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Dynamics of Scapegoating in Family Systems

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This paper concerns sibling roles in family systems, with a focus on the child frequently singled out for disfavor. Eleven Filipino adults were interviewed on family myths and rules, the child who frequently fails to follow such rules, and the behavior and subsequent interaction between family members. Results indicated that this sibling was usually preferred or favored by one or the other of the parents (i.e., parental tolerance), resulting in sibling conflict, the issue usually revolving around a sense of entitlement, responsibility, and financial matters. Some implications for educators, psychologists, and parents include: 1) the importance of nongenetic influences on development; 2) the shift from a family-by-family frame of reference to an individual-by-individual perspective within the family as critical for clinicians; and, 3) the usefulness to parents of acknowledging that differential appreciation is more likely to help their children than preferential treatment.

Keywords: sibling roles, scapegoat, identified patient, family myths, Filipino family.

INTRODUCTION

In an earlier study on the tagasalo personality (Udarbe, 2001), the research focus at the time concerned the dynamics behind the development of tagasalo (caretaker) behavior among families: Who is the tagasalo and why do particular children develop this role? In the course of that study, however, there was invariably identified among brothers and sisters, the

sibling "least like the tagasalo". The issue in the present study now turns to "that other" sibling—not quite the opposite, but certainly not the tagasalo.

In the tagasalo study (Udarbe, 1998), family members were simply asked to qualitatively describe each of the other family members in order to learn more about tagasalo characteristics. It gradually became apparent, however, that another sibling would be contrasted and compared with the tagasalo in ways that were hardly complimentary. Francine Klagsbrun in her classic study of family relationships—in particular, sibling relationships—aptly titled Mixed Feelings (1992), devotes a chapter to the "scapegoat". It appeared that the issue in such families was not favoritism but its opposite.

Klagsbrun relates how in the Bible two goats were used as part of a ritual in which people atoned for their sins. One, chosen by lot from the two and known as the scapegoat, was symbolically laden with all the bad deeds and wrongdoings of the people and sent off into the wilderness. The other, the pure goat, was set aside as a special offering to the Lord. In modern times, Klagsbrun adds, there exist families in which one child is seen as the bearer of all bad deeds and wrongdoings. While not sent off into the wilderness, the child is picked on, blamed and criticized more often than other children. Often that "bad" child is contrasted to a "good" one.

This latter role of scapegoat seems to be one reminiscent of the family member identified by Filipino child psychologist Ma. Lourdes Arellano-Carandang (1987) as the "identified patient" (I.P.)—the siren that signals that there is something not quite right in the family. Elsewhere, we hear about the "problem child" or the "black sheep", the child with no readily identifiable outstanding characteristics who then becomes different in a negative way, the "symptom carrier" or the "child tyrant," even the "family barometer".

We are warned time and again in parenting, teaching, and clinical psychology to refrain from labelling children. The person who usually suffers is naturally the one, Klagsbrun (1992) says, "singled out for disfavor." Scapegoating is one of the darker sides of family life for siblings, and one that usually requires professional help to undo. Klagsbrun refers to the dynamics of sibling relationships as one of "balancing the seesaw." About 80% of people, maybe even more, grow up with siblings, but so few people have actually examined the meaning of the sibling bond in their lives.

The present study examined the sibling relationship with a special focus on the role of a scapegoat. The label is unfortunate, given its history

and the implications in its use. Using the term scapegoat, however, draws attention to the usefulness of its role in family systems.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Much of family literature is replete with studies about the parent-child relationship, the development of personality as influenced by parental behavior, and even the influences of other social forces such as the extended family, the school, or the church. The therapist Daniel Gottlieb, popular for his talk-show "Family Matters" has chapters in his book Voices in the Family (1991) entitled Our Parents, Our Mates, Our Children, and Our Selves, and hardly a reference to the sibling relationship. Closer to home, Filipino psychologist Alexa Abrenica, in relating the dynamics of midlife through her book Spaces (2002), describes the adult's social network in Friends, Family, and Kin; there is no mention of the support to be found in the sibling bond. In writing about midlife, prominent Filipino women and men (Kalaw-Tirol, 1994, 1997) describe relationships with parents and partners, children and grandparents, but no one relates the struggles and triumphs that could only be found in the sibling relationship—a frequently neglected interpersonal network. But the power of Goldklank's 1986 study of family therapists' roles in their families of origin lay in its inclusion of siblings who confirmed their differing roles from those of their family therapist-siblings.

As early as the 1970s, researchers such as Kidwell and Smith pointed to the importance of looking into family characteristics related to the structure of the sibling relationship. Kidwell (1981) drew on the "uniqueness theory" that suggests that firstborns and lastborns as well as only-born male or only-born female children enjoy an inherent uniqueness in contrast to a middleborn or a child with same-sex siblings. Similarly, Smith (1984) spoke of the effects of "structural differentiation of positions in sibling groups." A child in a family in which the majority of the children are of the other sex has a more differentiated position than a child who is not in a "sex minority." Likewise, a first- or lastborn is more differentiated from siblings than a middleborn, who is "surrounded" by siblings. As a result, particular children "deidentify" (to borrow a term from Schacter (1976). Taking that point a step further, siblings fit themselves into developmental niches that allow them space to express themselves in ways indicative that they are, in Sulloway's words, Born to Rebel (1996).

Family Myths and the Scapegoat

In observations of family dynamics in therapy, Carandang (1987) has mentioned that children complement and need one another to become a whole, therapeutic sibling subsystem: each serves the other with her/his own specific function. The subsystem is therefore used as a built-in support mechanism. "There's a certain kind of laughing you can do with a sister or brother that you can't do with anybody else," Klagsbrun (1992) quotes one respondent saying. Without therapeutic intervention, however, sibling roles and relationships are allowed to take their course from childhood into adulthood and all children play these out even in relationships beyond the family.

There are pervasive belief systems that the family upholds from generation to generation. Carandang (2004) calls these family myths. The strength or force of this mythology comes from the fact that it is usually unconscious; the rules and expectations that come from this belief are usually unarticulated. One of the basic questions to ask of any parent then is: What are/were your expectations of your children? The children themselves may be asked: What messages do/did you get from your parents? The family member who acts and destroys the myth is most likely to become the identified patient (the I.P.).

The concept of the I.P. prevents the instant labeling of any one family member as the patient. The I.P. usually fulfills the function of sending signals that the family system is in crisis and therefore in need of help from outside sources. This is exemplified in the seven-year-old who is frequently referred to the school counselor for lying and stealing, the 10-year-old who collects "tong" from the other parking boys at a busy street corner, the 11-year-old girl prostitute, the 12-year-old who has a growing drug dependency problem, even the 15-year-old runaway who always seems to have some problem with the law.

But how does one get "selected" to be the I.P.? Carandang ventures the theory—based on clinical observation and intuition—that it is "the most sensitive, most attuned, most caring, and most concerned about keeping the family intact and happy" that turns out to be the IP or the symptom-carrier. But the same thing was found in the tagasalo—which is in Carandang's theoretical formulation just one expression of I.P. behavior. What of the child then who is "singled out for disfavor"?

In investigating the tagasalo personality (Udarbe, 1998), it was found that the tagasalo personality is not systematically related to gender nor birth order, but it can develop out of the need for a child to be different from a sibling who causes emotional upheaval in the family. Implicit in this finding is the rather negative view of the person identified as the least like the tagasalo, if not the opposite of the tagasalo.

What makes for differential treatment of children? On the most immediate level, Klagsbrun (1992) offers various causes: gender bias, disappointment in a child's abilities or achievements, and a basic incompatibility between parent and child—a "mismatch" of temperaments and personality. These immediate causes, she adds, actually mask deeper underlying ones that are closely tied to family or personal issues. Family relationships, Klagsbrun adds, follow patterns of behavior of which the individual participants are unaware; within those patterns, whatever affects one member of a family affects all others, and a member who is regarded as a problem may actually reflect a problem in the larger family system. That problem is often seen as a marital one that the partners are not willing or able to acknowledge, and then, by designating one child as troubled or difficult, the partners/parents may, without awareness, be using that child to deflect the difficulties between them.

This is where the concept of the identified patient comes in—an important aspect of family systems theory. In family systems terms, without realizing it, parents can use a particular child as a scapegoat in order to deny or bury marital problems. In every situation, all parties—parents, siblings, and scapegoated child—find their places and follow the steps that will push the real family difficulties underground. Carandang's metaphor for this is obvious in the phrase "sweeping tension under the rug."

It is suggested that one way of examining the dark, underlying causes of scapegoating is to look at the parents as individuals who may unconsciously displace their own internal conflicts onto one child (Klagsbrun, 1992). Among the most destructive feelings parents displace onto a child are hatred, fear, or envy of a relative from the past, or identifying a son or a daughter with their own brothers or sisters of the same sex or birth positions.

Such issues undoubtedly have a long history and go very deep and it is expected that family members may not wish to talk about such matters, even if in fact they are aware of causes and effects on family members of how they are actually relating to one another.

Family Dynamics

In describing the Filipino family, Medina (1991) cites Castillo's 1970s work on nuclear and household families rather extensively. Castillo considers the household as the best operational unit for the analysis of family relationships: husband-wife relations, parent-child relations, and sibling relations, all of which are characterized by mutual love, protection and respect. Medina adds that brothers are expected to look after their sisters and protect them from harm; older siblings are given the responsibility to take care of the younger ones; and, younger siblings obey their elders and look up to them with respect. Sibling unity is expected to be carried over even after everyone is already married.

Authority in the Filipino family goes vertically downwards on the basis of age: older children, male or female, are dominant over younger ones. The eldest child, in particular, Medina says, has a "quasi-paternal" status and has authority, including the right to punish younger siblings for misbehavior. Medina, however, indicates that there has been a shift from this traditional authoritarianism due to modernization. Although deference may still be given to the elderly, "the young and better-educated breadwinner today may actually be the decision-maker and the real manager of the household" (p. 29).

Ventura (1985) had earlier pointed out several factors as influential in patterns of child-rearing among Filipino families, including the size of the family, the stage in the family life cycle, age, gender, and birth order of the child, social class, and rural/urban residence. In general, child-rearing is nurturant, affectionate, indulgent, and supportive. Children are encouraged to be dependent on parents and to strongly identify with the family. They are taught to be respectful and obedient to authority, to be shy rather than aggressive, to maintain excellent interpersonal relations with neighbors and kin, and to be self-reliant and industrious. Medina (1991) added that parental strictness depends on site (i.e., dangerous or hazardous to child's health), occasion, and birth order. The youngest child is usually the favorite.

Family Influences and Sibling Relationships

Frank J. Sulloway, in 1995, published the classic Born to Rebel: Birth Order, Family Dynamics and Creative Lives based on the premise that

"the personalities of siblings vary because they adopt different strategies in the universal quest for parental favor." Sulloway's most important finding was that eldest children identify with parents and authority, and support the status quo, whereas younger children rebel against it. His work illuminates the crucial influence that family niches have on personality, and documents the profound consequences of sibling competition, not only on individual development within the family, but on society as a whole. Harris (1999), however, objected to Sulloway's findings theorizing, upon meta-analyses of Sulloway's data that "peers shape personality more than parents do."

Thus, studies on siblings and the sibling relationship may be found in The Sibling Bond by Bank and Kahn (1997), Separate Lives by Dunn and Plomin (1997), and Sibling Relationships by Sanders (2004). Bank and Kahn (1982, 1997), who conducted one of the first extensive considerations of the sibling relationship, define the sibling bond as "a connection between the selves, at both the intimate and public levels, of two siblings: it is a fitting together of two people's identities. The bond is sometimes warm and positive but it may also be negative" (p. 15). Yet, unlike other family relationships marked by such rituals as baptisms, confirmation, engagement, weddings, divorce, no such rituals exist to celebrate sibling bonds nor are there legal means to make or break them.

Dunn and Plomin (1997), in accepting that there are differences between siblings, have concluded that these differences are not in themselves exceptional or extraordinary, but rather that all siblings generally differ markedly from one another. Thus, in their writing and research, Dunn and Plomin emphasize differences rather than similarities reasoning that a) similarities are less surprising (given that they grow up in the same family); b) similarities in families are due to hereditary similarity than to nurture; and c) differences greatly exceed similarities for most psychological characteristics such as cognitive abilities, personality, and even mental illness.

Finally, Sanders (2004) asks the question 'Why are children who are brought up in the same family so different from each other?' when "children are more alike genetically (with 50 per cent of genetic material in common) than they are like either of their parents, or indeed like anyone else in the world?" (p. 84). Sanders suggests a clearer understanding of 'nonshared' influences, including such sources of intrafamilial environmental difference as: 1) sex and number of siblings; 2) ordinal position; 3) the significance of the child's sex to the parents; 4) differential life courses; 5) reconstitution of families; and 6) changing health of parents from one birth to the next. Sanders (2004) says that parents are not the

only, perhaps not even the major, influence on how children develop, but they are a significant influence. As a result of differential treatment, some children are put into favored family roles and others are put into less favored roles. Sanders adds, for emphasis that the "issue of differential treatment is not one of whether some children are treated preferentially, or with disfavour, whilst others are not, but rather to what extent and how it is perceived" (2004, p. 90).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A basic concept in family systems theory is that any stress or pain experienced by one member is felt and reacted to in some way by all the members of the family, each in his or her own way. This may be reflected in the basic family systems concept of interconnectedness (Nichols & Schwartz, 2001).

A particular focus on the child in the family "singled out for disfavor" brings to mind Heinz Kohut's ideas about "humankind's sense of self-defectiveness" (Barrett, 1998). In arguing his theory, Kohut contrasted the family environment of Freud's time with that of subsequent generations, finding great differences in influences on child development. He observes that families now have looser ties; there is much greater emotional distance among members, and one result is understimulation. In discussing threats to one's security, Barrett (1998) uses Kohut's theory to describe how humans—in the absence of optimal parental stimulation—end up feeling shame for this personal deficit. In this "felt inadequacy," humans invent modes of maintaining the self: some facilitative, others maladaptive, adding:

Of course, shame has always been with us, and the response to it is not a new behavioral act. But now the incidence is much higher, leading to a higher incidence of corrective activity to protect and justify ourselves. … We live in an age of diminished parental presence and authority and in a general culture marked by increased social disregard. Consequently, we are provided with less feedback on connectedness and worth—or less constructive feedback. We are more on our own and more likely to question our adequacy, experience social endangerment, and respond self-protectively. The results—good and bad, hardly noticeable or blatant—appear in all daily communication: at home, on the job, at school—everywhere. (p. 135)

It was not, however, the intention in this study to find someone or something to blame for the "higher incidence of corrective activity to protect and justify" oneself. Rather, the focus is on the resulting "felt inadequacy"—how

might this be understood in the context of family dynamics from which originate such a desire for corrective behavior—and to suggest ways by which such may be preempted, prevented, and subsequently addressed in the helping profession.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The overall focus in this study is on family dynamics, particularly sibling relationships, and more specifically, the sibling "singled out for disfavor." Where does this dynamic originate? What factors lead to the development of such behavior, among siblings, and among the "scapegoats" themselves? How can such an understanding help clinicians and other helping professionals address family conflicts and especially help family members understand themselves in the context of their families of origin?

METHODS

In-depth interviews concerning sibling relationships were conducted with a convenient sample of 11 Filipino adults. Particular focus was made on family myths and rules, the child who frequently failed to follow such rules, and the behavior and subsequent interaction between family members.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The focused interview was conducted with 11 adults (age range 33-59 years old, mean age = 44.42 years; female = 9; male = 2).

As was found in the tagasalo study (Udarbe, 1998), the role of a sibling singled out for disfavor is not systematically assigned by sex, number of children, nor birth order. While many of these children are secondborns (recall Schachter's deidentification hypothesis), there are also two eldest children and two youngest among those singled out.

Family myths revolved around such values as "the eldest child being given more responsibility, authority, and respect" (parentified roles), "all children have to help out with household chores", and "the importance of keeping appearances."

Table 1. Sibling Profile of Respondents Interviewed, n = 11.

Respondent	Sibling Sequence (Eldest to youngest from left to right)
1	o o o o □
2	o □ o o o
3	□ o o □ o
4	□ o □ o
5	□ o o
6	□ o o
7	o o o o □ o o □ □ □ o
8	□ □ □ o □ □
9	o □ □ o o □ □
10	o o □ o o □ o o o □ o
11	o □ o □ o □

□ Male
o Female
Respondent
Sibling singled out

When asked to identify the favorite child among the siblings, majority of the respondents (n=10) identified one of their siblings. Descriptions of the sibling "singled out for disfavor" (where female = 5 and male = 6— colored blue in Table 1) included the verbatim labels: "bossy"; "boastful"; "outspoken"; "loser"; "always got her own way"; "the prettiest"; "walang direksyon"; "bully"; and, "the favorite". One respondent (female) said, "Our parents go out of their way to defend her." Another female respondent said:

> "She would act nice to me when she needs my help and if other people are present. She is very manipulative. She knows that our parents would believe her over me. She seems sweet and thoughtful to people who don't know her. She is like a politician. Boutan sa uban but *dili sa pamilya* (well-behaved to others, but not to family)."

A third respondent (female) said of their only brother:

> "As a child, he obeyed all of the rules imposed by our mother. He is okay with respecting an elder sibling. But he hated having to think and consider what others may say. He would constantly argue with our

mother. He would tell her that in life, one has to be authentic -- not much emphasis should be placed on what others would think."

Additional references to the singled-out sibling included the following:

- "We don't see eye to eye."
- "We haven't spoken to each other for months."
- "We haven't seen each other for years."
- "Our conflicts always become physical."
- "We have very different personalities."
- "He used to be the favorite of my parents; now my father says they just have to accept him—anak man ni nato (he is our son after all)."

Based on the narratives (i.e., qualitative descriptions of the respondents of the particular family member singled out for disfavor), thematic analysis resulted in the following patterns: favoritism (by parents), tolerance especially by mother (gender factor), sibling rivalry, inclusion/exclusion (i.e., all siblings vs. scapegoat), money as an issue; entitlement, sense of responsibility, and the issue of generational transmission.

Favoritism. Many parents will say they do not have favorites among their children, but the children themselves are readily able to respond to the question "Were you your father's/mother's favorite?" and "If not, who was?"

Tolerance. The attitude of tolerance is a concept related to favoritism. Fathers have been found to be more lenient with their daughters while mothers have been similarly more accepting of their sons' behavior. In the case of the sibling singled out for disfavor, both parents, but especially the mothers were much more easygoing with this child.

Sibling rivalry. None of the respondents expressly referred to their developmental years as a period of "sibling rivalry." However, their narratives indicate that they did compare or contrast themselves to their siblings and much of the negative interaction that began in childhood—whether physical or verbal—has extended to adulthood.

Inclusion/Exclusion issue. In family systems, there is a tendency for children to form alliances for reasons that go beyond sibling rivalry such as, for example, same sex siblings, age difference and the gap in age between children, or similar interests and personality. This may also result when children perceive favoritism and parental preferential treatment causing

children to gang up against the preferred sibling.

Financial matters. The matter of finances is a familiar conflict theme. It is a behavioral concept (i.e., operational or instrumental conditioning) that stems from rewards for good behavior or differential granting of allowances in childhood and then translated in adulthood into loans and inheritance of property.

A sense of entitlement. The preferential treatment sometimes leads to the favored child assuming a sense of entitlement. Most of the time, this is an unconscious process that nevertheless causes an upheaval among less favored children.

A sense of responsibility as missing. As a consequence, the favored child does not develop a sense of responsibility through no fault of hers or his.

Generational transmission. Generational transmission of faulty family interaction patterns would have to be the most toxic issue. Family systems theorists, particularly Murray Bowen, believe that family systems are understood in the context of transgenerational transmission. Functional patterns are transmitted from one generation to the next, but so are dysfunctional patterns and concepts, a process that is usually unconscious.

The patterns are interconnected. The child who is favored by parents gets preferential treatment and his or her misdeeds are often tolerated. For example, one respondent narrated: "We all had household chores to complete before we went to school; she didn't have to do them; but also, if she was found to not have done her chores, we were the ones scolded." Such incidents led to conflict and rivalry so that the sibling would be frequently excluded in games and other activities—the exclusion, perhaps being the form of punishment for the sibling's favored role. The special favors extended to money matters—from daily allowance as children to adult gifts, and even property, including continuing to live at home as adults. The favored sibling naturally felt entitled. The parents, after all, are tolerant, although there was indication that the parents did not always agree on how to treat this particular child, causing some friction in the marital relationship. The blaming was a consequence of the perceived preferential treatment even as at the same time the siblings also observed the favored child as the one who violated many of the family's established rules. It is not certain which came first— the preferential treatment or the sense of entitlement. Clearly, however, the favored sibling is also favored outside the family.

The sense of responsibility on the part of the scapegoat is absent. He or she cannot be depended upon and, more frequently than not, the responsibilities fall on non-preferred children. There are indications that this is a repetitive pattern from parents' roles as children in their own families of origin. Thus, there has been multigenerational transmission.

Finally, more than half of those interviewed (while the rest were sad and/or indifferent) showed hopeful signs of how they saw things would be in their families in the future:

"I'm still looking forward to a reunion with him; we can't always be together. Maybe that's just what family is…there is that sibling who goes away. I hope we'll see him again."

"We will always have each other no matter what."

"No matter what happens, we always would never shun a sibling – we talk to them, advise them and help each other. Blood is, after all, thicker than water. We would rather be at each other, letting-out kept anger than shun each other. Because after every conflict we make something good out of it. Not the other way around."

It is worth noting that these responses were given by those who did not consider themselves "favored" by their parents. Perhaps these respondents were their family's tagasalo (as previously studied)—the caretaker. But even more toxic, it appears, and despite these being in the minority, are that 1) there is both sadness and indifference, and 2) emotional cut-off occurs but nothing is done about it.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It has been found that somewhere within the family system develops the role of 'scapegoat.' This is only one among many possible roles that a child takes on. As has been seen in the demographic data, it is not systematically assigned by sex, number of children, nor birth order. The most ironic finding appears to be that the one singled out for disfavor is the one parents (and sometimes also siblings) favor (preferential treatment), with obvious consequences—good and bad—for that sibling.

As has been mentioned, scapegoating is one of the darker sides of family life for siblings, and one that usually requires professional help to undo, and even more so than the tagasalo. Just as individuals practice parent-child interaction in preparation for adult relationships, sibling relations are an important training ground for broader relations outside the family. Siblings carry over negotiating skills learned from fighting and competing to their relationships in the outside world as well as the crucial skills of reading others' mental states, putting oneself in the place of others, and the capacity for empathy from the dynamics of childhood play.

The results point to the importance of understanding nongenetic influences on development, particularly parental behavior towards their children and children's perceptions and understanding of such behavior. The role of scapegoat appears to be assigned by the siblings rather than by the parents who, on the other hand, favor the child perceived as scapegoat by her or his siblings. Thus, singling out a sibling for disfavor by scapegoating appears to originate in the siblings, not from the parents. However, the role assignment is much dependent upon parental behavior. Parents' preferential treatment is associated with deleterious effects on the unpreferred child without increasing the adjustment or self-confidence of the preferred child. The aim for parents should perhaps be as far as possible to minimize the differences in their relationships with their different children, and to be especially sensitive to the acuity with which children monitor the different relationships within the family. It is useful to parents to acknowledge that differential appreciation (to the extent it is humanly possible) is more likely to help their children than preferential treatment (Sanders, 2004).

While it is important to reexamine parental behavior, the sibling viewpoint has been much neglected in previous studies. Much practice for living as adults is done in childhood and adolescence, but an understanding of sibling relations from the perspective of adulthood is vital for understanding our sense of identity—who we are, what we are, how we came to be where we are now, and where we are going. By using the sibling bond as the research context, the resulting knowledge aspires to help individuals reframe and renew themselves so that they may become more effective as family members and as contributors to social interaction, industry, and citizenship.

Finally, crucial to clinical psychologists and counselors is a shift from a family-by-family frame of reference to an individual-by-individual perspective within the family. Even as we study family systems and endeavor

to understand family members from that perspective, the interviews showed that family members' observations of relationships, interaction, and roles in their family varied depending upon their own phenomenological viewpoint—and acquired/assigned role—despite growing up in the same family. Family members' thoughts and feelings about their family of origin beg further investigation beyond the deceivingly simple labels. The data is always rich, the process therapeutic.

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