I AM WHO I AM BECAUSE I AM A SISTER:
EXPLORING SISTER RELATIONSHIPS IN MIDDLE ADULTHOOD


by


TONYA KAY RICKLEFS


B.A.S., Washburn University, 2000
M.S.W., Washburn University, 2011


AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION


submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree


DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY


School of Family Studies and Human Services
College of Human Ecology


KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
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# Abstract

Sibling relationships have often been studied with the goal of understanding the sibling influence on development of an individual.  With the focus on development, research has often been limited to the time of life between the ages of birth to 18. Sibling research in adulthood has often been limited to examining siblings' interactions in a particular context. Most of the research has examined siblings dealing with caregiving, family businesses, finances, or parental treatment. How siblings feel about their relationship, how the relationship has enhanced their lives, and what meaning individuals ascribe to that relationship through their lifetime has been understudied.

This study focused on the meaning ascribed to a relationship between sisters by those in the relationship as well as the importance of sisterhood to the individual's identity or perception of who they are because of the relationship. Participants responded to questions designed to gather information about what it means to them to be a sister in middle adulthood.  The sisters indicated that the relationship held meaning for them though out their adult life. Parents were found to have influenced the relationship.  In addition the sister relationship impacted the development of a sisters identity in multiple ways. For most sisters, they could not imagine who they would have become without the influence of their sisters.

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Approved by:

Major Professor
Karen Myers-Bowman

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# Acknowledgements

To Mom:      When others thought I couldn't/shouldn't do it you always pushed me.

To Ben:      You never doubted this was my path to follow. Thank you for being there even when I didn't want to be here myself.

To Heather:  A friend is someone who knows the song in your heart and can sing it back to you when you have forgotten the words. Thank you for knowing my heart song and helping me find it when I am lost.

To Rachael:  I hope once you read this you will know I did it for us. Love you.

To A & G:    You are my sunshine, you make me happy when skies are gray.  You are me and as proud as I am of this, I am more proud of you both!

To A&G&M&S- You didn't chose to be sisters, you have become sisters because of your love of each other. I love watching you all grow together.

To Dylan:     Thank you for watching me and pushing me to be a better person.

To Karen:    Thank you for helping me find my heart in this subject.

To Terrie:    Thank you for helping me find a new path to walk.

To Deb Rose: Thanks for encouraging me to face another challenge and reminded me that I was capable enough to face it.

To Jim Smith: I remembered you believed in me when I didn't believe in myself.

To Bertha:    Thanks for Starbucks. Dragging me there even if I didn't want to be.

To Dad:      You always told me "do what you love" so I did.   Miss you.

# Dedication

This is dedicated to the generations of sisters in my family and our stories. The years of broken legs and windows, the new babies, the missing loved ones and the life we have shared. This is for the AZ aunts, and the Texas trips. This is for the sisters who I have watched come through one challenge after another. This for my friends who are sisters, and the mothers of sister, and this is for every sister in my study that came forward and trusted me with your story. Thank you.

# CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

After my 19-year-old daughter finished her first year of college, she worked as a nanny for my niece during the summer. Because of the geographic distance between the two homes, my daughter moved in with my sister and brother-in-law for the summer.  As one may expect, there were a couple of instances where my sister had concerns about some situations my daughter and she had during that summer. My sister and I began texting and calling each other to brainstorm how to handle various issues.  We were always on the same page, but it took some planning on what to say and how to handle the situation.  While discussing the pros and cons of different options with my sister, there was something that prompted her to suddenly reference some experiences my family had with me in high school.

"She is reminding me of you. All I could think of was that it's you in high school," she said to me on the phone.  My first thought was to wonder what me in high school had to do with anything in this instance. We both agreed how to handle things with my daughter, the focus of the conversation.  Why was my sister taking me on a trip down the not so pleasant part of memory lane? I was instantly defensive and grimaced while thinking the pain I had put my parents through while I was a teenager and young adult. Then I wondered how this conversation changed from being about my daughter to being about me.  Will I always be that younger version of myself in her eyes?  After I got off the phone, I tried to tell myself that it was most likely just an opportunity for my sister to walk down memory lane, but it had changed how I was interacting with her.

Every time sisters interact, we have the opportunity to reminisce about the past: some choose to do that, and some do not. However, when we are around our family of origin, nearly

1

all of us instinctively begin interacting in ways that we have learned to do since birth (Kardasis, Larsen, Thorpe, & Trippe, 2011). Yet, with all of the years behind us, and hopefully all that lies ahead, I never really reflected on the relationship with my sister. I often wanted to help her negotiate things in life as an older sister, but she wanted to have nothing to do with it.  I am sure these numerous interactions through the years impacted of us throughout our lives, but I am not sure how.

Who am I because I am a sister? How would I be different if she was not my sister? There have been times that I have been shocked at how differently we as adults recalled specific shared memories. Some of these memories were during major family transitions that impacted the entire family.  How did my sister, who was raised in the same house as I was, have perceptions of our life that are so different from mine?  How do we fit in each other's lives now that we do not live together?

In 2013, Walt Disney Animation Studios released the movie *Frozen*. The audience flocked to the film, and soon it was labeled a blockbuster hit. One of the reason for the film's success cited by many film critics was the focus on the power of the sister relationship (Ebiri, 2014).  Popular culture has explored sisterhood in a way that the academic world has largely ignored. Popular movies explore adult sister relationships; examples are *In her Shoes, The Secret Life of Bees,* and *The Other Sister.* Journalists investigate the importance of sister relationships in popular media, such as comparing differences between sister and brother relationships (Schnee, 2014), and the importance of the connection between siblings for life (Marantz Henig, 2014). Popular novels, such as *The Poisonwood Bible* (Kingsolver, 1998) are told through the experiences of sisters. Mainstream self-help books explore topics about how to heal adult sister relationships (McDermott, 1993). What most authors of mainstream media have understood

about sisters seems to have been overlooked by academicians.  Jane Pfouts (1976) summarized this oversight:

> It is ironic that laymen more than family experts acknowledge the importance of the
>
> sibling bond, and that artists more than researchers have succeeded in capturing its
>
> essence. Since the beginning of history, the popular interest in sibling interaction has
>
> been reflected in fables, fairy tales, biblical accounts, plays, and novels that vividly
>
> portray the characteristic sibling themes of power struggles, rivalry, solidarity, and
>
> ambivalence (p. 200)

### Statement of Problem

While artists have understood the value of the sibling relationship, researchers have undervalued it. There has been growing research on sibling relationships focused during childhood and adolescence; however, adult sibling relationship research is limited (Whiteman, McHale, & Soli, 2011). Some researchers believe interest in sibling relationships began in the early 1990's because of a growing population of older adults (Bedford & Avioli, 2001). Yet research focused on adult siblings remains limited. One researcher theorizes that when siblings no longer live together in the same household these ties become invisible to researchers (Walker, Allen, & Connidis, 2005). After siblings stop living together and/or become adults, their influence on each other does not stop, yet research has stopped. Lack of research could be attributed to the complexity of trying to sort out a lifetime of interactions as well as multiple interactions between multiple siblings.  Regardless of the reason, this area of research needs to move beyond childhood to better understand the lifetime of influence siblings may have on each other  (Cicirelli, 1995).

Some of the focus on siblings in childhood has been on the learned patterns of exchanges siblings exhibit and how that influences their future relationships in their lives. These exchanges teach individuals how to socialize with not just their sibling, but with other person in multiple relationships established throughout their lifetime (Howe & Recchia, 2014). While each sibling may learn to adapt less desirable patterns of behavior as they age, many times each will continue to repeat this learned behavior in sibling interactions throughout their lifetime (Kardasis et al, 2011).

In Victor Cicirelli's (1995) book on sibling relationships, he calls for enhanced research on siblings in later life because of how the relationships can reflect the siblings larger family system functioning. When it comes to "understanding how individuals develop and families function," the sibling relationship that lasts over a lifetime is largely an "untapped resource" (Kramer & Bank, 2005, p. 483) to understand the family system. Siblings' lifetime interactions, and their role or roles within the family can impact their individual behaviors, choices, and actions (Cicirelli, 1995). The longevity of the sibling relationship is unique and can show us how relationships continue to influence individuals and how we interact with others throughout our adult lives (Weiss, 1974). Sibling relationships are vastly different from the other family relationships and "can be highly influential and important in one's life" (Statch 2007, p. 13).

Family expectations establish patterns of behavior that fulfill family needs and eventually establish an individual's role within the family unit (Epstein, Bishop, Ryan, Miller, & Keitner, 1993). Research on family roles has focused mainly on the purpose of the roles and how they are assigned within a family (Peterson & Green, 2009). When individuals fulfill the sibling role in their family and associate positive feelings about it, positive mental health seems to result (Aydin et. al, 2011). While researchers have explored the roles of motherhood for women

(e.g.,Bialeschki & Michener 1994; McMahon, 1995) and the role of being a wife (e.g.,Blossfeld, 1995; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004), very little research has been focused on the meaning of the sister role for women.

To begin a literature review about sisters in middle adulthood, searches were conducted in the databases, ProQuest as well as PsycInfo.  Using the key words of sister* and middle* and adult*, the searches generated nothing about the meaning of the sister relationship in adulthood. The ProQuest search only generated articles about family obligation values among adolescence (Milan & Wortel, 2014) and preferences of different parental treatment(Jeanin & Van Leeuwen, 2014)  This last article on parental treatment was found by changing the key word sister, to sibling.  In the PsycInfo database search, results were similar, but more focused into the area of physical health. The key words of sister*and middle* and adult* generated articles with the topics of communication about health within a family, such as children with brain injuries or autism, or developmental disabilities.

Many of the studies that involved siblings did not look at the relationship of siblings; instead they examined siblings within the context of another situation.  None of the articles attempted to understand the relationship specifically.  If there is a focus on the sibling relationship, it is often in general professional articles (not always research focused) that appear in professional magazines, and the focus is on adult sibling rivalry (Leder, 1993). Victoria and Paula Avioli called for the use of sibling relationship as a unit of analysis in future research (Blieszer & Bedford, 2012).  This study will begin to fill that neglected gap in the literature and is intended to inspire future research specifically focused on the relationship.

**Purpose of Study**

The focus of the study is to understand the meaning women ascribe to being a sister and associated influences. In adult sibling research, some of the most common foci are patterns of communication among each other, caregiving of each other or parents, perception of fairness or parental treatment, and adult child and parent relationships. This is why this study is focusing on the relationship and its meaning to the sisters regardless of its context.

In multiple studies about gender, specific differences are identified between expectations of male siblings and female siblings. Consistently, research shows that sisters tend to have more intimate relationships (Bedford & Avioli, 2001). Gender is a central issue to parental caretaking between siblings where sisters take on more of the caregiving role (White & Reidmann, 1992).

Sisters are more likely to take on or be assigned the kin-keeping role of the family by organizing family get-togethers, sharing the family news, and keeping communication going (Spitze & Trent, 2006). Another area where gender differences are apparent is communication between male siblings and female siblings. Even if sisters or brothers indicate they are close to one or the other, research consistently indicates that women do tend to telephone, or generally communicate more often than men do (Crenner, Dechaux, Herpin, & Jacobs, 2002).

The focus of this study, however, is not on inter-gender differences but solely on the relationship between sisters. Furthermore, the study focuses on adults. Facilitating a narrative from sisters about their relationship can increase understanding about how this relationship maintains its importance after childhood and variations in its importance through adulthood. Sisters reflecting on their past relationship and how that relationship has transformed over time may contribute to researchers' understanding not only of sisters' interactions but also how the family system works as a whole (Cicicerlli, 1995).

In nearly all of the previous research on sibling relationships, two basic theories have been applied: family systems and attachment (Bedford & Avioli, 2012). This study will be unique because sibling relationships will be examined by applying the lens of symbolic interactionism and identity theory. The exploration of a new theoretical approach makes this study an excellent fit for case study research, which aims to answer the question of meaning within a lived experience. Case study can contribute to existing theory and research as well as challenge existing research and theoretical approaches (Gilgun, 2011). Looking at the unit of analysis through the lens of symbolic interactionism and identity theory will provide a new focus on the sister relationship not previously applied to this population.

# CHAPTER 2 - LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of the academic literature to date suggests research on the adult sibling relationship is sparse. In 1982, two academic books about sibling relationships were released; Bank and Kahn published *The Sibling Bond* and Lamb and Sutton-Smith released *Sibling Relationships: Their Nature and Significance across the Life Span*. Then in 1995, Victor Cicerilli penned *Sibling Relationships across the Life Span*. Nearly 20 years passed before Sue Kuba (2011) authored, *The Role of Sisters in Women's Development*. Since the 1970's to now, only a few studies on adult sibling relationships were published, which is why this literature review includes publications that reach back to 1934. Much of sibling research is focused on siblings involved in a particular situation (e.g., caregiving, estate issues, or conflict) and the majority focused on the young adult relationship, the adult sibling bond, and what functions the sibling relationship provides.

Within literature about adult siblings, these few theoretical frameworks have been consistently used: life course theory, family systems theory, and attachment theory. Using a theoretical framework to apply meaning and self-identity to the sibling relationship is an area of research largely untapped.

## Symbolic Interactionism as the Theoretical Framework

What is symbolic to us in our lives and why? This is the question that goes to the heart of symbolic interactionism (SI). Symbols are formed as products of an individual's social interaction. Siblings are often each other's first experiences with social interaction. The meaning of something in our life is formed by the way we see others using them. This means that the meaning of a symbol can change from situation to situation and usually does. The individual learns to apply this meaning by observing the interaction within a specific environment.

Interaction is defined as "a social behavior between two or more people during which some type of communication takes place causing each person to react to the situation" (Pascale, 2011, p. 86). When this is applied to a sister relationship, a word or a phrase that may cause strife or frustration with a sister, may mean nothing coming from another individual.

Symbolic interactionism is based in pragmatism, which is the idea that the world is ever changing, social structures are not fixed, and meaning of an object is not based in the object, but our interpretation of the object (Ingoldsby, Smith, & Miller, 2004). While using pragmatism as a basis, George Mead and other researchers/theorists began to develop symbolic interactionism. Mead wanted to explain the process of how the self develops. He maintained that the self-developed through social interaction (Mead, 1934) Symbolic interactionism began to be used to assist in explaining how multiple people involved in the same situation or communicating with each other could perceive it differently.

There are basic concepts at the heart of symbolic interactionism important to understand, first of which are symbols and how they are products of social interaction. Meaning is given by the way we see others using them and the meaning of a symbol changes from situation to situation. A person learns these symbols from interacting with others in the environment (Reynolds & Herman-Kinney, 2003, p 86). A key part of symbolic interactionism is the interaction between people. It is this interaction between a person and others that provides understanding of what these symbols are. Interaction is defined as "a social behavior between two or more people during which some type of communication takes place causing each person to react to the situation" (Reynolds & Herman-Kinney, 2003, p 86). This interaction can be verbal or nonverbal. Interaction with others also involves socialization. "Socialization is a process by which we acquire the symbols, beliefs, and attitudes of our culture. Importation of

social symbols into the mind is part of this process" (White and Klein, 2002, p 101).  One thing taught to individuals during these interactions is social norms, or the "expectations about how to act in a given way" (Reynolds & Herman-Kinney, 2003, p 86). Social norms will guide an individual on how to behave and adapt in different situations (Reynolds & Herman-Kinney, 2003).

There are four basic assumptions of symbolic interactionism and how it applies to socialization outlined by the authors within *The Handbook of Symbolic Interactionism* (2003) outlines for us (1) when we are born we are born into a world with already existing norms and customs into which we are socialized (2) it is the interaction with others in this existing society that makes us human (3) we all have the ability to act in certain ways, but also change and react to our environment and social cues, and (4) individuals will be socialized into the culture as a whole, as well as their specific family subculture (Reynolds & Herman-Kinney, 2003).  Our ability to change means that throughout our life cycle, "humans are continuously changing their roles and regardless of age or experience, continuously negotiate(s) his or her role-identities through interaction with others" (Reynolds & Herman-Kinney, 2003, p 564).

*The Handbook of Symbolic Interactionism* also outlines three basic assumptions about meaning in symbolic interactionism, which are (1) "People will react to something according to the meaning that the things have (has) for them…people respond to something based on the definition of that symbol (2) We learn about meaning through interactions with others…value judgments are learned through social interactions… we (learn) what is positive or negative, and (3) as people come into contact with different things and experiences, they interpret what is being learned…we are active people who choose which parts of the environment to respond to.

We take an active part in controlling our environment" (Reynolds & Herman-Kinney, 2003, p 84).

Self-concept is needed for "beings to interact with others" and what meaning they make of that interaction. Two important assumptions about self-concept is (1) "a human infant is asocial, meaning they are not born into predetermined ideas and they develop these as they interact along the way." (Reynolds & Herman-Kinney, 2003, p. 84) This assumption is the basis of the looking glass self-concept of symbolic interactionism. The looking glass self refers to a person's beliefs about how he or she is perceived by significant others (Cook & Douglas, 1998, p 299). This includes what an individual perceives her sibling to think about her. An individual begins to think about how she appears to others and understands that the other individuals have thoughts and opinions about her. These perceptions are then incorporated into an individual's own concept of self. Most of these "looking glass self" interactions take place within the primary groups in a person's life (Pascale, 2011, p. 82-83).

The second assumption about self-concept is (2) "once individuals develop a sense of self, this will provide motivation for future behavior." The important part of this assumption is that "humans are reflexive and they reflect on their experience and use this guide for future behavior. You also get a sense of how others view you" (Reynolds & Herman-Kinney, 2003, p 84). Reflexivity of a person's processes and experiences allows for a person to develop herself as an individual. This self-reflection process leads to the concept of the "generalized other," or when someone thinks about how society may look at how her individual behavior and how it reflects on them (White & Klein, 2002, p 96).

Third, society is important to symbolic interactionism because of the influence the environment has on people (especially infants). "Individuals are influenced by

society…influenced by their own self-concept, the values, symbols, beliefs of their families, by cultural norms and values of the society in which they live" (Reynolds & Herman-Kinney, 2003, p 84). White and Klein (2002) summarized it best by explaining, "society precedes the individual humans use of their mind to manipulate and interpret…symbols" (p. 96).

These interpretations of symbols impact multiple aspects of people's lives; these interpretations lead to assumptions of specific roles in an individual's life. A role "is a set of social norms for a specific situation or part" (Pascale, 2011, p. 87). In many cases these ideas may be set by other family members of what roles a person holds impact everyday interactions. Changing roles or inconsistent role expectations can then influence conflict and disorganization within a family (Reynolds & Herman-Kinney, 2003).

Role salience is when an individual must determine what roles are the most important to her and which roles she identifies with in her life. While an individual may experience salience with the role with which she has identified this role may not be one in which other family members see the individual in. When individuals identify with a role, they will divide up their time so they can spend it performing the functions of those roles. Role salience is important in understanding sister relationships is because it will guide an individuals interactions with her. If she interprets specific expectations of her within the relationship, she will act to fulfill that role. The role an individual may assume is based on what she interprets family expectations are of her within a particular relationship (Carter, 2013).

The roles assumed that are the most salient in an individual's life are the ones that help an individual form her identity. This identity is formed through interactions in many roles. This identity then provides guidelines for a person's behavior in a variety of situations throughout her life. Symbolic interactionism proposes that the "greater perceived clarity of role expectations, the

higher the quality of role enactment" (White & Klein, 2002, p. 103). In other words, if a person understands what is expected of her in a particular role, then that person is able to behave consistently in that role. This proposition goes hand in hand with another that explains that "the more individuals perceive consensus in the expectations about a role they occupy, the less their role strain" (White & Klein, 2002, p. 103). Sisters often will have certain expectations within their relationship, but also sense expectations about their role as a sister from people outside of their relationship.

## Identity Theory

Within the theory of symbolic interactionism, and specifically the "looking glass self" concept, identity theory has emerged as a specific way to explain and understand how identity develops for an individual. From these early attempts to understand how we become who we are an individuals, identity theory was formed.

Michael Carter (2013) outlined the three basic concepts of identity theory: identity, identity salience, and commitment identity. Identity is a 'internal positional designation' that represents meanings actors use to define themselves as unique individuals (person identities), role occupants (role identities), or group members (social identities). An individual can have multiple identities, such being Protestant, a mother, a liberal, or a student. This is why the concept of identity salience is important. Identity salience explains how an individual chooses the identity to which they may align closer to in a given situation. An identity becomes "activated" when the environment changes and an individual will activate the identity that matches the perceived environment. Once this identity is activated, then it is motivated by the behavior of the individual within this environment. Situations can also invoke multiple identities

of an individual, this is where in internal salience a person has will guide which identity become prominent and therefore guides the behavior in that situation (Carter, 2013).

Finally, the concept of commitment is the "degree to which the individual's relationships to specified sets of other persons depends on his or her being a particular kind of person" (Stryker, 1981, p 24). An individual is as committed to an identity relative to the perceived importance of that social relationship in her life. If the individual still feels this role is relevant in her life, then they are still committed to putting time and energy into that role, this "commitment affects identity salience which, in turn, affects behavioral choices" (Stryker, 1981, p 24).

Within the field of identity theory, five models have developed: historical, structural stage, sociocultural, narrative, and psychosocial. The model that is closely aligned with the theory of symbolic interactionism is the sociocultural model. The focus of the sociocultural model is that identity is formed by the interaction an individual has with his or her environment. Because of the multiple groups, interactions, and meanings that individuals interpret, this is then why individuals can form multiple identities dependent on the environment they occupy (Kroger, 2007).

Identity does not stop developing at one point in one's life: identity continues to evolve and change through young, middle, and older adulthood. Middle adulthood has been a point of life with a wide range of diverse experiences and challenges. While one person is years away from his or her college life, another middle-aged adult may be embarking his or her first college experience. Some middle-aged adults are experiencing a household without children, while others are beginning their parenthood experiences.

Identity in midlife is often perceived in the Western culture as some sort of crisis individuals, mostly men, go through, while actually this crisis seems to happen to only 10% of middle-aged men (Kroger, 2007). An individual's identity is impacted by multiple issues in middle adulthood, most of which seems dependent on how tied to that particular identity he or she is. For example, changes in a person's environment from work to retirement can impact his or her identity and cause the individual to rebuild his or her identity to fit their new environment. Often while adolescent children of middle-aged parents are going through challenges with identity and body images, their parents are struggling with their own physical changes and how that changes their personal identity of who they are (Kroger, 2007, p 188) A role is different than an identity because it is part of an identity that an individual possesses as part of ones identities, or is something that can be taken on as part of what they perceive another individual expects from them.

**The Family**

The Western family is changing and evolving. In 2010, Pew Research designed a survey that included seven possible types of families. This report surveyed 2,691 individuals by phone to gather responses on the topic of changing family dynamics. Ninety-nine percent of the participants agreed that a married couple with children is a family. The participants were then asked if the following categories were a family (a) married couple without children, (b) single parent with children, (c) unmarried couple with children, (d) same-sex couple with children (e) same-sex couple without children, and (f) unmarried couple without children. Agreement about each category dropped until an unmarried couple without children only had a 43% agreement among participants that they were a family. While it seems to be difficult to come to an

agreement with what a family is, 76% participants in this particular study did identify family as one of the most important things in their lives (Morin, 2010).

The importance of family begins early in life when the primary relationships are established between family members. These relationships in childhood provide needed lessons and skill development that continue throughout an individual's life. These primary relationships provide six essential functions in a person's life (1) development of a sense of attachment, (2) sharing of concerns, (3) nurturing behavior, (4) reassuring of worth, (5) alliance, and (6) guidance (Cicilleri, 1995). Experiencing these functions in at least one primary relationship allows individuals to begin to apply them to other parts of their lives. These primary relationships are first developed within the family of origin.

While the sibling relationship can meet many of these primary functions, siblings also provide other functions for each other. Goetting (1986) and Bank and Kahn (1982) all found that the sibling relationship provides specific functions or tasks in each individual's life. Weaver and Coleman (2003) took these and identified them as the following sibling functions (1) identity formation, (2) mutual regulation, (3) defend/protect, (4) interpret, (5) provide direct services, and 6) teach new skills and abilities (p. 246-248). These functions provide opportunities for siblings to form their identity when they compare themselves to their sibling and their experiences, then they can decide if they want to have the same experiences, or choose to go in another direction. When siblings try new roles or activities, mutual regulation allows for an individual to experience feedback before individuals outside of the relationship can experience the new behavior. Within the family, siblings often rely on each other to keep each other's secrets, or defend each other against people within or outside of the family. Interpretation of parents' behaviors and choices is another function that siblings provide to each other. Finally, siblings

often provide services, teach each other new skills, or are a resource to each other throughout their lifetime, as well as teaching each other new skills.

## Sibling Bond

As siblings interact with each other, they also form their unique sibling bond. A sibling bond is defined by Bank and Kahn (1997) as "a connection between the selves at both the intimate and the public levels…it is a 'fitting' together of two people's identities" (p. 15). This is a useful definition of sibling bond when trying to understand siblings through the lens of symbolic interactionism. This definition focuses on the connection of siblings through the "self." How does a person see herself through her sibling, or how does she think her sibling influences her? Often, we think of bond in a positive way, but a sibling bond can take on either a positive or negative influence of a person's identity or sense of self. For example, siblings who hate each other can be considered 'bound' if their identities influence each other" (p. 15). Meaning, that even if siblings hate each other, they are still using the same amount of emotional energy to connect as siblings who love each other. These siblings are still connected

Whitney Stach (2007) summarized multiple factors that may or may not be shared between sisters that could impact their relationship. According to Stach (2007), sisters tend to have closer relationships if they share values, interests, experiences, attitudes, perspectives, and milestones. In many cases, siblings stay connected for life when they stay connected through these factors. It is the individual perception of these experiences that can set the tone for the sibling relationship throughout a lifetime.

The beginning of the young adult sibling relationship may involve ups and downs often while siblings are establishing competing primary relationships such as marrying or having children (Voorpostal & Lippe, 2007). Even though the focus is on other relationships, during

these transitions many siblings still consider themselves close during this time period (Circelli, 1995).  In fact, Connidis (1992) has found that the birth of children by siblings may increase the likelihood that they will attempt to maintain their relationship. Even if the relationship goes into a period of "dormancy" while siblings are establishing their families and raising children, they still consider themselves close and often reconnect to cooperate on health issues surrounding parents, or to deal with their own health and aging issues (Bank & Kahn, 1997).

## Gold's Sibling Relationship Categories

In 1989, Deborah Gold developed a sibling typology to identify five different types of adult sibling relationships.  This typology was unusual at the time, and still is, because it is focused on categories that uniquely apply to adult siblings only. Gold interviewed adults ages 65 and older and as a result designed a typology specifically for siblings in later life stages.  The categories of relationships identified were the intimate, congenial, loyal, apathetic, and hostile.

### Intimate Relationship

The intimate category for siblings describes those who "share a relationship based upon mutual love, concern, empathy, protection, understanding, and durability. They respond in "situations of trouble" (Gold, 1989, p. 43).  These siblings are connected emotionally and seem to anticipate the support each of them needs from the other.  The intimate siblings often communicate on a daily basis. The support offered to each sibling was not contingent on geographic proximity. These siblings are connected psychologically, sharing their inner lives, personal thoughts, and feelings usually on a daily basis. The intimate siblings have acceptance and approval of each other as well as a high degree of psychological involvement and personal attachment. The siblings who categorize themselves as intimate are the ones who see themselves as having the "closest" relationship of all of Gold's categories (Gold, 1989).  "Feelings of

jealousy occasionally occur in these relationships, but they are not destructive or hateful. Rather, they express admiration for certain traits" (Gold, 1989, p. 43).

## Congenial Relationship

Congenial siblings are close and have strong friendships with each other. They usually have not developed empathetic feelings and deep emotional ties for each other the same way that siblings with intimate relationships have. Persons in congenial relationships do maintain consistent contact but on less than a daily basis. These siblings still support each other, "should trouble occur, they offer solace and understanding; should a happy occasion arise, they join the celebration" (Gold, 1989, p. 43). One of the key differences between congenial and intimate siblings is the development of empathy in the relationship as well as not being as emotionally deep and not being as reliable with each other. "Intimacy may temporarily be achieved during times of crisis or stress (Gold, 1989, p. 43). These siblings will approve and support each other, but also occasionally share disapproval and disagree with each other. Sibling contact in the congenial relationship usually takes place on a weekly or monthly basis. Stressful life events usually do not cause stress in the congenial relationships, and usually these siblings will support each other. Other primary relationships will be their focus in their daily lives, but congenial siblings are still psychologically connected in "strong and positive ways" (Gold, 1989, p. 43). Jealousy is expressed in this type of relationship, but not at strong levels. If jealousy is expressed, it is short lived and usually only when something good may happen to the other sibling (Gold, 1989).

## Loyal Relationship

While intimate and congenial sibling relationships would be described as best friend or good friends respectively, the loyal relationship would be best described as "brotherhood" and

"sisterhood." The loyal sibling relationship is best described by the saying "blood is thicker than water" (Gold, 1989, p. 44). These siblings feel a sense of family obligation and responsibility. The entire basis of this relationship is on "shared family background rather than upon shared personal involvement" (Gold, 1989, p. 44). The loyal sibling interacts based more in the idea of responsibilities to each other. They attend family functions, as they would see necessary to fulfill the sibling role. In addition, they would assist the family in time of need based on what they view as their responsibility. These siblings "do not share a deep emotional level" (Gold, 1989, p. 44). These siblings feel, and may share disapproval with each other and share very little contact with each other. Loyal siblings may envision a close relationship, but this is usually actually idealized rather than the actual reality of the relationship. While these siblings provide each other support during times of stress or crisis, they support each other and contact each other less frequently in daily lives. Any sharing, support, or contact with each sibling is on a much less emotional level than the intimate or congenial sibling relationship. "Certain circumstances arouse strong feelings of family solidarity; a return to normalcy causes those intense feelings to ebb" (Gold, 1989, p. 45). Jealousy or envy is more common in the loyal relationship. Many of these resentments begin in childhood and are unresolved through adulthood. Loyal siblings will resolve their feelings of envy because of the importance of family loyalty and connection. While these siblings feel they should contact each other "more often" they mostly have their contact though family events, reunions, or various gatherings.

**Apathetic Relationship**

The next sibling type identified by Gold is apathetic. This relationship is defined by indifference. "They show no signs of solidarity with or responsibility for their siblings, not even because of shared family background" (Gold, 1989, p. 45). This indifference is so pronounced,

that siblings may go for years without contact with each other.  This lack of contact is not based

in anger or arguments, but just lack of interest in maintaining communication. While one sibling

may help her other sibling, she does not believe that she will be asked. The sibling does not

usually cross the other siblings mind. They are more likely to happen to cross paths at family

events such as funerals or weddings, and updates about each sibling are most likely shared

through other family members, not through contact with each other (Gold, 1989). Apathetic

siblings do not buy into the sibling norms expected from a "brotherhood" or "sisterhood" (Gold,

1989).  Siblings described as apathetic are not regretful of having little contact with their sibling;

it is just the way it is (Gold, 1989). Many siblings in the apathetic category stated that they "were

never close, not even as children" (Gold, 1989, p 45).  This disinterest in their relationship as

children has continued into adulthood. This relationship is marked by little contact, and contact is

often influenced by geographic distance from each other.

**Hostile Relationship**

The final sibling type is hostile.  This category also is an emotionally active category.

"These siblings denounce each other and declare that nothing can ever create or establish any

meaningful, positive relationship" (Gold, 1989, pp.45-46). Hostile relationships are defined by

resentment, anger, and enmity on a psychologically active level. These siblings deliberately

avoid each other; they strongly disapprove of each other.  This distain can be as extreme as

expressing embarrassment that they are related to the sibling. This disapproval is often to the

point of distain of each other and how they live their lives. The psychological investment of

anger and hostility for these siblings is great. Hostile siblings are as deeply engaged

psychologically as intimate siblings are engaged because of the amount of time they invest in the

anger and hatred. This "inverse" attachment is based more upon emotional attachment of hatred,

rejection, and desire for distance between the siblings (p 46).   When a sibling is thinking about past issues or what may happen in their future relationship, it takes a lot of psychological energy to engage in a hostile sibling relationship. Often, the hostile sibling relationship began through an event occurring between the siblings, such as an inheritance dispute or a social rebuff, but this event is related to a build up of feelings for years.  Envy and resentment is a major and consistent part of the hostile sibling relationship (Gold, 1989).  These hostile feelings can and will continue into older age but will change and adjust as the siblings get older still, involving psychological connections (Gold, 1989).  Many times these feelings of hostility and anger will maintain until the perception of the sibling is changed or the sibling is confronted by an alternate reality (Gold, 1989).  This relationship type does not maintain communication.

In addition to the categories of how siblings may define their relationship, Bossard and Boll (1955) identified several types of sibling "types" or roles with which siblings tend to identify. Many times siblings may view roles as "good" or "bad" and the role that the other sibling takes on influences what role they choose themselves. Physical characteristics may also influence the role choice (e.g., siblings' weight or hair color). These physical characteristics are based on what society values and can assist with that choice of making the "good" versus "bad" role.  The size of the family also matters: the more siblings, the more roles that are assumed by others.

### Sibling Role Types

Bossard and Ball (1955) found that these roles that siblings take on usually fall into eight different categories. The first role is the *responsible* one. This sibling often supervises the other sibling(s) or assists them as necessary. The next sibling type is the *popular or well-liked sibling*; this sibling type is usually very charming. The *social butterfly* role is similar, but different in that

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it is focused more on being socially ambitious.  The fourth sibling type is the *studious* type that gains recognition both within, and outside of the family being successful in school.  The studious one usually does not participate in social activities as much as he or she may retreat into a book. The *self-centered* sibling type organizes his or her life away from the family unit.  This sibling type can almost be seen as withdrawing from the family

The sixth sibling type is the *irresponsible one*, the sibling who avoids responsibilities. Another type is the *spoiled sibling*, which is most often identified as the youngest sibling or the one that gets his or her way. The final sibling type is the *physically weak or reoccurring sick* sibling (Bossard  & Ball, 1955).  These sibling types are important to identify because these are often roles that siblings continue to follow as they age when interacting with their siblings or their family of origin. While these roles develop in childhood, individuals will often identify with a particular role her entire life.

### Influences on the Sibling Bond

While siblings are beginning to form their relationships early in life, there are multiple factors that influence a child's personal attachment to his or her siblings. The amount of literature found on each influencing factor indicates that researchers have vastly understudied the continued influence into adulthood.

### Gender

Research has been extensive in exploring how men and women interact in sibling relationships depending on their sex. There are multiple ways that gender changes the dynamics of the sibling relationship.  Some sibling research has found that sisters are more likely to provide support and assistance to each other (Weaver et al, 2003).

When it comes to communication and types of communication, gender differences surface again. In sibling relationships, women associated self-disclosure with relationship closeness more often than men (Martin, Anderson, & Mottett, 1997). Generally, phone conversation is more frequent in sisters than other sibling pairs (Crenner, Dechaux, Herpin, & Jacobs, 2002). While some of these findings are consistent across the literature, there are still often conflicting results. Floyd and Parks (1995) found that females may communicate more, exhibiting their closeness in several ways, but both men and women share closeness in their sibling relationship, just exhibited in different ways.

The sex of the sibling also influences what role or expectations they have within the family overall. Sisters reported being treated differently by their family based on gender (Mize & Pinjala, 2002). Women are more likely to be placed in the role of kin-keeper as well as the parental caregiver. Women are often expected to keep the communication going, organize the family events, share the family news, and take care of the duties involved in assisting the parents. Men also have role expectations such different chores or duties within the family based on gender. In one case study, Mize and Pinjala (2002) summarized the experiences of some siblings that experienced "male privilege" within their family where their male siblings had role expectations based only on the fact that they were men.

## Birth Order

There have been multiple studies that have attempted to understand the influence of being the first, middle, or last-born child. Alfred Adler is seen as the father of this theory of siblings. Some of the overarching assumptions about birth order based on this Adlerian theory are; 1 first borns are the most intelligent and the least creative and emotional 2) only children are difficult 3) middle born are the least talkative 4) and the babies are creative, overly emotional, and

irresponsible (Herrera et al. 2003). One interesting finding by Herrera et al. (2003) was the possibility that these birth order beliefs by Adler actually may influence the development of certain characteristics because they have become the basis of assumptions people make about what a first, middle, or last-born sibling should be like.

## Perception

*In Mother Always Liked you Best,* Kardasis, Larsen, Thorpe, and Trippe, (2011), defined personal perceptions as how people view equal different than equitable within the family. Years of different perceptions and experiences during the shared family events evolve into family patterns that influence how siblings interpret information from each other. These "family myths" create assumptions about who is capable to do what duties, make what decisions, and respond in what ways. This "dance" of assumptions and responses form the patterns of interactions with our siblings that individuals carry though their lives. The key to this perception seems to be the definition of fairness. A sibling will often create the truth based on how they perceive they were treated. "Because fairness can be determined on many different bases, there may be many competing interpretations on what is fair" (Titus, Rosenblatt, & Anderson, 1979, p. 337).

Individual perceptions will even affect the willingness of a sibling to share or disclose information to another sibling. If a sibling does not perceive that the sibling will understand her, she is less likely to choose to disclose (Martin, Anderson, & Mottet, 1997). Personal choice to disclose information to the sibling is influenced at a greater extent by the individual's perception of the closeness of the relationship than the gender of the sibling (Weaver et al, 2003). A sibling is more likely to perceive social support when the sibling is female (White & Riedmann, 1992). The lens through which people view the history of their sibling relationship is important to how that relationship develops throughout their lives.

**Race**

Most of the research done in the area of adult siblings has been with participants who are White and middle class (Weaver et al, 2003). The factor of race seems to be as complex in regards to adult siblings as all the other factors influencing the relationship. White and Riedmann (1992) found that African Americans may interact with their siblings more than any other racial or ethnic group, but did not report feeling closer to their siblings than any other group. In fact, they may have less meaningful exchanges than other groups (p. 100). Other studies have also found that African Americans report seeing each other more often, but they did not help their siblings more often (Spitze & Trent, 2006).

While these studies seem to indicate that there is a difference between race and how often siblings see each other, Eriksen and Gerstel (2002) examined adult siblings and how they take care of each other. In this particular study, no difference was found between the amount of care given and the siblings' race.

While both of the previous studies examined quality of the relationship, Gold (1990) did use her typology to compare sibling relationships between Black siblings and White siblings. After coding interviews, she found that most Black siblings were distributed among the three most positive sibling categories with only 4.5% falling into the hostile category while White siblings had 22% percent of their group in the hostile category.

**Communication**

Probably one of the areas in sibling research that has been explored to the greatest extent has been sibling communication providing some insight to family communication interactions and what that means for their relationships.

Researcher Scott Myers (2015) utilized Gold's typology to explore the use of affectionate communication and how the frequency varied depending on the specific relationship category that the siblings fit into.  This study found that intimate siblings valued the use of affectionate communication at a higher rate than the other siblings.  In addition, the congenial siblings also used affectionate communication at a higher rate than the apathetic, hostile, and loyal sibling type.  This study highlighted the importance of communication between siblings and how that communication is different between each of these sibling types.

Another study by Rittenour, Myers, and Brann (2007) showed that siblings that share emotional and affectionate communication with each other could have a close committed relationship despite other issues that could create challenges to their relationship.  While this study showed that communication kept siblings bound despite outside challenges, it did not explore the motivation behind why siblings were communicating. Myers, Brann, and Rittenour (2008) studied the motivation behind communication and found that in some cases siblings may be communicating based on their own desire to keep the relationship intact for their children or their parents.  Because of the length of the sibling relationships, and the complexity this creates, studying siblings in adulthood and their perspective on the relationship becomes very challenging.  Siblings are the few family members that go through several relationship stages together.

<div align="center">

**Adult Sibling Relationship Stages**

</div>

**Young Adulthood**

As siblings move into young adulthood, they are often focused on their own life choices, choosing a career, getting married, and having children. Even with these significant changes, the patterns of support that have been established in childhood continue after they leave their

parents' homes. The emotional support coming through phone or other contact is changed because of the new focus on additional primary relationships, such as marriage or children. Often though, siblings are seen as a permanent family support through a changing time (Goetting, 1986, p. 708). Companionship and emotional support tasks are maintained into young and middle adulthood through other forms of contact such as phone calls (Cicirelli, 1995). The continuation of patterns in young adulthood is interesting considering this is the first opportunity that siblings can choose how often they will interact with each other (Goetting, 1986).

**Middle to Late Adulthood**

In middle to late adulthood, the sibling relationship goes through yet another evolutionary process. Young and middle adulthood have been focused on mutual support of each other while siblings establish new primary relationships (Cicirelli, 1995). Whether siblings decide to reconnect later in life is often contingent on how they view their relationship. An increase in contact often occurs with caretaking of a shared parent or personal health issues (Goetting, 1986). Support between siblings can also increase as they age, often resurfacing after the age of 70 (White & Lynn, 2001). The death of a spouse or partner at this stage of life may move the sibling relationship to one of greater importance (Dunn, 2005). Sibling support later in life could take the form of reminiscing of shared past life events; they may even attempt to resolve sibling rivalry that has taken place during their relationship (Goetting, 1986). Some sibling research has indicated that the sibling relationship may improve with age as they begin to accept each other and seek resolution to relationship issues (Dunn, 2005).

**Sibling bonds through Adulthood**

When examining the literature about factors of sibling closeness, there are multiple issues surrounding why siblings stay close. As siblings age, factors such as gender, age, proximity,

marital status, sibling status, listening, showing interest in the sibling's life, and being non-judgmental increased the probability of siblings being close (Cicirelli, 1995). Bedford (1989) suggested that through the different phases of adulthood, siblings become more aware of their changing feelings toward each other. They may examine these perceptions of fairness, or they may examine if the relationship is overall negative or positive. Sibling relationships are often seen as contemporaries having shared interests and shared pasts.  If the siblings do continue to have a similar perspective of a shared past, and continue to have shared current interests, siblings have greater relationship satisfaction than when they do not share common interests (Bedford & Avioli, 2001, p. 214). There is an aspect of the importance of past events and shared memories that also create importance in relationship satisfaction.

**Sisterhood as Adults**

Research specifically about sisters faces many of the same challenges that sibling research does.  Sisters are usually examined in the context of a situation, or in studies focusing on comparing the role expectations between sisters (older and younger) and sisters to brothers (Erikesn & Gerstel, 2002). The literature on sisters covers several aspects that influence these relationships, one of which is conflict.  In some cases, sisters indicated they would try hard to avoid conflict for the sake of their relationship (Mize & Pinjala, 2002). Some sisters indicated that they have to accept that conflict will always occur and jealousy always will exist (Stach, 2007). In Sue Kuba's (2011) study on sisters and their relationships, the participants also indicated that they felt conflict was inevitable. Kuba (2011) found that sisters who understood how to handle their conflict in childhood were more likely to be close as adults.

In addition to developing conflict-solving skills in childhood, there are other reported factors that increases closeness in the sister relationship. When sisters held similar values and

beliefs, it increased the closeness of the relationship (Kuba, 2011; Stach, 2007). In addition, shared interests and activities also increased the closeness between sisters (Kuba, 2011). The other important shared factor is shared parents, or at least a shared time growing together. Sisters described closeness with their sister because no one else understood how it was growing up together (Kuba, 2011, p 32).

Some sister research indicates that in addition to a shared history, going through similar life transitions, or milestones, also can increase sister closeness (Stach, 2007). A participant in Whitney Stach's study noted that her sister relationship grew closer after both of them became mothers (p. 8). This closeness can also extend to planning or focusing on the future together. This vision of the future can include plans of where they may live when they grow older or how they may retire.

A negative influence on the sister relationship that has been identified is that an individual can have a hard time being seen differently from the way the family has always seen her. Sue Kuba (2011) identified this perception as "frozen images." Frozen images are those that are "held in time." They are views of each other held in memory that continue to influence how sisters continue to see each other (Kuba, 2011, p. 54), conflicting frozen images are formed when perceptions differed between the sisters or "they remember and sometimes experienced things differently" (Kuba, 2011, p. 33). When sisters continue to see each other as those images frozen in time, they report having difficulty being real with their sisters, or not being able to be as natural with their sisters, as they are with their friends (Mize & Pinjala, 2002).

One predominant issue that relates to the relationship of sisters that has not been explored often by researchers is an individual's sense of self and how being a sister influences that. For example, Whitney Stach (2007) attempted to address differences and sense of self in her study,

but the literature summarized only the impact of the differences between them.  Sue Kuba (2011) explored a little deeper into the development of the sense of self by explaining that is comes from shared meanings and emotions (p 366). Kuba (2011) noted that sister identity development is closely associated with their sister's identity.  This happens because of the comparison with the other sister: a sister chooses to define herself by what role her sister already holds within the family and taking another one.  In addition, "protectiveness was another common theme that shaped the sense of self" (Kuba, 2011, p. 179). Sister relationships, in particular, can provide emotional support for siblings (Tannen, 2009). Siblings often see themselves reflected in their own sibling, through aging and comparison (Tannen, 2009). Shared events and the meaning of these events can shape the type of sister relationship and the meaning it holds for them.

Existing research on sibling relationships is minimal.  To date most research has focused on the relationships that develop while a child, and even in the area of child psychology, siblings seem to be barley mentioned in the *Handbook of Child Psychology* (1998). In a 2000 interview of Susan McHale, a professor of Human Development at Penn State, she pointed out that only 16 of 5,000 pages in the *Handbook of Child Psychology* mention siblings (O'Brien, 2000).

In Jane Krogers (2007) book following identity development from adolescence through late adulthood, siblings are not even mentioned.  It could be assumed that she may have placed siblings under the heading of immediate family, but when examining these chapters the influence of siblings was never addressed.

This study will supplement the current small library of mid-life sibling and specifically sister research.  What also makes it unique is the application of meaning to the relationship in adulthood.  Currently, no literature asks the question of what the sister relationship means to an individual in middle adulthood. While that seems impossible, most information we have in

existence that speaks to the sister relationship is from popular literature. The use of symbolic interactionism as well as identity theory as a guide to understanding the sister relationship is new. This study will add to the understanding of what is most likely the longest relationship that an individual has if she is a sister.

# CHAPTER 3 - METHODOLOGY

As has been discussed in this paper, sibling research past the age of 25 is nearly non-existent.  In addition, to look at the relationship through the lens of symbolic interactionism created a very unique study that has added to the sibling literature. The theoretical lens of symbolic interactionism was also complimented by the use of identity theory, which has its theoretical roots based in symbolic interactionism.

## Research Questions

This study examines one overarching research question: What is the meaning of sisterhood in middle adulthood? To better understand this meaning of adult sister relationships, I needed to address the following specific research questions (1) How does the sister relationship influence an individual's identity and the roles she chooses to assume in life, (2) What meaning does the sister role/relationship hold throughout a woman's life and family transitions,  (3) What does how sisters communicate tell us about the meaning of the relationship, (4) What influence does a parent have on the meaning of the sister's adult relationship?

## Qualitative Case Study Approach

The unit of analysis for this study was the sister relationship. This unit of analysis allowed for examination of the self within the framework of the relationship.  In the case of multiple sisters, the interviewer asked them to reflect on each of their sister relationships. This highlighted multiple relationship styles that sisters had and the different meaning held about each of those relationships (Gold, 1990). I examined how the sister relationship impacted the adult women, how the relationship impacted their identity, and the overall meaning of the relationship.

Because I wanted to understand the meaning that has been constructed by the sisters, qualitative methodology was best suited for this study. Sister relationships involve complicated family emotions and history that is difficult to quantify. As Connidis (1989) noted in her quantitative study of siblings in later life, "meaning attached to sibling relationships cannot be fully explored with such quantitative data" (p 93). A qualitative approach allowed for exploration of an individual's thoughts and feelings through a narrative, conversational approach (Yin, 2003). Within the field of qualitative study, I choose a case study approach. The case study design allowed me to "gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and the meaning for those involved" (Yin, 2003, p. 298). This is what makes case studies unique in that multiple interviews and information come together to create one entity to be studied, in this case, the sister relationship.

## Participant Criteria

To ensure that a diverse group of middle-aged sisters was included, participants were recruited using the goal of maximum variation. Invitations to participate were distributed electronically on one academic listserv and in an article in the *K-State Today* daily email at Kansas State University. The immediate response to these two recruitment techniques resulted in nearly 55 emails from women interested in participating in the study. To keep the sample within the middle-aged adult population and to ensure data-rich interviews, specific screening criteria was designed for potential participants. Eligible participants were between the ages of 45-65, female, and had at least one sister within the same age range who agreed to participate. Participants self-identified that they had a sister relationship in their life, this resulted in a variety of sister relationships, such as adopted, half sisters, identical twins, and full sisters.

Some of the groups had other sisters who were outside of the age range for this study, so they did not participate. In some of the other cases, some of the sisters had died, had cognitive disabilities, or refused to participate. A screening interview was used at the very beginning of the recruitment process to make sure all participants were appropriate for inclusion in the study.

The final recruitment process resulted in a total number of 12 family cases including 34 individuals who participated in the study. It was quickly apparent that each sister group was unique and provided a broad range of relationships to the study. The families represented different races and various geographic locations. Some of the cases had only two sisters and some had as many as five sisters.  Only one case requested to not be interviewed together. Another case involves three living sisters, but one refused to participate, but the other two sisters did answer questions about that relationship as well. To see the full case summary descriptions please see Appendix D. (See Table 3.1 for details about the participants.)

Table 3.1

*Study Participants*

| Case | Study Name | Age | Location | Education | Race |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Adams | Ashley | 51 | Midwest | Bachelor | White |
| Identical Twins | Anne | 51 | Midwest | Bachelor | White |
| Brown | BJ | 64 | South | Bachelor | Black |
| Full Sisters | Bea | 63 | Midwest | PhD | Black |
| Campbell | Catt | 54 | Midwest | Masters | White/ |
| Full Sisters | Cindy | 52 | Midwest | HS Graduate | Native American |
| Davis | Darcy | 49 | Midwest | Bachelor | White |
| Adopted | Dena | 45 | Midwest | Bachelor | White |
| Edwards | Emma | 59 | Western | Bachelor | Latina |
| Full Sisters | Elsa | 56 | Western | Bachelor | Latina |
| | Edith | 51 | Western | Associates | Latina |
| | Eva | 50 | Western | Associates | Mexican |
| | Elyse | 46 | Western | Bachelor | Latina |
| Frank | Fay | 62 | Midwest | PhD | White |
| Full Sisters | Frances | 61 | East | PhD | White |
| | Faith | 59 | South | Bachelor | White |
| | Fanny | 58 | South | Bachelor | White |
| | Freda | 54 | East | Masters | White |
| George | Gail | 65 | Midwest | Ph.D | White |
| Full Sister | Ginny | 60 | Midwest | Some College | White |
| Hanks | Helen | 61 | Midwest | HS Graduate | White |
| Half Sisters | Hannah | 57 | Midwest | Some College | White |
| Iverson | Iris | 58 | Midwest | Ph.D | White |
| Full Sisters | Isadore | 53 | Midwest | Bachelor | White |
| | Isabelle | 52 | Midwest | Some College | White |
| | Ingrid | 46 | Midwest | Bachelor | White |
| Johnson | Judy | 58 | East | Masters | White |
| Full Sisters | Jo Ann | 57 | Midwest | PhD | White |
| King | Kathy | 47 | Midwest | Masters | White |
| Full Sisters | Karen | 45 | Midwest | ABD | White |
| Lehman | Leslie | 54 | Midwest | Doctor | White |
| Full Sisters | Laura | 53 | Midwest | Bachelor | White |
| | Lana | 51 | Midwest | Masters | White |
| | Leah | 46 | Midwest | Bachelor | White |

## Data Collection

Interviews conducted with the sisters were done both jointly and individually. This decision was made to capture the dynamics between the sisters as they were answering the questions together, as well as allowing for opportunity for individual sisters to provide confidential reactions to the joint interview. The individual interviews were also designed to allow freedom for sisters to make comments and provide insight into their sister relationships that they may not have felt comfortable to do in the joint interview.

### Joint Interviews

Once a group of sisters confirmed they were interested in participating in the study, and confirmed eligible, joint interviews were conducted with all of the sisters within the age range of 45-65. In some cases it was decided to interview a group of sisters even if all were not participating because of the diversity of relationships it would bring to the study. The interviews were conducted in person at Mary and Carl Ice Hall, online in a location that each of the participants felt comfortable in, or on a conference phone call. Each interview was audio recorded and lasted an average of 60 minutes. A majority of the interviews were video recorded if they were online or in person. I utilized the videoconference software, Zoom for the online and in person interviews. In addition to the records I made of the interviews, I took notes on thoughts and observations that I had during the interview.

For the joint interview, the following questions were designed to elicit conversations and a storytelling narrative with the sisters.

1. Share with me the story of your relationship as sisters: what are the highs and lows, where would you start your story together? If your relationship was depicted in a movie, what sort of themes would it have?

a.   Describe a memory that represents your childhood relationship. (*They may choose one together or separately*)

b.   How do you think that represents your childhood?

c.   (*If they choose different memories*) What do you think of the memory your sister told?

d.   How well do these memories describe your relationship growing up?

e.   Tell me about one of your experiences as adults during a life transition such as birth, death, and marriages.

f.   Provide me an example of a situation that explains your relationship as adults.

g.   How well do you think that represents your relationship now?

h.   (*To the other sister*) What do you think of the memory your sister told?

2.   How often do you communicate with each other, and in what ways?

a.   What sort of things do you share with each other?

4.   How do you think you would individually be different if you were not sisters?

**Individual Interview**

Following the joint interview, each sister was interviewed individually. Some sisters chose to conduct their interviews immediately following the joint interview. Other interviews had to be scheduled later, either online, in person, or on the phone. These interviews were also audio recorded, and in some cases, video recorded. They lasted an average of 30 minutes. The following questions were utilized during the individual interviews with the participants:

1. Reflecting on the joint interview with your sister(s), is there anything you would like to expand on, clarify, or share more about?

*2.* I would like to refer you to three pages of Internet memes that summarize different viewpoints of various sister relationships. Can you select the meme that you feel best represents your relationship with your sister? If you cannot narrow it down to one meme, then you can choose more than one meme.

> *a.* Which meme did you select? Why did you select the meme that you did?

>> b. (*If more than one meme is selected*) Why did you select more than one meme?

3. How often do you communicate?

4. If you were going to describe your relationship with your sister using one of these phrases, which one would it be:

   a. We share a relationship based upon mutual love, concern, empathy, protection, understanding, and durability.

   b. We approve and support each other, but also disapprove and disagree with each other.

   c. "Blood is thicker than water": I feel it is my responsibility to have a relationship.

   d. I have contact with my sister only at family events or from a distance on special occasions such as, birthdays or holidays.

   e. I have no interest in having a relationship with my sister.

5.. How would you describe yourself to someone?

6.. How would you describe your sister to someone?

7. How do you think your sister would describe you?

8. Think of a time that you chose not to discuss something with your sister. Please describe that situation for me.

    a. What were you thinking when you made that decision?

    b. How do you feel about the choice not to share with her?

    c. Has there been a time that forced these topic(s) to be discussed?

9. Think of a situation when your sister chose to withhold something from you.

    a. How did you identify that she did not share this with you?

    b. How do you feel about this?

10. Is there anything else about your relationship with your sister that you would like to add?

**Data Transcription and Management**

After the individual and joint interviews were completed, I used the audio and video recordings to transcribe the interviews. I transcribed a majority of the interviews, as well as utilizing a professional transcribing service and colleagues who volunteered. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, including pauses, stammers, and utterances. These utterances were left out of the quotations within this document to ease with flow and readability. My notes were combined with the transcripts later after I had received all transcripts. To be better able to manage the data each person was assigned a pseudonym with the same first letter of the first and a shared pseudonym last name. My personal observations, the transcripts, and the Internet memes that the sisters selected allowed me to develop case summaries of each sister group. The interviews and my notes were stored on my locked personal computer, as well as password protected on a separate hard drive. The notes about the memes that were chosen by the

participants during the screening process and the individual interview were also kept with the

transcripts of the interviews.

## Data Analysis

To address all of my research questions, the goal was to allow the data to guide the

analyses inductively.  I read each joint and individual interview looking for patterns within the

interviews. I made notes while I was reading each interview.  Additionally, I created tables to

organize each Internet meme that the sisters selected for each other.  This allowed for

comparison between sisters within each case. I also organized the questions about personal

descriptions and identity in a table format for easy comparison.  After I finished reading the

interviews, I created a code book/key wordbook to keep track of the themes I was finding.  I then

re-read the interviews using the research questions as my guide and placed each sister's answer

in a table with each theme I was discovering. This allowed me to compare each answer to the

other and develop patterns within the themes.

I developed a case summary of each sister grouping.  Next, I compared all the case

studies to each other to see if patterns emerged. When comparing all the case studies, I looked

for categories and relationships among the patterns to further understand the meaning of adult

sister relationships.  Then using these categories, I revisited the data to compare each individual

case in the study to the others using the categories.  I used inductive research methods as outlined

in Patton's *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods* (2002) and allowed the themes to

come from the data rather than imposing my own ideas on it.  This inductive approach was key

to the analysis for this study because I had no hypotheses were proposed

The final results and themes we developed from the coded themes that I finalized in a

handwritten book, in tables used to group quotes together by theme, memes I assembled in a

comparative table format, as well as comparing case summaries. I utilized a co-analyst to perform some spot verification to assist in confirming some of the themes I discovered in the coding process.

## Reflexivity

One important aspect about the qualitative coding process is the fact that the researcher is the measurement tool (Patton, 2002). As an insider (I am a sister and close to the age of the participants), I need to be reflective about how I worked through the analysis process. My age criteria for my study sample were sisters 45 to 65 years. I am just below this age limit. I am an eldest sister with one younger sister. Being an "insider" of these types of relationships, I felt that I could add some insight to the data analysis. I do feel being an insider helped in gaining trust with the participants. Many of the sisters I interviewed specifically asked if I was a sister myself, reflecting a similar experience that Kuba (2011) noted in her study of sisters. This shared "sisterhood" seemed very important to the participants, as if I could understand their language, their descriptions. Such as, "you know how older sisters are", or "well, she's the baby, you know". They wanted to make sure that I understood first-hand the unique bond that comes with blessings and challenges. In some cases, the complexity of a sister relationship can come across in their words and actions, but may not be easily perceived by an outsider of these types of relationships.

What I quickly realized is that, while I have been shaped and influenced myself by being a sister, it did not prepare me completely for the wide range of experiences and stories that were shared with me. Each interview had some history of pain and loss in it. Many interviews also included much joy. Often the stories described such roller coaster experiences that I had to remember to be present and to stay focused on the intricacies of the interview as well as the side

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interactions that sometimes happened among larger groups of sisters during the joint interviews. It was difficult to anticipate the wide range of emotions that the sisters experienced throughout their interviews. Many times, these video interviews allowed distant sisters an opportunity to catch up and share new information, or plan upcoming events. While we would wait for all the participants to sign on I sometimes I felt I was eavesdropping on joyful planning, or in some cases, awkward silence.

While serving as the measurement tool, I also had to be aware of my own personal biases based on my personal experiences in my sister relationship. My relationship is not the same as those of the participants. Also, I have the experience of an older sister and cannot assume that I also understand the experience of a younger sister. Because I am the research tool, and I am following an inductive process, it is important to understand the influences and assumptions I may have about birth order and my own personal experiences. I felt I was able to listen to the interviews multiple times and also use the symbolic choices they made looking at the memes. During the interviews I utilized deep and reflective listening skills to ensure that I stayed present in the interviews. Between interviews, I had frequent debriefing sessions with colleagues. I would discuss concepts and emerging themes with more than one person familiar with the research topic and the methodology (Shenton, 2004). I was aware of any biases and preconceived thoughts that I may hold about sisters, and be aware of my bias as an older sister. I took notes during the interview to reflect on thoughts I had during the interview. I referred to these notes while transcribing, or reviewing the interviews during the data analysis.

During both the process of the study, after the data gathering, and after the analysis was complete, I subjected these stages of the study to peer scrutiny. This allowed for a fresh

perspective of the data and the themes that were emerging. The themes and sections of the

analysis that others observed verified my conclusions from the coding process (Shenton, 2004).

# CHAPTER 4 - RESULTS

In this chapter, the findings of nearly 60 interviews will be presented. I will present several themes that emerged from the data that served to answer my overarching research question of what the meaning of the sister relationship is in middle adulthood. The three specific research questions designed to explore my overarching question about sister relationship meaning were:

1) How does the sister relationship influence a woman's identity and the roles she chooses to assume in life,

2) What meaning does the sister role/relationship hold throughout a woman's life and family transitions, and

3) What does the way sisters communicate and what they communicate about tell us about the meaning of the sister relationship?

4) What influence does a parent have on the meaning of the sister's adult relationship?

I will present the findings from the interviews that address each one of these research questions. Throughout this chapter, you will see data from both joint and individual interviews from the participants. Before each direct quote, you will see either a letter (I) or a letter (J). This will indicate if this quote came during a joint interview (J) with all of the sisters participating present, or an (I) for individual interview where it was just me and one participant being interviewed.

## Sister Relationship Influence on Individual Identity and Roles

Throughout the interviews, participants discussed the different roles they have fulfilled in their families throughout their lives. How they viewed themselves as children and the roles they fulfilled when they were young were greatly influenced by being a sister. The sisters were influenced by roles they were expected to fulfill in taking care of other family members. Sisters

also observed the other sisters' behavior and either compared themselves to their sisters, or other family members compared them.

**Caretaking Roles**

The role of motherhood in adulthood was greatly influenced by those women who had to take on a caretaking role as children. While many sisters may have considered being mothers regardless of whether or not they were sisters, the type of mothers they became and the skills that they brought to the experience were influenced by being a sister. This was specifically true for sisters old enough to be put in a caretaking role.

In some cases the role was thrust upon the older sister. As older sister Catt (J) expressed:

*I can remember my mom and dad were gone a lot and I had to babysit her and then a little brother that is 10 years younger than me and uh, I was in the age where I was kinda resenting that and all my friends were doing things that sounded like-and I had to stay home.*

Older sister Emma (J) also recalled the pressure of taking on the caretaking role and how much was expected of her, especially when caretaking may not have gone as well as the parents would have hoped. "*My dad is yelling at me that I'm the one responsible. I was supposed to be taking care of her. It was my fault if her leg was broken, it was my fault.*" Eva (J) also felt the pressure from her family to make sure her younger sisters were taken care of. "*So, we were scared into taking care of her because we had to be responsible for her when we were in charge of her.*"

Other sisters reported that they didn't necessarily feel pressure to take on the role of caretaker for their sisters, but it was seen as a part of the daily responsibility of being a sibling. In some cases, a sister took the role on because she enjoyed it and found some value in doing that as

a child. During the joint interview, all of the younger sisters in one family I began talking about all of the caretaking that their older sister Iris had done.

> *For some reason, (she) was more of a caretaker than a sister…I don't feel she (mom) was gone a lot, but I also felt like (our sister) babysat for us a lot or took care of us, or whatever. So I don't know how that happens.''*

Isadore (I) reflected on her experience as a caretaker for her little sister, Ingrid as her chance to develop her skill and that role of a mother when she was still young.

> *She was my first baby. She was how I learned to be a mama and how to balance, you know. How you can, you can go to the grocery store and push a kid around in a cart and you can, you know, you can, you have to get this one off to sleep but you still have this one that you have to take care of, you know. I helped her do all kinds of stuff. I helped her write papers in high school.''*

While Eve (I) commented earlier that she had felt the pressure of being a caretaker for her younger sisters from her parents, she also felt that taking care of her older sisters' children prepared her for motherhood.

> *I learned a lot about mothering and taking care of children at a really young age, and I don't think I would have been, I don't think I would continue to be such a good mom to my daughter if, if I hadn't of been able to do all that babysitting and assisting with all that child rearing to two older sisters' kids. That really, that really made me feel ready when I had my own daughter.*

**Comparison and Role Models**

One of the concepts of symbolic interactionism is that we see ourselves as reflected in the others around us, such as our family of origin. Our identity is formed based on how we perceive

those around us see us.  This comparison to sisters was echoed in the interviews.  Sometimes the sisters made these comparisons; sometimes they were pointed out to the sisters by the parents. While we often think of sisters being compared when they are living within the same household, sister comparison by parents can continue throughout adulthood.

**Parental Comparison**

Some of the sisters could remember the comparisons beginning in their teenage years. As Candy (I) recalled, her father compared the difference of attitudes the sisters had when they were teenagers. "*He said, 'Your sister will probably always be happier than you.'*"  Candy knew he was referring to how much she cared about what others thought, but it was the comparing the two of them that stuck with her through life.

Other comparisons that parents made reflected parental expectations rather than individual characteristics or personality types. JoAnn (J) recalled how disappointing it was for her to be compared to her sister by her mother. These comparisons were about expectations or roles that the mother had decided they should fulfill as adults.

> *Our mom had our lives absolutely scripted. I called my mom and told her I was pregnant, and I was really, I was 33-years-old, and I was really, really happy. Very glad to finally be having a baby and her response was, 'Oh, then you won't be able to travel.' I mean she was disappointed that I was pregnant. It was horrible. (My sister), on the other hand, [was] perfect Miss Suzie Homemaker.*

Judy (J) further explained that the pattern of comparison with her sisters continued as each of the three of them had children who were compared.  According to Judy, their mother felt the youngest sister had the children who were the best behaved.

*Our youngest sister stayed home. She was having babies at the same time. She was*

*having girls, and the girls were perfect. And so, our mom was constantly comparing how*

*(her) kids did this and they're perfect and they behave.*

In this case, the sisters felt the comparison between the sisters impacted their identities throughout adulthood. It also created some animosity between the older sisters and the younger sister.

Sisters that had felt compared to their siblings as adults described various ways that it impacted their perception of the feeling. In some cases, parents did not purposefully compare the sisters, but it was interpreted by the sister as comparison. Ginny often listened to her parents explain why her younger sister Gail would have such a difficult time with life and struggle with achieving personal success. Ginny (I) would perceive the parents' explanation of her sister's struggles as a reflection of her own personal and career success.

*It was always a matter of life dealing her bad cards and her lack of good luck. It was*

*not, from my mother's point of view, that my sister was making bad choices. So, by*

*comparison, then I would say, 'So, that just means my success that I have had has been a*

*result of good luck instead of my making good choices?' So, if it has to be the one sister*

*her struggles are the result of bad luck and choice is not a part of it, then that same*

*standard I would always perceive…I just have good luck, and without my mother*

*acknowledging that it was a set of good choices.*

While Ginny's experiences with sister comparison was during adulthood, many times the comparisons between sisters started in childhood. Sisters would also compare themselves without the parents being involved. Sometimes the girls would do the comparing, while sometimes other family members, or people outside of the family, would compare the sisters.

Often when one sister experienced success or was talented in a different way from another sister, she felt pressured to conform to the expectation set by another sister and how she was talented. Elsa described herself as a "*tomboy*" when she was a child. Her older sister, Emma, was talented academically. Elsa (J) always felt pressured to succeed in the same way as Emma had in school.

> *I remember always kinda in the back of my head going through school with this sister who was five years older than me and I would just pray every year, 'Please don't give me the same teacher (she) has because they're going to think I'm like her and I'm not,' you know. I can't read like her, and she was like a straight A student. Never talked, anything.*

Another form of comparison described by the participants was watching their sisters throughout their life and seeing them as role models. The symbolic use of a sister provided them with examples of what to achieve in life or a cautious tale of what not to do in their lives. Ingrid (J) spoke about how she looked up to Iris as they were growing up, and even after she moved out of the home:

> *She was my 'go-to' person. She was the older, wiser, more worldly sister and I just looked up to her and admired her and wanted to be her. You know. I loved that she had these little apartments, you know, and I could go and visit her and spend the night.*

Freda also looked up to her oldest sister, Fay. Fay served as a representative of what Freda thought was cool and impressive because Fay would be joining activities or clubs in high school that were interesting to Freda (J). "*I was impressed with the fact she was doing things like that. It seemed like part of the women's liberation movement, and I thought that was really cool.*" Leah (J) explained how important it was for her to have all of her older sisters in her life who influenced her with their leadership; "*You were my motivators, you were my leaders.*"

This form of modeling was described by sisters as constructive, because it provided them with what they perceived as a positive influence on their development.  In other cases, the sisters commented that they watched older sisters as they were growing up and they made different choices based on what they perceived as mistakes that their sisters made. For some older sisters, that realization has also caused tension in relationships. For example, when Eve (I) heard her younger sister Eva talk about correcting her behavior as a child to make sure she did not make the same mistakes as her sisters, it made her emotional: "*One that really hit home was when (she) said 'I learned from my sisters' mistakes.' And, you know, I, um, that was a big ouch!*"

**Family Roles and Expectations**

Another manner sisters expressed learning about role assumptions within their family of origin was identifying the expectations that family members held for the roles each sister should take within the family.  These are the roles that are placed on individuals by other family members' expectations, not necessarily one's own. Some women in this study indicated that these differences in expectations still influenced them as adults in various ways.  As Freda (I) explained, she felt that she could not express early in adulthood what she wanted to do in life. She admits, she may have projected her parents' expectations onto her sisters, but an educational path was based on family expectations.

> *It's not what I wanted to do for a career. And it's just, you know, for me, I couldn't, in so many ways I couldn't, I didn't feel comfortable being authentic or showing the things I really cared about in (my) family.*

As Freda (I) grew older and became more comfortable expressing herself, she did change careers. While she felt comfortable making that adjustment, she has not yet become comfortable changing her behavior around her family to better fit her own adult identity outside of the family.

This perception of expectation she feels her family has about her continues to dictate the way she acts around her family.

> *I think a lot of times I would revert to um, a certain type of incompetence. Sometimes I will leave an event we've had and I'll think, I'm a raising three kids, I work, and yet, how do I turn into this other person when I am at home that feels so incompetent?*

Elyse (I), who is also the youngest sister of her sister group, described similar frustrations of family role expectations and how she copes with them when she comes back to spend time with her family.

> *You know, I think my role was picked out for me a long time ago. There's no changing that. I just, I just go with it. I don't live around them, so I don't have to deal with it that much. Everybody, everybody plays their part.*

Sometimes sisters are fulfilling roles within the family of which they are not even aware. While these roles may be common assumptions by other family members, the sister herself may be completely unaware of this role she holds in the family. The revelations can surprise some sisters when they come out. For example, Lana (I) discovered her role during the interview for this study when she heard her sisters say she was fulfilling the role of "daddy's girl" in her family.

> *So, that was, that felt kind of weird to me. Yeah, I guess I was surprised when (she) said, 'Well it's you and (our brother) and (youngest sister) that are Dad's favorites.' and I'm like, 'Really?' Because, I had no idea.*

**My Sister is Part of Me**

As part of the interview process, sisters were asked if they could imagine how they may be if they had never been sisters. Of course, many sisters responded that they could not imagine

that. This is not surprising considering sisterhood often begins very early in one's life. However, even the sister groups with large age gaps had a hard time picturing their lives without each other. The interesting part was that, beyond just having a hard time imagining their separate lives, the reaction for some of the sisters was that imagining life without one's sister(s) almost felt as if they were being emotionally or physically torn apart from themselves. Catt (J) explained how seeing her sister as being part of her does not mean that they are exactly alike and do everything together:

>  It's not like we're sisters so we do everything and think everything the same, because we don't. She's very unique. But, she's a necessary part of who I am. You know, without her I'm missing a part…You know 'cause she's the part of me that I didn't develop, the strength that I didn't develop.

Other participants also explained how hard it was to picture their lives without their sisters. Fanny (J) said, *"It's who I am, it's so much part of my DNA."* Ima really struggled with answering the question, She said, *"It's a hard question you are asking. I can't even, it's impossible."* Iris (J) felt her relationships were, *"a significant part of who I am."* For Ima (J), the relationship has created her identity, *"I think being part of this group has made me who I am."* Emma (J) thought of it in terms of always keeping her sisters connected with her. *"I can't imagine my life without you. So, no matter what, I'll always try to bridge that gap…aside from my parents and my children, the most important relationships I have."* Laura (J) summarized it best by her first reaction to the question, *"I have never thought about it (being a sister), but it really defines who you are."*

Most participants identified specific traits, or parts of themselves, that they felt were developed because of their sisters. Emma and Eve both felt that they became more extroverted

specifically because they had sisters. Emma expressed (J): *"I think my world would be a lot smaller without them."* Eva (J) echoed those same thoughts, *"I would say the same exact thing as (her), I mean I definite-I would be more, I would be more introverted."* Fanny (J) actually felt that she would have been a less interesting person in general without her sisters. She said she *"would be dull, boring and lonely if I didn't have sisters."*

For Fanny, the feeling about her sister relationships went beyond just she would have not been social, but she as a person would not be someone as likeable as she was. These perceptions about their positive traits gained by being sisters was summarized well by Elsa in their joint interview:

> *I would not be as well rounded. I think because each of them brings each one of their own unique gifts, uh, from, you know the odd, just their own talents and their own arenas that they are all involved in, so to speak. I've taken pieces of that and applied that throughout my own life with my kids. I don't think I would be as well rounded and balanced as I am. I pull from all of their talents and whatever they have.*

While most of the participants felt they had close or somewhat close relationships with their sisters, some still could identify things that they did not develop, or things that may have impacted them in their identity development that may have held them back, or been something they needed to overcome. For Hesse (J), who has an openly hostile relationship with a sister who declined to be interviewed, she simply said that if they had not been sisters, she *"probably wouldn't have so many sad memories."* These sad experiences for her were just as impactful as the relationship she had with her sister to whom she is still close.

Gail (I) speculated about how not being sisters may have eliminated some standards in their lives that were difficult for her sister to achieve. *"If I hadn't been around, then maybe she*

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*wouldn't have had the, uh, standard that she always felt like she had, that was so out-distancing*

*her that she couldn't attain."*

One interesting theme emerged from the younger sisters. They guessed that they might

have been slightly more independent or self-sufficient if they had not been younger sisters. It

was not as if they did not want to be sisters, or resented being sisters, but that in some areas of

their lives they had some sort of learned incompetence. Kathy (I) recognized a pattern of reliance

on others: *"I might be a little more, I don't know this for sure, a little more self-sufficient because*

*I tend to depend on other people if I know that they are there."* Leah (I) also thought she may see

changes in herself: *"Maybe I would be more of an individual."* Lana (J) noticed that she always

had someone around her in her life. *"I get nervous if I am by myself. I don't know, maybe a little*

*more comfortable in my skin alone. It took me a long time to be ok with living alone, because I*

*had never been alone. Ever."* Freda (I) felt that she had always had someone around to help and

that impacted her:

> *I would revert to um, sorta like um, a certain type of incompetence, because I always*
>
> *assumed that the older sisters were going to take care of things. I think that is something*
>
> *that might be different for me. If I was not the youngest of seven - that level of confidence.*

Ginny (I) wondered how things might have been different for her if she had been born

first. *"I think if I had been the firstborn, that my needs and my wishes, and the things that I*

*wanted to do might have been brought out a little bit more."* She felt her older sister set the

standard for achievements in areas she was not talented in. She wondered if her parents'

expectations would have been different if she was the first-born.

Researchers often have focused on the support that sisters may provide to each other through the transitions of childhood and early adulthood. In this study, I wanted to understand what sisterhood meant to them when they went through transitions or changes in their adult lives. Overwhelmingly, participants stated that they felt sisterhood was an important positive influence for them during these experiences. This meaning took many forms: caretaking each other, resolving conflict in transition, and growing closer through transition.

## Caretaking with Each Other

Overwhelmingly, participants spoke about how their sisters took care of them during times of change in their lives. One important aspect of this caretaking is that the person experiencing the transition must be willing to **accept** support from her sister. For example, when her sister was having struggles with her relationship, Ashley (I) felt it was important that she let her be there to support her: *"She was really great about opening up to me and letting me be there."* Many times sisters would know that if they allowed themselves to open up to each other, they would be able to count on each other. Lana (I) talked about how, when she found herself in a situation that involved domestic violence, the first people she went to for support was to her sisters, because *"I just knew I had to be somewhere safe."*

Kathy (J) felt that she was the largest beneficiary in her sister relationship when it came to caretaking. She acknowledges this and how important her sister has been during the stressful times in her life.

> *I like this one, this little card that says, 'You got awesome big sister qualities, you save*
> *my* (she didn't want to say the word ass) *every time. You're lucky I'm not your big sister.*
> *Your life would suck.' That is probably it… (it's) just little things like… I will push a*

*button on my cell phone* (her sister's number) *and go, 'I'm hungry,' and a pizza will*

*appear down in the lobby for me to eat.*

While one-sided caretaking was not present in all of the cases, it did appear fairly

consistently in a few of the case studies. Hannah talked about how many responsibilities that

Helen had to take on even in childhood. She was an older (but not the oldest) sister and took on

caretaking duties for all of the siblings in the household.  Hannah (I) remembered Hesse's

creativity with just a can of pumpkin.

*We had nothing to eat in the house. Literally, one can of pumpkin. That is it and she got*

*some sugar or something from the neighbors and she made up some pumpkin, some kind*

*of creation for us to eat.*

 Hannah (I) also recalled the year her older sister made Thanksgiving dinner for all of the

siblings. "*An 11-year-old, and yes, an 11-year-old fixed a big dinner like that, and it was just like*

*there was a bunch of us kids. So that was major!*"

 That caretaking has continued into all of their adult relationships, to the extent that Hesse

is now taking care of their brother. Hannah (I) shared that *"they stay in the same town. (She)*

*checks on him every day, um, helps him out, cleans his house. She takes care of him."*

In some of the other cases, support between sisters was more mutual. Eva (J) described

that each of them could always count on the caregiving from the others. "*Call me if I need to be*

*there, and she will be there. We were raised* (that) *we would be there and do it, get it done.*" Eve

(J) added a recent example of when they pulled together.

*When dad had his pneumonia and we all were there and we tag teamed. So, when major*

*events happen, I think that um…whatever differences we have, we pull together. And we*

*come through for my mom and dad regardless of anything else.*

In some cases, sisters talked about how important it was to have a sister around during transitions for emotional support of each other. BJ (I) described how much support her sister offered her when she was getting divorced.

*I think that, actually, my divorce was the main thing, and I saw her real true love, you know, for me. And not that I didn't know that she loved me, but it's different when…you actually see that love come through, because there was nothing she wouldn't have done for me, just nothing that she wouldn't have done. So, you know, I felt very lucky to have her.*

Ginny and Gail agreed to do the study as long as they could be interviewed separately. There is much tension in their relationship, but even with that, Ginny (I) spoke in positive terms about how they were there for each other in the past when children were born.

*I tried to be involved and that was, uh, a happy time for me because I became an aunt, and I wanted to be involved. And I think, I think, um, those were all special times. And she's always reciprocated to me in that way with the birth of my children and the various steps in our lives.*

Children seemed to bring sisters together often in positive ways. Support of each other in some form around having children often came up as time that sisters reflected on feeling that support from each other. Judy (J) said, *"Like our kids when we were younger, talking about raising kids and kids stuff and our kids doing this, our kids doing that we connected around."* Emma (J) spoke about how her sisters support her grandchildren as well:

*It has been, umm, really helpful in my grandkids' case. She does a lot for them. (Two others) have been extremely helpful with one of my sons, well actually the other one*

*too…I know that they are there if I need any help with one of them or one of them needs*

*something they know that they can go to* (to my sister).

Leah (J) shared how much the support of her older sister provides for her son with special

needs means to her. Her older sister Lana felt it was more about how nice it was for her to be

able to spend time with her nephew and how much she enjoyed being there for him. Lana (J)

explained it like this:

> *It's neat to have (him) at my house because I like, I have the summers off…so I can have*
>
> *(him) come and stay, or you know, I have that one-on-one time that is hard for anyone*
>
> *else to do and I have time.*

**Conflict in Transition**

While many of the responses from the sisters showed that they felt positive about going

through transitions together, those experiences often also included fights or conflict. Nearly all

of the participants reported some sort of conflict or trouble at stressful times. In most of the

cases, the sisters explained how they were able to transition through those conflicts and keep

some relationship with their sister. BJ (I) explained their fights like this:*"We do fight. We hang*

*up the phone on each other, and then we call back, 'You okay? Whatcha doing?'"* But as she

further explained, there were ways that they would look at their relationship and the larger

picture of what was going on at the time and reframe what was important to them. During the

time that their mother was ill and dying they still would have fights, but she explained, *"Then, at*

*the end of the day, we'd come to the conclusion that it wasn't about us. It was about our mom."*

Many of the sisters explained that they would fight and disagree during stressful

transitions, but most of them had an explanation of how they chose to get through it as

individuals. Catt (I) summarized it like this:

*I think we don't always agree with each other, but we love each other and understand*

*that we're different. And, so, while I think, 'Fighting, that's ok. And then we are done, I*

*understand how she feels about it and I am not going to make her feel things my way, and*

*I am not going to feel things her way. We just understand that and it's ok.*

Frances (J) explained that her perspective about why they can work through their

conflicts because of growth and maturity over the course of their relationship:

*For me I think it was definitely a maturity issue. And I have one child, and just raising a*

*child…it puts things in a different perspective. I hope I have become more generous and*

*easy going because of that. And, you know, sometimes having a fight makes you realize,*

*'Oh, I was in the wrong.'*

And for some sisters, there is the belief that there is no other option. They have to work it

out because they need their sisters in their lives.  Isadore, Ima, and Ingrid were very passionate

about why they felt their family could stay together and make it through conflict. Three of the

sisters were in the same location during the video interview, it was very apparent getting through

conflict together was a very important topic to all of them. They talked directly to each other and

sometimes over each other in the following joint conversation (J):

*Well, I would be devastated if there was a breakdown in our family.*

*I would too.*

*And, I think with all of us operating from that mindset, we go out of our way to make*

*sure that, I mean, it's not like we're, um, you know, have to, have a big discussion about*

*it, or clear the air.*

*If we needed to, we certainly could, but I think that underlying, um, sense of the devas-,*

*you know, the devastation that we would feel if there was some kind of a conflict, a long*

*term conflict or breakdown, just it's a pre-emptive thing. We just make sure that is never*

*happens. We, that is what keeps it from happening.*

*It's 'cause we would all be so devastated if it did.*

These sisters had cousins who had stopped speaking to each other during a family conflict, so they were very aware of what happens when there is that sort of conflict between siblings. They felt this is why they were so passionate about not letting that ever happen to them.

## Closer through Transition

Several sisters commented that going through a transition together had made their relationship closer. The transitions they described included both happy and sad events. Something had facilitated their relationship in a positive way. In the Adams family, the sisters had to work together in taking care of more than one family member. Ashley and Anne said they didn't remember being distant, instead they knew they grew closer through the process. Ashley (J) said, "*I thought we became closer again. Yeah, we started having a relationship. Like I said, I don't remember why we necessarily didn't have one. It just seemed better.*" She went on to further explain her thoughts on why the relationship grew closer. "*Well, I don't think it all had to do with grandmother passing away is why we got closer. But I think initially, we both had to share a lot. There was a reason. We had to talk to each other about it.*" So, for her, it was about the fact that had to communicate more, which increased what they shared with each other. For the Frank family, events such as childbirth and marriage had not brought them closer together. It was their sister's stroke and the emotions involved with that experience that brought them together. As Frances (J) explained,

*We had a lot of drama with who we married and the children and all that. A lot of drama.*

*We were still growing up. And then, after (her) stroke, none of that seemed to matter*

*anymore, you know. We just all came together. So it's, it was a pivotal point I think in our*

*family.*

Catt and Cindy spoke jointly about how important it was to have each other there

during their mother's health issues and eventual death.  Catt said, *"I couldn't have done it*

*if she hadn't stepped up."* She talked about the day they got to the nursing home: *"We*

*stood around, that was one of the worst days, one of the worst days of my entire life. We*

*got to the car and cried. It was horrifying."* Cindy shared that they were together when

their mother died: *"We began taking turns going up there. We were both there when she*

*took her last breath, which was cool. It was very cool."*

Ingrid (J) described how sisterhood is different from other relationships during crises:

*It means, um, blood bond. You can't have it with anybody else. You have friends that you might*

*be close to and you consider to be like a sister, but there's really nothing that would come*

*between us four girls.*

### Communication

Participants reported changing and adjusting their communication with their sisters over

the years. While many of them still get together in person and have live conversations, e-mail,

text, and social media have become important communication tools for sisters to stay in touch

and up-to-date with each other's lives. These participants thought that email was the way they

communicated as often as they would use the phone to call each other.  Leslie (J) said they used

it for planning:  *"We used email a lot for, 'Ok, who is bringing what meal at Christmas?'"*

Emma (J) reported they would communicate through both e-mail and text. *"We are always*

*emailing each other…I would think it's more emailing and texting than anything. That would be*

*the majority of the communication."* Judy (J) said they emailed all the time:

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*Ok, I sent her three million emails, probably every day, every other day and she goes,*

*'Why is she sending me all this junk?' Yeah, we have communicated a couple emails a*

*day. With, 'I just saw this, thought of you' and it's some hairy monkey with shampoo in*

*their hair or something.*

Texting and Facebook were also described as a common form of communication between sisters. These digital modes of communication have changed how often sisters communicate. Laura (J) described how she enjoyed using the new technology:*" To have the Facetime and all the social media now, we are closer and we are so much more connected than we were 30 years ago, when we started out moving out."* Eva (I) used it as a way to stay symbolically connected to her sister, *"Well, Facebook and Instagram just make it so easy. I feel like if I like something of hers, I'm touching her. You know?"*

### Topics of Communication

**Children.** The most common topic across the families was communication about the women's children.  This is described as important because children are such an important topic to them as mothers and as aunts. Jo and JoAnn talked about how much they shared with each other about their children.  Judy (I) said*, "Like our kids when we were younger, talking about raising kids and kids stuff and our kids doing this, our kids doing that we connected around. Yeah, stuff like that."* JoAnn described how they shared with each other the stress of raising kids:

*About all the stress of the babies, you know. Are they walking as fast as the other kids? Are*

*they talking? You know, it's all this stress parents put on each other, and put on*

*themselves, to have perfect kids. And then your kids aren't perfect at all, but you still love*

*them anyway. So, we have been through a lot of that kinda stuff.*

Even in relationships that had difficulties, such as Gail and Ginny, Gail (I) indicated she would still be open to communicating about Ginny's children if she wanted to. "*You want to call and chat about difficulties with your kids and some of the choices they're making? Then we'll hear you out.*"

**Parents**. Right after children, the second most common topic of communication between middle-aged sisters was their parents. That usually focused on a wide variety of topics such as parent finances or health. While taking care of their mom, Ashley (J) said that the she and her sister had to communicate quite a bit.

> *As sick as mom has been recently, has it been three, four years, we share a lot just through that because I'm calling her to talk about what's going on or, you know, to kinda keep her informed and pull her in when I need another voice or another um, support. A couple years ago, you know, she and I had to have a come-to-Jesus meeting with Mom or she was probably going to die. And, I don't know, we just both, we were just on the same page.*

While the Frank sisters used to talk a lot about each other's health, Fanny (J) says their communication has changed focus. "*Now I would say it centers around Dad. We talk about Dad a lot.*"

Even if sisters did not consider themselves to have particularly close relationships, the topics of children and parental issues were consistently shared between them. But the participants who felt they were in emotionally close relationships commented that they could communicate about a wide variety of topics. As BJ (I) summarized, "*Anything and everything - we talk about (it).*" Many of the other sisters also described that nearly anything could be communicated between them. For example, Ashley (I) said*, "I feel like we share everything. I*

*can't think of anything, I mean, I can't think of anything* (we don't talk about).*"* Frances (J) felt that after they went through so much together during the various health crises and the death of their mother that *"there (were) no holds barred."*

**Withholding Information**

Participants also described what types of topics they would not have conversations about with their sisters and why they choose not to share information with them.  One of the reported restrictions placed on communication was that, in families with more than one sister relationship, what some people shared with one sister was not as always discussed with the other sisters. Iris (I) understood that her sisters shared things because they were mothers. Because she does not have children, she knew that she was often not included in those conversations.

> *Some of their connection is children related. It's something they have in common and I don't have that. Like someone's not calling me to say, "Hey what did you do about that?" So, you know, I think it's just that.*

Freda and Emma both felt that they connected differently with their various sisters. Freda (J) said, *"For me I think it varies between each of you."* Emma (J) remarked*, "I share different things with different sisters.  Just because we have a different, we all have different talents, skills, knowledge."*

While sisters did not necessarily choose to keep something from another sister, one sister may have information that another had only because of timing and opportunity.  Leslie (I) explained that because she did not have to travel to their parents' house, she did not get to stay for the overnight activities: *"I don't get those late-night, sit-around-the-campfire conversations that my other siblings get…It's more having the opportunity…It's not that I wouldn't talk about*

*it.*" She felt very confident that her sisters would not decide to keep something from her. *"It wouldn't be that they chose to hold it, (just) that the opportunity to talk about it didn't come up.*" Isadore (I) also felt that her sisters would have information that they had not shared with her because the opportunity did not come up.

> *So a conversation might come up and then later I'll go, 'Wait a minute, what?' You know, and they'll you know go, 'Yeah, remember we were talking about that.' And then, 'Oh, I wasn't there.' 'Oh, right, right.' You know, those kinds of things.*

There were topics that, regardless of the sister with whom they are communicating, many participants said they would rather not talk about to their sisters. The most common of these were issues within marriages or intimate relationships and issues involving children. When there were problems within the family of procreation, some participants chose not to share this information with their sisters. Most of these women also assumed their sisters were not sharing those topics with them. For example, the Frank sisters both stated that they chose not to share marriage struggles with their sister. Freda (I) said, *"I can't think of a time when I've really confided in any of them regarding any challenges in my marriage.*" When asked what she does not tell her sister, Faith (I) replied, *"I would say quite a few times usually something about my, about my family - meaning my kids and my husband.*" Isabelle (I) also indicated that she kept information about her relationship with her husband private: *"It would be something that I would want to keep, like I mean, with my husband, to keep something quiet and I wouldn't tell anybody else either.*"

Another communication theme that emerged from the interviews regarding why a sister would choose not to share information was because of the concern to protect that sister from things that might cause her concern or cause emotional harm. When Frances (I) received health

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news, she decided to not share it with her sisters right away. "*For some reason, I just didn't want to worry them.*" Gail, who described significant bumps in her relationship with Ginny, indicated that often she had not shared things in order to protect Ginny's feelings about nice things she was able to have:

> *Mostly out of not wanting to rub in her nose in the fact that we have some funds to go do, to have luxuries like vacations. I don't think I tell her about purchases of new furniture, or like we're renovating something, because once again it just points out what I have that she does not.*

Leah (I) explained that in their family they make sure to always protect each other's feelings. "*I guess it's the way we have always been. You don't want to hurt feelings. You just decide to just deal with it instead.*" Kathy (I) said it was not about family expectations of communication, but being aware of emotional stress on her sister. "*I didn't call her about that because there was nothing she could do; and I guess I do feel like I don't need to add that additional stress of her worrying about me.*"

Isadore (I) had kept information to herself that she felt would be very emotionally overwhelming for anyone. She worried about hurt feelings and had concern for her sisters. "*It might be too much for that one living soul, and they might have to tell one person, you know. And, and people could get hurt; and so that is why I have chosen to never ever tell anyone this.*"

The final theme about why sisters chose not to share information is because of personal embarrassment or fear of judgment. Many times the risk of judgment or being embarrassed by one's own choice or behavior kept participants from discussing topics. Laura (I) had been concerned about communicating with her sisters when she had gotten pregnant and had a baby. "*I was embarrassed…So I was-- didn't want anything to do with anybody…I just kind of*

*secluded myself from everybody…I didn't talk to anybody at that time, just because mainly I was embarrassed at the baby being put up for adoption."* Others indicated that the concern was sharing information about relationships that they perceived would not portray them in a positive light. Darcy (I) explained that she chose not to tell her sister about her a particular relationship.

> *There are, there are times when I didn't, just I didn't I didn't want her to know that I was…seeing him, still, 'cause we had an altercation before and then she had thought I had cut it off …and you could tell she was a little mad, like, 'What is he doing here?' That type of thing.*

Freda's (I) fear was that if she would talk to her sisters about disagreements in her marriage, they would think she was the one at fault. *"I'm probably a little bit embarrassed, or I think they would just like not get it like, "How could you be having anything to complain about?"* Fanny (I) indicted that it was also about judgment of her and how she was handling issues in her marriage.

> *I want them to listen and I want them to, you know, give me some encouragement; but the repercussions of the judgment sometimes isn't worth it, because they wouldn't be able to forgive my husband. So I don't address it because I don't really relish the judgment.*

### The Parental Influence on the Meaning of the Adult Sister Relationship

Participants mentioned multiple ways that their parents, or the parental figures in their lives, influenced the relationships with their sisters in childhood and adulthood. This occurred in several ways  (1) parents acting as the middleman, (2) parents as a model or example of behavior, and (3) the perception of parental preference.

### Parents as the Middleman

Sisters reported that, if they disagreed in childhood or as adults, or if they needed to share information with each other, their parents often acted as a referee or a liaison. The parents would

share their opinions about what to do in an argument or would give information they thought was important. Frances (I) commented that when she experienced conflict with her sisters, "*Mom tried to get involved and tell us we would regret it later.*"

Parents also operated as the middleman in other situations that did not involve conflict. They encouraged sisters to interact with each other in certain ways. Karen (I) explained how it works with her parents.

> *Its kinda like Mom is the in between for who knows what is going on. You know, there will be times, maybe once or twice like I said. Dad called, 'Check on your sister. Make sure she's got food. Or Mom will call, 'Call your sister and check on her.'*

Eva (I) explained that her mom told her how she should care about her relationship with her sisters. "*My mom always said that, 'Your sisters and you, this is a responsibility you carry for the family.'*"

### Parental Role Models

Throughout the interviews, participants commented on ways that their parents influenced behavior, thoughts, or actions towards sisters by showing rather than telling. In some cases, this modeling of behavior did not come from parents, but from influential relationships in their lives such as caregivers or grandparents.

Freda and Lena expressed that both of their parents and both sides of the family set expectations about how they needed to interact with each other. Freda (J) said, "*I think Mom and Dad really modeled (how) you just do what you need to do to take care of one another.*" Lena (I) indicated, "*The examples that, with Mom's side of the family, Dad's side of the family, because it for the most part went well…So, we have that precedence set for us.*"

Some sisters indicated that they were not taught how to interact as sisters at all, or that they had models that were not very positive. While one Edwards sister felt that her mother had provided guidance about how to interact with her sisters, her sisters felt that guidance was not provided, and the modeling did not help them. When Eva indicated that she felt her mother had taught them how to interact as sisters, Eve (I) disagreed with her sister's assessment of the example that their mother set.

> *I watched my mother and her sisters with my mother and it was such a dysfunctional*
>
> *(stops talking). My mom didn't, my mom did not teach us how to take care of each other.*
>
> *My mom's mother, my grandmother had four sisters and they all fought.*

**Perception of Parental Preference**

Another theme regarding the influence of parents included sisters feeling that others were favored by their parents. For example, they were picked to handle finances, to keep secrets, or identified as better parents. These perceptions would often change how sisters thought about each other or guide how they interacted. This seemed to occur even if that preference was not accurate, but was just perceived by one of the sisters.

In some cases, problems between sisters began to grow because of perceived financial inequality (e.g., when one of them was provided with more financial support than the other, was chosen to handle the family or parent finances, or even possibly inherent all of the estate of their parents). Elsa (I) explained how she felt when one sister was identified to inherit all of the estate in her family:

> *Then we got a whole another deal about the house. Now she inherits my parents' estate.*
>
> *It's not a mansion, but it is an estate … I want to go there. But, that will never get*

*brought up and I feel that the fairness when you had kids that you split everything down*

*the middle.*

Hesse (I) also experienced frustration when she felt that her sister was provided with

more by her mother than the all other sisters combined.  She also commented on how the same

sister's child received more than the other children because of this favoritism.

*She was a single mom with one child; and since she was a single mom with one child,*

*Mom kind of took it among herself that she had to give (her) whatever she could possibly*

*give her. So that child had more than any of our children combined.*

JoAnn (I) spoke about how the relationship was impacted when there was a perceived difference

in how a parent treated a sister's children differently.

*Mom kinda drove, put a wedge between us then, because we had boys and we were out of*

*town and everything, our younger sister stayed home, she was having babies at the same*

*time. She was having girls, and the girls were perfect. And, so, our mom was constantly*

*comparing (her) kids did this and they're perfect and they behave.*

In other cases, the parental preference emerged between the sisters in the form of secret

keeping. Some parents chose to confide secrets to or share family information with one sister

instead of sharing it with any or all of the others, which also sets a difficult tone for the sister

relationship. Eve (I) explained how she experienced this choice by her parents in her family.

*(Dad) and my mom had a major blow out and my sister found out about everything,*

*found out about things about my parents that she didn't want to know. So, my parents*

*told my sister, 'Don't tell your sisters.' This whole secret thing, you know, this is big*

*dysfunction.*

Ginny's (I) parents had been assisting her financially while she was performing some caregiving duties for them.  When her parents chose her to have power of attorney, she speculates it may have been to also keep secret the assistance they had given her.

*When it was down to being my mother's power of attorney, she felt that it was best for me to carry on where I had been doing it.  So she named me, with my sister as an alternative for obvious reasons, you know. And, my mother was still aware that she had been helping me make my home payment and whatnot, and we just continued. And that might have been another reason that my mother chose to have me as power of attorney, because changing that would have then made my sister more aware of the fact that parents had helped me.*

Elyse (I) spoke from the viewpoint of the sister who was made aware of information and a choice by the parents not to share it with everyone. *"So, when they had all their paperwork drawn up, they chose me and my other sister. They chose not to tell anybody and it's their, you know, their business, their personal business; and I said I respected that."*

### The Meaning of the Sister Relationship

A consistent theme emerged when participants talked about their parents and the relationship they have with their sisters: hope for closeness and increased time and communication with each other.  The sisters enjoyed their relationship and even if it was difficult, they wanted to be in the relationship together.

### Hope for the Future

When participants were asked about what they wanted their sister relationship to look like in the future, they provided great insight into how important this relationship is for sisters to have in the future. Besides Hesse and Hannah, who have no communication with another sister

at all, all participants indicated that they wanted some sort of positive connection with their sisters in the future.  Several themes emerged regarding what they hoped for in the future (1) continued communication, (2) growing closer/stronger, (3) living together, (4) more time together, and (5) at least the relationship remaining the same.

### Communication

As I discussed earlier in this chapter, sisters communicated in many different ways. Regardless of the forms of communication the sisters shared, many sisters had hope that they would at least continue, but more expressed a wish to increase their amount of communication with each other.  Ashley (I) said, *"I hope that we can stay in touch and it's positive…I just think that we can continue to keep the communication going and be close."* Emma (I) replied, *"I hope that we can always find ways to communicate."* Lena (I) and her sisters commented that they would share and communicate together often.  She hoped that they will be able to do that in the future: *"I think, hope we can continue getting together and sharing with each other."* Communication with each other was meaningful and for most of the sisters, no communication would have been considered a significant loss for them in their lives.

### Strengthen or Grow Closer

Some sisters, even if they felt they were already close, wanted to have stronger relationships with their sisters.  They would like to share more and in some cases make sure they can always know what is going on in each other's lives.  Bea (I) shared how much she values the relationship and what she would like it to look like in the future: *"I hope that, um, we continue in the same vein that we have, and that we grow stronger as sisters in terms of, you know, um, knowing about what's going on with each other. You know, what is actually really happening."*

Her older sister, BJ (I) echoed those feelings. *"I want our relationship to remain the same as it is, or either grow stronger…I just want it to keep going like it is and just-we just keep growing strong."*

While Ginny and Gail both expressed that their sister relationship is strained, Gail (I) communicated the hope that the relationship may improve. *"Well, I'd like it to remain a least as good as it is now and perhaps be somewhat better."* Isadore (I) also hoped to see growth in the relationships with her sisters. *"I hope that we will continue to stay close and grow closer as we age."* JoAnn (I) explained that her desire to be closer to both of her sisters is enough for her to consider relocating. *"I hope we get closer. I am considering retiring halfway between them."*

**More Time Together**

In many of the cases, the sisters felt that other obligations in their lives, busy schedules, and geographic distance prevented them from spending the amount of time with their sister that they would have liked to. Dena (I) spoke about jobs, husbands, relationships and activities that continued to interfere with their time together. But she also recognized the importance of what they both get when they do spend time together.

> *I hope that we get to spend more time together than we have. I hope that at some point maybe our lives won't be quite so crazy busy. I would like to spend more time with her because when we do spend time together, we have a good time, we enjoy it, we get support from each other, and we just need to make more time to do it.*

As was mentioned before, JoAnn (I) commented that she wanted to move to be closer to her sisters to assist in becoming emotionally closer to both of them. She also felt that may provide more opportunities to spend time with them, *"I expect to spend more time with them. You know, it would be nice to get together. It's always fun when we get together."* Several other

sisters also indicated more time together would be a priority for their relationship if they could manage it. Kathy (I) said, *"I wish, I do wish for more time together. It just doesn't fit our lives right now and I don't know if it ever will."* Lana (I) and Leslie (I) explained in their interviews also shared their wish that they would spend more time together as sisters. Leslie *"I hope we can continue to get together more often."* Lana (I) said, "*My hope is that we would have more time together."*

 **Live Together**

While many sisters indicated that they would love to spend more time with their sisters, some even went as far as talking about living together at some point in the future. For many sisters, this was a retirement possibility together when they may no longer have children or partners at home. In her individual interview, Anne (I) summarized her thoughts for the future.

> *I know I said the other day something like we will live together when we are older because our spouses won't be around and I would want to be around family. Like, when we are 85 we are going to have to share a house or something.*

Isadore (I) also mentioned that she and her sisters wondered how well living together would go, but that they do all talk about doing it. *"But, we do joke about it, I mean we say, well we'll do that when we live together, eventually, yes."*

For Cindy (I), she may not see the two of them doing everything together or living together, she has an example of family members who have a relationship she hopes she and her sister will have when they grow older. While she spoke about living together, she was not sure that would happen. But, she shared that she pictured that they would do everything together, "*You and I are just like (them), you know, when we get old. We'll still always go sailing together, we'll help each other do stuff. I mean, we're just going to be tight through the end."*

**Remain the Same**

Even if the sisters could not increase time together, or thought it was possible to make their relationship closer, at the very least, they wanted their relationship to stay the same. The sisters still wanted some connection with their sister, or if they thought they were close, they wanted to continue to be close. For Ginny (I), she was cautiously optimistic about what she and her sister could possibly expect in the future. *"I don't hope for anything other than us to continue to have some type of relationship. I know that it is not going to get any better, but I don't think it is going to get any worse."*

For Hesse and Hannah, they both have made the firm decision to no longer maintain a relationship with their third sister. Both sisters look forward to maintaining the relationship that they have together, however. As Hesse (I) said, *"Oh, we'll just grow old together, and hopefully just keep on being like we are."* Leslie (I) probably summed up this theme best when she shared that that her hope for the future, *"I hope we can continue getting together and sharing with each other."*

**Conclusion**

In the literature review, identity theory explained that identity and role development does not take place just in childhood, but continues throughout adulthood. When exploring the data from the interviews, several themes emerged about the influence of a sister relationship on an individual's identity and choices in roles they assume. These family roles and expectations often established how they were seen in their family of origin for much of their life and many sisters struggled with their identity outside of their family of origin. For a majority of the sisters, they felt that their sister is a large part of who they are. Sisters developed individual characteristics

because of who their sisters were.  In many cases, sisters find it almost impossible to separate

who they would be as individuals if they did not have their sister relationship.

# CHAPTER 5 - DISCUSSION

This study focused on the meaning of the sister relationship for women who have reached middle age. It was designed to add to the minimal amount of literature primarily addressing the relationships of adult sisters. Interviews were conducted with sisters between the ages of 45-64 to explore their thoughts about their relationships and what sisterhood means to them as middle-aged adult women.

Women were interviewed who reside all over the United States and each case had a wide variety of relationship characteristics. As a whole, the interviews provided great insight into the meaning that women ascribe to the relationship they have with their sisters. This relationship holds important meaning regarding who they are as individuals. Many of the relationships also provided consistent support for them in their lives. A majority of the participants described positive and meaningful sister relationships; and, while a few participants spoke about having a history of some conflict, they still reported positive feelings associated with the relationship. All participants voiced hope for continued connection with their sisters in the future.

In this chapter, I will discuss several important findings that this study revealed about the topic of adult sister relationships. First, the influence of assuming the role of caretaker in childhood and how influences one's motherhood. Second, I will discuss the challenges that sisters face when trying to "fit" into the sister role and the expectations that come from their sisters. I also will discuss what sisters communicate about and what they choose not to communicate about and why. Next, I will address the parental influence on the sister relationship in adulthood. Finally, what the sisters indicated that they hoped for in the future of their relationship and what that means will be discussed.

**Influence of Sisterhood on Identity and Roles**

In her study of sisters and their relationships, Sue Kuba (2011) addressed the topic of the how a woman's identity is connected to her sister's identity. She found that sisters felt that their identity was partially defined by their sister and who they are. The results of this study were congruent with Kuba's findings that sisters find it difficult to separate the role of a sister from the other roles they are fulfilling in life.

**Practicing Motherhood**

Expectations and roles for adults often originate within one's childhood family. According to symbolic interactionism, these early roles provide us with insight and ideals about what roles mean across the lifespan (Reynolds & Herman-Kinney, 2003). For example, nearly all of the participants in the study (especially the sisters with younger siblings) mentioned that one of the earliest roles that they fulfilled was that of caretaker. Additionally, many of the participants identified their current role as a mother/caregiver as a central part of who they are and how they see themselves as adults. In fact, Chibucos and Leite (2005) used the role of motherhood as an example when explaining how symbolic interactionism works. As they explained, expectations of role characteristics for motherhood are socially constructed. Symbolic Interactionism explains the role they assumed in childhood provided them with an understanding of how to enact this mother and caretaker role later in life. In addition, the "greater perceived clarity of role expectations, the higher the quality of role enactment" (White & Klein, 2002, p. 103). This helps us understand why the women who received continuous feedback about their performance as a caretaker from their parents and their sisters interpreted this feedback to provide them with guidance on what they should expect from themselves as caretakers and mothers years later.

This study was focused on the sister relationship as a unit of analysis. Therefore, it is beyond the scope of the data to identify whether or not caretaking sister-to-sister is any different when a sister performs caretaking duties for a brother.  Researchers should examine this issue in the future.

## Role Expectations From Sisters

Symbolic interactionism suggests that as a child, an individual is "continually taking the attitudes of those about him (sic), especially the roles of those who in some sense control him and on whom he depends" (Mead, 1967, p.160). Because the sister relationship begins in childhood, the role of sister is one that is assumed early in life. This particular role is unusual, because it is one that will often continue throughout an individual's lifetime.

This lifetime role associated with the sister relationship is one in which another individual has expectations. Sisters are often expected to continue to interact within the guidelines of role expectations held by their other sister.  To maintain their relationship, some sisters focus on trying to fulfill those expectations of the other.  For example, multiple younger sister participants in this study shared that they struggled to meet the expectations set by one or more older sisters.

Identity theorists debate the various ways that the struggle to perform in a role where the individual expectations are different than those others with whom she is interacting.  Some assumptions of the theory is that the longer her individual expectations are different from the expectations set by others, the less time she will spend in that role (Turner, 2012). Therefore, while her motivation to spend time with her sister may come from things such as shared family history and emotional connection, the role becomes a struggle for her.

Even when relationships continue, this inconsistency of expectations eventually begins to impact the relationship. Several of the younger sisters reported that one of the coping mechanisms they used in this situation was to spend less time with their sisters. This time and distance break would reduce the time that they had to spend in the role in which they felt they could not be themselves. This time away from the relationship created a relationship that became less of a priority for the sister. While the sisters chose to "act" in the role in the way that they felt pleased their sisters, the choice to take time away from the relationship actually limited the ability for the sister relationship to reach its full potential and meaning. These sisters did not always feel connected to the relationship in the same way as their other sisters may have. This finding is consistent with that identified by Sue Kuba (2011). She found that sisters reported that they struggled with sometimes being authentic with their sisters because they are always viewed in a "frozen image" or perception of always being who their family perceives them to be.

**Personality Development by Comparison**

As participants described themselves and their sisters, it was clear that they often used comparison to do so. They included ways that they were both the same and different from their sisters. Six decades ago, Bossard and Ball (1955) attempted to define sibling roles and how they are acquired. The roles they identified included: responsible, popular, social butterfly, studious, self-centered, irresponsible, spoiled, and physically weak or ill. They asserted that while the first-born child has only the expectations of her parents to meet, the next born has to meet the expectations of the parents and the other sibling. As time moves forward, the more siblings that are added, the more expectations that children have to meet.

Participants in the current study recalled understanding that some characteristics and roles had already been "claimed" by others when they arrived within their family of origin. This

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helps to explain why some of the characteristics the sisters adopted were based on comparing themselves to others within the family when they entered it.  For example, many sisters reflected on memories from childhood where they knew that they could not achieve the standards set by another sister within the family (such as being the academic or the popular one), so they made the choice to develop their own path.   The act of comparing themselves to their sisters was a part of their character and identity development throughout childhood. Then the sisters continued to compare themselves to each other in adulthood.  These characteristics continued to be a large part of their identities as a whole.  Sisters compared themselves with each other as adults and would sometimes make choices about how they interacted with each other based on those characteristics.

Bossard and Ball (1995) began to explore childhood sibling role development, however, this continued comparison between sisters into adulthood has largely been unexplored. Because individual identity is an ongoing developmental process, ongoing comparisons may be slightly different than we understand them to be in childhood because they no longer live in the same home. Researchers should investigate whether they are still trying to differentiate themselves from their sisters during adulthood. These questions are ripe for further study.

### Summary of Identity and Role Development

Participants in this study practiced future caregiver roles with their sisters, struggled with the role of a sister, and compared themselves to their sisters in order to become who they are today.  The women in this study believed who they became was largely influenced by the sister relationship. For most sisters, it was impossible for them to see who they may have become if they would have had no or different sisters. The participants were not even able to comprehend where they began and their sisters ended. It was almost as if I was asking them to pull

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themselves apart physically. Fanny best represented what it meant to so many of the sisters by stating, *"It's who I am, it's so much a part of my DNA."*

## Making Meaning of Sister Relationships through Family Transitions

The participants described many types of life transitions they have experienced: illnesses of their parents or siblings, divorces or other relationships ending, and births of children. While the actual transition issues varied, what was consistently reported were the acts of caregiving and support sisters received or provided. A theme of mutual caretaking emerged from most of the sisters. While the actual ways support was provided varied, the positive association the receiving sister had to the sister relationship was consistent. Many participants indicated they could not have made it through the difficult situations they faced without the support that was offered by their sisters.

White and Riedmann (1992) identified siblings as being in the "second tier of family ties" when it comes to support (p. 100). This means that that the sibling relationship falls behind an individual's spouse, own children, and the parental relationship in hierarchy of importance. While this study does show the importance of the sister relationship in adulthood, the results indicating that spousal and child issues are not shared with sisters supports White and Riedmann's work (1992).

The support provided by sisters during transitions highlights a commitment to each other that is often underestimated during adulthood. Because this relationship has been identified as a "second tier family tie," family scientists may be overlooking the value that this relationship may have to adult sisters (White & Riedmann, 1992, p 100). Much of the focus in adult development research and adult relationships has been on the family of procreation and the emotional

connections those relationships bring, but this study highlights the importance of the emotional support that sisters offer during transitions.

Connidis (1992) questioned the reliability of the sibling connection and support during various transitions in adulthood. This is inconsistent with what was expressed by the participants in this study. Nearly all of the sisters indicated that they counted on their sisters as support. Some were surprised at the lengths that their sisters would go to take care of them, especially those that said they were not especially close.

Connidis (1992) does mention that life transitions do not just happen to the individual sibling, but to the family unit as a whole. This then creates a necessary re-negotiation of roles and expectations within the family. The Frank sisters mentioned that their family transitions are "*watershed moments*" where they do take the time to reflect on what their sister relationship means to each of them and how they want to interact with each other in the future. This may happen within more sister relationships, even though they do not specifically identify or recognize this process they go through. This is important to address in future research.

This willingness to assume these roles with each other in adulthood shows a continued commitment to the sister relationship in adulthood. While the research indicates that emotionally distant sibling relationships are less likely to offer support (Connidis, 1992; White & Riedmann, 1992), even the sisters who reported struggling with each other indicated an interest in assisting each other in times of crisis. The intent to provide care was consistent among participants. Interestingly, most sisters held personal expectations to *provide* support to their sisters, but were often surprised by how much support they *received*. They consistently expressed appreciation and valued the support their sisters provided to them during times they felt they needed it the most.

**How Sisters Communicate**

Sibling communication is one area of the sibling relationship that has received slightly more attention than others.  Much of this research has been focused on the mechanics of communication and less about what siblings talk about.  In this section, I will address the topics of communication common to the participants in the study, as well as motivations about why sisters choose not to communicate about certain topics with their sisters.

**Topics of Communication**

When White and Reidmann (1992) classified the sister relationship as a second tier family tie, they had placed the children and spouse from the family of procreation as a first tier family tie.  The "first tier" family relationship was identified as the most common topic of communication between sisters. Children were discussed most often for a wide variety of situations, such as communicating current information, discussing parenting issues in general, or gathering advice about a specific event. The importance of discussing children is consistent with findings from the study by Whitney Stach (2007) in which sisters felt that their relationships grew closer after they both became mothers.

The second most commonly discussed topic was the sisters' parents. This topic of communication usually began to surface when sisters were faced with discussing issues related to their aging parents, such as health, finances, or other quality of life issues.  The sisters were choosing to share information with each other about the most important shared people in their lives.  Communicating with family members about family issues makes logical sense. It also is probably within the sisters' comfort zone. Fowler (2009) found that siblings were motivated to communicate with each other based on comfort. This lends understanding to why they would choose to communicate with each other when talking about such important issues. The sisters

can provide support for topics (e.g. parents and children) that are so important to them.    The choice to share such important topics means they are receiving that needed comfort and support from each other and illustrates how important that relationship is as a resource.

**Choice to Not Share**

Fowler (2009) called for researchers to explore the area of topic avoidance between siblings.  He recognized that to understand why siblings choose not to share information with each other may help us better understand the sibling relationship as a whole.  Participants from the current study were asked to recall a time that they choose not to share information with a sister and explain why they had made that decision.   They reported multiple reasons for choosing not to disclose information. In some cases it was as simple as not being in the same geographic location or a lack of opportunity. However, when a sister made a conscious decision to not disclose information to a sister, the reasons were usually to protect a sister, because of fear of receiving judgment from a sister, and or keeping personal relationship problems private within a family of procreation.

When sisters choose not to disclose information in order to protect their sister, it was usually because they did not want to worry her or cause some other form of emotional stress. The types of news sisters chose to keep secret were things like health issues, assaults, and unplanned pregnancies. Many times the sister who had the information knows that she can seek out support from a sister and most likely receive it, however, she choose to give up the support in order to protect her sister.

In understanding functions that the sibling relationship serves, Goetting (1986) and Bank and Kahn (1982) identified defending and protection as one of the tasks of a sibling.  When trying to understand this decision to not communicate information to their sibling, symbolic

interactionism can help explain this motivation. This role of protector often will start in childhood. All the expectations are set and sisters will continue to operate within this role as they have if they continue to receive positive reinforcement for these actions (Reynolds & Herman-Kinney, 2003). While sisters sometimes struggle with other expectations of the sister role, the participants in this study all indicated some positive association with supporting their sisters. This role of protector and support to the sister does not seem to change over time. When faced with sharing information that she feels may cause her sister emotional pain or worry, the woman continues to act in the long-established role of protector. In some of the cases, the sisters did eventually share the information, but this was usually in the case of health information where the sisters need for support eventually outweighed the need to protect. Sometimes, the information eventually surfaced even though the sister wanted to keep it hidden.

Another reason to keep information from her sisters was the fear of judgment. This concern was cited when a sister either knows she has engaged in a behavior that she feels bothers her sisters, or if her sisters would view her as being in the wrong. While the woman indicated she would like to talk to her sisters, she was too worried about what her sister(s) may think about her. This concern can be understood through the concept of the looking glass self, in other words, we see ourselves as others see us (White & Klein, 2008). This continued action and concern about what a sister thinks shows us that this use of the sister relationship as a mirror to reflect herself in continues throughout adulthood. If a sister interprets that this information may hurt or damage her sister's image of her, she may then choose to keep it to herself.

While this secret keeping does create a challenge for an individual to be herself in the relationship, she fears more what her sister may think about her and her actions. Naima Brown-Smith's (1998) study on family secrets does indicate that while secret keeping is difficult for a

family, the type of secret it is and how it is eventually revealed can bring some family members closer together.  While this is a very difficult process, sisters may be counting on the outcome of secret keeping as being more beneficial to the relationship then having to face what their sisters may think about them.

The final reason many sisters provided about why they chose not to share information was because it most often involved their spouse or partner.  In some cases, they also mentioned choosing not to share information about their children. This choice is consistent with Brown-Smith's (1998) five dimensions of family secrets.  The first dimension is that secrets are shared in families through various boundaries or alliances.  "Information can be withheld by any number of family members from one another or from outsiders" (p 23). This indicates that keeping the information within either the spousal relationship or within the family of procreation, that there is a hierarchy of relationships within the sister's lives.

This reasoning to not share information outside of the significant other relationship (most often a husband, and in some cases, children) helps provide us more insight on what exactly the sister relationship means to an individual.   While many sisters indicated it was nearly as important to them as their children or parents, the choice to create a boundary of information within just their family of procreation indicates that in adulthood there are more significant connections than sisterhood. In looking at it through the lens of identity theory, this relationship has become higher in the identity hierarchy (Turner, 2012).  When faced with the decision to share information or not, the most likely role that a sister will operate in will be one of a spouse, partner, or mother in order to protect that relationship.

## Parental Influence on the Adult Sister Relationship

When children are young and living together, parents often are the ones that are negotiating the conflicts, trying to help siblings work out their fights, or at least sending them to separate corners until they can play together again. What this study has demonstrated is that parental influence continues on in adulthood by continuing advice and actions by parents. Parents set this expectation and the sisters listen to the advice into adulthood. Parental influence on the relationship seems to be more of a norm for most of the participants, rather than the exception.

In this study parental influence on the relationship was seen as both helpful by showing sisters how to negotiate through conflict, as well as harmful to the relationship by appearing to favor one sister or another. The participants provided multiple examples and situations that involved their parents. These forms of influence were exhibited in three different ways (1) parents being a middleman, (2) modeling behavior, and (3) perceived preference.

In their study of adult sister relationships, Mize and Pinjala (2001) found that sisters reported their mother acting as a middleman. Mothers will call the other sister and ask questions about if they know what was happening with the other. Sisters also stated that mothers will try to regulate the relationship if they felt that the sisters were having a conflict (Mize & Pinjala, 2001). This study supports this finding by Mize and Pinjala (2001). Sisters indicated that their parents would call to question how their sibling was doing. In some cases parents go as far as to tell the sisters what actions they should take to resolve their conflicts.

In some cases, the parent's expectations for their daughters relationship was set by their own behavior. Modeling behavior or setting expectations through family member actions is at the heart of symbolic interactionism. The meaning of the sister relationship and how an

individual should perform in her role as a sister was shown to the participants in a variety of ways.  In some cases, the parents inadvertently set an example of what not to do when they had conflict throughout adulthood with their siblings.  More often, though, participants indicated that they learned what to expect from their sister relationship as a result of their parent's positive example.  Their parents modeled long-lasting, satisfactory relationships with their family members.  For some participants, these examples were not set by their parents, but by other family members or close family friends.

While symbolic interactionism is often used to explain the education of family role modeling in childhood, the literature is silent on how this modeling of behavior happens in adulthood.  This study tells us that continued modeling and setting of examples in adulthood can continue to influence sibling interaction. Some sisters even spoke about examples they are using to set the expectation of how they want to age together.

Symbolic interactionism explains that individuals continue to renegotiate roles and role expectations through adulthood (Reynolds & Herman-Kinney, 2003).  This tells us that individuals will continue to learn from example throughout their life, continuously shaping what they think about the role. While watching their parents as young siblings, they begin to get the stage set for role expectations, but as they age they continue to integrate the model of how an adult sibling relationship should work and they can begin to enact their own sister role.

**Parental Preference**

In the book, *Mother Always Liked you Best* (Kardasis, Larsen, Thorpe, & Trippe, 2011) the issue of individual perceptions of equal treatment is discussed.   Once the perception of unfair treatment by parents is established, it is the basis of nearly all sibling interaction. They respond to their sibling based on the idea that their sister is receiving preferential treatment in

some way. Suitor, Sechrist, Plikuhn, Pardo, Gilligan, and Pillemer (2009) discussed that this perception of fairness could be seen as either emotional or financial. In their study, perception of parental preference between siblings was found to have a direct negative correlation on the sibling relationship. These findings are consistent with Taylor and Norris (2000) who examined parental preference within the context of transferring the family farm from parents to children. Taylor and Norris (2000) found that one of the keys to sibling contentment and ease of transfer was the perception of fairness and equality within the family.

The findings in this study support both Taylor and Norris (2000) and the Suitor et al. (2009) study. Participants indicate they feel concern and frustration about such issues as financial preference, choosing only one power of attorney, siblings included in parental secrets, and parent health care choices.

When coming from parents, secrets, decision-making power, and money are all symbolic of resources and social capital. Symbolic interactionism tells us that individuals attach meaning to these objects or actions of parents (White & Klein, 2008). The sisters attach meaning to the resources provided by parents to only one sibling. Whether this meaning is accurate or not, it is the perception of the meaning to the sister that is important. While parents may be making a choice because of geography or skill set of the child, the sibling does not perceive the logic of the choice, but the possible favoritism of their sibling. When a sibling interprets a fair division of resources or responsibility, then the relationship between sibling and parents usually will stay unharmed even when having to choose one sibling to take on a role.

The influence on the sister relationship in this case is still coming from the parent but it is reliant on the perception of the sister and what that parental action means to them. While the research exists about sibling perceptions of fairness, what the literature is lacking is why the

choice of the parent seems to be reflected in the relationship between the sisters. Some sisters were upset when they felt their sibling lobbied for the responsibility; there was resentment in some cases when it seemed the parent made a completely independent decision. The sister applied the frustration they felt by their parents choices to what their sister relationship means to them.

As JoAnn described it, her mother drove a "wedge" between them because of the favoritism she showed for her sister and her sister's children, yet both Judy and JoAnn did not indicate the other sister understood this was going on, yet the action of their mother impacted the relationship with their sister. These choices favoring one sister seemed to symbolically represent a rejection of sorts. While some siblings did indicate some frustration with their parents, a majority verbalized more frustration about their sister. While this could have been a result of the subject of this study, further research into understand this influence on the relationship will be very helpful to negating damage to sibling relationships.

## The Future of the Sisters Relationships

When asked what each sister wanted for their future of their relationship with their sister, participants indicated that they hoped to continue to maintain the relationship that they had, or grow closer with their sister in the future. The meaning and the optimism of the sister relationship was expressed through the hope for increased communication as well as increasing their time together.

As discussed earlier, communication and sharing of information was an important function of the sister relationship. Many participants indicated that they enjoyed talking to their sister about a variety of topics. When asked about what they would like in the future, they wanted to be able to continue communication or increase it. Fowler (2009) found that sibling

communication was motivated by intimacy. Siblings want to communicate with each other because of the enjoyment of the connection they feel with each other.

This enjoyment of the relationship and the positive emotions that it symbolized in their lives explains why sisters indicated they will want to increase this connection. The exchange of information that they share is positively associated with their relationship as sisters. Even if the sisters shared that have had ongoing struggles with their sister, they still hoped to always communicate, to always share with each other what is going on in their lives.

Like the desire to increase communication, sisters also expressed a desire to increase time together. Time is a precious resource, on that an individual cannot make more of for herself. The hope to spend more time together indicated how valuable the sisters saw their relationships. As identity theory explains, individuals spend more time in roles to which they are more committed to (Carter, 2013). This hope to spend more time with a sister is an indication of the importance of the relationship to them.

In some of the cases, the sisters saw that increased time together developing into the possibility of them living together as they aged. At the very least, the sisters were counting on each other as relationships that they would have together as they grew older. As Bedford and Avioli (2001) found, sisters found themselves drawing closer together as they experienced the loss of a partner or spouse when they were older. They also concluded that having an intimate relationship with your sibling provided greater comfort and mental health as the siblings aged. The sister relationship represented a friendship that they could have while they were aging together. Connidis (1989) found that a sibling relationship could serve as a social support buffer as someone ages. This is consistent with previous sister case study literature where Stacy Stach

(2007) also talked about a shared future plan about how they may live together as well as spend time together in retirement. The sisters expected that they could count on each other as they age. The sibling relationship will sometimes increase in contact and frequency as they get older meaning they will see each other as their future companions for each other as they age.

## Implications for Working with Families and Adult Sisters

The sibling relationship in adulthood has been overlooked both as evolving dynamic process, as well as a support resource for individuals. Because of the large gap in literature, the lack of understanding of the relationship impacts the amount of education that has been provided to both professionals and family members.

When thinking about what we can better to do support adult sibling relationships, it is first important to educate family life educators about the dynamics of the adult sibling relationship. Family life education within the university settings should proactively work towards ensuring that pre-professional education includes adult siblings. This ensures that family life educators have developed the knowledge about how important the sibling relationship is as a support resource throughout adulthood. In addition, they need to be educated about how much of an ongoing influence the parents can be on this relationship in adulthood.

Family life educators who better understand how the adult sibling relationship functions and continue to evolve can then better educate other professions that are working with families with adult siblings. This study has provided a greater framework in understanding how those relationships work together. When someone is working with adult children, it will help to understand how important that relationship could be to them. For example, a caseworker (hospital, public assistance, etc.) needing to identify resources may overlook the importance of a sibling. Family therapists working with adults may not fully understand the dynamics that the

adult sibling relationship can continue to have in adulthood.  In addition, people working with

older adults planning their estate and possible future care need to be aware of how these

decisions may impact the sibling relationship if they are not carefully decided and everyone

informed.  This study has outlined how important this relationship can be as a support through

times of transitions.  Family life education can take a lead in proactively working to grow the

knowledge base of multiple professions dealing with adult siblings.

One of the areas for family education and intervention is the area of aging parents and

adult siblings. This transition for families is increasing because of the aging of the Baby Boomer

generation. This generational group has 10,000 individuals turning 65 every day for the next 19

years (Cohn & Taylor, 2010).  While baby boomers are getting older and living longer, people

are waiting longer to have children with women between the ages of 30 and 34 experiencing the

highest increase of childbirth (Taylor, Cohn, Livingston, Wang, & Dockterman, 2010).

With such a large growing social issue that families are facing, it is important for people working

with these families to understand the sister relationship through its ebbs and flows throughout

their relationship. In Kardasis, Larsen, Thorpe, & Trippe's (2011) book about resolving family

disputes involving adult family members, they address the most common reasons for family

conflict.  These conflicts are:

1. Asset distribution including homes, land, antiques, artwork and more,

2. Caregiving for elderly family members,

3. Old relationship patterns and unhealed wounds that are still being worked out
   among siblings and between parents and their adult children,

4. Geographic dispersion and infrequent communication,

5. Sibling wealth disparity (p. 5)

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All of these top reasons for conflict in adult families usually involve some sort of contact or interaction between adult siblings. Because these top triggers of conflict involve siblings, it is so important for family researchers to learn more about the relationship and provide this information to the multiple people who would be involved in these types of conflicts. This means that information about adult sibling interactions should grow to educate lawyers, mediators, physical and mental health workers, to name a few.

Kardasis and colleagues (2011) also addressed multiple barriers to conflict resolution within families. A few of the barriers mentioned are different perceptions of fairness, entrenched patterns, complicated role reversals, and emotional triggers (p. 45). This study has begun to add to literature that can help us further understand these barriers and can assist in creating educational programs that can help professionals working to assist families through the challenges of conflict.

One critical piece in the steps towards resolving conflict in families is moving from positions to interests (Kardasis et al, 2011). This study has highlighted one common interest that nearly every sister has, maintaining a relationship. Further understanding this motivation to maintain a sister relationship can be the key in assisting resolving some of these family conflicts and successfully keeping healthy relationships and connections intact.

**Implications for Future Research**

Sibling relationship research is behind much of the research on other family relationships. Researchers still only know a little about how the adult sibling relationship works throughout a lifetime. This long-lasting relationship is complex and there are a lot of influences that still need to be examined. This study examined sister relationships only. Further research on other sibling relationships is also significant. More research in understanding the dynamics of siblings who

have completely cut off the relationship also may assist professionals in understanding how to prevent these fractured relationships. Sibling research in the future should also take into consideration a more educationally diverse group of sisters. In addition, this research study included sisters who self-selected their participation. Including participants in future research that may not self-select could provide a study with more breadth. By including sisters who have different educational backgrounds, we then can learn how further how advanced education may impact decisions sisters make in their relationship. Also, a sample that is not self-selected could provide insight from sister who may not be as willing to discuss their sister relationship. Further research that includes relationships that may contain more

 **Implications for Gold's Typology**

Gold's (1989) categorized sibling relationships as intimate, congenial, loyal, apathetic, and hostile. She described that sibling relationships fit into particular categories based on factors such as frequency of communication, how often they come together, whether they try to do things together, and in what situations they come together (e.g., spending time informally or only at family events like funerals or weddings.

Early in this study, it became difficult to try to categorize sisters into specific categories. To assist me in this process while gathering data, I asked the participants specific questions about how they would describe their relationship and how often they communicated with each other. Gold (1989) used communication aspects- such as never communicating for hostile, and nearly communicating every day for intimate siblings. Since the creation of Gold's sibling typology, major changes have occurred regarding how individuals communicate with each other. The creation of mobile devices, texting the Internet, social media websites, blogs, and apps that are available on personal smartphones has changed communication dramatically.

When I asked about how much the sisters communicated with each other, in nearly every case, the participant asked what counts as communication. For this study, I advised them they could count communication in whatever way they felt they appropriate. Most sisters included social media as a form of communication. By using the measure of Gold's (1989) typology, some sisters who could have been identified as being in an apathetic relationship, identified as communicating with their sister in some form at least weekly, maybe more. This form of reaching out included "liking" a picture their sister may have shared on their Facebook wall. In some cases, the sisters would comment about how they "follow" each other on different forms of social media and feel connected because they can see the activities that their sister is doing. The sisters would felt connected to their sister's children because of photos shared of children or grandchildren.

While the amount of communication between the sisters was asked of each participant, the question remained what the quality of this interaction actually is? It does not take the same commitment of time and energy to scroll through someone's Facebook page and make a comment as it does to visit or make a long distance call to a sister. In addition, some sisters who described apathetic relationships in their narrative stories identified as communicating with their sister in some form at least weekly, maybe more. The typology needs to address changing patterns in communication and what that pattern of communication may mean to the individual.

Gold's typology is just one of many adult sibling research opportunities that exist. This area of research would be fairly easy to undertake partially based on the large response I received from the recruitment for this study. The large response to just a couple e-mails indicates that sisters are excited to participate in studies about their relationship. In conversation with other researchers in the area of adult siblings, the challenge seems to come from the lack of funding

associated with this type of work.  Many funding sources are not appreciative of this area of work and pass it by for more politically exciting research.

While funders and researchers may underestimate the need for this area of research, popular media and entertainment continue to value the interest of this relationship.   Just this year, another new television sitcom was introduced, *Life in Pieces*.  This show is very similar to *Modern Family* in that much of the show is centered on adult sibling interaction.  While popular culture continues to understand the meaning of this relationship throughout adulthood, family science professionals continue to largely ignore it. Some speculation has been the complexity of the relationship; other researchers believe it is the lack of funding associated with sibling research.  Whatever the reason sibling research needs to continue to work to grow this important area of literature.

## Limitations

The sisters in this study were recruited only through email contact.  The initial interest in the study was so overwhelming that the decision to stop recruitment after the first two recruitment emails.  Because these recruitment emails both were sent through academic email channels, it resulted in an unusually highly educated participant sample.  While this study did include participants who did have less than graduate school education, the graduate educated participants did outnumber the rest of the participants. While impact of this unusual educational demographic of this on the study is not known, it is important to point out.

Other demographic participant information to emphasize is the small amount of diversity in the overall study.  Sister studies have mostly been focused on White females, and while this study attempted to recruit multiple races, future research in the area of sister relationships needs to be very conscious to include multiple races.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this study addressed the question about the meaning of adult sister relationships, as well as provide a stepping stone to future researchers who are also interested in the area of adult siblings. At the introduction to this study, I explained that I myself am a sister. I now better understand why I will always try to maintain this relationship with my sister. She is the history of who I am as a person and the future of our family of origin. She will be the person that remembers what I was scared of as a child, and understand what I will worry about in the future.

The sister relationship changes depending on the sisters in the relationship. It is a relationship that shapes the characteristics and identity of the members throughout their lifetime. Personally, I was moved much more than I anticipated by the emotions of both joy and pain that each sister shared with me. Nearly all the interviews involved tears. Some of the interviews ended with me still feeling the warmth of the love shared between the sisters for hours after it was over. And still, some of the interviews I could still feel the sadness for hours because sisters who wanted to mend relationships could not grasp how to reach out to each other. What was undeniable about each one of these sister relationships is that relationship influenced and continues to influence the adults they each are today.

> *I know I am who I am today because I knew you…Who can say if I have been changed for the better, but because I knew you, I have been changed for good… So much of me is made of what I learned from you. You'll be with me like a handprint on my heart* (Schwartz, 2003).

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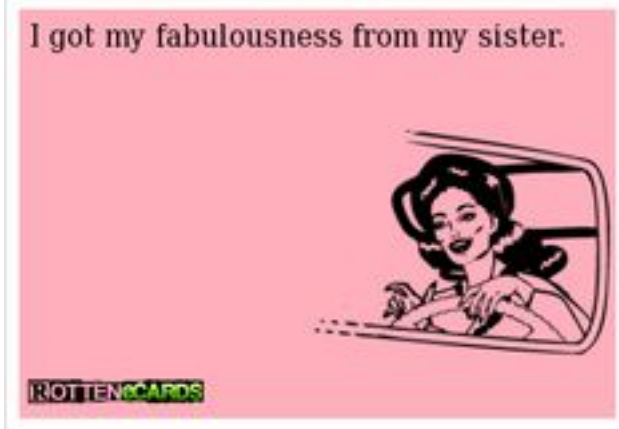
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# APPENDIX A - EXAMPLE OF SISTER INTERNET MEME

# APPENDIX B - INTERNET MEMES SELECTED

If you don't understand how a woman can both love her sister and want to wring her neck at the same time, you were probably an only child.

your ecards
someecards.com

"I am the big sister which makes me the boss!"

your ecards
someecards.com

Yes, I do have the best sister in the world ... It's just that she's crazy and she scares me a little bit.

your ecards
someecards.com

As a kid, my little sister was a pain in the ass. Now shes the one I call to help me plan your disappeearance. Now that's what I call sisterly love.

som ee cards
user card

Sisters: You can never decide if you want to hit them or hug them.
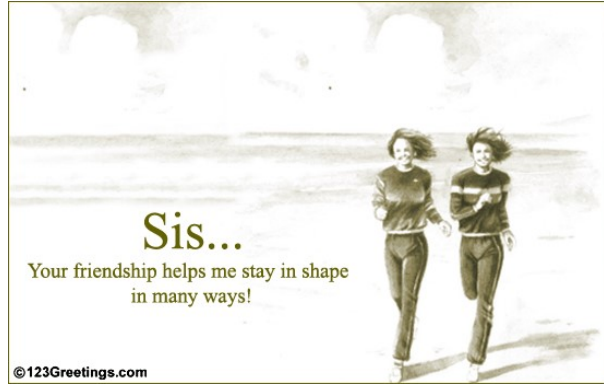
your ecards
someecards.com

I got my fabulousness from my sister.

ROTTENECARDS

You are not my friend neither my best friend, you are more than that, you are my sister.

someecards
user card

Sis...
Your friendship helps me stay in shape in many ways!

©123Greetings.com

In the sister department
I sure did luck out
You are the best
Of this I have no doubt

It doesn't matter if you're old or young. You'll always be the older sister
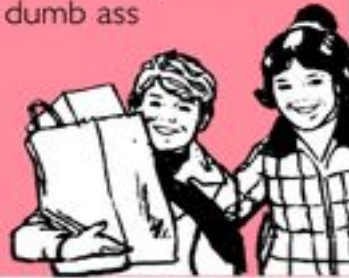
your ecards
someecards.com

I smile because you're my sister. I laugh because there is nothing you can do about it.

someecards
user card

Its no wonder my mom likes me more... I have been learning from my older sisters dumb ass mistakes!

someecards
user card

You are more than just a sister...
you are my best friend.

Words cannot describe
how I feel about you
because I don't
feel anything
about you.

your e cards
someecards.com

You've got awesome big
sister qualities. The way
you save my ass everytime
I am in trouble. Your
lucky I am not the
big sister or your
life would suck

your e cards
someecards.com

You and I are sisters.  Always
remember that!

If you fall, I will pick you
up...

after I finish laughing my
ass off.

Peg It Board

# APPENDIX C - INTERNET MEMES AS A SCREENING TOOL

The Internet meme is a symbolic form of expression that most people have encountered using some form of social media such as Pinterest, Facebook, or Instagram. This use of social media as a form of expression has grown exponentially within the last ten to fifteen years. Adult women are very active in social media. According to Madden and Zickuhr at Pew Research (2011), the only social networking site that had more male users than women was LinkedIn. The other social networking sites examined were Pinterest, MySpace, Facebook, Twitter and a few other social networking programs (2011).

Meme is a term that has been around for a long time that describes parts of a culture, such as sayings, fashion, and architecture. Since the invention and the growing use of social media, Internet memes have grown to become popular ways for people to express themselves online.  A photo Internet meme is usually a photo or an illustration that communicates "popular quotes, images, and real people, which are copied, imitated, and spread all over the internet(s) (Urban Dictionary, 2015). Pinterest is a social networking site largely based on visual bookmarks.  Some of these visual bookmarks are photo memes that people save to their board for later reference or use, as well as sharing with others.  The other social networking site that uses meme sharing quite often is Facebook.  Both Pinterest and Facebook are actively used by women, who are often, middle-aged women (Madden & Zickuhr, 2011).

Like most people on social media, I have seen the memes used to summarize relationships and express emotions tied to those relationships. While conducting the literature review on sisters, I came across an Internet meme showing an older and younger sister with vastly different interpretations about how it is to dress alike (see Appendix A). Based on the use of memes to express feelings associated with relationships, I decided to use memes that were

generated through a Google search. The memes selected were the top results by image search.  I

used the memes that were clearly written, easy to read, and had little offensive language. These

memes are included in Appendix B.  If you have further questions about the use of Internet

memes as a screening tool please see Appendix C. The most important aspect of the memes is

their symbolic form of expression.

Participants were asked to describe their sister relationship by identifying an Internet

meme that they felt reflected their relationship with their sisters.  In some cases, the participant

did pick more than one meme to describe a sister.  In one case a sister declined to select any

memes. The use of the memes as a sensitizing concept allowed the participants to summarize

their perception of their sister relationship into a visual description that may be easier for some

sisters to use to express themselves.

# APPENDIX D - CASE SUMMARIES

## Adams Case Summary

Case A sisters were two White 51-year-old identical twins. Anne is the older twin, Ashley is the younger sister, and the birth order is something that is very important to Anne.  Both sisters live in the Midwest near or in metropolitan areas.  They have both earned bachelor degrees and both are in relationships.  One is heterosexual and married, the other sister is homosexual and in a long-term relationship.  They also have one brother. The sisters both agree that their relationship has ebb and flowed over the years between being close and being distant.  The time in their relationship that seemed to be the most emotionally distant occurred during high school and early adulthood when they had different friends, different interests and did not live under the same roof or in the same state.

Both sisters have been involved in caretaking of older family members together and they report that process actually brought them closer together.  In addition, development of new rituals or shared time together within the last ten years has assisted in bringing them closer together.  The relationship that they had with their grandmother is something that they felt brought them together, especially after her death where they grieved the loss together.   The relationship has been front and center for both of them in their life.  This relationship assisted in keeping them bonded together over the years, as well as sharing important times together in their childhood. These sisters laughed together throughout the interview. They both indicated that throughout their relationship, caretaking challenges and other life events they have supported each other and can openly talk to each other.

**Brown Case Summary**

These African-American sisters are Bea (age 63) and BJ (age 64). One sister lives in the South and the other in the Midwest. Both of the sisters live in populated areas. One sister has her Ph.D. and the other sister has a Bachelors degree, one is married and the other sister is single. The sisters had four brothers, but one has died. These sisters indicated that they talk to each other everyday and cannot imagine communicating with each other less than that. They describe each other as best friends. They both view this relationship as close to, or the most important one of their lives.

The sisters are quick to point out that this closeness does not mean that they do not argue. Both sisters acknowledge arguing with each other, but they quickly move through it and accept each other for the differences they have. They have worked together as caregivers to older family members and felt supported by the other one through that process. This relationship also has laughter as a centerpiece to it. These sisters enjoy laughing and humor as a way to relate and tease each other. Humor is also used to deal with stresses in each other's lives. Each sister feels that the other one has strengths that compliment possible weaknesses that they perceive themselves as having.

**Campbell Case Summary**

Case C these sisters report being both White and Native American. The older sister is Catt age 54, and the younger sister is Cindy age 52. They both live in the Midwest. One sister has her Masters degree and the other sister is a high school graduate. Both sisters are currently divorced and have one brother. These sisters have a relationship that has changed over time, depending on what stage of life they were in and what was going on with them personally. They both believe some personal growth and changes in perspective on their relationship with their

sister has brought them closer together as adults.  Both sisters have cooperated with each other in caretaking an older family member and believe that they would not have made it through some of the responsibilities of caretaking without the support of each other.

Their mother was an important influence in their life because they both felt she held very high, if not impossible, expectations for each of them. One sister acknowledged in the interview that even though her mother is deceased, she is still trying to achieve her approval. Her sister, on the other hand, rejected trying to achieve the recognition by her mother that she felt would never happen.  Both sisters feel that their relationship has become closer as they have chosen to accept things that they cannot change about each other and focus on keeping the relationship going. Laughter is a centerpiece to their relationship.  Humor through death, divorce, and their changing relationship is common for both of them.  They both consider each other strong and count on each other for that strength as they have faced adversity. Both of them are Christians and place this a center part of their life as individuals and together.

### Davis Case Summary

Case D is two White sisters, Darcy, who is 49, and Dena age 45. They both live in the Midwest. One sister is married, the other is divorced, and both have bachelor degrees.  The sister's have the same adopted parents but do not share biological parents. These two sisters described not being close until they were older and the older one had moved out of the home.

The sisters know their parents willingly adopted them after trying to have their own child. The parents were older when each girl was adopted, and neither sister felt that they were particularly close to their parents growing up.  They did not spend much time together as a family.  Both of the sisters credit a childhood caretaker and her husband as forming their expectations about relationships and why they are now close as adults in a relationship. These

sisters share a lot of laughter together and while they both indicate they may not reveal personal problems to each other immediately, once they are ready to share personal issues, the first person they would go to would be their sister. This relationship has had ebb's and flows throughout their lives, with both sisters reporting distancing when they were physically far apart from each other but still feeling they could count on each other. This relationship held together by a childhood bond they formed that they described as an "us against the parents" type of relationship. They felt they had to count on each other because their parents were focused on each other and their life. They did see their caretaker and her husband as their parents both in childhood and adulthood.

## Edwards Case Summary

These five sisters identify as Latina or Mexican, depending on which sister you would ask. The oldest is Emma, (59), then Elsa (56), Edith (51), Eva (50), and the youngest, Elyse who is 46. They live spread across the Western part of the United States in mountain and coastal areas. Some live in large urban areas, others in smaller populated locations or in suburban areas. Three of the sisters have achieved Bachelors degrees while the others have Associate degrees. Caregiving of an older family member has caused stress in the relationships of some of the sisters. Issues dealing with caretaking have impacted all of the sisters in some way. There are some sisters that live closer together and have a greater amount of responsibility with caretaking their parents.

All of the sisters agree that when crisis such as death or illness has occurred in their family, they have pulled together to get through that immediate crisis together as a team. Whether they feel close to their sister, they are currently involved in conflict, or feel tension from past conflicts, sister relationships are impacting all of them in some way, either positive or

negative.  The sister's parents influence their sibling relationship by making heath and financial decisions that sometimes may not involve all of the sisters.

All of the sisters indicated that they communicate differently (topics, frequency, type of communication) depending on which sister they are interacting with.  Each of these individual relationships experienced various stages of closeness at different stages of life that they were in at the time.  The sister's described what they called the "first family" and the "second family" acknowledging that when the older siblings moved out the younger ones experienced different family dynamics and relationships within the household.

**Frank Case Summary**

Case study six is about five White sisters who are 61, 54, 62, 58, and 59.  They have a sister who mentally and physically disabled.  She is but still has a legal guardian did not consent to the study.  The seventh adult sibling in the family is a brother. All of the sisters are married and live in locations scattered throughout the Eastern, Midwest and Southern parts of the United States. Two of the sisters have a Ph.D., one sister has a Masters degree, two sisters have a bachelors degrees and one sister completed high school.  If the sisters would have been interviewed for this study ten years ago they would have most likely shared stores about girls weekends together and occasional visits every other year to each others homes. It was rare to get all of them together at once and they would often hope to see a sister or two at their parent's home.

In the last ten years, two of the sisters suffered major health crises and the death of their mother. All of these "watershed moments" (as described by the sisters) have involved support, care and cooperation from each of the sisters in various ways. One sister is continuing to need physical and emotional support from her sisters as a result of a stroke. These major life events

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caused all of the sisters to reevaluate their relationship and what is important to them. While the sisters still agree that they have some communication issues that they would like to work on, the importance of their family and their sister relationship has been reinforced during these family moments of the past decade.

## George Case Summary

These two sisters agreed to participate in the study, but only if they could complete the interviews separately. Both sisters indicate that they are still speaking to each other, but only occasionally about topics such as if they are going to be in town, or just a casual check-in or hello phone call. Neither sister was comfortable answering questions about their relationship in front of each other. The sisters are White and are 60 and 65 and both live in the Midwest. One sister has a Ph.D. and the other has a high school diploma with some post high school education. One sister is single and the other is married.

Both of these sisters indicated that while they were close in childhood, they both grew apart as young adults. They continued to remain in contact, but their relationship grew apart slowly throughout high school and young adult years with a drastic change occurring during the process of taking care of their parents. When you examine the world cloud of their interviews, you see the word parent is very dominant in what they spoke about. Both sisters would describe themselves as very different from each other. Aspects of how they both handled the caretaking, finances, and death of their parents has impacted this sister relationship and how they see each other. Different expectations, roles, and interactions with their parents influenced how they both viewed each other. Very different life courses and philosophies on how those courses were set also influence their interactions with each other. Choices in personal and parent finances were one of the topics that created a problem with the sister relationship. When creating the word

cloud for this sister case, it was my only one where the word laughter never appeared in the cloud. The sadness and the pain of the relationship still seemed very fresh for both of the sisters. Yet, these sisters shared that they also hoped like the other cases, that they had a continued relationship with each other.

## Hanks Case Summary

There were four sisters in this family, one of whom is deceased now. The third sister refused to be interviewed when I contacted her. Since the death of their mother, the two sisters no longer have contact, or very limited contact, with the third sister. The non-participating sister is a half sister to one of the study participants, and a full sister to the other sister participant. The three sisters also have at least one brother that is still living. Both of the sisters have contact with their brother with one of them doing some caretaking for him. All of the living sisters live in rural locations in the Midwest. The deceased sister had moved out of the country at one point and was still there when she died.

The ages of the two sisters that participated are 57 and 61. The sister that did not participate is 60. One sister that participated and the sister that refused to participate both have some college, the other participating sister has a high school diploma. The two sisters that participated in the study are half-sisters. One sister that participated is married; the other one is in a heterosexual relationship. When looking at the word cloud for this case study, the word mom is obvious. This person is very important to the sisters because the mother according to both of the sisters interviewed, their mother spent a lot of their childhood absent either out with people, or spending time out drinking. The mother was also involved in the long-term issues between the four sisters and their relationships. The challenges between the sisters and the mother involve

a way range of issues involving perceptions of lying, caretaking, communication, as well as estate issues.

## Iverson Case Summary

The ninth case has four sisters from the Midwest except one that lives in the Great Lakes area; their ages are 52, 46, 53, and 58. The four sisters are White; all married and have two brothers. Two of the sisters have earned bachelor degrees, one has a Ph.D. and another has had some college. The sisters all report feeling very close with each other. They also indicate that this closeness as varied at different points in their life. The ebb and flow of how close of their relationship has not varied greatly from childhood to adulthood. More than one of them hints at some recent challenges to their relationships while dealing with a death in the family.

While there was some trouble with how people communicated, this situation seemed to create opportunity for the sisters to evaluate how they will communicate with each other in the future. There were a variety of issues that the sisters brought up that they felt explained why some of them had different relationships with each other, such has geographic distance, who is employed full-time, and who may have children the same age. The sisters acknowledged speaking to different sisters about different topics. Depending on which sister they are engaged with at the time, they will talk about children, or work, or stressful events. This is based on the history of the relationship and the situation that they are in at the time.

## Johnson Case Summary

This case has three White sisters that are ages 57, 58 and 52. Only two of the sisters choose to participate in the study. One sister lives in a midsized city in the Midwest, and the other sister participant lives in a large metropolitan city on the East coast. The sister that chose not to participate lives in a large metropolitan city in the Midwest. One of the sisters has a

Masters degree and the other has a Ph.D., one is married and the other sister is not married. These sisters reported that they have a closer relationship with each other than either of them has with the third sister. These three sisters also have a brother. The brother is not close to any of the sisters.

Both sisters believe that their relationship has developed over the years because they could talk to each other when they couldn't talk to others or their mother about children and other personal issues. They both felt that their relationship with their mother was difficult and not someone who they could discuss the challenges of raising children and growing with her. This meant that the sisters turned to each other to be each other's support while going through life transitions. As you can see in the word cloud, their mother, kids and other relationships were very important topics of conversations. Both felt that they did not connect with their other sister as much because she was very much like their mom. These sisters also indicated that they were close as children, but did go through a stage, as young adults were they did not connect as much as young adults.

### King Case Summary

These two sisters are both White and married, ages 47 and 45. They are the only two children in the family. One sister lives in a midsized city in the Midwest, the other lives in a rural part of the Midwest. One sister has a Masters degree; the other is ABD in a doctorate program.

Both of these sisters say they are in a relationship based in the caretaking of the older sister. The younger sister does not need constant help, but she knows that she can call the older sister for almost anything. The younger sister feels if the older sister called on her she would not be able to reciprocate it in the same way. The older sister seems to know that as well and is accepting of it. The word mom is at the center of their word cloud. They both spoke often of

their mother because she is a person that both of them worry about telling things to because of the judgment they may receive from her. Topics about how the sisters spend money, what they spend money on, and how they live their lives are not always shared with their mother.

The other most common words in the word cloud are time and dog. One sisters career is completely focused around dogs and this keeps her from making connections with her other family. Multiple conversations centered on the dogs, to the point that she admits that is the most common conversation she has with anyone. This commitment directly impacts the time she can spend on any relationship. Her older sister is accepting of this. They both admit they have little in common and wonder how much time they would spend together if one of them did not have to make frequent trips to the other sisters hometown for work.

## Lehman Case Summary

These four White sisters come from a family that had eight children. There are five sisters and three brothers. Only four of the sisters were within the age range to participate in this study. The four sister participants were ages 51, 46, 54, and 53. Their youngest sister is 37 and she did not participate in the study. All four sisters live in the Midwest, some of them in large urban areas, others in midsized towns, or very rural locations. They all grew up in a rural location as children. One sister is divorced and the other three are married. One sister has a medical degree, one has her Masters degree and the other two have Bachelors degrees. These sisters consistently referred to their home they grew up in as the center point of their time together and where they return to and spend time together. They remember spending time together as children, but also having different experiences because of age differences and what children were home at the time. They all report being close to each other. They often referred

to the fact that their spouses struggle with marrying into such a large family and the expectation that if they visit each other or come to town, they all stay at the same home.

The sisters spoke about various life transitions and how they all relied on each other to get through difficult or stressful events.  There was some concern raised about what would happen once both of their parents passed away and how their family would operate.  Christmas was a big holiday for them with all of the family coming together every year.