisters

All the boys interviewed spent considerable time reflecting on gender roles in their interviews and discussed different aspects about their brothers and sisters. However, none of the boys, besides Craig, made direct or specific reference to gender. Nevertheless the way they discussed their siblings highlighted the impact gender has on their relationships. The boys who only have brothers spoke about how they feel included and part of the group, and many used their gender to talk about their skills and power. The boys who

have sisters focused on how different they are to their sisters. The boys' accounts clearly showed that regardless of their experiences of gender similarities and differences they all, besides Sam, to some extent desire a close relationship with their siblings.

Initially when looking at the texts it appeared as if many of the boys have a superficial, though age appropriate, understanding of gender. They spoke about it in a conventional manner and their reports were characterised by many references to elements of masculine stereotypes. For example, many of the boys spoke about how aggressive, strong, competitive and active their brothers are. However, many of the boys qualified their point of view and later showed a more textured and complex understanding of their relationships. Others referred to stereotypical feminine activities, such as being understanding, considerate, gentle, and kind. Some boys included these characteristics in making sense of their sibling relationships and their narratives showed that they experienced their relationships as being characterised by both masculine and feminine behaviour. For example, three boys in particular spoke at length about playing sport with their brothers but ended their interviews by saying that the best part of having a sibling is to have someone with whom they have close emotional contact, as Phil said siblings "*are nice because we get to just talk to about stuff*".

Many of the boys' stories highlighted the importance that they place on power and status. Their narrations frequently highlighted the vital role that size and strength, activity and sporting prowess played in their understanding of gender. The boys clearly felt that their interactions with their brothers, both older and younger, exposed them to physical challenges. For example, Steve made a number of references to the fact that his three older brothers are "*big and strong*". He also spoke about "*play fighting*" with his brothers and said

"it's like fun playing with him [sibling] he just doesn't know his own strength...he is very strong"

Later he added

"N is pretty scary because like, when he is angry (.) if he gets angry with you (.) [but] he won't ever hurt you(.) he only hurts you when he plays with you, he would rather go and punch a wall and break his hand than hit you"

Steve's concept of his brothers is closely related to his feelings about size and strength. In his account he spoke at length about their physical prowess and he places great importance on this. His KFD drawing supports this. In his drawing Steve drew himself and his four brothers as large, in excess of fifteen centimetres, and they all have exceptionally broad shoulders, solid torsos, thick arms and strong legs. These characteristics typically indicate that the drawer sees the person/people as robust and tough. However Steve not only places value on strength and power but also on activity. He said

"this is my big brother N, he like he can't sit down and like work, he's got to be active all the time(.) he's like always been really nice to me"

To begin with, his report focused on his siblings' size, strength and high levels of activity. He also made numerous references to how much time he and his brothers spend together while playing sport. Steve describes his brothers as very good at sport, aggressive and in addition to their size and strength, their sporting prowess is clearly important for him.

In his account Steve spoke at length about their competitive sport participation. He feels this as a time when they are very close and twice he referred to playing sport as belonging: *"it's like a big family"*. Steve referred to playing sport as the time when he feels particularly close to his brothers and it is likely that their sport involvement is not merely about strength and physical activity, but it is also a time when they share in the emotional highs and lows *"like when we lose the game"*. Not only is sport about physical activity and competition but it is a time when they talk about their feelings including their feelings about winning and losing. Steve's account plainly displayed how highly he thinks of his brothers' proficiency on the sport field and their physical strength. In addition, he places value on their consideration and kindness. He described the brothers with whom he relates best

"like I get along most with Q and N [two siblings](.) its like N and Q have been like kind to me ...don't usually hit me"

On initial examination of the text it appears as if Steve understands his relationship with his siblings as stereotypically masculine as he emphasises and focuses on their potency

and vigour. However, his grasp of gender is not merely simplistic or stereotypical and it is clear that although he sees his brothers as big and strong Steve also attaches importance to Q and N's kindness. This compassion is fundamental to his close relationship to these two brothers. His relationship with his other brothers, E & O is different. Intimacy is expressed through activity rather than verbally. This depiction of brotherly love is one of tomfoolery, play and combat. Consideration or kindness seems understood as having limits to rough play rather than as displays of affection.

He describes his experience with another sibling E

“ like when [he] gets angry(.)like with E just like (.) overdone...he can never just play ...its...like he will start fighting for real”

Steve said that even though M gets angry and can be aggressive and violent Steve does not see this as frightening or seriously threatening. He feels E is intimidating and upsetting and he explains that they do not get along. When they fight he takes it seriously. Steve's relationship with his four siblings is noticeably different. He has a close relationship with two brothers and he sees their relationship as encompassing both typically masculine and feminine characteristics. However, he experiences his other two brothers are more stereotypically masculine and he spoke about their relationship as being characterised by aggressive and conflictual interactions.

In his account Phil made many references to strength, physical prowess, competency and rationality. He referred to how big his brother is *“like [sibling] is the tall one, [he is so] big he had to have a custom [sporting equipment] made for him”*. Phil admires this brother as he

“also is pretty smart. He won the maths prize for [name of university]he went to [name of country] and he is going to go and see if he can get into university there”

Phil spoke at length about his brothers' strength and prowess. For example, he spoke about T, his sibling, fighting and punching him to show that he is strong

“...when my friends come over they [sibling] tries to show off...my brother S tries to show how he is stronger and he like punches me and stuff”

He spoke about how he and his brothers engage in traditional boy activities:

“sometimes we [he and his siblings] play with our dogs ... and there is a hill next to our house and then we like play on the hill... and we really play cricket and soccer because our garden is big ... and sometimes we go to scouts and our garden has a big wall and we take a rope and swing around this wall and then we like try and climb up and down the wall and stuff”

In addition to his many references to size, strength and academic competency, Phil’s explains his sibling relationships by referring to conventional gender roles. He enjoys the boy games he and his brothers play. He explained that his brothers are bigger than him and are thus more powerful than him. However, he added

“like my brother E [oldest sibling](.) he is tall, but they say, the doctors say I am going to get like quite taller than him, they say I am going to be so tall that I’ll bend down when I go through doors and stuff”

Phil is aware of and feels keenly that he is smaller than his siblings. He finds this difficult and spoke about authority figures, “*the doctors*”, who are confident that he will grow up and be big and strong. However, it is not only his brothers who are strong are powerful. He was at pains to explain how strong he is. Phil explained

“I like hurting myself (.) I wanted to break my arm but I never seem (.)I never can because (.) uhm (.) I like milk so my bones are really strong (.)the doctor says it is because I drink so much milk”

Initially it appears as if Phil needs to emphasise how he is also very strong and powerful. By aspiring to be as big and powerful as his siblings and to show that he is also strong, he identifies with them and so he belongs to the group of “*strong boy[s]*”. His opening explanation of T’s behaviour seems to indicate that he values a ‘boys don’t cry’ approach. However, much like with Steve, if one explores his text further it is clear that Phil later clarified T’s tough behaviour. He understands that T has difficulty in verbalising his feelings and so he responds aggressively.

“he is like the top one (.) my mom says he has never actually cried(.)he is also pretty strong and they way he says he loves me, is like he beats me up(.)and I know that so I don’t mind”

Phil is sensitive to the complicated dynamics between his siblings and he understands why his brother behaves as he does. He does not misinterpret T’s intentions and perceive him as indiscriminately aggressive. Phil is clearly aware that T has difficulty in expressing his feelings verbally and so reacts aggressively and “*punches and stuff*”.

However, he understands that this does not mean that he does not love Phil and it his brother's behaviour is "*just like play-play fighting*".

It is clear from Phil's account that he admires his oldest brother for his competency, size and academic and sporting expertise. However he emphasised that he feels particularly close to his other brother, T, and that they have a particularly warm and caring relationship. T has had significant social, academic and conduct problems and is not a high achiever. However, Phil stressed that he is closer to T than his other brother in spite of his aggressive behaviour. Their relationship is based not on aggression and violence, stereotypically masculine behaviour but on communication, understanding and consideration. Conventional feminine roles are essential to their relationship. They have close contact

"It's nice [having siblings] because (.) if you are like sad, you can talk to someone or (.) if you are lonely you have someone to play with"

Most of the boys made mention of their close relationships and although none of the boys spoke about severe bullying at the hands of their siblings, many of the boys referred to how they fight with their siblings. Don, said that his brother is very aggressive, competitive and frequently engage in power struggles

"always trying to beat each other ... and when he doesn't beat me he tries to hurt me"

He also made many references to his brother being very antagonistic "*like playing soccer he'll try and trip me (.) he doesn't like being beaten*". However, unlike Steve and Phil, he doesn't see his brother's behaviour as normal and acceptable. He has contradictory feelings about his brother and early in the interview said he feels overwhelmed by this aggression and said "*ja so I can't defend my self against him ... I can't deal with the violence*". However, he later explained

"he'll like grab my head and then he threatens me like, I'll hurt you so bad or something (.) but he won't really hurt me(.)he doesn't really hit me and I don't really hit him(.)it's more like he threatens me "

Don sees his brother as unpredictable and aggressive and he is cautious and vigilant in his dealings with him. He did not describe their relationship as close. However, he spoke at length about his cousin N

“me and N have lots in common (.) we are good friends. We talk, play games and show each other stuff”

He added that there is a difference between his relationship with his brother and his cousin

“It’s like N [cousin] I look up to him and he is like all nice and kind...helps me... and my brother ...I also look up to him...[but] not in the same way...with [brother] it is a little bit more difficult”

Don and his brother have a conflictual relationship. He understands that all the stereotypically masculine roles, being big, strong and aggressive, are important for his brother but this does not bode well for them having a close relationship. He understands that with his brother, *“there is like no other way (.) it is just the way it works”*, but Don feels closer and more comfortable with his cousin who is kind and understanding.

Don has come to terms with his brother’s aggressive and competitive behaviour. He feels that dealing with his brother difficult behaviour has taught him to utilise different strategies in coping. With his brother direct confrontation is not always the best option *“I have learned to deal with it...I just get away from him”*. Although his brother appears to wield more power than Don, it is clear that Don is able to exercise power indirectly through the choices he makes.

The boys also spoke about how they engage in much physical rough and tumble with their siblings. Phil says *“I also play with him [his sibling] like punching and stuff”*. Steve said of his oldest brother *“we play fight and wrestle and that sort of stuff [which is] pretty fun”*. Like Phil and Steve, Don also spoke about testing his strength on his sibling

“because of all the rivalry and sports and stuff (.) and I mean its everything...when we walk to the shower we will both start running and try and hit each other into the wall (.)sometimes it is fun and sometimes it is annoying(.) there is no other way(.)its just the way it works, I like it like that (.)it is fun to try and compete and try and beat each other”

Some boys spoke about their physical interaction with their siblings and made sense of this by saying that it assists them learning to cope by adopting different tactics. Many boys felt that “fighting” with their siblings empowered them and helped with their feelings of agency and potency as it teaches them how “*to protect [themselves]*”.

In Derek’s account his experience of having a brother played out differently. He explained that he and his brother, who is younger, have a conflictual and competitive relationship. Derek finds his brother “*very annoying*” and they often clash. When asked about having no brothers or sisters Derek said “*I’d prefer to have a sister to brothers*”, but he was unable to elaborate why he felt like this about his brother. He also spoke about how frustrating he finds his brother and how he enjoys irritating him.

Derek described how he frequently teases his brother. He explained how he taunts him about “*three or four girls that he knows*” which makes his brother very angry. Derek realises that teasing his brother about girls, in particular, results in his brother reacting in a very dramatic manner and losing control. His account highlights how he uses his awareness of the differences between boys and girls to provoke his brother. Derek has no sisters and attends an all boys’ school. By provoking his brother he is exploring at least two aspects of his gender development. On the brink of adolescence, it is appropriate that Derek is developing an interest and awareness of the opposite sex. Furthermore, his brother who “*is a really annoying ... little... brat*” has access to a valuable and highly desirable resource, girlfriends. On the one hand his teasing is about their conflictual relationship. He gets “*really, really cross*” and frustrated with his brother and the teasing is an effective way to gain his brother’s attention. However, it also concerns his developing interest in girls.

Ridiculing his brother and can be seen as compensatory bravado. He is interested in girls but is in an environment where he has little daily contact with girls. So his teasing is due partly to the build up of tension in his relationship with his brother and is his way of dealing with this. However, it is also due to his developmental stage and his early interest in the opposite sex. His brother’s female friendships exclude Derek and make him feel

isolated and this changes the power structures. Derek as the oldest is stronger and more skilful and so feels that he wields more power than his brother. However, his brother with his contact with girls has introduced a new power differential.

Unlike Derek, who has little contact with girls, Craig has two sisters. However, like Derek he also experiences the opposite sex as confusing. Craig was the only child interviewed who made direct reference to gender and his account showed how he finds girls bewildering. In addition, he referred to feminine stereotypes and he spoke about how this makes him feel excluded. Craig has no brothers but has sisters,

“ja it would be the best (.) to have a brother(.)it would be fun to play with him and it would make my life easier ... my sister wouldn't be so much into me because she is a girl and then I can teach him (.)because my sister teaches my baby sister how to be a girl because (.) like my (.) baby sister and I would be playing shoes(.) and she used to pee like this (.) she used to go pee like a boy (.)ja and she used to like do that and my sister would go no, no, no and my sister is teaching her how to be a kind of ballerina and stuff like that like a girl(.) a proper girl which kind of sucks now, but I mean she is meant to be a girl ... and now (.)'cause whenever I walk into the bathroom my big sister is like no don't look at my boobs (.) so it kind of sucks”

During the interview Craig made many references to how he and his older sister have a conflictual relationship, and how he often feels left out and rejected by both his sisters. In this quote he refers to feminine roles. For example, his older sister teaches his younger sister about ballet and how to be a “*proper girl*”. Craig's account highlights two points.

Firstly, he speaks about teaching his youngest sister how to urinate like a boy and describes his feelings about his other sister taking over his role of teacher. He initially teaches his sister to urinate like a boy and feels that they are the same as they urinate the same way. However he is confused and distressed when his older sister usurps this role and teaches her how to be a proper girl. He understands that she is expected to behave like a girl, but it makes him feel different and isolated when she behaves in a way which is fitting, in both his and his sister's view, for a girl. The second point is more about a developmental issue and pertains to his age appropriate interest in his older sister's physical development. Again here he feels confused, rejected and isolated when his sister banishes him from the bathroom.

Craig starts the vignette by saying he would like to have a brother, who would be the same as him, and then speaks about how he is different and how he feels left out by his sisters. Both of these issues highlight how he feels isolated and excluded. So for Craig his experience of gender highlights his feelings of being different and excluded. His sisters band together and do their girl things which he sees as excluding him. Although he feels that as he is the oldest he has more status (discussed in previous section) his sisters, by forming an alliance based on their gender, are able to wield their power indirectly, and this negates his rank. Also Craig interprets gender differences in another way, he sees the benefit of having sisters as through them he has access to other girls. However Craig and Derek differed in one respect. Derek, unlike Craig, was unable to express his confusion and interest in girls. He could not verbalise the important role that access to the opposite sex have for him. Two other boys have sisters

Both of these boys, Warren and Sam, unlike Craig, have sisters who were considerably younger than them. In their interviews they merely made fleeting reference to their sisters. Warren said

“she [sibling] runs a lot and I don’t really like her (.)I do like her (.) but (.)ja (.)bit irritating (.)I don’t know (.) she like moans for everything, but sometimes she is nice”

When asked about his sister Sam said

“her name is M and she is quite cute (.)[I] just sit and watch TV with her...play with her toys (.) I do it to pass the time”.

Neither Warren nor Sam spoke about having close contact or much interaction with their sisters. They did not respond spontaneously about them and their answers to the researcher’s questions were largely non committal. It must be noted that both Warren and Sam had more than one other sibling and their sisters were much younger than them. So at thirteen years old it is possible that they would have more contact with their other siblings who are older. It is likely that this was due more to their sisters’ ages than their gender.

In conclusion, many of the boys spoke about gender roles to make sense of their relationships with their brothers and sisters. For example, some of the boys spoke about

the similarities in gender and how this resulted in them having a sense of belonging and of being-the-same-as their brothers. On the other hand Craig expressed that he feels isolated and different from his sisters. In their discussion of their brothers and sisters the boys showed their understanding of the complexity of gender roles and gendered identities. Some of them did not merely rely on superficial gender differences to describe their sibling relationships. These boys' accounts highlighted how they have a deeper and more complex understanding of the relationship between brothers and sisters. Power and strength was important for most of the boys and many made reference to their brothers' competency and skill. In particular many placed high value on their siblings' academic and sporting expertise and achievements. For many of the boys their experience of gender in their sibling relationships showed how they perceive contradictory aspects of these relationships. Their reports highlighted their awareness of the role of aggression and anger in their relationships and most of the boys, despite the gender of their sibling, identified how conflictory their relationships are.

3. Competition and conflict

The majority of the boys' accounts reflected their awareness that their sibling relationships are rivalrous and conflictual. Most of the boys spoke of competition between their siblings. The degree of this enmity varied from open hostility to playful "*betting a coke to see who can land the biggest fish*". In their accounts, boys spoke about competition and conflict in relation to similarities and/or differences in their sibling relationships and no boy made mention of competition with his siblings in relation to his parents. Instead it was noted that their interviews emphasized the boys' understanding of likeness and/or dissimilarity. In addition some boys also spoke about how their experience of conflict and competition differed as a result of the differences in their relationships with their different siblings.

Many of the boys used examples, such as their interest in playing or watching sport, to highlight the likenesses between them and their siblings. For example, Steve said that he and his brothers have many similar interests. In his interview he went into a lengthy

description of how very close he is to two of his brothers. They spend a lot of time together as they play the same sport and do the same extramural activities

“well the three of us [siblings] have all got [name of activity] qualifications ... I know all the people [name of activity] in the school (.) we are all involved in [name], it's like a big family[name of sport]it is like one big family ”.

Steve feels that their similar interests reflect their close relationship which he describes as belonging to a “*family*”. In his KFD drawing, which was described in a previous section, it is noticeable that he drew himself and his siblings with no identifying features. They are all identical, the boys are all the same size and are drawn in the same style with broad shoulders and thick arms, big feet and solid legs. This supports his account of them all being very similar with similar interests and are a cohesive unit. However, in spite of talking about how close he and his brothers are, there are two brothers with which he does not get along well. As described in a previous section he sees them as different as they are “*touchy*” and “*dodgy*”. He mentioned one brother, E, in particular. They have a competitive and conflictual relationship and he said that E has difficulty in “*play-fighting*” and soon the “*teasing*” becomes genuinely competitive and it develops into “*fighting for real*”. He said

“No E will just hurt you, it's like he teases, makes fun (.) of the music [other siblings] listen to, and then as soon as I go and make fun of what he listens to he just gets angry”

Steve stressed that he and two of his brothers are close and they enjoy participating in similar activities. However, he also said that, although he and his other two brothers also have similar interests, their relationship is characterised by much rivalry and fighting. He later added

“like now I have started to be able to fight back a bit (.) there was a stage when I just walked around with like a pole (.) because he [sibling] never left me alone”

During the interview he spoke at length about the different relationships he has with his siblings. His account outlined clearly that they are all different and yet they are still close.

In addition he has learnt how to deal with those differences

“[sibling] got older (.) he went through a stage (.) when you stayed away from him, [another sibling] didn't really have that, but [another sibling] is just permanently angry”.

In his report, Steve did not express feelings of being overwhelmed by the conflict between him and his aggressive and competitive brothers. He makes sense of the conflictual relationship he and his siblings have, by drawing on it to increase his confidence and develop his ability to protect himself *“like now I started to be able to fight back a bit”*.

Don and his brother have a conflictual relationship which he experiences as characterised by aggressive interactions. As he explained, he and his brother are *“always trying to beat each other ...if we don’t...then we start boxing”*. However he also said

“I like watching him playing sports and he likes watching me playing sports but we can’t play sport together...ten minutes we get angry... Playstation [computer game], we fight...even board games...we are always trying to beat each other...even school marks”

They compete with each other but their similar interests, such as participating in the same sport, results in conflict.

“my brother was good at tennis so I tried to start tennis(.) but like(.)I was okay (.) and then I gave up and then he gave it up”

He feels that although they have many similar interests they cannot do the same sport or games as it results in them fighting and he has come to terms with the fact that they each have their own interests. Despite the fact that Don feels they cannot play the same sport, he does not feel that they have a poor relationship. He explained that he feels close to his brother when he watches his brother playing sport or vice versa and his brother watches him. For him and his brother the problems occur when they try and compete against each other in the same activity so they now support each other but play different sports.

Terry, like Don, said that he and his brother are not close. He spoke about having a rivalrous and competitive relationship with his brother and one that is characterised by frequent disagreements. Terry introduced his brother by saying *“we just fight...ja, like over sport sometimes...when he cheats or I cheat”*. He said that he and his brother have similar interests in sport and play a number of sports together. However, his account suggests that he and his brother fight if they play the same sport. He said he feels this is

more prevalent if they play sport in which his brother is more skilful than Terry. For example, his brother is good at one particular sport which Terry doesn't play and so he, Terry, is beaten regularly as soon as they start playing. He said this makes him very angry and he either cheats or "*just throws [sporting equipment] at [brother's] head*". He feels good when he does this "*because I get rid of my anger*". However, he added later that he finds it distressing when he and his brother fight and cheat and said that they do not clash when they are on holiday at the beach. He explained that although they are very active and often play sport together, while on holiday, they do not fight as they do not compete with each other while surfing and swimming. In his KFD drawing Terry drew his mother, father and brother and excluded himself. His KFD drawing suggests that he feels excluded from the family. It also indicates that he feels different from his brother and experiences feelings of being isolated and separate. Some of the other boys' reports indicated that they are aware of dissimilarities between them and their siblings.

Ned spoke about feeling different to his brothers and said that their relationships are rivalrous. He is the eldest of three brothers and described at length how much sport he and his brothers play. Ned also spoke about feeling "*quite jealous*" of his brother who is slightly younger than him. This brother is very good at one particular sport and Ned dislikes being a spectator at his brother's games, but added "*I do watch him so it can also help me*". He described how he worries that his brother will be better than him.

"and last year I made [a high score] and I feel much better...then this year like because I helped T [sibling] a lot. I am not taking all the credit but I helped T a lot in his [sport] so he made [a high score] and that is good for his age...so I was kind of hoping(.)S don't beat my score (.) S don't beat my score (.) ja and it made me feel so good (.) that S was there watching me". (Participant's emphasis)

He also said

"also at [the sport meeting] T was just there cheering me on so he started shouting, come on Ned you can do it(.) come on! ja and it like made me happy"

Ned made many references to his competitive and conflictual relationship with his siblings. He feels envious of his brother's sporting skills and is anxious that S might be more successful than him. However, in spite of making reference to how difficult he finds

his brother's successes and how this makes him feel left out and inadequate. Ned did not only speak about having a conflictual relationship with his brother, he also spoke of the supportive relationship that they have. Ned drew himself, his siblings and his parents in his KFD drawing. The siblings are all holding pieces of the same type of sporting equipment. His drawing suggests that although at times he feels angry, jealous and antagonised by his brother's achievements, he also feels that they have a caring and close relationship. He sees it as a relationship which is exemplified by their mutual admiration and common interests. Ned's account suggests that the conflict and competition that he and his siblings experience not only plays a role in Ned facing his own inadequacies and but it also emphasises his competencies.

Some of the boys spoke about how their siblings' size and age highlighted differences between them. Joe initially made reference how different he and his brother are, in that they have different abilities. He introduced his brother by saying that he is a number of years older than him, and that he is very skilful. His brother is "*about eight foot tall (.)huge*", he is also a high academic achiever "*he is super, super, super clever, my brother*", and he is very sporty and is a leader. Joe made mention of the close relationship that they share and listed their common interests

"play sport together...ja all the time, boxing, cricket, soccer, rugby and that is a bonus because we live [name of place]so it is like do you want to kick a rugby ball ja...we go [outside] and kick a rugby ball."

However when the interviewer asked how his brother's considerable sporting and academic triumphs made him feel he referred to the similarities between them

"I don't really mind that much (.) because I am not like dumb (.)I got academic honours (.) so its not that hard (.) it is like we are both extremely (.) we both like to play sport and academics (.) so that is great because we each get a turn in the spotlight"

Joe referred to his brother's achievements many times during the interview and he mentioned that he is proud of his brother. He spoke at length about how he holds his brother in high esteem and reveres him. However, as can be seen in this quote Joe has a balanced and realistic view of his own abilities. Unlike Ned, he did not report feeling envious, inadequate or belittled by his brother's achievements. Furthermore, he feels their

close relationship, based on their mutual respect and care, is able to sustain both boys' achievements without feelings of inadequacy and or feeling isolated and rejected. During the interview he spoke about how he sees his relationship with his brother as very positive and supportive. When asked how important his relationship is with his brother he said "*oh it is [important] more than any other [relationship]*".

Phil, like Joe also describes his brothers as older and skilful, big and strong. He spoke about how he and his siblings have a close relationship and have many similar interests, such as sport, going to scouts together and he said they often play games together. In addition he and his oldest brother play the same sport and this brother has recently become his coach, which he feels "*is very nice (.)I spend more time with him*". However, in spite of enjoying their company and wanting to spend time with them, Phil is aware that there are fundamental differences between him and his brothers.

Phil spoke about how different his brothers are. His one brother is a high achiever who recently won a scholarship to go overseas, but his other brother has many serious scholastic and behavioural problems. He mentioned this brother's showing off and aggressive behaviour when Phil is with his friends. Phil does not interpret this behaviour as conflictual and it does not make him angry or resentful. It does not negatively impact on their relationship, which Phil describes as close. He said, without his sibling, "*I probably will be sadder*". He makes sense of the differences between the siblings and their fighting as beneficial as they have "*taught me how to defend myself if someone is hurting me*". Most of the boys who had more than one sibling spoke about differences in quality in their relationship with their different siblings.

Craig's experience of conflictual sibling relationships differs from Phil's. He spoke about his relationship with his sister as being very conflictual, "*we don't get along and we normally fight*". He said his two sisters have a good relationship with each other but his relationship with his one sister is problematic.

"I don't like her because she's always telling me and teasing me, she's taller than me so I tease her about that (.) she's really mean"

He said they frequently clash

“whenever I try and make her a nice cup of tea, she never says thank you (.) she doesn’t appreciate what I do for her which really sucks...she doesn’t even try and make an effort (.)she’ll take it [the tea he made her] and drink it and then when like I come and I ask her for tea she goes ok (.) and when I come back she’s like I thought you were going to make it yourself”

Craig also spoke about how his sister, who is slightly younger than him, does not keep her promises, frequently tests limits and often “*get[s] smacks*” as she is disobedient. He highlighted the differences that exist between them and explained in great detail that he values respect and appreciation highly. He is obedient and does not test limits. Craig’s sister’s casual disregard for authority is very different to his rule compliance. He feels that this difference is fundamental in their conflictual relationship. Craig spoke about the differences in his relationships with his two sisters and whereas he and the sibling who is slightly younger than him clash “*my baby sister and I get on quite well*”.

Like Craig, Steve emphasised how he doesn’t get along with his one sibling E. He said that, unlike his relationships with his other siblings they have a conflictual relationship “*like he [E] will just get angry and start fighting for real with me*”. He spoke about how he and E compete at sport and how this impacts on their problematic relationship. Steve contrasted his conflictual relationship with E with the relationship he has with his other two brothers. He described how protective and supportive they are.

Some boys’ feelings about sharing the same interests and playing the same sport as their siblings differed. For example Peter, who has two brothers, said they all play the same sport and the three brothers also spend most of the weekends participating in an extramural sport together. Peter did not feel that their similar interests result in competition and conflict. He said they have a very close relationship and “*we encourage each other to do things...I enjoy that*”. He described how his youngest brother is very demanding and irritating, but said this is not problematic for him, as he has

“got used to that kind of stuff, sometimes he [youngest sibling] gets spoiled (.) irritating I should say (.) but other times I guess he is still young”.

Peter said that his relationship with his two siblings differs. He spoke about being tolerant of these differences and said he has learnt to understand them.

In conclusion, as in all the previous sections, the boys' accounts described a wide range of different experiences. Furthermore, many of the boys' reports reflected their awareness of the paradoxical make-up of these relationships. They described how their relationships are both close and conflictual.

Some of the boys used references to their siblings to speak about their own achievements, and some used their siblings' achievements as a bench mark to live up to, while others felt inadequate in comparison to their siblings. Most of the boys said that, at least to some degree they had a close relationship with their siblings while others spoke about their experiences of struggle and discord with their siblings. However, it is noted that their rivalry was focused at their siblings and none of the boys spoke about competing with his siblings in order to gain benefit from his parents. All the boys' accounts illustrated their awareness of the contradictory and complex nature of sibling relationships

Many of the boys felt that as they have similar interests and participated in the same activities as their siblings this draws them closer together. However, other boys felt that having similar interests as their siblings resulted in conflict and highlighted the areas in which they are different. Many of the boys spoke about the competition and their conflictual interaction with their siblings as "*normal*". In addition some of the boys appeared to use their sibling relationships to help them with facing or working through their feelings. For some of the boys their interaction with their siblings resulted in them displaying mature responses to the conflicts, without reliance on adult intervention. A consequence of this was their being adaptable and flexible in difficult situations.

For some of the boys the competition and conflict with their siblings impacted negatively on their relationships. A number of the boys said they are not close to their siblings and spoke about their relationships as being very competitive. This was apparent when they felt that there were considerable discrepancies in ability levels between them and their

siblings. Some boys, who spoke about their siblings as very skilful or accomplished, said their contact with them resulted in them feeling inadequate, separate or even isolated from their siblings. However this was not the case for all the boys. Several boys of the boys, even though they spoke about their skilled siblings said they experienced their relationships as rivalrous. However, it did not prevent them speaking about the close relationship they have with their siblings, even though they expressed feelings of resentment about this rivalrous relationship,

Other boys, in spite of being aware of differences in skills and ability levels, were able to accommodate the feelings their brothers' successes and achievements evoked without feeling incompetent or resentful. Two of these boys described the rivalry as being beneficial as it helped them. Clashing with their siblings resulted in them developing skills to cope with hostile encounters and so increased their confidence levels. The boys' accounts reflected how competition and conflict bolstered their feelings of self-worth and helped them discover new strengths and capabilities. Finally, plainly evident in the boys' reports was their awareness of contradictory feelings about their siblings. On the one hand they had a desire for closeness with them and disliked feeling isolated from them, but they also felt a need to be independent and separate from them.

4. Experience of relationships - about separateness and togetherness

All the boys who were interviewed, with the exception of Sam, have ambivalent feelings about their relationships with their siblings. At times they feel they have close relationships with their siblings and at other times they feel separate from them. In speaking about their siblings, most of the boys made reference to wanting to belong to the sibling group. However, at the other times they felt they wanted to be separate from them. Many of the boys spoke about feeling part of a close knit group with their siblings but also of feeling isolated from them.

(i) **On being separate**

To a greater or lesser degree all the boys spoke about sometimes feeling close to and at other times feeling separate from their siblings. Some boys spoke about their conflictual sibling relationships and expressed how they feel alone and isolated. Once again many of the boys spoke about the role of sport in their relationships. Some boys, spoke at length and glowingly about their older siblings, and expressed the very close relationship that they enjoy with them.

Sam felt differently and had very strongly negative feelings about his siblings. He described conflictual relationships with this brother and said “*me and him don’t get along*” and added he would be happy if he had no siblings. He referred to discord in his relationship with his brother and said he, “[*gets*] *angry with [his brother] a lot of times [then] I scream at him*”. But he added a little while later that their fighting is “*normal*”. After some thought he said was unable to think of anything good about having a brother. In addition, he said he and his siblings are not close. Sam spoke about how it is “*havoc*” at home since the birth of his sister as “*everyone is running after her and making a big fuss*”. Sam said he does not want to spend time with his siblings. When he referred to his sister he said he sits with her “*to pass the time...it’s boring*”, and he prefers spending time with his father. Sam’s KFD drawing hints at the conflictual relationships he spoke about and indicates he feels isolated from his siblings. He drew his siblings standing together next to his parents and his grandfather but excluded himself from the drawing. This omission suggests that he feels distant from his siblings and his family. Excluding himself from his KFD drawing suggests that he feels separate or apart from his siblings and parents. It also indicates that he chooses to withdraw from the family unit and isolate himself. By referring to his boredom with his siblings in his report and his normalisation of their fights suggests that he has a sense of emotional unconnectedness. His experience of his siblings is of being aloof, alone and distant from them. Also it is likely that Sam failed to draw himself, for of all the children interviewed he was the only one who said he would rather have no siblings. He reported that he would prefer to spend time with his parents than with his siblings. Unlike Phil, Sam did not at any time speak about feeling close to his siblings.

Warren, like Sam, has a sibling who is much younger than him. In his narrative he spoke fondly about his baby brother and said “*he is my favourite brother, he is cute (.) I was lucky to have a new brother*”. He also added that since the birth of the baby, his mother is too busy caring for his new sibling and so is unable to do many of the things that she used to do, such as school lifts and homework. He said that he does not mind this as he is “*used to it*”. In addition Warren feels his other two siblings are irritating and he finds them tiresome. For example, he complained about his brother, who is slightly younger than him,

“I don’t really like him (.)because like whenever I get something to do something he [wants to come too] like the [name of sport] me and my friends are going and he wants to come with us but he doesn’t even know any of my friends”

Warren chooses to isolate himself from his three siblings. He is obliged to take care of them and this makes him feel angry and resentful. For example, when speaking about going to watch a sport game, he said he will make arrangements to ensure that his brother does not accompany him and his friends. He provided another example of his wish to separate from his family when he said that if his parents emigrate, which they are thinking of doing, he will refuse to go with the family and will remain in this country “*I can just say I am not going*”. However, Warren also spoke about having ambivalent feelings about his siblings. He said he finds his siblings “*irritating (.) boring*” and annoying but he also said that he would prefer to have siblings “*than not to have them*”

The ambivalence was particularly apparent when during the interview Warren spoke lovingly about his new baby brother “*he is my favourite brother (.) he’s cute*”. However his KFD drawing indicates that he might have different feelings about this sibling. Although he spoke affectionately about his baby brother and more than once he said that he does not mind his mother being very busy since the baby’s birth his KFD suggests otherwise. He first drew his parents standing together with his mother holding a baby and himself standing between his parents and his other siblings. Later he erased the baby, and as he did this he explained that he wanted to make the baby smaller and then proceeded to draw the baby, very small, apart and underneath the rest of the family. This suggests

that he wishes to erase the baby and make him insignificant, which indicates that he feels resentful and might not be as happy about the baby's birth as he reported.

Don, who has one sibling, an older brother, also made many references to their very rivalrous relationship. He said his brother

“doesn't like being beaten , we can't play sport together, we fight (.) we are always trying to beat each other and when he doesn't beat me he tries to hurt me (.) I've learned to deal with it now, I just get away from him (.) like playing soccer he'll try and trip me and so I'll jump and I'll trip him and stuff, ja even on the Playstation (.) try and beat each other, if we don't then we start boxing (.) we try and beat each other”.

Initially in the interview Don made no reference to a close relationship with his brother but spoke at length about how conflictual and aggressive their relationship is. He spoke about being distressed about how his brother threatens him and how he *“can't deal with [his brother's level] of violence”*.

Don also added that they constantly compete with each other:

“its like all of the rivalry with the sport and stuff...and I mean it's everything...when we walk into the shower and I ...we will both start running and try and hit each other into the walls trying to get to the bathroom first...sometimes it is a bit fun and sometimes it is a bit annoying...there is no other way ...it is just how it works....”

However, later in the interview he said:

“...But I am getting bigger now...he is concerned about my sports, he wants me to win, he comes to watch my [sport] games and is happy when I score (...) he is always concerned if I am training ...if I am winning or losing”

On the one hand he finds their conflictual relationship distressing and said *“ja so I can't defend myself against him (sighs) [I] can't deal with the violence”*. But later it is apparent that his view of their relationship is mature. His brother's aggression is not merely to do with violence. Don is able to see the complexity in his sibling's belligerent behaviour and their fights. His sibling

“doesn't like really hit me and I don't really hit him (.) its more like he threatens me ... but he won't really hurt me

Don finds his relationship with his brother difficult but he has been able to cope with the aggression and lack of closeness and has come to terms with his brother's behaviour. In his KFD drawing Don drew his parents and himself and his brother standing close together. This suggests that their rivalrous relationship does not preclude him from feeling that the family is a unit with a certain degree of closeness. Despite his awareness and distress of their conflictual relationship, he does not feel aloof from his brother. Unlike Sam who feels detached from his siblings, he does not see himself and his brother as isolated from each other "...we are like friends but then he goes ...different moods...one day we are friends then next day we are enemies". Don's interview included aspects which suggest that he is aware of the paradoxical nature of his relationship with his brother. He said he feels close to his brother "we are ... we are like friends" but equally he also feels "[he] can't cope with the violence". He describes their relationship as a friendship, which he experiences as warm and accepting but it is also dangerous and frightening. Don was not the only boy who feels his relationship with his siblings is confusing.

Craig has two sisters and he is the oldest of the three. He spoke about how they are not close and he explained how he and his siblings clash

"we [Craig and his sister T who is slightly younger than him]don't get along that well, and we normally fight ...and I play games with her but she doesn't always like playing games with me which makes me really, really (.) really, really mad and then I go and disturb her and stuff and then I fight her and stuff ... my baby sister (.) she and she is really, really bratty and she gets everything she wants ... my baby sister and my big sister get on better, ja (.) well ja, better than my sister and me and my baby sister and I"

Throughout the interview Craig spoke about feeling jealous of his sisters as he feels that he does not get as much "stuff" as they do. He also spoke about his sister T

"I don't like her because she's away telling me [what to do] and teasing me...she is taller than me ... she is really mean"

Craig feels rejected and left out by his two sisters and twice mentioned that he likes being the role model for his sisters and other children that are younger than him "so it's cool (.) I'm like a role model to people". He also spoke of feeling isolated from his siblings and his experience of his siblings is one not one of closeness or camaraderie. For

example, he said he is the oldest and so he deserves respect *“I always say [to his sisters] respect your elders”*. Craig isolates himself by taking on an adult role and trying to keep the peace in the family by taking the blame for his sister’s transgressions.

In the section on Brothers and Sisters, Craig’s feelings about being different from his sisters were discussed. In that section Craig’s perception and experience of gender and gender roles made him feel separate and different. In this latter section the point being discussed is slightly different. Craig separates and to a certain extent isolates himself from his siblings by demanding deference as he is the oldest, by taking on adult and *“role model”* roles. He distances himself from his sisters and yet feels distressed by this feeling of isolation.

He said he feels envious of his sisters as he thinks his parents favour them over him. This was apparent when he spoke about how he felt it is very unfair that his sisters are allowed to stay up until his bed time but he isn’t allowed to stay up later. Craig says it is unfair and he gets angry and *“feels bad”* when he thinks his sisters get preferential treatment. For example he spoke about how his mother punishes him if his sister complains about him but ignores his complaints of his sisters’ misbehaviour *“whenever she [sibling] does something bad I go and tell my mom and she just says, get over it”*.

Ned also spoke about his two younger siblings and how trying and irritating he finds them

“often like when I am trying to study and my brothers would come along in to my room and they would come and play so I said you can play if there is no noise, as soon as they made a noise I kicked them out ...They get annoying and they are always trying to copy what ever I do”

Like Craig, throughout the interview Ned spoke about feeling isolated from his siblings. His account suggests that his feelings of being separate are linked to the roles that he adopts. He too, like Craig forms alliances with his parents and takes on a bossy and adult role. Ned spoke about how he instructs his younger siblings about what they are, and are not, allowed to do and his account indicates that he takes the responsible older brother role seriously. The pacts he forms with his parents, results in his feeling separate and alone.

Not all the boys felt that they have to tell their siblings what to do. However they did all discuss how that sometimes their relationship with their siblings is conflictual and characterised by fighting and hostility. However, in spite of sometimes having antagonistic feelings towards their siblings, most of the boys, even if only making fleeting reference to it, spoke about their desire to feel close to their siblings.

(ii) **On being together**

All the boys, with the exception of Sam, spoke about their siblings providing support, camaraderie and companionship. Some spoke appreciatively about the warm and supportive relationship that they have with their siblings said that they would rather have a sibling than not. On the other hand others made brief and rather grudging reference to preferring to have a sibling than not. The boys indicated that they make sense of being together and/or feeling separate by referring to their participation in sport. From listening to the boys' accounts it was clear that for most of the boys sport plays a significant role in their sibling relationship.

Steve spoke at length about how close he and his four brothers are and how they all do the same sport at school. He recounts how he and his siblings adjusted to a new school they were moved to after they all started playing a particular sport. He described it as like belonging to "*one big family*". In addition to playing the same sport the boys all partake in a particular cultural activity, and again he described this as "*belonging to a family*". Playing the same sport and doing the same cultural activity as his siblings engenders closeness in him and his siblings and makes him feel that he belongs. His report showed how his relationship with two of his brothers differs from that with his other two brothers.

He feels two of his siblings are supportive and caring and the other two are "*dodgy fellows*". In spite of this he made numerous mention of the closeness that all the boys enjoy and he sees the siblings as a closely knit unit. This was particularly apparent when he described how the boys do not go to their parents to resolve conflicts but rely on the

older siblings to sort out the problems. Steve's KFD corroborates his feelings. His drawing shows himself and his four siblings, standing shoulder to shoulder. His parents are slightly behind and apart from the boys and they are also smaller. It is also noted that he drew no facial details or identifying features making the siblings indistinguishable from each other. His drawing confirms his report and indicates that he sees the five boys as so close that they are virtually identical. For Steve, closeness to his brothers is very important and he referred to how supportive and considerate two of his brothers are. He feels he and all his brothers belong to the sibling unit, even though he describes his relationship with his "dodgy" and "touchy" brothers as competitive and conflictual. In spite of speaking about their discordant relationship his KFD suggests that he still sees the sibling group as united.

Peter also drew upon sport to illustrate his closeness to his brothers. He spoke about how much time he and his two younger brothers spend over the weekend playing a recreational sport and that this is a very enjoyable experience for all of them. In his interview Peter said "*we encourage each other [at the sport]... I enjoy that*" and he made frequent mention that he and his brothers have a caring relationship and said "*me and my brothers are close*". In his KFD drawing Peter drew the siblings all leaning against each other. They are standing so close together that they are touching. Peter's hand is holding T's shoulder and T's hand is touching Peter's shorts. T has his arm around N's shoulder and N is holding T's leg. Peter's drawing suggests that he sees his siblings as a close unit, they are supportive of each other and are able to lean on each other.

Phil also spoke about sport coaching, and how his older brother is his sport coach. He introduced his brother by saying "*E is the oldest brother and he is very nice and he is actually my [name of sport] coach*". Later he added "*now he [E] is my coach, it is very nice ...I spend more time with him and stuff...it is just nice*". Throughout the interview Phil spoke about the close bond he and his brothers have as they teach him about life and he feels that they protect him. In addition he spoke about how much fun they all have together, they play with their pets, they watch television together and "*we just talk...we just talk about stuff*". Despite Phil's numerous claims that he and his siblings have a close

relationship, his KFD drawing suggest he might have ambivalent feelings about them. Phil drew his siblings and his parents but omitted to draw himself. This indicates that he might have conflictual feelings about his siblings and although he speaks about their close and caring relationship he also seems to feel left out or isolated.

Phil's account indicated that he was aware that things will be different for the siblings in the following year and that they will not be living together anymore. His oldest brother has left school and he is anticipating going to university in another country. In addition his other brother has been moved to a different school and "*he [sibling] has made a lot of new friends at [name of school] so he is happy there*". In addition, Phil said he would be going to boarding school the following year. It is likely that his KFD omission emphasizes the ambivalence he feels and potential separation he is anticipating. He and his brothers are very close but they are also separate individuals whose paths will soon diverge as they will soon not be living together. It is likely that his feeling of being isolated, which is illustrated in his KFD, reflects the changes his sibling relationships are undergoing.

Phil's account primarily focused on close bonds but also included his ambivalent feelings about his siblings. He said that there were some things that he did not like about having siblings. At times they are kind and supportive but at times they are uncaring.

"...sometimes they can be mean but most of the time they are really nice...what I mean ...you don't really understand it why they are mean to you but then later you understand why they are mean to you because it was something or stuff"

He spoke about how interaction with his siblings allowed him to develop an understanding of how people don't always behave consistently. Sometimes he does not know why they are unkind to him. However he tolerates this "*meanness*" and has made sense of it by being patient and taking a wait-and-you-will-understand stance. In spite of them being unkind he values his relationship with them and he says without siblings "*I probably will be sadder and I would be lonely*". Another boy was also definite about his positive feelings about his brother.

Joe has one older brother. He highlighted how their interest in sport fosters a close bond between them. He mentioned that he and his brother get along very well and have a close satisfying relationship. He said they both play a lot of school sport and partake in one particular recreational sport together. When asked about his favourite time with his sibling, he described how he and his brother actively take part in this sport and said he most likes to “*spend the whole day Saturday... ja a whole day, weekend or a week [participating in this recreational sport]*”. In addition Joe spoke about how important it is for him that his brother supports him playing sport. He explained

“I remember when I was made captain of the first team [name of sport and school] the first game ...I remember him [brother] coming to watch my game and he was benching for the first team...I [describes being injured] and in the ambulance he phoned my parents and he left his first team game and came to the hospital with us”

This quote exemplifies how close he and his brother are. Joe understands the sacrifice that his brother made to take him to hospital. In order to care for Joe and ensure that he was safe he forfeited a “*first team game*”. The value of his brother’s sacrifice is not lost on Joe and it is typical of the deep respect they have for each other. Joe’s responded to questions about how important his relationship with his brother “*it is more [important] than any other [relationship]*”. Analysis of his KFD drawing supports his report. Joe drew himself, his brother and his parents all standing close together with their arms around each other. While he was drawing he spoke quietly to himself saying “*uhm...arms around each other...uhm...like happy*”.

To conclude this section: most of the boys referred to how sport was unifying bond for them and their siblings. Some of the boys’ narratives depicted sport as fostering friendship and a sense of belonging. They also felt that playing or watching sport provided them with the opportunity to spend quality time with their brothers. Initially many of the boys complained about their siblings being difficult while others idealised them. Initially these descriptions suggested that they see their relationships in a one-dimensional manner. However during the process of the interview all the boys, besides Sam, added details that showed that they have a more complex and layered explanation of their sibling relationships. They described feelings of closeness but analysis of their

KFD drawings also made it clear that they might not always feel this way. The boys spoke about yearning for closeness but also an awareness of being separate.

The boys' accounts highlighted that they have ambivalent feelings about their siblings. At times they feel, and want to be, close to their siblings but at other times they feel isolated and distant from them.

Finally, the boys' reports highlighted that for this group of preadolescent boys there is no homogenous experience or explanation of sibling relationships and each boy experiences differences in each specific relationship differently at different times. Also, each of the boys' accounts, besides the one exception, highlighted the ambivalence they felt about the relationship they have with their siblings. Their accounts emphasised the complexity and contradictory relationships they have. For example Don said

“my brother's like my friend (.) and my enemy (.) and I also look up to him ... I don't know it's just the way it works (.) some days he will be evil and some days he'll be fine (.) quite changeable”

All but one of the boys felt that there were some aspects of their sibling relationships which are good and other aspects that are not so good. This boy clearly indicated that he and his older sibling *“don't get along so well”*. He said there is nothing good about having an older sibling and was also negative about his younger sibling whom he finds boring. He also said he would prefer to have no siblings.

Craig made numerous references during the interview to both negative and positive aspects of having siblings. He succinctly described the complexity of these relationships by saying sibling relationships *“suck and rock”*.

Chapter 5

Discussion

The aim of this study was to identify and explore preadolescent boys' views of their sibling relationships. This was done by looking at how they describe and explain these relationships. Secondly, it aimed to investigate how they make sense of these relationships and the importance they attach to them. I will first give a general explanation of how the boys responded in the interviews. Then I will deal with the two research questions. This section is concluded with suggestions for future research.

This study explored how this group of boys described and accounted for their sibling interactions. The findings to some degree support previous research claims and theoretical explanations and this will be addressed in the following sections. It was evident from all the boys' responses that they did not have one simple or homogenous explanation of their sibling relationships. Their accounts were by and large characterised by ambivalence and highlighted the contradictory nature of their sibling interactions. For example, their responses ranged from describing their sibling as a "*brat*" but also as "*quite cool*". Some boys initially expressed how they have very conflictual sibling relationships while a little later the same boys said that despite the conflict they have a close bond with their siblings. Many of the accounts showed how the boys have a nuanced understanding of their sibling interactions. Furthermore, many of the boys identified the paradoxical nature of their relationships and explained that their sibling is both their friend but he is also hostile, aggressive and is therefore frightening. The multifaceted nature of the boy's experiences of their siblings is reflected in the diversity and richness of their accounts. This study is largely descriptive in nature and so the focus was not on interpretation of the findings.

The first research question focussed on how the boys described their sibling relationships.

Hierarchy

Without exception the boys referred to hierarchy and the role it played in their relationships. Despite the differences that the boys identified in their relationships all the boys', with the exception of one, spoke about wanting close relationships with their siblings. They spoke about age and age differences and how this results in considerable differences in power. For most of the boys this was seen as both negative and positive. They described that the negative aspects were generally about their older sibling being physically more powerful and so they were aware of them having the potential to hurt them. However, some boys described fights in a positive light as well, as this provides them with the opportunity to learn how to defend themselves.

Many of the boys' reports indicated that the age differences necessarily meant that older siblings have more status than them and are skilful and experts. This was described as being helpful by numerous boys. These boys' accounts indicated that they find their older brothers supportive, helpful, their coach and teacher. They described these relationships as being beneficial as their siblings care for and protect them.

Brothers and sisters

The boys all spoke about having brothers and/or sisters. Several initially provided a fairly conventional explanation by referring to fairly superficial and predictable masculine and feminine gender roles. They described their brothers as strong, clever, active and big. One of the boys who had sisters spoke about them being ballerinas and enjoying shopping. However, most of the boys later added more details which qualified their explanation of these differences. For example, they indicated that not only are their big brothers strong and clever but they are also kind, caring and understanding. Their accounts and discussions of gender supported the literature and highlighted that the boys were grappling with the complexities and multifaceted nature of understanding similarities and differences (Kamler, 1999; Pollack, 1998).

Competition and Conflict

Sibling relationships are frequently understood as conflictual and rivalrous and much of the literature reviewed and research available focuses on this. Thus the boys' explanations of conflict and competition were particularly interesting. Many authors highlight that discord is evident in sibling relationships (Abbey & Dallos, 2004; Brody, 1998; Charles, 1999; Coles, 2006; Graham-Berman, 1994; Mitchell, 2003). However, it is likely that this rivalry has a complex explanation, one which is based on a variety of factors including age differences, family dynamics, individual differences, and the child's relationship quality with his sibling, amongst others. The boys' accounts reflect the complexity of their experiences of conflict and competition. Most of the boys spoke about how having similar and/or dissimilar interests results in conflict and high levels of competition. Without exception the boys made reference to sport when they spoke about competition and conflict. Several of the boys mentioned that they play the same sport as their siblings and these common interests result in closeness and camaraderie developing between them and their siblings, but this was not the case for all the boys.

Some other boys said that they find it impossible to play the same sport as their siblings as the sibling becomes unbearably competitive. Both they and their sibling become angry, envious, and jealous of each other and some boys reported that they feel inadequate when they play sport with their siblings. They also spoke about being fearful that their siblings will be more accomplished than them. One boy spoke about how he and his brother have a very conflictual and rivalrous relationship. They cannot play sport together but this did not prevent them from being close. In order to overcome the difficulty that competing in sport presents they have negotiated how to have friendship. They don't play the same sport but now support each other by watching the other competing in sport.

Separateness and togetherness

The boys' accounts of separateness and togetherness emphasized the complexity of these relationships and also their paradoxical nature. All the boys besides one spoke about their ambivalent feelings about their relationships with their siblings. At times they feel close and have warm contact with their siblings and at other times their relationships are

characterised by high levels of separateness. Most reported feeling that they have a close knit sibling group but also that they at times feel isolated from their siblings. Despite this ambivalence they were all, bar one, resolute that they would rather have a sibling than not.

Sam was adamant that he did not wish to have, or be a sibling, and that he preferred spending time with his father. He was the only boy who said he would rather be an only child than have siblings. This boy spoke about being distant from his siblings and he said he and his brother frequently fight. He also said he finds his sister boring. He was not alone in speaking about having a conflictual relationship with his siblings.

In addition, several other boys said they often don't feel close to their siblings as they have very rivalrous relationships. Their accounts highlighted that these relationships are characterised by much aggression. However, none of the other boys said they would wish to be an only child. All said they would be bored and lonely if they didn't have a sibling and so, despite not always feeling close to their siblings, they would rather have siblings than not.

The second research question addressed how the boys made sense of their sibling relationships. It explored the diversity in these lateral relationships and importance the boys attach to them. Some of the boys' accounts support the current theoretical explanations of sibling interactions and where applicable these will be dealt with.

Hierarchy

Without exception the boys accounts emphasised their awareness of power and status in their sibling interactions. Their accounts highlighted that they used differences in age to explain the differences in power between the siblings. They also used age differences to explain differences in status. Some of the boys' accounts indicated that older siblings were perceived as more powerful and younger siblings were seen as irritating and annoying. This supports the literature (Epkins and Dedmon, 1999; Graham-Berman,

1994) that older children, as they have more skills, necessarily have more power and status. Some boys described differences in power and status as being both positive and negative.

Several boys made sense of the differences in power by discussing the positive aspects of their sibling status. They explained that they feel that it is beneficial for them that their siblings are older as they provide them with an opportunity to cope with contact with their peers whilst having the siblings support. The skills that their older siblings have can make them, the younger siblings, feel protected and cared for. Several boys spoke about how it is helpful and useful for them. However, not all the siblings felt the status and power differentials are beneficial and spoke about feeling jealous of their siblings. This was particularly apparent in the one boy who is the oldest sibling.

He referred to himself as the responsible “*bossy one*” who conforms to the rules and complies with his parents’ expectations. He is a “*role model*” for his siblings and looks after them. However, he explained that his younger sisters are naughty and “*irritating*”. Furthermore, he was confused that his sisters do listen to him and disregard the respect and status he, as oldest, feels he is due. This child made sense of the differences in power that he perceived in his lateral relationships with his sisters, by explaining that it was due to the order of birth. The birth order theory would explain his experiences with his sister by making clear that as he is the eldest it is expected that he would be sensible and considerate. His behaviour would be so that he could reap the most benefits from his parents. It seems that Sulloway’s birth order theory explains this boy’s experiences with his sisters. However, I suggest that this is one of the fundamental problems with Sulloway’s theory. It provides simple and systematic explanation of external factors such as position in family to explain complex family dynamics and make sense of people’s anecdotal experiences. It does not explain the complexity and diversity of these relationships. As this is a descriptive study it is not possible to explore Craig’s unconscious motivations. Nevertheless it is necessary to mention that Sulloway’s theory does not explain Craig’s feelings of fear and anxiety about his sisters. In addition, Abbey and Dallos (2004) report that life experiences, such as divorce, results in children looking

after each other and that this results in children, even laterborns exhibiting behaviour which Sulloway would describe as typically that of a first born. This child spoke at length about his parents divorce and how he feels about this. It is likely that this also impacts on his responsible behaviour.

Brothers and sisters

Initially the boys generally provided conventional explanations of gender and gender differences. The boys made sense of feeling belonging and/or feeling separate by speaking about how similar and different they are to their brothers and sisters. Initially their responses provided a fairly straightforward explanation of gender and gender roles. For example, brothers are “*strong*” and “*aggressive*” and sisters are “*ballerinas*”. The boys made these categorisations and it was apparent that they used these to explain similarities and differences. They feel included in the group when they do the same things as their sibling, for example playing sport. However, one boy used this to explain how he is separate from and different to his sisters. For example, he referred to how they urinate differently from him. This difference emphasises how he feels he is not like them and so is excluded from their group. Many boys spoke about similarities and differences between their brothers and sisters to make sense of feeling the same as and different from their siblings.

It was particularly noticeable that during the interview process many of the boys added details about their siblings in order to provide a less stereotypical and more multifaceted explanation. This allowed many of them to make sense of contradictory behaviour and so they were able to explain how their brothers are sometimes aggressive and hostile but also at times caring, kind and considerate. They were able to provide a more textured explanation of their sibling relationship. Also with the exception of one child the boys all spoke about trying to find areas of commonality where they could make contact with their siblings. Despite describing how diverse their interactions with their siblings are, that is either being the same (a boy) or being different (a girl), all the boys, besides one, made an effort to negotiate these differences so as to foster some degree of closeness.

The boys' accounts reflected their perception of closeness and separateness and it seemed that the two boys who have sisters who are many years younger than them did not feel close to their sisters. Dunn et al. (1994) suggest that older brothers withdraw from interactions with their sisters and lose interest in them when they enter puberty. It is possible that the findings of this study support this. However, it is noted that these sisters are also considerably younger than their brothers so the lack of contact between the siblings may have been due to their age differences.

Competition and Conflict

Most of the boys' accounts emphasised that they are aware of how alike they and their siblings are and also how dissimilar they are. Their references to conflict and competition highlighted these similarities and differences. Many of the boys used references to sport to make sense of their rivalrous and conflictual relationships.

Some of the boys spoke about how problematic it is that their brothers have similar interests in sport as them. These particular boys feel that they are unable to play sport with their brothers as it results in them fighting. When they compete in sport they become jealous of their sibling and this leads to them feeling inadequate. Some boys spoke about how this makes them aware of their own inadequacies described how they come to terms with this. For example, by watching their siblings they learn how to play better sport. Other boys feel left out and isolated by having similar sporting interests as their siblings. This was noticeable when one sibling was more proficient than the others.

Aquilar et al. (2001) and Furman and Buhrmester (1985) suggest that the level of conflict is linked to the size of the age gap. If there is a small age gap, less than three years, the siblings are likely to have a conflictual relationship. However, the findings of this study do not support these claims as some boys reported a particularly close relationship with siblings who are close in age, that is, less than three years. Conversely, the same boys also reported especially conflictual relationships with siblings who are close to them in age. Thus the findings of this study suggest that age differences are not prescriptive of

conflictual or close relationships. Some boys made sense of their rivalrous relationships by describing that their brothers are indiscriminately aggressive. However, this was not the case for all the boys interviewed.

The degree of rivalry varied and some boys explained it as playful interaction. They made sense of their sibling relationship by describing how playing sport with their brothers resulted in them having a close and warm relationship with them. One boy described how being in the same sport team as his brothers made him aware of his own competencies and made him feel that they all belonged to a “*family*”. The boys’ reports highlighted the diversity in their experiences and they spoke about having relationships which are both rivalrous and close.

This supports Brody’s (1998) and Cutting and Dunn’s (2006) claims that conflictual and warm relationships are not opposite ends of a continuum. Siblings fight even if they have a warm relationship and thus rivalrous relationships are not only detrimental. In this study it was found that most of the boys described how their rivalrous and conflictual relationships coexisted with warm and close relationships. Their accounts suggest that it is likely that this offered the children with an opportunity to deal with and to negotiate difficult relationships so as to develop closeness.

Interactions with siblings are likely to provide children with a range of experiences. It was noted in the findings of this study that the boys used diversity to make sense of their lateral relationships. They all, with the one exception, explained their siblings’ behaviour and discussed how they find ways to interact, so that they are able to come to terms with difficulties in their sibling interactions. Many boys rationalised their siblings’ behaviour and so made sense of it. For example, Don explained that his very aggressive brother doesn’t “*really hit [him]*” but rather “*threatens [him] and won’t really hurt [him]*”. The boys who made sense of difficulties in their relationships are able to have contact, to a lesser or greater degree, with their sibling. It was noticeable that the one child who was exceptionally negative about his brother was not able to make sense of their enmity and he was the child who said that he would prefer to be an only child.

However, several of these boys had made sense of their siblings' hostility and were able to provide a mature explanation of their siblings' aggression. They understood that much of their brothers' anger and hostility was due to their brothers having problems. The boys' accounts suggest that some boys who experience very rivalrous relationships with their siblings are able to differentiate what aspects of the rivalry and conflict has to do with the boy and what is about his brother, that is what is "*me*" and "*not me*". Charles (1999) suggests that the sibling interaction provides the child with the opportunity to identify what is self and what is other. Don understands he is not the target of his brother's aggression but that his brother's anger is due to him taking a food supplement and him being incapacitated. Furthermore many of the boys who were able to explain and understand their sibling's antagonism said that the rivalry did not prevent a closeness or of not belonging to a sibling unit. They were able to see their brother as sometimes being a "*friend*" and at other times as an "*enemy*". It was noticeable that many of the boys rationalised their siblings' behaviour and so reached a level of understanding so that they could cooperate with each other. Many boys, despite indicating that their relationships are very conflictual explained that they have negotiated these differences in order to have some level of closeness and contact with their siblings. They all said, with the one exception that despite their relationships being competitive and conflictual they would rather have a sibling than not.

Finally it is important to make a note of the role that sport played in the boys' accounts. Pollack (1998) suggests that sport is one area where boys, who find it difficult to talk about their emotions, are able to express and show their feelings. The boys' accounts suggest that rather than emotional interaction they use physical action as a means to show affection. Pollack (1998) emphasises that this applies to both positive and negative feelings. It was evident sport was important for all the boys and most of them referred to sport and used it to make sense of the diversity and complexity of their relationships. For example, one boy, was moved when he spoke with deep affection about the sacrifice his brother made by choosing to withdraw from the first team so that he could go with him to hospital. His experience of sport was that they connect emotionally when they play sport.

It provides both him and his brother with a way to share intimacy and care. Other boys spoke about more negative feelings and their accounts of playing sport with their siblings reflected the vicious competition they experience. By talking about sport they expressed how angry and hostile they feel towards their siblings. As described in a previous paragraph sport also provided some boys with the opportunity to negotiate difficulties in their relationships so that they are able to foster closeness. Therefore talking about sport enabled the boys to make sense of both their positive and negative feelings and enabled many of the boys to show their siblings affection.

Separateness and togetherness

Many of the boys provided a layered explanation of their sibling relationships. Their accounts emphasised their ambivalent feelings about their siblings and their descriptions indicated how complex these relationships are. In addition the boys' reports highlighted the paradoxical nature of these relationships. Many of the boys spoke about feeling both close to their siblings but also to feeling isolated from them. Their accounts indicated that they feel that although they wish to be close sometimes this closeness is undesirable and is stifling.

Many boys spoke about feeling separate from their siblings and referred to high levels of rivalry to make sense of this. One boy, specifically, expressed that he feels separate from his siblings. He makes sense of his feelings of separateness and aloofness by describing how he would rather spend time with his father than with his siblings. He withdraws and distances himself from his brother and sister. Dunn et al. (1994) report that during adolescence, children tend to withdraw from their siblings, they suggest this is due to children developing new friendships at this time. However, this study's findings suggest that for this child it is not only about new friends being made, and more to do with individual differences and the six year age difference.

Another boy spoke about feeling separate from his siblings and indicated that he forms alliances with his parents. He like the child mentioned above withdraws from his siblings.

He made sense of this isolation by speaking about how his sisters are disobedient and how he assists them as he provides a good role model for them. This boy referred to feeling distant from his siblings but also identified the paradoxical nature of this as he strongly desires to feel united with them.

These boys' experiences differed considerably from another boy. Joe reported that he and his brother have an extremely close relationship and his account reflected the camaraderie they share. He said that they do not have a rivalrous relationship but each contribute to their dyad. Peterson (1990) and Howe et al. (1997) describe how siblings often complement each other and it is likely that this boy's account reflects this. He and his brother are able to compliment each other and this creates the strong bond that they share. Another explanation of this very close contact that Joe and his brother share is suggested by Shapiro and Ginzberg (2001). They refer to Kohut's (cited in Shapiro & Ginzberg, 2001) concept of "*twinning*". Kohut suggests that a person projects representations of his self into another, in this case a sibling, which results in a bond developing which is encourages each person of the dyad to develop a sense of wholeness. This results in feelings of safety and closeness developing. However as the current study is descriptive in nature it is not possible to confirm these proposals. For Joe and his brother, despite their large age difference, in excess of five years, and the fact that they have many similar interests and play the same sport, they are nevertheless able to have a very close relationship.

The results of this study highlight the complexity of sibling relationships which was apparent in the rich diversity of boys' accounts. Some of the boys' reports indicated that they are aware of the paradoxical nature of these relationships. They want siblings and wish for a close relationships and friendship with them. However, these relationships also characterised by high levels of conflict and so are at times frightening as well. Previous research has emphasised the conflictual and rivalrous aspects of these relationships and this study is not the exception. However despite all the boys, to a lesser or greater degree, describing their relationships as conflictual they were all with the one exception able to identify positive aspects of their relationships. They also spoke of how they negotiate

within their relationships. So, despite not always feeling close to their siblings, they all said they would rather have siblings than not and felt that they would be bored and lonely if they didn't have siblings.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this was a small exploratory study which looked at the complexity and diversity of sibling relationships. As it was qualitative in nature I did not aim to predict or test hypotheses or to identify causal links but investigated preadolescent boys' perceptions of their sibling relationships and as it was descriptive interpretation was not the focus. The boys' subjective accounts provided the data which I used to gain insight into the importance and meaning, for these boys, of their sibling relationships. The findings suggest that this group of boys perceive their sibling relationships as complex and they have ambivalent feelings about their siblings. The results indicate that sibling relationships defy a homogenous explanation. The boys referred to their interactions with their siblings to explore how to deal with other people. Particularly people who are not parents or other adults and who are therefore on a more equal footing. I intended to provide a textured and thick explanation of what these relationships mean for this group of boys. In addition, I explored the importance of sibling relationships and how these relationships impact on this group of boys. I focused on and addressed both negative and positive aspects of sibling interactions in order to offer a balanced view of these relationships. This study helps to illuminate the diversity of sibling relationships. It also shows how by referring to the diversity of their sibling interactions these boys make sense of these complex relationships.

Limitations

This research project addressed boys' perceptions of their sibling relationships and an attempt was made to explore horizontal, sibling-sibling, relationships so as to investigate the dynamics of these lateral relationships. One of the main limitations of this study is linked to this topic specifically. The focus of this study was to explore lateral relationships but I, as the researcher, am an adult and so necessarily impose fundamental and implicit power structures into the research project. An adult interviewing children

duplicates a vertical parent – child relationship which unavoidably will impact on the data collected (Mitchell, 2003). Although I was sensitive to and aware of the impact I would make, this was still noted to be an important limitation for this research project.

The second main limitation of this study reflects the problems of the interview setting (Breakwell, Hammond & Fife-Schaw, 1995; Hollway & Jefferson, 2000; Potter & Hepburn, 2005; Sarbin, 1986). The data was collected by talking to a group of thirteen preadolescent boys. These interviews took place in a classroom in the school grounds, during school hours and the boys were dressed in their school uniforms. This particular school places great emphasis on strict discipline and respect for elders. Furthermore, I am a mature woman and I was previously a teacher. Therefore it was particularly noticeable when most of the boys treated me deferentially and with great respect, referring to me as “*ma’am*”. Thus, it is possible that they may have been unduly obedient and compliant in their responses, as they are used to behaving in a respectful manner to all adults and in particular to teachers. It is recognized that it is possible that the boys may have spoken more freely about their relationships if the interviews had taken place in a different location, especially if that place was out of the school grounds and out of school hours.

There was a further limitation due to the location (Breakwell et al., 1995; Hollway & Jefferson, 2000; Potter & Hepburn, 2005; Sarbin, 1986). The interviews took place in a disused classroom which was in a corridor where there was at times a considerably high level of noise. In addition, a few of the interviews were interrupted by scholars, who opened the door and were curious to know what was being done in the classroom and this might have influenced the boys’ responses. To ensure confidentiality the researcher temporarily paused when the door was opened.

A further concern is a more general limitation of all qualitative research. Kettrey and Emery (2006) suggest that interviewees might develop stories which appear believable but that they merely reflect their feelings at one particular time and place. Therefore it is not possible to claim that the data collected is the truth about the boys’ relationships, or that they even have a single reality about these relationships. Each boy’s account is

merely his subjective account and so is a reflection of one of many possible realities which he constructed and which he might also at another time and place refine or change (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985; Kettrey & Emery, 2006). In addition, the results present an account of what the boys wished to reveal at the time of the interview and so no truth claims are able to be made.

The findings of this study were obtained by interpretation of the boys' subjective accounts which reflect their feelings in a specific place and time. Therefore there is always likely to be disparity between our knowledge of siblings and what we need to understand about their nature. However, the interpretations provided by this study can be utilised to link that gap between what we know and what we wish to know. In addition this study has attempted to explore a specific area in sibling relationships, in a specific context and it has made no attempt to formulate general rules or truth claims. It has endeavoured to provide a plausible account about sibling relationships.

Finally, the ability to generalise the results is limited by a number of methodological issues. Firstly, the study utilised a small convenience sample of thirteen preadolescent boys from a primary school in Gauteng, South Africa. The demographic makeup of this group does not reflect the demographic makeup of South Africa as a whole. Therefore the results are representative of a group of individuals with a very specific range in age, education level, gender and income level and the results would not be able to support truth claims beyond this group. Furthermore, the limited sample size limits generalisability. It is also unlikely that the study will be able to be replicated and so caution must be taken with regards to claims about objective reality of sibling relationships based on this study's findings.

Future research

This study was able to provide insight into preadolescent boys' perceptions of their sibling relationships. It was however, unable to explore and fully address unconscious aspects of the boys' explanations about their siblings. Therefore an in-depth case study which would include a full history and assessment using other measures such as the

Child's Apperception Test and Purcell's Incomplete Sentences, both adapted to reflect sibling interactions, would provide valuable insight into a sibling's unconscious motivations (Graham-Bermann, 1994).

In addition, this study was based on findings of a small and specific sample group so future research, which focuses on other groups, is necessary in order to develop a broader understanding of the importance and role of sibling interactions.

In the way of a concluding note: I wish to comment on the context within which the research took place. Although the participants in this study could be described as middle class South Africans, research on siblings seems particularly relevant for the other South African populations. Within the context of post-Apartheid South Africa migrant labour saw fathers frequently spending prolonged periods away from home. In addition, the increasing fatalities of parents from HIV-Aids related diseases has a far reaching impact on the family structure, and often results in the boundary between caregivers and siblings merging. Thus an explanation which explores both the negative and positive aspects of sibling relationships is important. For these reasons the boys' accounts provide us with valuable insight. Insight into their perceptions and explanations of their sibling relationships offers a view of an area which has previously not been researched or explored.

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Appendix A

Letter of consent from school

Appendix B

Letter from school psychologist

Parent consent form

Appendix C

Dear Parents

date

My name is Marie Blackburn and I am a Clinical Psychology Masters student at the University of the Witwatersrand. I am researching the relationships between siblings as part of my degree. I would like to invite your son to participate in this project.

The aim of this research project is to explore sibling's relationships in pre-teen boys. Mr. Workman has granted permission for the interviews to be completed during the school day on the school premises, at a time which is not detrimental to your child's well-being or education. Each interview will take about an hour. The questions will focus on your child's perception and understanding of sibling relationships. Please note that participation in the interview is voluntary and that your child will be able to withdraw at any time without any consequence or prejudice. You too may withdraw your permission for your son's participation at any time, if you so wish.

Please be assured that confidentiality is guaranteed, as identifying details will either be excluded or changed in the interview transcripts. No child will be individually identified in any written or spoken report. The interviews which will be audio recorded will be transcribed and coded in order to protect your son's confidentiality. It is possible there may be direct quotes taken from your child's interview and utilised in the research report write-up, if this does occur no identifying details will be included and all possible steps will be taken to ensure that your son will not be identifiable. All information will be used exclusively for research purposes. Feedback will be provided to the school in the form of general patterns and, if desired, a short general report will be made available to you, once the research is completed.

Thank you for your interest and if you should want more details, please do not hesitate to contact me on 082 578 3472 or email pblackburn@yebo.co.za or my supervisor Dr. Carol Long at 717 4510 or email longcp@umthombo.wits.ac.za. If you are willing to allow your child to participate in the study, please discuss the study with him and if you are

both willing for him to participate, please sign the attached form and return it to the class teacher at your earliest convenience. Due to time constraints, it is unfortunately only possible to include the first twelve replies in this research.

Yours sincerely

Marie Blackburn

Please detach and return to the class teacher

Consent for child participation in sibling research interviews

I,

.....(parent/guardian)

of(child's name)

have discussed this study with my child and hereby give consent for him to participate in it. Please tick the following - By agreeing to participate in this research, I acknowledge:

The confidentiality of the interviews.....

Interview participation is voluntary.....

I understand that my son may withdraw at any time and that I can withdraw permission for his participation at anytime.....

I understand that I my son is not compelled to answer any of the questions if he does not wish to do so.....

.....

Signature

.....

Date

Child's letter of assent - to be signed on the day of the interview

Appendix D

Dear

Thank you for agreeing to do this project with me. I am a student at the University of the Witwatersrand and am doing this project for one of my subjects. We will go to a quiet room and I would like you to tell me a story about your brothers and sisters; what things you do together, what things you prefer not to do with them and how you communicate. I am interested in finding out how you feel about being a brother. You do not have to answer any of the questions if they make you feel uncomfortable or unhappy. It should take us less than an hour but there is no rush and you can take as long as you like.

I am going to record the interview on an audiotape but I won't show these to anyone but my supervisor. Everything that you tell me is confidential. That means I won't use your name when I write up my research report. Please remember that you can stop at any time you like if you don't feel like carrying on.

Thank you for helping me with this project.

Marie Blackburn

I..... (child's name) would like to do this interview.

Please tick the following – I know that:

- I can stop at any time if I don't feel like carrying on.....
- I don't have to answer the questions if they make me feel uncomfortable or unhappy.....
- I understand that the project is about understanding more about the relationship between brothers and sisters.....
- I understand that Mrs. Blackburn will not use my name or any identifying details in her research write up.....- I don't mind if she uses some of the words of my story (direct quotes) in her research write up.....

Signed.....

Date.....

Children recording consent form

Appendix E

To be signed on day of interview

Dear

date.....

Thank you for agreeing to do my research with me. As I have explained I will chat to you for about an hour. I will make an audio tape recording of our interview so that I can remember everything you tell me, the tape recording will be typed out and I will make sure that your name and details are not in the write up. The tapes will be kept in a locked cupboard and only I, and my supervisor Dr. Long, will listen to the tapes. I may want to use some parts of the story that you tell me in my write up, if that happens I won't include any of your details.

Thank you

Marie Blackburn

I..... (child's name) am happy for my interview to be recorded so that Mrs Blackburn can remember what I say.

Please tick the following:

I understand that

- I understand that she will not use my name or any identifying details in her research write up.....
- The tapes will be kept in a locked cupboard.....
- No one but Mrs. Blackburn and Dr. Long will listen to the tapes.....
- The interview will be copied out and then the tapes will be destroyed.....
- My name won't be on the typed out interview.....
- I am happy for Mrs. Blackburn to use parts of the story (direct quotes) I tell for her research write-up.....

Signed.....

date.....

Parents recording consent form

Appendix F

Dear.....

Date.....

Thank you for your interest in my research project which aims at exploring sibling relationships in pre-teen boys. To enable data collection, the interview I do with your son will be audio recorded. However please be assured that I will not identify your son in any spoken or written report. Prior to transcription the audio tapes will be kept in a locked cupboard and only I, and my supervisor Dr. Long, will listen to the tapes. Subsequent to transcription the tapes will be destroyed. It is possible that some direct quotes may be used in the research report write up, in this case all identifying details will be removed or changed. Please sign the attached letter and return it to the class teacher.

Thank you

Marie Blackburn

Statement of consent for audio recording:

I(parent/guardian) consent to my son's
.....interview being audio recorded.

Please tick the following:

- I understand that Mrs. Blackburn will not use identify my son in any written or spoken report.....
- I know that the audio tapes will be kept in a locked cupboard prior to transcription
.....
- No one but Mrs. Blackburn and Dr. Long will listen to the tapes.....
- Once the interview is transcribed the tapes will be destroyed.....
- The transcriptions will not contain my son's name or any identifying details....
- I give my consent for direct quotes (which will not include any identifying details) to be used in the research write-up.....

Signed.....

Date

Semi-structured interview schedule

Appendix G

Interview questions

1. In order to establish rapport and establish the interview context– provide the boy with coloured pencils and paper, and puppets (mother, father, son, daughter and baby).
2. Explain that we will be talking about families which include siblings and that I would like him to tell me a story about his family and siblings.
3. Allow him to choose him to either draw a picture of his family or using the puppets tell a story about his family. Allocate about 10 minutes for the drawing option.

If he has chosen to draw

Ask each child:

- Tell me a story about your family (invite his story)
- Who lives in the boy's house who has he included/excluded
- His sibs e.g. siblings ages, gender, names.

Exploring general horizontal sibling relationships

- What they do together/for fun.
- When they play together what do they do?
- When he does not like playing with him/her and why not?

The relationship quality, i.e., his feelings about the sib

- If he has more than 1 sibling, are the feelings different? Why?
- What it is like having a sibling?
- The good things about having a sibling?
- Some of the not so good things?
- Does having a (sibling) make a difference in any way?
- How would it be if he had no brothers/sisters?
- How important the relationship is for him?

Look at vertical relationships –

- Explore if sibling relationships are merely derivatives of parental relationships.
- What is it like for his mom/dad to have children?
- How would it be for them if they had no other children?

If the participant has chosen to use the puppets listen for the above

(Furman & Buhrmester, 1985; Hollway & Jefferson, 2001; Kvale, 1992; Mitchell, 2004)