ATTENDING TO SIBLING ISSUES
AND TRANSFERENCES IN
PSYCHODYNAMIC PSYCHOTHERAPY

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ABSTRACT: This paper urges that attention be paid to the meaning and
importance of early sibling relationships as manifested in clients' and thera-
pists' lives and psychodynamic psychotherapy.

INTRODUCTION

Heinz Kohut (1977), contemplating Franz Kafka's "Metamorpho-
sis," writes; "Gregor Samsa, the cockroach of Kafka's 'Metamorphosis'
. . . is the child whose presence in the world had not been blessed by the
empathic welcome of self-objects—he is the child of whom his parents
speak impersonally, in the third-person singular; and now he is a non-
human monstrosity, even in his own eyes" (p. 287). Re-reading "Meta-
morphosis" from a somewhat different perspective, we can pick out a
sibling sub-plot, involving Gregor, his younger sister, Grete, and their
parents. (Kafka in fact had three sisters, who later died in concentration
camps, and two younger brothers who died in infancy.) At the beginning
of the story, when Gregor is beginning to confront his own disturbing
transformation, Grete is portrayed as his doting younger sister, under-
standing and solicitous. Her sympathy and general positive orientation
towards him is assumed, and she appears to be much more present and
empathic than either of his parents, including his mother, though she,
too, is portrayed as generally sympathetic to Gregor for much of the
story. We hear that Gregor, in turn, has had plans, secret from the par-
ents, who appear to regard sister Grete as insignificant, to finance his
sister's attendance at a conservatory to study violin.

By the end of the story, however, Grete is entirely "turned off" by
Gregor's insect self and fervently wishes to get rid of her brother—or
the cockroach which is now in his place. With Gregor dead and gone, Kafka ends the story in the following way: "... (It struck both Mr. and Mrs. Samsa, almost at the same moment, as they became aware of their daughter's increasing vivacity, that in spite of all the sorrow of recent times, which had made her cheeks pale, she had bloomed into a pretty girl with a good figure. They grew quieter and half unconsciously exchanged glances of complete agreement, having come to the conclusion that it would soon be time to find a good husband for her. And it was like a confirmation of their new dream and excellent intentions that at the end of their journey their daughter sprang to her feet first and stretched her young body" (Kafka, 1912, p. 139).

In Kafka's story of Gregor's existential misery in the Samsa family, sibling rivalry and sibling protectiveness and concern coexist. Siblings serve selfobject functions for one another. Parents focus their narcissistic needs, hopes, and aspirations upon one sibling, then upon the other. Fantasies of sibling death and replacement are enacted when, with Gregor's demise, the younger sister, once in the shadows and in need of Gregor's solicitude) as well as serving important functions for him, (their rivalry mostly latent), has almost casually become the parents' focus. In the end, what appears to be a stable sibling-parent triangle has been established.

SIBLINGS AND PSYCHODYNAMIC PSYCHOTHERAPY

The impact of sibling relationships upon individual psychology has been notoriously neglected in the mainstream psychodynamic literature. For example, although John Bowlby in 1969 was calling attention to the attachment behavior of infants to their siblings, at about the same time, in Kernberg's (1976) Object Relations Theory and Clinical Psychoanalysis there were no index references to "siblings." Over the years, herculean and numerous attempts (2,000 research articles by 1979, ref. Sutton-Smith and Lamb, 1982) to show straight-line causation between variables such as birth order (Sutton-Smith and Rosenberg's "silent variable," 1971) or spacing and attributes such as personality and intelligence have been made. Even while childhood development was studied under the aegis of psychoanalysis, mainstream psychoanalytic theory, focused as it was on the direction and fate of the drives and then on the development of the ego, did not for a long time conceptualize human relationships as the central motivator and builder of personality. When it did, the object-focus became mother, eclipsing or minimizing all others.

Regardless of whether siblings were left behind in the theoretical cul de sacs of sibling rivalry and birth order or simply overshadowed by