

Public Abstract

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Title:WE DIDNT REALIZE THE LOSS UNTIL IT ACTUALLY HAPPENED:

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL, DIALOGIC ANALYSIS OF SIBLING PAIRS RELATIONAL TALK ABOUT MOVING APART

Though research on family ties during the transition to adulthood has typically focused on parent-child relationships, scholars have begun to explore how this important transition impacts the relationship between siblings. Due to the benefits associated with maintaining strong ties with sisters and brothers throughout adulthood and particularly in old age, it is important to understand the communication behaviors that help siblings transition into and develop an emotionally close and supportive adult sibling bond. Thus, the present study used a phenomenological, dialogic approach to explore siblings' communicative sense-making as they transitioned from living together to living apart for the first time. In-depth, qualitative interviews were conducted with 22 sibling dyads who had moved away from one another within the past twelve months. During the interviews, sibling pairs were encouraged to engage in a conversation with one another about their relationship and talk about their experiences of transition in storied form.

The current project involved two phases. In part one of the study, I conducted a phenomenological analysis to achieve a deeper understanding of siblings' lived experiences of moving away from one another for the first time (RQ1), the changes they described related to the transition (RQ2), and how, if at all, they engaged in the recentering process (RQ2a). Findings for the first research question revealed that siblings characterized the experience of moving away from a brother or a sister as: (a) taking time to "sink in," (b) a "weird" experience, and (c) a difficult experience. In terms of the second research question, siblings described specific relational changes (i.e., a strengthened bond and a disrupted bond) and communication changes (i.e., reduced contact, needing to put in more effort to stay in touch, and improved communication) resulting from the transition. Finally, whereas most participants emphasized that their brother or sister was still a significant part of their primary social circle, a few siblings appeared to be in the early stages of recentering their relationships.

For the second part of the study, relational dialectics theory was used as a lens to investigate how siblings communicatively co-constructed meaning of their changing relationships in their conversations about moving apart (RQ3), as well as how they voiced competing ideologies of siblingship to construct a dialogue of adult sibling relationships (RQ4). Specifically, I engaged in contrapuntal analysis—a methodological practice useful for identifying competing discourses and analyzing their interplay—to uncover the cultural and relational meanings animating siblings' relational talk. My analysis of the third research question revealed that siblings constructed meaning of their changing relational identities and their experiences of transition through three main discursive struggles: (a) distance as good for the relationship vs. distance as bad for the relationship, (b) moving apart as a normal transition vs. moving apart as a "weird" transition, and (c) certainty as still possible vs. uncertainty as unavoidable. Finally, for the fourth research question, two overarching discursive struggles were identified as central to how participants viewed adult sibling relationships: (a) siblingship as a voluntary bond vs. siblingship as an obligatory commitment, and (b) siblings as a unit vs. siblings as separate individuals.

Throughout their stories of transition, most sibling pairs in the present study described moving apart for the first time as a significant event that held meaning for both their own lives and their sibling relationships. Although prior literature suggests that siblings assign less priority to their bonds as they move apart and focus on new relationships, the current findings propose that they continue to consider one another an

important member of their inner circle even when they incorporate new friends, co-workers, and romantic partners into their networks. The analysis of siblings' relational talk also revealed that despite being an uncertainty-evoking event and prompting a decline in contact, the experience of moving apart encourages sisters and brothers to connect on a more mature level and develop a greater appreciation of their relationship. Thus, as a whole, the present study illuminated both the communicative challenges and the opportunities for relational growth siblings experience during the transition to adulthood.