

Why Do Siblings Often Turn Out Very Differently?

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No one has a definitive answer as to why the same parents often raise children that turn out very differently, but it happens time and again. I grew up in such a family. One of my brothers never “lifted off” to function independently of my parents. Occasional forays towards independence invariably ended in some type of crash and burn. He would lose a job, get sick, or be terribly lonely. My parents would again take care of him. He was a source of great anguish for my family. My other two brothers and I coped and assumed adult responsibility more easily. How to understand this? My parents were good, hard working people and dearly loved all of their children.

In my practice as a psychiatrist specializing in treating families, I routinely consult with parents who are having more difficulty raising one child than the others. The child is usually having some mixture of academic, behavioral, or health problems. Whether he is the oldest or the youngest child, the parents often say that he or she seems less mature, more insecure, more intense, more sensitive, or more dependent than their other children. They are worried and usually at their wits end about how to help their son or daughter.

The differences between siblings are not always marked, but statistical studies show that significant disparities in the overall life adjustment of siblings are more the rule than the exception. Common explanations for these differences include genes, peer influences, life traumas, bad parenting, and even bad luck. Some parents fear that the child is inheriting their emotional difficulties, despite concerted efforts to prevent it; other parents feel that the problem has little to do with them. One thing most parents of a child having significant problems do agree on is that they have invested more time, energy, and worry in that child than they have in his or her siblings. Parents say this despite sometimes feeling that they are not doing enough for the child.

In recent years, in an effort to understand human development more completely and to shed new light on questions such as sibling variation, a growing number of behavioral scientists have moved beyond a genes versus environment debate to study the complex interplay between nature and nurture. The thinking is that a child’s development is governed by the interaction of many factors, such as his genetic make-up, intrauterine experiences, family relationships, and experiences outside the family.

Social scientists from many disciplines have been studying the impact of the family on development for a long time and have provided valuable insights. However, some unique family research began within psychiatry and the allied mental health disciplines during the 1950s that has greatly expanded our knowledge. Among the areas that these family studies have helped us better understand is this question of why siblings often turn out differently. One of these pioneering researchers was a psychiatrist named Murray Bowen. His studies spanned five decades.

Bowen and his group at the National Institute of Mental Health were the first to study whole families living on a research ward for long periods. Their early study was of families that had both a severely mentally ill adult child and a fairly normal child. Following the N.I.M.H. project, Bowen continued his work at the Georgetown University School of Medicine until his death in 1990. The studies at Georgetown expanded to include families with milder psychiatric problems, those with mainly behavioral

difficulties, and those with chronic physical illnesses. His group also studied fairly well adjusted families. A surprising revelation of these studies was that families differ in degree, not kind. The basic ways that family interactions can create problems that were discovered in the N.I.M.H. families are also present in families with milder problems. The interactions are simply less intense in better functioning families.

A core discovery from family research is that the family must be considered as an entity or “organism” in its own right. It is not a collection of psychologically autonomous individuals, but a highly interdependent relationship system. This discovery meant that theories of human behavior that were derived largely from studying individuals, such as psychoanalytic theory, were inadequate for explaining the phenomena that were being observed in families. A theory was needed that could address the whole as well as its parts. The new theory, *Bowen family systems theory*, emerged in the mid-1960s. Bowen developed it based on his group’s research and on the work of others. The ideas and their applications have undergone continued development since that time.

An understanding of the new theory begins with an evolutionary perspective. Human beings have evolved to be profoundly social mammals. The strong disposition to live in groups, the ability to work together to accomplish complex tasks, and a remarkable intelligence have enabled our species to adapt to a wide range of habitats. The building blocks of human social groups are tightly knit multigenerational family units.

The powerful ties that exist between family members are assumed to reflect instinctually rooted forces for emotional attachment that are part of mankind’s mammalian ancestry. Cultures enact laws to discourage people from abandoning a spouse or children, but it is unnecessary to legislate attachment. Unless bad experiences have made a person wary of relationships, if he leaves or loses one set of attachments, he will seek new ones. Comfortably close connections activate brain chemicals that instill calmness and a strong sense of emotional well being. Relationships could be the best tranquilizers yet devised!

A sobering counterpoint to the well being that relationships can provide is captured by the familiar expression, “I can’t live with him and I can’t live without him!” It is not easy to be in an intimate relationship or to live in a group. Tensions inevitably arise. People can gain in myriad ways from living in a group, *but the dependency inherent in close ties and the pressure to make accommodations to preserve and manage the ties can push people to the edge—and over.* Problematic interactions leave some group members feeling isolated, overwhelmed, excluded, or out of control. Research shows that people experiencing such feelings over a long period are at risk for illness or other impairments in functioning.

Instability in important relationships threatens people in two fundamental ways: (1) it jeopardizes the security of attachments on which their well being depends, and (2) it overloads their ability to cope with adverse social stimuli. Given the impact of unstable relationships, it is not surprising that human beings have evolved finely tuned sensitivities to social cues that alert them to threats to important relationships. We watch others for signs of attention and approval, we assess their expectations and whether we are meeting them, and we sense their distress.

Social cues that indicate a threat trigger anxiety. Anxiety triggers emotional reactivity and behavior that are designed to reduce the threat. For example, a man interprets his wife’s facial expression and tone of voice as disappointment in him. Consequently, he

says and does more things to please her. She brightens up and he feels less threatened. It would be difficult to be in relationships or to live in a group if people did not react to such cues and adjust accordingly. The responses temper urges to do what we want to do when we want to do it.

The innate urge to form relationships, reactivity to social cues, and ease with which relationships generate tension are the core elements in Bowen theory that help explain why siblings turn out differently. The description of how these elements translate into the different developmental outcomes will begin at the point of a couple's courtship. I will simplify the description by using a family with only two children. I will accent the differences between the parents' interactions with each child by drawing a starker contrast than what occurs in real life.

Most couples have a fairly comfortable courtship, but most find it difficult to sustain that level of comfort and closeness over time. The early romantic attraction smoothes and soothes a relationship, but it also helps that couples typically face fewer responsibilities and conflicting demands during that time. It makes it easier to respond to each other's desires for attention, affection, and communication. Each person's willingness to invest sufficient energy in the relationship to keep the other happy is one reason that people pick each other.

Often, the first serious strain on a marriage is when the children come along. It is a strain no matter how much people want children. It raises the bar in terms of the spouses' expectations of themselves and of each other. Given the reality demands inherent in rearing children, it is reasonable for parents to depend more on each other during that time and not surprising that tensions arise. However, most families experience levels of tension at various points during the child rearing years that are disproportionate to the demands. Various stresses contribute to this tension, but the principal reason for it is the parents' insecurity about coping with the challenges.

The increased responsibilities and uncertainties bring out each parent's insecurity. One way this manifests is in each reacting more intensely than in the past to the other's needs, fears, expectations, and distress. For example, feeling unsure of her ability to be a good mother, a wife wants more attention and support from her husband. He feels pressured by this, but tries to meet expectations. Because children do not grow up overnight, the sustained pressures and expectations erode each parent's tolerance for the other's reactions. The wife feels increasingly overwhelmed and that her husband is not doing his part. He feels increasingly harried and that she is too demanding. She gets more critical and pressuring; he gets more defensive and oppositional. Tension escalates.

Tension is one thing, but how people manage it is something else. A key point for this discussion is that *if the parents do not address the difficulties they are having dealing with each other, their child is vulnerable to filling this breach in their relationship.* Addressing the difficulties means that parents keep their needs, fears, unrealistic expectations, upsets, and immaturity focused on each other. This keeps them in emotional contact. Ideally, it takes the form of talking productively about problems, but arguing unproductively maintains contact also and keeps a child out of harm's way! The alternative is emotional distance. People may distance quietly, with each parent acting as if things are fine, or they may distance emphatically, with each one knowing that things are not fine but avoiding dealing with the issues.

The usual way that marital distance places a child in harm's way is that the mother focuses less energy on her husband and turns to the child to gratify desires for a comfortable emotional connection. In the process, the child becomes so important to her well being that he easily triggers her worries as well. This mix of needs and fears cements a powerful connection. The father invests much of his energy in work and is usually less entangled emotionally with the child. However, he participates equally in the child focus by playing his part in the marital distance and getting anxiously entangled in his wife's relationship with the child. The parents may draw closer around concerns about the child, but that is not the same as dealing with their relationship problems. The pattern of an overly involved mother and distant father tends to occur even if both parents work outside the home. Furthermore, a father can be an active presence in the home, but still fairly distant emotionally from the child.

The firstborn child is not necessarily the one that fills the breach. It can be any member of a sibling group and may involve more than one child. It is determined primarily by the emotional state of the family when a child is born. For example, parents may cope more successfully with the addition of the first child than they do with the addition of a subsequent child. Even if a child is born with a defect, how well the parents cope in face of it usually has a greater impact on the child's emotional development than the defect itself.

A parent being overly involved with a child is harmful because *the ongoing emotionally intense interactions over the years of his development program the child's well being and functioning to depend heavily on relationships*. The child actively participates in this emotional programming by automatically reciprocating the mother's involvement with him. Like a moth drawn to a bright light, he becomes preoccupied with her attention, approval, expectations, and distress. His mood and motivation become linked to how she and others view him. Being ensnared in the emotionality constrains the child's instinctive urge to develop his individuality.

If one child fills the breach in the parents' relationship, his sibling is relatively off the hook. The parents expend their needs and fears on the overly involved child. It enables them to be more relaxed and at their best with his sibling. The sibling's reality needs rather than their anxiety largely govern their interactions with him. Developing in a less intense emotional climate, the sibling tunes into social cues, but without being programmed to overreact to them. Less entangled with mother, he is available for a fairly even relationship with both parents, he can develop other relationships inside and outside the family, and he can energetically explore the world around him. Learning about life in many domains fosters the development of his individuality.

The depth of a mother's overinvolvement with a child may be difficult to discern in the early years because it can be seamlessly woven into meeting his reality needs. The relationship is generally harmonious. In other cases, the sensitivities between an overly involved parent and child erupt in ferocious power struggles early on. Intense periods of conflict and distance may persist throughout the child's development. The tone of an overly involved attachment does not affect the degree of relationship dependence that the child develops. For example, an oppositional child may just as sensitive to attention, approval, and expectations as a compliant child.

Differences in functioning between an overly involved child and his sibling are evident in the preschool years. For example, one child is easily bored and looks to mother

for direction. The freer sibling finds things to do. In elementary school, one child feels excluded by his peers and his ability to learn depends on the interest the teacher takes in him. Relationships are less of an issue for the other child and he can learn from most any teacher. The overly involved child is the one prone to rebel in adolescence. He rebels with a vigor that parallels his difficulty being an individual. The freer sibling navigates adolescence more smoothly. The overly involved child may function fairly well until stumbling badly in trying to make the transition into adult life. At whatever point problems surface, the parents intensify their focus on the child in an effort to fix him. This further escalates the tension, particularly if the child does not respond.

Leaving home does not resolve the emotional attachment to the parents. This is evident in the overly involved child's insecurity in adult relationships. He looks for someone to replace the original dependence on the parents. His partner seeks the same thing. Their mutual insecurity makes it difficult to sustain a close relationship. They are so reactive to each other's needs and fears that it becomes too intense to manage. His unresolved attachment also manifests in difficulty defining and pursuing life goals. The emotional turmoil that is associated with relationship disruptions and the absence of a life direction render him vulnerable to serious clinical problems. Tensions with the parents may eventually result in cut-off from the family, which aggravates his difficulties.

The life of the freer sibling is a contrast. His relationship to the family is more resolved by the time he leaves home. He is secure in adult relationships and selects a mate like himself. The couple is able to face life's challenges with only modest tension levels and upheaval. The freer sibling takes full advantage of educational and work opportunities and, consequently, his life is productive and orderly. He, his spouse, and their children usually have few serious clinical problems. The mature relationship between him and his parents makes cut-off from them unlikely. The ongoing connections with extended family further enhance his life adjustment.

Bowen theory, of course, does not explain everything about how differences in the life adjustment of siblings develop. However, by explaining what transpires in the mother-offspring relationship in the context of the family unit, it expands our understanding of the forces shaping human development. I have covered only a few ideas in the theory, but have tried to describe them in enough detail that the reader could recognize them as relevant to his or her life and family. That is how I got attracted to the ideas thirty-five years ago.

By the time I heard about Bowen theory, my impaired brother had already received a psychiatric diagnosis. A diagnosis is supposed to facilitate treatment, but it made things worse in my family by reinforcing the view that my brother's problems were the principal cause of the family turmoil. We were certain that if he could change, our family would be happier. This view reflects the cause-and-effect model that has long dominated medicine.

A systems model does not assign the cause of a disturbance in a group to one or a few group members. Hearing this was a breath of fresh air! It helped me not to see my brother as a psychiatric case, but as someone deeply dependent emotionally as well as financially on my parents. He had not separated from them and they had not separated from him. The interdependency existed long before his serious problems surfaced. It was refreshing to see that we all played a part in the problem. No one caused it. It seemed accurate and fair.

One dividend from applying these ideas to my family was that I could see that my mother's anguished and subjective view of my impaired brother had powerfully

influenced my own view of him. She did not force her view on me. It was shaped by my sensitivity to her approval, expectations, and distress. Seeing the world through her eyes connected me to her, but it interfered with my ability to think for myself. I was less relationship dependent than my brother was, but relationship dependent nevertheless.

The ability to observe relationship processes and one's part in them more factually is referred to as *emotional objectivity*. It is a necessary step toward being able to be present in an anxious family without one's thoughts, feelings, and actions being governed by the powerful relationship currents. If one person can get more objective about how family interactions contribute to the difficulties and change his part in those interactions, it calms the system and opens up new options for problem solving. Paradoxically, being more of an individual in a system promotes closeness and cooperation.

Applying systems thinking to human behavior has enabled us to track the complex interplay of human relationships. It also enables us to track the interplay between what is occurring at the human relationship level and what is occurring at physiological levels as basic as the genes. It is becoming clear that genes do not control our destiny. They are part of a larger process. A systems model opens the door for integrating knowledge from fields as basic as molecular biology to as broad as the study of human societies. This means that interdisciplinary research is more critical than ever for moving us towards a science of human behavior.