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SISTERS and BROTHERS

Results of a UK-wide postcard exercise

ESRC Festival of Social Science 2008



SUMMARY

How important are sisters and brothers to people at different times in their lives?

As part of the Economic and Social Research Council's *Festival of Social Science 2008*, researchers conducted a UK-wide 'postcard' exercise, exploring sibling relationships across the generations.

Nearly 800 people from all ages and backgrounds filled in a paper or electronic postcard.

- Just under a fifth of people who completed a postcard were aged 19 or under. The youngest participants were 3 years old. Some children and young people described their sisters and brothers in positive ways, while others saw their relationships as challenging. Some highlighted both positive and negative aspects of having siblings. Several mentioned half and step sisters and brothers, while a few saw friends as just like siblings.



- Around a third of the postcards were from younger adults, aged 20 to 39. They often focused on employment and family status. Some noted the influence that parents had on bonds between sisters and brothers, while others reflected on changes in their relationships.
- Another third of the postcards were completed by the middle generation, aged 40 to 59. Many described support between sisters and brothers at different times in their lives. They often reflected on changes in their relationships with their sisters and brothers in the context of complex generational structures, with growing children and active parents.



- Around a tenth of the postcards were from the older generation, aged between 60 and 79. They described lives and relationships over time. Some voiced concerns about the role that sisters and brothers played in caring for elderly parents. Others focused on being separated from their siblings by bad relationships or through death.

- A small proportion of postcards came from the oldest generation, aged over 80. The oldest participant was 90. They tended to give a positive picture or memories of relationships with their sisters and brothers over the course of their lives.
- We also received postcards from 39 people with no full siblings, who instead wrote about their half-siblings, step-siblings, friends and other relatives who they felt were just like sisters or brothers.

INTRODUCTION

How important are sisters and brothers to people at different times in their lives? As part of the Economic & Social Research Council's (ESRC) *Festival of Social Science 2008* two teams of researchers, who share an interest in relationships between sisters and brothers, got together to conduct a UK-wide exploration of sibling relationships.

Rosalind Edwards and Susie Weller, from London South Bank University, are currently studying changes in young people's relationships with their sisters, brothers and friends, whilst Bill Bytheway and Joanna Bornat at the Open University are researching the lives of the 'oldest generation'.

The ESRC's *Festival of Social Science* was a week-long programme of events, held between 7th and 16th March 2008. It was designed to demonstrate work carried out in the Social Sciences. The ESRC is the UK's leading research funding and training agency addressing economic and social concerns.

To find out about relationships between sisters and brothers we designed postcard and poster displays which were hosted by:

- ✿ Regional Offices of the Open University across the UK
- ✿ Schools in South London and Sussex
- ✿ Public libraries
- ✿ Organisations such as the Bristol Older People's Forum
- ✿ London South Bank University



Display at London South Bank University



Display at Keighley public library

People from all age groups were invited to complete a postcard telling us a little about their sisters and brothers. Respondents could either complete:

- ✿ A paper postcard at one of our displays
- ✿ An electronic postcard via our website

The website - www.lsbu.ac.uk/families/brothersandsisters - was advertised through a wide-range of organisations and discussion groups, including Facebook.

We were overwhelmed by the **793 postcards** we received during the week-long exercise. Postcards were completed by a wide-range of people from all different age groups, backgrounds and from across the world (although a large proportion were completed by women)!!

Many people included **a lot of detail** about their lives and their relationships with their sisters, brothers, step-siblings, half-siblings, adopted or foster siblings and other people who they felt were just like sisters and brothers.

In this report we've included examples from all different age groups. The postcards will be archived so that further analysis can be completed in the future.

THANK YOU TO EVERYONE WHO HELPED & SUPPORTED THE EXERCISE!

CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE

17% of those who completed a postcard were aged 19 and under. Our youngest participants, who got a little help from their parent(s), were just 3 years-old! Our youngest respondents described their sisters and brothers in a wide variety of ways including: information about their school, college course or job; their interests and talents; their personalities and how well they got on with one another.

Some young people described their sisters and brothers in very positive ways:

"She [sister aged 7] makes me laugh. We have a good bond ... we [respondent and her 1 year-old sister] have a good bond and makes me happy" (Female, aged 15).

"He's [brother aged 14] cool and funHe's [brother aged 23] very kind... He's [brother aged 27] very fun" (Male, aged 9).

"I love my sister [aged 27]. We get on really well ... I love my brother [aged 24]. We get on well" (Female, age 14).



Whilst for others, sisters and brothers could be really challenging:

"We fight a lot. Really annoying" (Female aged 12).

"She [younger sister] is very annoying. She is 9... He's 8 [younger brother] also very annoying... He's 11 [younger brother] the most annoying person" (Female, aged 12).

Some young people highlighted both positive and negative aspects of their relationship:

"We sometimes fight, but I do care about her [younger sister aged 8]" (Female, aged 13).

"[Brother is] very nice, gives lots of stuff ... [Second brother] gets on my nerves sometimes ... [Sister is] super nice, stands up for me ... PS. Very pretty" (Female, aged 12).

Several of those aged 19 and under mentioned half and/or step sisters and brothers. For some, these relationships were relatively close:

"My name is [...] i live in [...] i have 1 sister [aged 15], 1 half sister [aged 12] and 1 half brother [aged 10]. i have 2 best mates called [friend's names]. my fav hobbies are chatin to ma mates on msn. [Sister's name] is my full sister (i think) she is really smart but really weird. i have a very close relationship with [my sister] I'm her best friend because she dosent have many friends. [Half-sister's name] is my half sister. she livies in london wid ma dad. me and [my half-sister] are more alike then me and [my full sister] because we both ave similar interests. i dnt really have a great relationship wid [my half brother] but we r good mates. he lives in london wid ma stepmum who i hate" (Female, aged 12).

Whilst others described people who they felt were just like sisters or brothers:

"He's 10. Not sure of his birthday ... She's 7. Not sure of her birthday. These are people I have known since they were born so very close friends. As close as brothers and sisters" (Female, aged 13).

YOUNGER ADULTS

Those aged 20-39 completed a significant proportion (33%) of the postcards. Some chose to write about the lives of their sisters and brothers, focusing particularly on their employment and family status. This represents how many of us, as young adults, are preoccupied with our own domestic circumstances, having left the homes in which we spent the first two decades of our lives:

*"I'm the youngest, so apparently I was spoiled! My brother is the oldest of my siblings, but not the most responsible or bossy (that's me!). My older sister is very successful at her job. My younger (though older) sister is the *normal* one of the family- has husband, children, 4 by 4, lives in the countryside and has a yacht (which doesn't live by the countryside)" (Male, aged 36).*

Humorous remarks were not uncommon amongst this age group:

"The best and only brother I've ever had. When I was 3.5 my brother was born, but I remember being more interested in a square pack of smarties" (Male, aged 27).

Not everyone, however, included positive comments. One male described his three older siblings as 'short', 'skinny' and 'ugly', whilst one female described her siblings as a 'pain in the neck'. Others mentioned irreconcilable differences:

"Brought up by mother and father. Left home at around 18. Highest level of qualification A Level. Employed in retail sector. Virtually no communication between us for around 8-9 years despite the fact that she lives close to the family home in Sheffield. No interest in rekindling sibling relationship" (Male, aged 29).

Some noted the influence parents had on bonds between sisters and brothers:

"I'm the eldest of 3 children. When my parents split up 2 years ago, the 3 children decided to team up 'against' our parents and organised a mediation to avoid any nonsense decision about the family house and finances. Although we're 1.5 years apart, my sister look so similar we pass for twins. After much fighting until we reached our twenties, we're now best friends. Our little brother was born when we were 8 and 6, so he was our living puppet - he's almost been brought up as a single child, since we all teamed up to spoil him. My sister and I are very protective of our little brother, especially when we noticed that our mum was having a bad influence on him" (Female, aged 32).



A number of respondents reflected on change:

"We [respondent and older sister] have always got on really well. She moved to London 3 yrs ago and I did to Edinburgh last year. Since then we've enjoyed many happy holidays together.... He [younger brother] seems to never have really (yet) grown out of his non-communicative grunting stage which started at 15 but occasional flashes of consideration & good sense of fun mean we're still close" (Female, aged 24).

Some wrote about 'what-might-have-been':

"... My sister is also my best friend. My mother had twin girls when I was 5 but they were stillborn and I often think about what my life would have been like with 3 sisters instead of just one ..." (Female, aged 35).

THE MIDDLE GENERATION

34% of respondents were aged 40-59. Participants included information about their sibling's employment and family life, reflections on changes in their relationships and support amongst siblings at different times in their lives:

"... I am closer to my twin sister than my other siblings, although my brother was also important as a surrogate father figure after my dad died when I was only 5 yrs old, leaving us with a mentally unstable mother. Our eldest sister was a heroic daredevil role model, challenging our mother, and an adolescent trailblazer, having boyfriends and staying out late, even though she herself did not experience it like that at all (heroic) ... In our twenties/thirties other people became more important (partners, in-laws, own friends, etc.), which was made worse due to problems with our mother (none of us really loved her-she suffered from a personality disorder and therefore family gatherings were not a pleasurable experience). However we are all quite close now my mother has died ... I am glad there were four of us sharing the good, the bad and the ugly, providing support for one another" (Female, aged 55).

Many recognised that they were of a middle generation, with growing adolescent children on the one hand and active parents on the other. It is in the context of this complex generational structure that siblings were sometimes viewed with a sense of distance.

One woman, aged 42, described herself as the youngest of three daughters, *"independent and stubborn"*, a mother of two with a 'fab' husband, working full time, and 'very close' to her parents, but not her sisters - *"My best friend is more of a sister than my own"*. Her older sister *"can be fun, can be a good support, on her own terms!!! Jealousy runs deep for her - little self-esteem"*.



Whilst some spoke of distant relationships others viewed close friends as 'sibling-like'. One male, age 57, described having experienced a varied relationship with his brother and half-sister but spoke fondly of two 'brother-like' friends:

"My close friend and I call each other 'bruv' and we mean it. I can talk to him about pretty well anything, and he to me. Known each other for 36 years ... My oldest friend. We don't call each other 'bruv', but we know that we can call on each other whenever we are needed (and I think of that as being part of what a brother is.) Known each other since we were 11. In my teens and beyond, saw his as a second home" (Male, aged 57).

Some described tragic circumstances in their lives and the lives of their siblings:

"My brother was brought up with me by both our parents in London. He failed his 11+ but later managed to go to University and became an electrical engineer. He left home at 18 and did a few jobs before deciding he would get a degree. At approx 25 he married and emigrated first to Canada and then to the USA. He started his own business and had 4 children. Sadly he died at the age of 50 from a malignant brain tumour" (Female, aged 59).

BECOMING THE OLDEST GENERATION

12% of respondents were aged between 60 and 79, and a number of whom described at length the lives and relationships of their sisters and brothers.

Positive comments included:

“We are a very close family” (Male, aged 64)

“Although different personalities we were very close” (Male, aged 77)

“Very close relationship” (Female, aged 77).



There were examples of the postcard being used as a way to voice concerns about, for example, the role sisters and brothers play in caring for elderly parents:

“I live in the UK. My sister lives in the US. I feel guilty because she has to do all the 'caring' for our 90 year old mother. Fortunately mother is cognitively intact, relatively wealthy and is living in the community, though yesterday she and my step-father moved into a wonderful retirement community” (Female, aged 61).

The following is a powerful account of the experience of becoming the oldest generation and how this affects a life-long relationship with a sibling:

“I am single, never married, lived with my mother, apart from 4½ years in my 20s when I lived and worked in London, until she died last year at the age of 95. My father died when I was 7 and my mother never remarried. I ... had a career break last year to care for my mother until she died in September. I returned to work ... in January. My relationship with my sister, my only sibling, has been a love-hate relationship which drove me close to a nervous breakdown in my twenties and years of depression which didn't lift until my mid-forties as I suffered from very low self esteem and a complete loss of self confidence. It has been a hard battle to become my own person. Things came to a head in my mid twenties and our relationship was uncomfortable for many years though there was never a complete rift. Our mother was the glue that kept us together. We have grown much closer over the past couple of years with the declining health of our mother, both mentally and physically, and as joint Executors and heirs have sorted out her affairs harmoniously...” (Female, aged 60).

Within this age group a number of respondents simply described themselves as separated from their siblings either as ‘totally estranged’ or ‘semi-estranged’. Some siblings had passed away and a sense of loss was apparent in some accounts.

“Loving caring man [younger brother]-sadly missed” (Female, aged 76)

THE OLDEST GENERATION

Just 2% of respondents were over 80 years old, of which the majority were female. Our oldest participant was 90!

The oldest generation generally presented positive (or at least neutral) accounts of their relationships with their sisters and brothers.

Some chose to describe the lives of their sisters and brothers focusing particularly on their education, occupations and war-time involvement:

“He [older brother] died in 1990 at 85 ... ships steward, fireman 1939-45, grocer” (Female, aged 89).

“[First brother] left school at 14. Didn’t want to wait until he was 17-18 to become an apprentice ~ he joined the army ... [second brother] was a very good swimmer, served in the Middle East, emigrated to New Zealand but returned ... [third brother] working in the local electrics company in our local town - joined the Navy then worked for electricity until he retired” (Female, aged 85).

Talents and positive attributes also featured. For example, one 82 year-old male described four of his older siblings as ‘musical’, one older brother as a ‘brilliant artist’ and an older sister as a ‘brilliant dressmaker’. Our oldest participant described her brother as:

“Good, kind person and astute” (Female, aged 90).

There were only a few less positive comments:

“[Sister is] unreliable and self-centred” (Female, aged 86).

“[Brother had] a difficult personality” (Female, aged 80).

For some of those whose sisters and brothers had passed away completing the postcard seemed to evoke fond memories of shared childhoods:

“My younger sister was my best friend through my life. I have strong memories of our love and my sister being with me on holidays, the fun we had. She wrote poetry, and I used to read stories every night from my imagination when young”! (Female, aged 82).



OTHER KINDS OF SISTERS AND BROTHERS

Amongst the people who replied with accounts of their siblings were 39 people with no full siblings. That is, they listed people they described as ‘half brother’, ‘half sister’ or ‘stepsister’.

The step-relationships come across as highly varied, even within families. So, for example, one 55 year-old female says she has *‘only one sister’* though in fact they only share a mother: *‘But we did share the same father - he was the man my mother married when I was about 2 and with whom my mother had my sister. We grew up together and I was very involved in her bringing up’*. She goes on to say that she has *‘9 other sisters and brothers with whom I share a biological father’*, but that she doesn’t really *‘think of them as my sisters and brothers in a “real” sense by which I mean an emotional and experiential sense’*.

Having an emotional attachment and shared experiences seems to make the difference as people distinguish their different step-siblings. Parents’ contacts as well as wider family relationships carry through into these ties. So for example, one female feels close to her ‘brother’ who lives in America who was born when she was four, after her mother married ‘my dad’. She explains: *‘He is my half brother although we do not use this term, and I don’t ever think it crossed his mind!’* Other step-relationships worked out differently. Another female, now 66 who did not get on with her step-father and who is not close to her step-brother and sister writes *‘They are close & I believe supportive to each other. I’ve never had that relationship & would have wanted it’*.



Amongst the step-relationships are those where relationships have been hidden or undiscovered until recently. One male, aged 66, only found out about his two half sisters when going through his mother’s papers after her death. He mentions *‘My father’s son’* who does not know the identity of his father: *‘Only a few of my father’s generation knew the truth, only a few of my generation know the story’*.

The term ‘sibling’ seems to have a flexibility about the way it is used, as these contributions suggest. Indeed amongst the respondents, there were five people who replied with accounts that illustrate how people seek and find sibling relationships even though they have no full or half brothers or sisters, and in one case even when they have. One participant has a ‘stepsister’ and a ‘half sister’ and ‘half brother’ and also has *‘a close relationship with my best friend who I live with...I often consider him to be a brother’*. She says she *‘considers him to be family because we share a lot domestically - cooking and eating together, and because we can talk to each other openly and honestly’*.

Three respondents describe relationships with cousins as significant, either because they were *‘brought up closely’* or because they were linked through wider family activities regularly. One woman feels that her cousin, eleven years older her is *‘like my older brother’* because, *‘He paid a lot of attention to me and treated me gently’*. One respondent mentions four first cousins each of whom is *‘a bit like a brother’* and with whom she has frequent and close contacts. Finally, another female mentions cousins as being significant though she says her friends *‘see me through’*.

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION
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