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# SIBLINGS

PRACTICAL AND SENSITIVE  
RELATIONS





# **Siblings**

- Practical and Sensitive Relations

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## **Siblings – Practical and Sensitive Relations**

By Ida Wentzel-Winther, Charlotte Palludan, Eva Gulløv and Mads Middelboe Rehder

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# Content

PREFACE BY ORVAR LÖFGREN & DANIEL MILLER	5
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	7
INTRODUCTION	8
A SIBLING STUDY – THEORETICAL INSPIRATIONS	13
CHAPTER 1 REAL SIBLINGS	23
CHAPTER 2 THE IMPORTANCE OF THINGS	37
CHAPTER 3 MEDIATED INTERACTIONS	49
CHAPTER 4 SIBLINGS BETWEEN SPACES	62
CHAPTER 5 INTIMACY	74
CHAPTER 6 CONFLICTUAL CLOSENESS	85
CHAPTER 7 MOBILE POSITIONS	98
CHAPTER 8 DOUBTING THE OBVIOUS	109
POSTSCRIPT	121
REFLECTIONS ON A SIBLING STUDY	134
FILM: (EX)CHANGEABLE SIBLINGSHIP – EXPERIENCED AND PRACTICED BY CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN DENMARK	143
BIBLIOGRAPHY	144

# The film

The film *(Ex)changeable Siblingship – Experienced and Practiced by Children and young people in Denmark* is made in connection with the research project on which this book is based. It features 30 children and young people from 10 constellations of siblings, and it can be seen as an introduction to this book. The film can be found on YouTube at <https://youtu.be/a6vXpmpz008>



## Preface

*“This book is about sibling relations and especially the complex social webs of divorced families, but it is also a book about motions and emotions. Children alternating between parent’s new homes, are navigating not only the journeys but also the different emotional landscapes they switch between. By focusing on different family combinations the authors explore the many facets of siblingship and the different emotional investments which take place.*

*In many ways, this is a story of children on the move, a theme beautifully captured in the film, which brings new dimensions to the analyses. It is also a story of families on the move, trying to be flexible, accommodating changing needs, demands and problems, households that grow and shrink with the flow of visiting kids.*

*This fascinating study captures an important dimension of family life, through different ethnographic strategies. It highlights the constant tensions between family ideals and family realities, which produce feelings of togetherness and warmth as well as guilt, frustration and longing”.*

Orvar Löfgren, Professor emeritus of European Ethnology Department of Cultural Sciences, University of Lund.

*“This is a fascinating book on a neglected subject, which is yet so common that most of us will know people in similar circumstances. The most important contributions are the many significant insights that arise from some excellent research of what families really do, insights that often go against our assumptions and presumptions. And shows the additional insights we gain from paying attention to material culture. The book is also highly unusual in the clarity of presentation, which makes it a model for reporting academic results and it also makes good use of material cul-*

## SIBLINGS - PRACTICAL AND SENSITIVE RELATIONS

*ture as another way of gaining an understanding of the participating children's behaviour.*

*What struck me most is the kind of book this is. It is something in between psychology, sociology and anthropology. Maybe this is stereotyping, but it reminds me a little of Danish Design furniture, rather stylish, elegant and functional; quite sparse with clear lines and directions. The book makes especially good points about the importance of the nuclear family, while appreciating that siblingship is fundamentally cultural and would be performed differently in places where people live in more extended families. This work is in the tradition of Simmel, because mostly it is about the essential contradictions of social life, for example, how we seek both intimacy and autonomy. It provides us with the recognition that this is not a fault but rather something inevitable to most cultural practices”.*

Daniel Miller. Professor of Material Culture, Department of Anthropology, University College London

# Acknowledgements

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We would also like to thank our advisory board which includes representatives from relevant institutions and organisations: Bente Boserup, Susanne Dahl, Charlotte Guldborg, Søren Gade Hansen, Anders Kragh Jensen, Nikolaj Lubanski, Grete Nymark and Birgitte Holmberg Pedersen. As well as our interdisciplinary support-group, which includes international researchers with professional expertise to supplement the research team's expertise: Kjeld Høgsbro, Jette Kofoed, Annette Kronborg, Anette Molbech, Perle Møhl, Jens Christian Nielsen, Mai Heide Ottesen and Astrid Würtz Rasmussen. And finally, a huge thank you to all our international collaborators: Rosalind Edwards, Hilde Lidén, Orvar Löfgren, Daniel Miller, Karin Zetterqvist Nelson and Carol Smart, with whom we repeatedly discussed the project and who, in the final phase, helped us weave the many threads into a whole.

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Copenhagen, 2015

Ida Wentzel Winther, Charlotte Palludan, Eva Gulløv and Mads Middelboe Rehder.

# Introduction

This book is about siblingship as a social and cultural phenomenon in contemporary Denmark. Being a sibling, having siblings and getting siblings are conditions in the lives of most children; actually 90 per cent of all children are registered as having siblings (Nielsen & Petersen, 2008). Despite the prevalence, we have little knowledge of how children perceive being siblings, who they consider as siblings, and what they do or do not do together. Neither do we know much about how this phenomenon is culturally understood. Do children consider all the children they live with as siblings, even if they do not have parents in common? Can you be more or less real siblings? Can you stop being siblings? Obviously, there are many ways of being a sibling, and sibling relations can change considerably as children grow up. New children may appear – in the shape of newborn babies or children from previous marriages – while other children may be separated by way of divorce or moving out. Sibling configurations vary, as do the experiences of having and getting siblings.

We have wondered why siblingship is neither a topic discussed among professionals working with children nor in public debates. This is not to say that the issue of siblingship is entirely ignored, but attention is mostly directed towards the impact family dynamics have on children's relations; not least in relation to families who have undergone changes by way of bereavement or divorce. Also, sibling rivalry and the importance attached to the position in birth order are recurring themes. Often however, such discussions more or less implicitly focus on the 'vertical' relations between parents and child(ren) rather than children's internal relations. In this study, we address children's interrelations, because we find that a 'horizontal' perspective adds important knowledge to our understanding of children's everyday lives in various family constellations and children as part of family dynamics.

## SIBLINGS - PRACTICAL AND SENSITIVE RELATIONS

In this book, we investigate children's experiences and perceptions of being a sibling. But we also address how material, social and cultural contexts influence the way siblingship is performed and perceived. We have a specific interest in examining how children's relations are affected by the different changes that occur in families. This interest springs from the fact that many parents in Denmark divorce and enter into new partnerships, which invariably generates dynamics and changes in children's sibling relations. This book, however, is not about divorce; it is an analysis of what being a sibling is and what it means in different life circumstances.

In the book, we differentiate between what we term *long* and *wide* siblingships and *short* and *narrow* siblingships. Inspired by historian Leonora Davidoff (2012) we regard sibling groups *long* when there is a relatively large age gap between the youngest and eldest sibling. We use the term *wide* when children have different parents and families and thus are part of several different households. *Short* and *narrow* characterize sibling groups where the children are fairly close in age, share parents and families and live under the same roof. This differentiation allows us to discuss various facets of siblingship and to show the interconnectedness between being a sibling and the life worlds and conditions siblingship is performed within.

The book is based on our sibling study from 2011 and 2012, where we observed and interviewed approx. 100 children from all over Denmark. The study includes siblings who live together and quite a few who do not. The families' financial situations vary; their number and sizes vary, as do the age differences between siblings and their geographical position. A number of the children we have talked to have experienced their parents divorcing, and some have experienced parents' serial change of partner. A smaller group of children have themselves been separated from their parents – and often from their siblings as well – as they live in institutions. Some children have no personal experience with divorce, but have siblings who commute between homes, or who have moved away from home to, for example, a boarding school. Finally, there

## SIBLINGS - PRACTICAL AND SENSITIVE RELATIONS

is a small group of children who have experienced no changes to their family or sibling relations. In this way, our material encompasses a wide variety of family models and a diversity of relations between children.

In Denmark many children have more than one home, and they often commute between homes as a result thereof. This is usually organized by way of different shared parenting arrangements, typically along lines of 7-7, 9-5 or 10-3, which refers to the number of days the children spend with each parent. This life style is supported by Danish legislation, which makes it possible for parents to share custody and by the welfare state's economic support for children in general and especially for children with divorced parents. The relative prosperity and the relative short distances in Denmark also allow Danish parents to prioritize and organise parallel households for their children. Commuting materializes in different ways. Some schools have rooms specifically designated to the storing of bags. And for several years now, there has been a designated closed train carriage commonly referred to as the 'divorce carriage' between destinations in Denmark.

Not only the children involved have siblings. Many people have siblings and carry a sibling history with them. In addition, several of us have children who have siblings. Personal and private stories are not our areas of interest in this book, but when we turn our gaze to a phenomenon such as siblings, as when any aspect of private life is scrutinised, it will often reverberate and resonate. Readers will most likely start to contemplate their own and their possible children's sibling relations, and it is our hope that these personal reflections will supplement the reading of the themes covered in this book.

### **The Structure of the Book**

The book contains eight chapters, each dealing with a central theme. Chapter 1, *Real Siblings*, explores how children's perceptions of siblings relate to cultural notions and expectations of siblingship. Chapter 2, *The Importance of Things*, discusses the ways the material surroundings and the distribution of things influence sibling relations and family life. In

## SIBLINGS - PRACTICAL AND SENSITIVE RELATIONS

chapter 3, *Mediated Interactions*, focus is turned to how siblings communicate; not least how they use social media as a means of maintaining siblingships when physically separated. Chapter 4, *Siblings Between Spaces*, focuses specifically on children who commute between homes. It is emphasized how experiences of transitions and life in transit have emotional repercussions. In chapter 5, *Intimacy*, we are interested in what intimacy entails in sibling relations and how intimacy is at risk of becoming intimidating. This is followed by a chapter called *Conflictual Closeness*, which highlights the coexistence and constant balancing of conflictuality and emotional closeness in the everyday lives of siblings. In chapter 7, *Mobile Positions*, we discuss how sibling positions and roles change over time, and how children view themselves in relation to how similar or different they are from their siblings. In the final analytical chapter, *Doubting the Obvious*, we thematise how some children consider sibling relations natural and indisputable while others consider them much more uncertain and doubtful. A summing up of the themes covered concludes the book. We highlight the general points in relations to siblingship as phenomenon while at the same time reflecting on the significance siblings have in the lives of children, for example if the experiences of growing up in long and wide siblingship allow children to develop certain socially relevant skills. The experiences of private life settle in children's bodies and play out as competences or flaws when they are called to act in broader social contexts such as schools, workplaces and public spaces. In this way, we believe that studies of private relations, including siblingship, can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of social life. In the concluding part of the book, *Reflections on a Sibling Study*, we present a number of considerations over the course of the study and our priorities.

We have chosen an essayistic approach to the book, thus allowing the analyses of empirical examples and children's specific statements to constitute its core. Our aim has been to allow the reader to gain a sense of our material's character and to give concrete insight into the contemplations, conditions, challenges and feelings that children experience.

## SIBLINGS - PRACTICAL AND SENSITIVE RELATIONS

This approach has reduced the presence of references and theoretical concepts. To mark the analytical considerations behind each presentation, we close every chapter with a summary that emphasises our analytical points, including a short paragraph to explain our specific theoretical inspirations. We have done this to make the chapters easily readable and to highlight empirical points, thus allowing empirical findings rather than theory and concepts to take centre stage. It is our hope that this format will encourage readers to read all chapters, as we believe that combined, they present a novel view of contemporary siblingship.

Readers will most likely expect different things from a book such as this. Some may well find too few action- and application-oriented considerations; others may expect to find more theoretical discussions and methodological considerations in our analyses. In any case, we have chosen the perspectives of the children themselves as the foundation of our presentation of the sibling phenomenon.

Precisely to underline the importance we place on children's own perceptions, we have created a film based on part of our visual material. This production is an integrated part of the overall research project, but it is also an independent narrative about some of the facets of siblingship. In the film, children talk about their experiences with siblings and some of their statements and experiences are included in the chapters of this book. The film *(Ex)changeable Siblingship – Experienced and Practiced by Children and young people in Denmark* (Winther et al, 2015 - can be found on YouTube at <https://youtu.be/a6vXpmpz008>). As discussed further in the last section of the book, these different publications should be regarded as a whole.

Before unfolding the chapters, we invite interested readers to continue reading in order to find out more about the theoretical inspirations of the study. It is also possible to skip the section and go directly to the analytical chapters without knowledge of the underlying theoretical contemplations.

# A Sibling Study – theoretical inspirations

## Ideals of family life and sibling relations

Understanding what siblingship entails will always be closely tied to family relations. Within the last hundred years, we can see how dwellings, gender roles, working life and provider patterns have changed, as have cultural views of family life, parenthood, children and their roles and duties. These changes mirror differences in living conditions but also changes to the perception of what is important and healthy, who relates to whom, and what that entails in terms of responsibility. The family is not a static institution; it is a culturally and historically variable, and this is the point of departure for the historical, sociological and anthropological family research, which has inspired us throughout our work on this book.

The historian John Gillis points to how the family in a Western European and North American context has become an almost mythological entity, greatly influencing peoples' expectations of themselves and those closest to them. Differentiating between 'the families we live with' and 'the families we live by', he points to how we evaluate our concrete life with members of our family in light of some very strong ideals about family. One of the things he points to is the fact that our specific practice will always be influenced by myths, rituals and pictures that idealise family relations to a degree, which it is very hard to live up to (Gillis 1996). One example is the widespread idea of the stable, heterosexual nuclear family as the right and normal family – an ideal still very much alive, despite the fact that 46 per cent of all marriages in Denmark end in divorce and Statistics Denmark currently operates with 37 different versions of families in Denmark. The most frequent is the nuclear family. More than half of all families with children consist of mother, father and

## **SIBLINGS - PRACTICAL AND SENSITIVE RELATIONS**

children. In addition to this family type, there are, in Denmark, multiple forms of single parent families and blended families with separate children, visitation children and shared children in varied constellations (Statistics Denmark).

The way children perform siblingship and their ideas about sibling relations are influenced by such ideals, as these are embedded in legislation and expressed in public debates, pictures, books etc. For example, the rights and relations of siblings are determined in a number of legal regulations that limit closeness (in terms of sexual relationships), define rights of inheritance, and determine the conditions of custody cases etc. Also cultural products such as children's books, children's TV, fairy tales and adverts define and maintain norms in relation to siblingship, which can influence the way children experience their specific relations. Our aim is not to analyse these ideals and their representations, but our interview material reveals that children draw on such invisible (re)presentations and perceptions of normality, which they then use to assess their own relations.

When reading historical and cross-cultural descriptions of sibling relations, it also becomes evident that ideals and norms are far from universal (e.g. Circirelli 1994; Montgomery 2009; Weisner & Gallimore 2008, Davidoff 2012). Siblingship should therefore be understood in relation to cultural and social contexts.

### **Family Relations are Shaped Through Practice**

In our approach to siblings, we have also been inspired by the family-sociologist David Morgan, who stresses how important it is to focus on what it is people do, when they *do* family. Rather than seeing the family as a specific institution, he recommends that we investigate a variety of family structures, ideas about families and family practices (Morgan 1996). In keeping with that recommendation, we investigate what siblings do. Our approach is based on the assumption that the sibling phenomenon is not merely something that exists, it is something that is shaped through human interaction and friction, and thus it changes

shape, intensity and character, also individually, throughout childhood. This finds us on par with the sibling researchers Rosalind Edwards, Lucy Hadfield, Helen Lucey and Melanie Mauthner, who look at how children use their siblings in a UK context (Edwards et al 2006). We are also interested in finding out what being siblings entails, which expectations come with siblingship, and how sibling relations vary between children in different contexts. When compared to their study, we tend to be more concerned with differences in family structures and the related sibling figurations, because our material reveals that growing up in either long and wide or narrow and short siblingships influences relations and competences.

Our interest in different family structures has also highlighted the question of the importance of biology, more so than in studies that focus more unambiguously on sibling relations in nuclear families. We see that the divide between biological and social siblings is highlighted by some of our informants and toned down by others. We hear that they talk about blood being thicker than water, but we also hear that many attach more importance to those siblings they have grown up with. Biological bonds are often of great importance when authorities have to regulate visitation and inheritance cases. And so we encounter the existence of strong social understandings of what real siblingship is, only they are also continually challenged (a current example is the increasing number of global egg and semen donations). In this light, biological relatedness is obviously of great importance to how some of our informants interpret sibling relations, but it is difficult to point precisely to what it means. Perhaps it makes more sense to simply establish that biology is potentially important when siblings interpret their interrelations, but it is far from the only factor that defines and characterises these relations.

Thus, when siblings are defined by more than biology, we need to investigate further the circumstances influencing who they recognize as siblings and who they exclude as strangers, to paraphrase historian Leonora Davidoff who have studied sibling relationships in bourgeois families of the Victorian époque (Davidoff, 2012: 15). In trying to explore

## SIBLINGS - PRACTICAL AND SENSITIVE RELATIONS

this, we furthermore draw on the anthropologist Janet Carsten's concept of relatedness (Carsten 2000; also see Tjørnhøj-Thomsen 2004). Using this concept, Carsten turns our attention to the fact that family relations are not defined by fixed positions but depend on reciprocal social recognition and actions that support those relations. Even though the classifications and perceptions of the surrounding world obviously influence the way people view their surroundings, her point is that we establish, maintain and shape relations through actions. This approach allows us to view families and siblingship as bundles of relations, constantly shaped and re-shaped through human interaction and friction. Or families and siblingship can be viewed as framing relations that change character and shape over time, also within the lifespan of individual human beings. This approach means that whom we classify as siblings can change as can the way we determine such classification. In line with this perspective, the family sociologist Carol Smart emphasises that an individual's family relations are shaped through actions and interpretations that are influenced by said individual's history and conditions. From this perspective, all concrete relations are not necessarily considered relevant; they are activated or pushed aside, dependent on given situations, relations and social interests (Smart 2007). In other words, to understand relations, we need to look closer at people's life-situations and emotions.

In our context, these discussions are central to the interpretations of sibling relations that we come across in our material. The informants talk about their different relations in narrow and wide siblingships, they talk about changes over time, about events, about material conditions that have made a difference and about diverging possibilities, conflicts and emotional experiences of closeness and distance. As is revealed in our analyses, their combined actions are of central importance to how we can understand what siblingship entails. However, these actions cannot be understood as isolated from the social, material, cultural and historical contexts in which they take place. Relations are conditioned by circumstances but also by actions.

We try to identify these social dynamics, variations and changes by way of the metaphor *movement*. Relations move, not least because people move, between families and homes, and because they move each other through actions and expressions of emotion as well as opting in or out. Sibling relations are far from unequivocal, they are shaped by family circumstances and concrete actions. Notwithstanding this mobility, sibling is neither an empty nor an irrelevant category. Regardless of the people included in this category, siblingship is almost always an important aspect of the way individuals understand themselves, their history and surroundings as well as the way they interpret other people's lives. And thus our analyses help emphasise how sibling relations are important in the lives of children. They are formed by the concrete ways that people understand each other and the actions they perform in order to express their relatedness, which again relate to the familiar, biological and historical contexts that they are part of.

### **A Horizontal Perspective**

As mentioned at the beginning of this introduction, parent-child relations are widely considered central to understanding a child's character as well as the way s/he acts and feels. From this perspective, children's relations to their siblings, both physically and emotionally, are greatly influenced by their parents' attention and appreciation. We agree that parents play an important role in children's lives, but we are critical of approaches where it is immediately assumed that parents are the most important actors in terms of children's development, learning, wellbeing and in relation to family dynamics. We believe that rather than taking our point of departure in some family members being more important than others, we have to investigate the different perspectives, interests, and relations the different members of a given family have. Rather than looking at vertical relations – i.e. relations between parents and children – the focus of this book is turned to the interrelations of children – i.e. horizontal relations. We are interested in investigating the practical and emotional significance our informants relate to being a sibling. And as

## SIBLINGS - PRACTICAL AND SENSITIVE RELATIONS

researchers, it is important to disengage from the preconceptions that relate to the family as an institution and the accepted ideas about who is important. There are children in our study who specifically point to siblings as the most important people in their lives – more important than their parents. Such statements can evolve in certain emotional contexts, and they may change. However, that is not for us to decide. We cannot disregard such statements, although it is generally accepted that parents are the most important people in a child's life. And we cannot regard such statements as expressions of problematic psychological fixations or flaws.

Another dominant perception with regard to siblings is the importance allocated to the birth order within a sibling group, in terms of personality. Here, we also find that the ideology of the nuclear family prevails when, for instance, we talk about the typical traits of an elder sister compared to a younger brother. These understandings make little sense to a family that has changed over the years. In families with divorced parents, where new homes have been established, where different partners and children have been added, and older children have moved out, the birth order is not a determined structure with unequivocal positions. A child can become a little brother at a ripe age as well as an uncle to a child his own age. Positions shift and change, which makes it difficult to determine unequivocal psychological sibling profiles. As the analyses in this book will reveal, the picture is much more complex and mobile. Roles and positions shift, as do perspectives and interests. Our point of departure has been listening to what the children themselves had to say about this and then trying to understand what that information adds to the knowledge we have. And in a greater perspective, what it adds to what we know about the everyday life of children, as they grow up, and about the family as a social institution in this specific society.

And thus, our approach challenges the widespread conception that not growing up in a nuclear family is something to be pitied, as is the restructuring of family life in the wake of divorce. We make no judge-

ment as to whether or not these conditions are reasons for pity, but we view children's families as a condition they grow up under. In childhood, children enter into many dynamics, relations and structural contexts, and childhood never was nor is simply bright and carefree; it is full of conditions and complexities that have to be managed. That adult couples divorce is a fact, that families split up and children are separated and coupled with other children is also a fact. Children live with their families and handle their relations in many different ways. Our aim is not to judge what is good or bad, but rather to shed light on the relational consequences that different actions and family structures entail. In her study of family practices following a divorce, the sociologist Jenny Ahlberg describes that the most important occurrence for the children is the arrival of new children (Ahlberg 2008: 274). A study on shared parenting in Denmark carried out by The Danish National Centre for Social Research, (Ottesen 2011), also emphasises that children perceive siblings as a stabilizing factor when parents divorce and in shared parenting arrangements. These points are remarkable in relation to the weight divorce proceedings place on the parents' and new partners' relations to the children. These points reverberate in our material. We find that the relations between children are vastly important to their self-understanding, identification, learning, actions and perceptions of possibilities as well as to the dynamics within the entire family.

### **The Material Behind the Book**

As has already been pointed out, we are interested in what it means to be a sibling, the part siblings play in the lives of children, and how siblingship changes over time, as well as how children handle changes in family structures and the movements in sibling relations that these changes instigate. To investigate those questions, we designed a qualitative study in order to understand patterns, variations and intersections in children's sibling relations.

We have tried to include families and sibling groups of different shapes and conditions in order to give ourselves the best possible prem-

## SIBLINGS - PRACTICAL AND SENSITIVE RELATIONS

ise for investigating the sibling phenomenon in all its complexity. We did not want to compare, but rather gain insight into as many of the conditions that influence sibling relations as possible. We have implemented a snowballing approach, where we looked for informants far and wide. We have asked schoolteachers and health visitors across Denmark as well as activated networks of friends, acquaintances and colleagues. We have announced on Facebook, send letters to selected residential institutions and contacted after school clubs. In the course of a year, the group of informants grew each week, until we decided that we had reached a sufficient and suitably varied number.

Our total material encompasses 93 children from all over Denmark, 12 of whom we have observed at a number of children's meetings at a centre for family counselling, where they talked about experiences and feelings related to their parent's divorce and their own family relations. We interviewed the rest, i.e. 81 children between the ages of 6-32, some of them several times. In most instances, we interviewed a group of siblings together or individually. The relatively wide spread in ages refer to the fact that many adults get several 'litters' of children and/or get new partners. Generally speaking, we have only interviewed and observed the children, but in a few cases it seemed obvious to also interview grown-up siblings who could provide us with insight into the longer sibling narrative. Most of the interviews were conducted in the children's home; one in a café; two of them in a residential institution for young people, and four of them in an orphanage, where the interviewees resided at the time. We interviewed 16 of the children in groups of four, four children in each group. They were 9-13 years old and had been picked from a youth club and an after school club. None of them were related siblings, which afforded us a unique opportunity to gain insight into how children talk about their siblings with their peers. Some informants volunteered to photograph events or activities they would partake in with their siblings, which would then be the starting point of subsequent follow-up talks. Other informants - 30 in all - we followed with a camera, filming them as they did things with their siblings, includ-

ing sporting events, visits to cafés, spending cosy evenings at home, or when commuting from one home to the next. An edited version of these recordings constitutes our film. In connection with the editing, several of the participants viewed the material that included them, which gave cause for further talks. We have followed 10 of the children over a longer period of time, and we have made quite a few ethnographic observations about their everyday doings and interactions. Finally, we interviewed 12 parents, two pedagogues, two children's psychologists, one social worker, two family therapists, two lawyers and an advisor from Børns Vilkår (Children's Welfare).

### **What Did We Ask the Children?**

We began all of our interviews by asking the children to make a drawing of their family and then explain to us who their siblings were and how they were related. We did this because we wanted the children themselves to define whom they considered siblings and whom they perhaps did not consider siblings. Generally, we simply wanted to hear how they themselves defined family members. The drawings then became our point of departure for further questions such as: what would they do with their siblings, how did they live, who did they possibly share a room with, which chores did they have, how much pocket money did they and their siblings get, who did they go on holiday with, who did they eat with, who did they fight with etc. We wanted this opening and subsequent conversation to help us locate the specific understanding of being a sibling for each individual child. So we listened to their personal experiences with their siblings and their narratives about the more common ideas and ideals about siblingship. We continually asked clarifying and slightly off-key questions, which allowed for associations that differed from the immediate and evident. The interviews gave us insight into quite a few relations, and we were struck by the strong influence material conditions and the organisation and logistics of a family have on the relations between children and the time they spend together; a recurring theme in several of the chapters. We were also struck by the subjects the

## **SIBLINGS - PRACTICAL AND SENSITIVE RELATIONS**

children talked quite freely about and the subjects that were barely touched upon. We heard a lot about emotional relations, about whom they liked and how and what emotions were stirred in certain situations. But we were not told much about their parents, i.e. their collaborative skills and possible divorce, and conflicts were only superficially touched upon. Naturally, we have accepted these priorities and we never probed deeper when we sensed that a child was unwilling, partly because we never felt close enough to the children, and partly because ethical considerations demanded respect. We mention this, however, to point out that although we have covered many subjects in our interviews, there are also aspects we know very little about. Nonetheless, we find that the material contains many important themes.

It is our hope that the perspectives raised by the children will be stimulating and allow for a greater focus on sibling relations in future discussions of the everyday lives and conditions of children.

# Chapter 1

## Real Siblings

By Eva Gulløvd

*Interviewer:* 'You're 13, and you said there are three siblings in this household?'

*Bodil:* 'Yes, and then there's their big brother, who is also a little bit my big brother. Well, I see him as my big brother, but he isn't my big brother.'

...

*Interviewer:* 'You began (the interview) by saying that Kasper isn't your brother, but now you say he is?'

*Bodil:* 'Yes'

*Interviewer:* 'So, when did you become siblings?'

*Bodil:* 'Well, my mother and Kurt, they met when I was two. So, he's always just been there. And when you live together long enough and know each other really well, you know, then you become sort of, well, to me, he's definitely, 100%, my big brother'

...

*Bodil:* 'You know, Kasper and I have a really close relationship. We talk about everything and help each other with everything, I mean, not school and stuff like that, but you know ... yeah, feelings and that, everything' (Bodil 13 years old).

In these excerpts from an interview, Bodil reflects on her relation to a family member, Kasper. Kasper came into her life when she was two, because her mother moved in with Kasper's father. They have lived together every other week throughout their childhood, as both of them

## CHAPTER 1: REAL SIBLINGS

alternate between parents. As is apparent, she considers Kasper her brother, but she is also a little hesitant and initially describes him as the brother of her siblings. From a conventional, biological perspective, they are not related. But, as she explains, you can become siblings when you have lived together for a long time and know each other really well.

### Sibling Categories

Bodil's hesitation speaks volumes. For what do you call children you live with but with whom you have no parents in common? Expressions such as 'my real brother', 'she is not my real sister', 'they are my half-siblings', 'they are my bonus brothers', 'they're merely stepsiblings<sup>1</sup>', 'I consider him my part-time brother' take up considerable space in the material and corroborate how the children (and the adults in their lives) strive to find denominations that others are able to understand yet also reflect their own perception of the relation.

Offhand, it would appear that the chosen categories are quite systematically constructed. 'Bonus siblings' is a more positive term than 'stepsiblings' when describing someone who has entered your life but with whom you do not have parents in common. 'Half-siblings' or 'part-time-siblings' have one parent in common, while 'full siblings' or 'real siblings' share both parents. However, apparently the categories are not experienced as being quite so straightforward. Some of the interviewed children struggled to align their lived experiences with the established categories; because categories do not merely describe, they also stipulate that some relations are more right than others. Some invent new expressions to fit their relations ('we are everyday-siblings', 'she is my weekend-sister'), while others insist on describing their relation as that of siblings, regardless of the degree of biological relatedness. This is true of Bodil in the example above, and it is true of 13-year-old Philip. During a group interview, another child asks Philip if his 'big brother' is not in

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<sup>1</sup> The exact phrase used by informants is 'cardboard' siblings indicating a non-stable or fragile relationship.

fact his 'half-brother', but Philip emphasises that he calls him 'brother' even though they have different fathers. They have always lived together and although his elder brother is a few years older and much more interested in his computer and his girlfriend than in his younger brother, to Philip he is indisputably his brother.

Vigga who is part of a family that comprises children from several relationships explains how she views her seven siblings:

*Vigga: 'I consider Sally and Agnes and Linus and Jenny, and yeah, it's them really. Because Nicolaj and Sebastian and Thomas, they are not really my siblings ... So Jenny and Linus and Agnes and Sally and me, they are my half-siblings'*

*Interviewer: And what about Nicolaj and Sebastian and Thomas?*

*Vigga: 'They're just step'.  
(Vigga 10 years)*

Vigga's categorization follows the conventional understanding of biological kinship. If you look a little closer at the interview, however, it becomes clear that, as was the case with Bodil in the opening dialogue, she is concerned with other aspects. Even though, at one point, she explains that she does not really have any 'real' siblings, in the interview, she goes a long way to explain her relations to the others. She considers four-year-old Linus and six-months-old Jenny who live with her father, and one-year-old Sally who lives with her mother, very close siblings, because she has always lived with them, and they are very fond of her. It is of great importance for her that visits are not too far apart. She has known 16-year-old Agnes for several years, and so, Agnes has also known Vigga when she was younger, and they share many experiences. Now that Agnes is at a boarding school they do not have much contact, yet Vigga still feels closely connected to Agnes on account of their shared history. The two older boys, Sebastian and Thomas are now in their mid-20s and Vigga has never really had much to do with either one of them. On the other hand, she has occasionally lived with 15-year-old Nicolaj

## CHAPTER 1: REAL SIBLINGS

and she describes him as a closer brother. As her narrative progresses, it appears that her classification is as much a description of relatedness over time; Vigga feels mostly related to the children she has shared her everyday life with and with whom she has done things over a longer period of time.

The conventional classification of siblings based on biological relatedness is therefore not necessarily particularly representative of the experiences of children. This is illustrated when Vigga's elder brother, Nicolaj, emphasises that they all makes up a family, even if others may not see it that way:

*'I think of them as my family. But then again, some of them might not be real and real family and stuff, but I still think of them as family' (Nicolaj, 15 years old).*

In the interview, he makes quite an effort to stress relatedness, even though he does not include the same children as Vigga in his group of siblings. A sibling group may include different siblings, depending on perspective and position.

Even if the children we have interviewed generally use well-established categories and also reference accepted understandings of some siblings being more 'real' than others it would appear that they also need to emphasise other experiences or add nuances to these categories. To understand the material, we must therefore differentiate between an ascribed and a lived understanding of siblingship.

The ascribed understanding rests on a well-established cultural distinction based on a biological classification of whom we consider siblings and whom we do not consider siblings. From this perspective, siblingship is unequivocal and invariable – and it is exactly its invariability that distinguishes it from friendship. This cultural understanding dominates the way siblings are generally presented and it is an understanding that all our informants relate to.

The second understanding of siblings, that of lived experiences of siblingship, is the most prevalent in the interviews. Because when the interviewees talk about their siblings, they need to nuance and define beyond the common understandings of what being a sibling entails. Siblingship is not merely a predefined category; to each individual, it represents unique relations that change over time and encompass many different feelings. And it is exactly this lived experience of emotional complexity and changeability that seems to incur deliberation and doubt. Complexity, to all intents and purposes, contests the unequivocal understanding that is culturally dominant. Children apparently assess their own sibling relations in relation to what is presented as 'real' siblingship; i.e. unequivocal and invariable siblingship.

### Emotional Relatedness

A general aspect of the descriptions is that siblings are a relation you, ideally need not to consider; an understanding probably supported by the conventional idea that 'real' siblingship cannot be broken. Nicolaj expresses it this way:

*Nicolaj: 'They're just there, and they're nice to have. And you can talk to them and stuff, be with them and you know ...'*

*Interviewer: 'They are a given, not someone you have to consider?'*

*Nicolaj: 'Yeah, yeah, you can fight with them and fall out, but they're still there.'*

Some of the children describe siblings as providers of emotional security, a feeling of having someone who is 'always there for you', that you are 'never alone' or 'completely isolated'. You do not have to live together or be biologically related, but the awareness of accessibility is central. With this awareness comes another expectation, namely that of one's siblings being unconditionally loyal. Even when they cannot be physically present, the relation entails an ideal perception of the others taking an in-

## CHAPTER 1: REAL SIBLINGS

terest in your life and backing you up. By way of example, Eline has the following contemplations on her obligations towards her younger brother:

*Eline: '... If I hear that some of Theodor's friends are on their way, and they tell me that something has happened, of course, I'll get upset. And if it happened just close by ... so of course I'd go and help and see if he was okay or something ... And he'd do the same for me. I know that', (Eline, 9 years old).*

At the same time, she emphasises that siblings should not monitor each other and they should not be too protective of one another. She elaborates by stating that the good thing about her elder brother is that he is not controlling:

*Eline: 'My big brother, he's, I mean, he's not one who is really into what other people do, like if you do something wrong or put something down the wrong way or things like that. It's a bit more like; you have to fix it yourself. He's a really good big brother, because he doesn't watch to see if I take some sweets, and I forgot to ask or what do I know, you know, stuff like that. So he doesn't keep taps on me so much' (Eline, 9 years old).*

From Eline's perspective, siblingship entails an indisputable solidarity that includes not controlling or backstabbing each other; it is each to their own, but there is help if needed. It is a fine line between 'keeping taps' and providing the space to 'fix it yourself', as Eline expresses it. At the same time, she elaborates that she does not share thoughts and secrets with her brother. The closeness of their relation is rather located in what it is not necessary to verbalise or explain; it becomes a very special relation because there is an expectation of potential loyalty and of a lasting relation.

As will be discussed further in the book's last chapter, *Doubting the Obvious*, this expectation can, however, also lead to doubt. Younger siblings are not always convinced that their elder siblings really take an interest, and many have experienced direct rejections when seeking the company of their older siblings. Solidarity and loyalty seem to be defining aspects of what siblingship should be. And this is exactly why doubt as to whether or not that solidarity will also manifest itself is a pivotal point in many children's reflections on their concrete sibling relations. This is seen when Liv, for example, talks about her siblings: 'They are really there for you – most of the time'. Being a sibling entails an emotional obligation, which can also be a source of insecurity.

### **Relatedness and Autonomy**

Even though there appears to be an explicit expectation that siblings will be there for you, there are many deliberations on where and how it is appropriate to show that you are related. You are obligated to one another, but only to a certain degree, because displaying too strong a relatedness can also challenge your autonomy as an individual. In a group interview, four children aged 12-13 reflect on the question of what you can expect of your siblings:

- Jakob:*            *'They'll help you if you need it'*  
*Sigrid:*           *'If it's real bad, then yes'*  
*Emma:*           *'It depends on whether they're older or younger'*  
*Philip:*           *'Yeah, that's right'*

The experience of sibling relations is also influenced by the social contexts. Older siblings are more obligated to help their younger siblings, though it has to be a serious situation for you to trouble your older sibling(s). In the group interview, the children talk about how some of their older siblings are sometimes a little embarrassed by them. As when Emma talks about her brother refusing to walk her to school:

## CHAPTER 1: REAL SIBLINGS

*Emma: 'Then we pretend that we're not together' (laughs)*

*Interviewer: 'Was he embarrassed to be with you, or how should we understand it?'*

*Emma: 'Probably just that I'm a little girl who shouldn't be hanging out with his friends just then ... But later on, it was sort of okay. I didn't talk to him much at school, on rare occasions ...'*

*Interviewer: 'So if someone teases you, is it then alright to call on your older brother or sister?'*

*Philip: 'It depends on how bad it is'*

*Sigrid: 'I mean, her big brother was extremely strong, you know' (pointing to Emma)*

*Philip: 'He's really big'*

*Emma: 'He's like this karate-ninja, right, but no, I'm usually quite capable of hitting back if the boys in my class hit me or poke me or something. But then, if it's really bad, then I'd like to be able to count on him helping me'.*

It is apparent that many of the children are quite aware that support from siblings is not always a real help in the on-going social games they are part of. It is a resource they expect to have access to, but help from siblings is also connected to risk and potential loss of prestige. Partly because there is no guarantee that their siblings will actually help if asked, and partly because help signals an inadequacy that most children would want to keep invisible. Judging by their stories, there seems to be an explicit awareness that siblings are always there, but in practical everyday life there are most certainly limits to how often you get to see each other, how much contact you have, and in which situations it is appropriate to call on one another.

Schools, afterschool care and youth clubs appear to be places where siblings don't engage in each other's activities. These are places where you hang out with your friends, and no matter how important a sibling

relation may be, it belongs in other contexts. As we sense when listening to Vigga:

*Interviewer:* 'Well, what about, do you use Nicolaj if you get upset?

*Vigga:* 'No I don't. I'm okay in school'

*Interviewer:* 'So did Agnes, did she go to the same school?

*Vigga:* 'Yeah, she just left'

*Interviewer:* 'Was it nice to have her at your school then?

*Vigga:* 'Yeah, sometimes. Sometimes she would also just say, "get lost"'

And in the following excerpt, Laurits also expresses a certain reservation in terms of asking for help from his one-and-a-half-year younger brother:

*Interviewer:* 'Okay, so what if you're in school and somebody teases you or says something that upsets you, or if a teacher tells you off, or whatever it may be, would you look for Oskar at school?'

*Laurits:* 'No, it's only him who'll look for me'

*Interviewer:* 'Okay'

*Laurits:* 'And then I'll talk to the teacher about it'

*Interviewer:* 'Okay, so you never look for him at school?'

*Laurits:* 'Not very often. I think it's better, a little, you know, more supportive when you have a big brother who, who, I mean, I just don't think I'd look for my little brother. But then, my friends are usually quite good at helping out. I mean, then, I mean, it's not that Oskar can't help. But you know, when my friends are close by and stuff. But Oskar, many of his friends often come running and say that I have to come over, if anything is wrong, well, not often, but sometimes'

*Interviewer:* 'Then what do you do?'

*Laurits:* 'I go and ask if he is okay'

## CHAPTER 1: REAL SIBLINGS

*Interviewer: 'Okay, then if someone teases him of something: would it be helpful if his elder brother comes?'*

*Laurits: 'Yeah, well, then I don't say anything to them, I say something like, "can't you go and look for a teacher on playground duty" and if they don't stop, then I'll walk them over to a teacher or something'  
(Laurits, 11 years old)*

What is interesting here, is the indication of the many dilemmas that Laurits experiences. It is not easy to balance the role of elder brother with the contexts he finds himself in. Throughout the remaining interview, Laurits manages to explain in many different ways that he can always count on Oskar. If something has happened during the day, he will tell Oskar about it. In their individual interviews, both he and Oskar emphasise how close they are, and in a steady stream of associations, they recount playing football together, cycling, doing parkour, playing with Lego, and describe how they have always been together, shared a bedroom, regardless of whether they are staying with their mother or their father. And yet both of them also make some effort to stress that there are situations when you cannot be obligated to one another, and you have to balance the considerations you make. In school, it is not really appropriate to be dependent on one another, especially not for Laurits; school is where you have to call on the teachers.

### **The Nature of Responsibility**

The balancing that the children express in relation to where and how they can depend on their siblings relate to a more common perception about children and independence. Professional day-care institutions stipulate that you have to be aware of not placing too much responsibility for their siblings on any child. Children should be encouraged to develop independently and having to consider younger siblings may be experienced as a burden. And it would appear that something similar

occurs at home. Many children have chores at home, but they are usually distributed individually. Older children can be given the chore of having to look after younger siblings, especially in families where the age-gap is considerable, or older children may be asked to help in the transition from one home to another. But in the more evenly aged sibling groups, helping young siblings with getting dressed, with homework and with picking them up does not seem to be part of everyday life. On the contrary, it would appear that siblings are explicitly not obligated to one another, something that varies significantly from expectations of siblings in many other societies.

This aspect is also evident in several of the parent interviews. In the following excerpt, by way of example, Jane expresses her concern that her eldest son has been handed too much responsibility for his siblings: 'He's been handed a lot of responsibility for his two younger siblings, which somehow he shouldn't have, I think. You will always get responsibility. But he takes responsibility himself, you know, because he's older, and he should, but not too much ... Sometimes I feel that it's been too much for him' (Jane, mother of 3).

And Malene corroborates this concern:

*'Yes, I also think I've made an effort that having siblings should not become a burden for them. I mean, they shouldn't – we are the ones who wanted children' (Malene, mother of 4).*

In other words, siblingship is considered a relation that children must not feel burdened by. Duty can undermine independence and perhaps also put a strain on the relation. Marianne expresses it quite explicitly in this slightly longer excerpt where she reflects on her eldest daughter, 10-year-old Mathilde's role in relation to Laura who is two years her junior:

*Marianne: '... It's not like she has to keep Laura in her back pocket, not at all'*

## CHAPTER 1: REAL SIBLINGS

*Interviewer:* 'What about in school ... are they obligated to one another when they are in school together?'

*Marianne:* 'No, I simply won't have that. There are teachers on playground duty over there, keeping an eye on them. That they, that Matilde has kept an eye on whether someone has hit her younger sister and then comforts her, that's another matter. I've never told them that they have to help each other'

*Interviewer:* 'That they are responsible for one another?'

*Marianne:* 'No. "You're in school and you have to make the most of it and get by on your own". And Mathilde, she shouldn't be dependant during the breaks, being the nurse who looks out for her sister. Because she has to learn to look after herself, and there are also her friends and other adults around as well'

*Interviewer:* 'So do you know if they have ever used one another in that way, regardless of what you have told them?'

*Marianne:* 'Yes, they have. Yes, I know that Laura has run up to Mathilde and said: "You know, so and so from your class did this and this", right. And then Mathilde has tried to be the mediator and, and I can hear that that can quickly go wrong. So I've just said: "Yes well, you should go and see the adults in charge", that is what I told Laura, and "Mathilde, you should go and see the adults who look after you"'

*Interviewer:* 'No, as you say, there are adults over there as well'

*Marianne:* 'Yeah, yeah, and of course they can use one another, it's not that ... Of course they can, but they have to learn to manage on their own, yeah'.

From parent interviews and conversations with kindergarten teachers as well as after school care and youth club assistants, you get the general impression that if siblings take responsibility for one another it may

impair their individual independence and autonomy. A sibling relation should be borne out of an emotional tie, it should not stem from given tasks or too much asymmetry. On the contrary, it would appear that parents, pedagogues and teachers alike see sibling relations as so much of a given that their task is more a question of liberating each individual child rather than supporting their sibling relations.

Interestingly, this emphasis on emotions means that siblingship, despite the unequivocal classification, has no unequivocal content. Sibling relations are formed by way of emotional exchanges, and therefore each individual has to work continuously to express their own emotions and interpret the signals of other siblings. This becomes evermore important in situations where physical and organisational frames do little to support the relation, e.g. when siblings alternate between homes out of step, when siblings move away from home, or when you have to live with children you do not know (cf. discussion in Chapter 4, *Siblings Between Spaces*). Sibling relations are emotional relations and might therefore be experienced as difficult and complex, despite a rhetoric that makes it sound like a fairly simple and indisputable phenomenon.

### Summary

As revealed in this chapter, siblingship is, on the one hand, presented as a rather unequivocal phenomenon, defined by biological kinship. On the other hand, sibling relations are experienced as being as complex as any other social relation. They are full of concrete considerations and interpretations, investments, joys and disappointments, and are experienced as unique while also being held up against and judged by general, cultural understandings of what siblingship is and should be. By implementing a perspective that focuses on these experiences, it becomes clear that siblingship is not a given relation. It is a phenomenon one has to work at maintaining, in ways that at the same time live up to certain well-established expectations of loyalty and invariability while also being in accordance with the concrete places and relations each individual is part of. As the examples above reveal, this work entails considerations and

## CHAPTER 1: REAL SIBLINGS

interpretations, which, on occasion, also gives cause for doubt, something to which we will return in the last chapter.

### **Theoretical Inspiration**

The approach to this chapter was inspired by analyses conducted by the British anthropologist Janet Carsten. We have been particularly inspired by her concept of 'relatedness' as a perspective on family relations, which focuses on people's perceptions and actions rather than established classifications. The British study on sibling relations by R. Edwards, L. Hadfield, H. Lucy and M. Mauthner (2006) has also been a source of inspiration, because their primarily sociological approach reveals actions and emotions encompassed by siblingship. Finally, numerous studies of siblingship in other cultural contexts (see for instance Cicirelli 1994; Montgomery 2009; Weisner & Gallimore 2008) inspired the chapter's attention to the expectations and obligations that siblingships encompass in a Danish context. And we can also mention a Danish study on siblings in day-care institutions (Høytrup 2013), which points to the general perception that children should not be overly responsible for their siblings.

# Chapter 2

## The Importance of Things

By Charlotte Palludan and Ida Wentzel Winther

In front of the house, there is a green Opel Zafira with a roof rack. Next to the car there is a post-box with a sticker that reads: The Hansen Jensen Family. A red and blue plastic motorbike is lying in the driveway. There are two junior children's bikes and a muddy mountain bike leaning against the wall of the house. The nameplate next to the front door has a lot of names on it. In the entrance hall, there are coats on hooks and three schoolbags in a pile. Right next to the entrance, there is a small closet-room with shelves from floor to ceiling on the one wall. These shelves are filled with baskets and boxes, each with a nametag. Against the other wall, there is a tall, white shoe closet, and next to the entrance, there is a key-rack with the names of the residents engraved with an electric incandescent burner. On it are house and bike keys, each with a nametag. If you proceed a little farther into the house, you find portraits of all the children in the household.

### Bits and pieces

To have and be siblings are manifested materially: the more children, the more things. But do things tell us anything about what is actually going on? Can we read things as expressions of something? By looking at the list of names on the nameplate, the number of shoes and coats in the entrance hall, the number of bicycles parked in the driveway and the number of children's portraits in the house, it becomes obvious that children live here, but it says nothing about whether or not they are

## CHAPTER 2: THE IMPORTANCE OF THINGS

siblings. You get the impression that there are children of many sizes (from a plastic motorbike to a mountain bike), and a closer look at the nameplate reveals that the names are constructed in different ways. The names are listed in a sequence that forms a pattern: Søren Jensen, Sanne Hansen, Frederik Rodsten Hansen, Fie Rodsten Hansen, Frederikke Jensen and Felix Hansen Jensen. The top two (Søren and Sanne) are most likely the adults. Sanne's last name, Hansen, is repeated in three of the following names, Frederik and Fie whose middle name is Rodsten, and Felix (the last name on the list) who has two last names: both Jensen and Hansen. Søren's last name is also Frederikke's last name, which in all likelihood indicates that she is his daughter. In other words, the children do not have the same last name, but they are connected by way of a first name starting with an F.

Nameplates can provide one approach to understanding how material orders interweave and generate social orders. Nameplates not only reveal who lives here, whom the house encompasses; a nameplate tells us that these people are categorised as a family. Whether or not the listed children have always been siblings is not revealed, but they are connected and constituted by way of the nameplate. If you look closer at the portraits around the house, you will see how they also contribute to the constitution of connections between the children and they reveal how the children are related. In the living room, there are kindergarten portraits of three smiling children in a row. It is Frederik, Fie and Felix. In the hallway between the living room and the kitchen there is a huge wall picture with photographs of a handful of children in many different situations. Frederikke made this a couple of years ago and she gave it to her father as a present, because her portrait was not included in the row of smiling children. She has included photos of both Frederik and Fie from when they were little, before she knew them – in other words, before their parents moved in together. There are photos of her, alone and with the other two children. And then there are lots of photos of Felix, who is the son of both parents and the youngest brother they all share. In the bottom corner, Frederikke has placed a small photo of Cilla, her

younger sister, whom her mother had 10 years ago and whose father is Jeppe. The photos illustrate the history of the sibling group, and it is a material manifestation of the fact that they were not always siblings but now they are.

Connections actively occur around and by way of material things. The computer appears to be one such pivotal material point in many families. We see this clearly in the home of 13-year-old Jakob, as his sister, who no longer lives at home, squeezes into his life and onto his computer. On the one hand, he is pleased that she is home, but at the same time, he also finds it a little annoying that she makes a mess and throws her bras on top of his computer. Alongside Jakob, his peers Philip, Emma and Sigrid talk about how the computer plays a different part in their relations to their siblings. It constitutes a rallying point for them. In Philip's and Sigrid's families, there are two stationary computers that everyone uses, which is annoying when you want to be left alone and even more so, when someone else sneaks a look at your passwords. In Jakob's house, they all have their own computer, and both he and his 18-year-old brother often play games at the same time, i.e. they meet online. Sometimes Jakob's elder brother will order Jakob to carry out specific duties, such as fetching bottles of cokes and pizza. When Marius, who is eight, sometimes minds his younger sister who is one, they play shooting games together, and otherwise he will often argue with his elder brother about which games to play on the computer. Different kinds of sibling-ship play out around the computer. Including the teasing and conflicting as well as the servicing and solicitous siblingships.

### **Abundance and Scarcity**

In 13-year-old Kalle's sibling group, computers are less something that the children unite around and more like possessions that are distributed among them according to a requirement-logic defined by their parents. Part of this logic stipulates that each child/family member can gain access to a shared family computer depending on specific wants or for specific purposes. The computer is located in Kalle's room, which means

## CHAPTER 2: THE IMPORTANCE OF THINGS

that the other children are allowed access to his room, unless he has a valid reason for keeping them out. The valid reason is homework, and he sometimes uses it to keep his siblings out. In this way, the family computers and associated policies for using them become an integrated part of Kalle's link to his siblings. By way of the computer, he becomes especially privileged and holds a certain power over some of their shared belongings, while at the same time he is expected to show a sense of fairness and justice in the allocation of computer access.

Nine-year-old Karl has a brother who is seven years his senior, and, like Kalle, he is also highly influential in certain matters. His name is Kasper and they share a room. It is organised in a manner that includes Karl moving out and sleeping on the sofa when Kasper is home. Among other things, this means that Karl does not have unlimited access to his musical instruments as these are stored in their shared room. He needs Kasper's permission to stay in the room and use his things. Karl adheres and accepts that it is a necessary condition related to the scarcity of space in a large family with lots of children. His adhering to material circumstances makes it possible for the entire sibling group to live under the same roof; something his body language strongly indicates that he appreciates. At the same time, he reveals that he finds it a little unfair that Kasper is thus afforded a special position in the sibling group, while his own contribution is taken for granted. And thus the material conditions and the material order constitute a lack of equality within the sibling group. Some have precedence, while others are at a disadvantage.

In Alberte's home, the scarcity of space manifests itself in three children sharing a small room. Having to adhere to each other's sleeping rhythms and shared noises can, on occasion, cause irritation within the sibling group. However, the discomfort that both Alberte and her one brother, Kalle, experience in relation to sharing a room is probably first and foremost connected to the original allocation of the room. When the family had to move to an apartment that necessitated a shared room, three children sharing two rooms appeared to be an option. Alberte dreamt of having her own room and sensed that her father and his girl-

friend understood this dream and found it reasonable, because Alberte is a girl who needs a room to herself and away from her two brothers. In much the same way, Kalle dreamt of having his own room and he also sensed that the adults understood and found it reasonable, as he was the eldest of the three siblings. When the day of the move finally arrived, and the rooms were allocated, it turned out that one of the rooms would be used as a study, which meant that the second room became the shared bedroom of all three siblings. Both Alberte and Kalle were disappointed. Apparently, they have not talked about their hope let alone their disappointment. They simply appear to accept both the specific decision made and the fact that the adults decide on the material conditions pertaining to the sibling group.

This is not how it plays out at Nanna's home when she is exposed to an equally disappointing parent decision. She comments on what she considers an unfair and unjust allocation of rooms. When Nanna and her mother move in with Liv and Liv's father, Nanna is given a room to herself. However, Nanna voices her displeasure with the room, as she believes it to be smaller and therefore less attractive than Liv's room. Nanna seeks confirmation for her allegation by measuring the room, thus drawing attention to the fact that the room is indeed smaller. The parents, however, uphold the allocation of rooms, as their logic stipulates that Liv should be allowed to stay in the room she has always occupied. It is an argument Liv herself accepts, although she never contributes to the discussions. Liv deals with the situation by way of silence. And so, the girls position themselves differently, by way of vociferous opposition and silence, respectively. There are only two rooms, and the difference in the girls' response to the allocation of rooms can be understood as two different strategies to obtain space – physically as well as mentally.

### **Fairness and Justice**

The stories of Liv and Nanna and Alberte and Kalle reveal that parents' allocations of rooms generate potential opposition between siblings and thus it points to rooms being more than materiality. Rooms also consti-

## CHAPTER 2: THE IMPORTANCE OF THINGS

tute social powers that generate specific relations, which is something the parents are aware of and try to take into account when they allocate and distribute. Cornelius, Egil and Arendse's house is being refurbished, which, among other things, means the addition of two new rooms for the children. The parents, Bjørn and Malene, decide that the two eldest children, Arendse and Egil, will get the new rooms. Cornelius will keep the room he has had along, which he used to share with Egil. But, Cornelius feels disadvantaged and so his parents decide that as compensation, he will also get to use the extra room in the basement that previously belonged to Egil, but now Cornelius can use it to play on his Play Station. This gives Cornelius two rooms and he is content. And so their parents manage to avoid creating too much of a stir in the sibling group, despite Egil's privileges being contested. Whether or not Egil agrees is not revealed, but as he is given one of the new, larger rooms, he does not protest as he loses his basement room. Fair ...? From the outside it seems right and rather fair; but what adults consider indisputably fair is not always how children experience it. Neither is fairness always the most important aspect as far as children are concerned. Having to hand over a room to one's sibling can thus be a rather emotional affair for very different reasons. It could be, for example, that a child is particularly fond of a specific room, due to certain memories related to that room.

Age appears to be a legitimate differentiation factor when allocating and distributing material things among siblings. The older you are, the bigger, the newer, the more expensive the material resources you are entitled to. This does not push siblings into opposing corners, nor does it generate arguments and fights on any scale commensurable to unfair resource distributions by way of other principles. These could include gender and seniority, which are used much less frequently than the principle of age, and most often retrospectively, when specific resource allocations call for an explanation. Parents relate that distribution and allocation of material resources always hang in the balance. It is rarely a question of following principles dogmatically; it is rather a continuous assessment of how to enable a just and fair distribution. And it does not

merely concern the allocation of rooms, it also concerns the distribution of electronic devices, bicycles, clothes and children's savings accounts etc., including scope, quality, sizes as well as frequency. Liv's and Nanna's parents have given this much thought in relation to phones and music systems. One guideline in their deliberations is an even distribution of resources in order to secure social equality. They have, however, been derailed by other parents and grandparents by way of gifts that include an iPhone and a computer. Rather than resettling the balance through an even distribution of material resources, Liv's and Nanna's parents have had to re-balance by way of filling gaps and smoothing over inequalities, ensuring that the girls' material status remains relatively equal.

### **Priorities and Investments**

Moral balancing is interlaced with the families' financial priorities and histories. Karl's parents buy computers and musical instruments for all their children as and when required. However, they cannot add more rooms to their villa apartment, despite the increasing number of children in the family. They live in close quarters and some siblings have to share rooms, and as a consequence, the right of use has to be counterbalanced accordingly. Kalle and Alberte, on the other hand share computers, while the fact that their mother has been a member of a housing association for many years enables her to offer her children their own room. Which may make it a little easier for them to have to share a room when staying with their father. Specific priorities and the subsequent counterbalancing are often based on principles and logics, which parents create and adjust over time, but they are not always consciously and explicitly included in concrete considerations.

Sometimes, a social order is inadvertently affected by material circumstances. You could say that sometimes it simply happens that way, as when the saucepan *once again* proved too small when all the children in the family were sat around the table. The mother is dishing out pasta, and as she gets to the last of five children, she realises that there is only

## CHAPTER 2: THE IMPORTANCE OF THINGS

just enough to go all the way around, and she frets, because despite cooking a lot of pasta, it barely suffices. She acknowledges that it has nothing to do with a scarcity of pasta but rather a scarcity of saucepans large enough for the number of people eating dinner. There are children who live in the household permanently and the saucepans match this particular constellation. When the household is extended, there are no saucepans large enough to cook pasta for everybody. The use of a certain saucepan signifies that the material equipment in the household is not adapted to the total number of children in the family, and thus it becomes a symbol of how not everybody is considered a complete and equal member of the family. The handling of materiality unintentionally turns into something we can read as including or excluding social statements. Whether it is experienced as unfair can be difficult to tell and it varies greatly.

12-year-old Zenia alternates between living with her father and her mother, and she does not have a room in either home. In both households, there are other children; some of who also have other homes, while others live there permanently. In one home, Zenia sleeps in a shared room with the other children. In the other home, she sleeps in a bed-loft, which she also shares with other children. Maybe it is simply the way it played out, perhaps it is a question of limited space, or perhaps it is an expression of her parent's allocation of material resources. The otherwise strong norm, which dictates that children should have a room, and preferably one each, and preferably one in every home, has certainly not succeeded in Zenia's family. Nor with her as she never indicates that she finds not having her own rooms unfair.

### **Being Recognised as Siblings**

Much like children's rooms, holidays are high on the list of priorities in many families. It is a commodity often connected to generating a shared narrative and to being viewed as belonging together. Holidays are organised, and through the organising, they materialise. Websites and catalogues are looked at. Families dream and negotiate: where does every-

one want to go on holiday? What can they afford? When can they go? Who can come? Reservations are made and money transferred. Necessary equipment is obtained depending on the holiday destination. Bags and suitcases are packed. Families travel together in cars, busses and aeroplanes. They arrive at holiday apartments, summerhouses and camping sites. And they consume ice cream and pizza, they go shopping and swimming, buy souvenirs, take photos, and spend leisure time canoeing, mini golfing, bowling, on fishing trips or with a Play Station and they visit Zoos and amusement parks. Not only do they bring back numerous (holiday) stories, they also bring back things and photos. And all of it is part and parcel of building sibling relations. On holiday, we invest both time and money in consumption, and through consumption we establish and maintain a shared sibling narrative. Both parents and children make this investment. Children primarily invest time, while parents invest both time and money.

12-year-old Lasse does not get to see his brothers much on a daily basis, but on holidays they spend a lot of time together. They have many grandparents who have summerhouses in different locations. The children travel to – and between – these destinations. Financially, the family prioritizes having summerhouses where they can all meet up - and afford the tickets to get there. The boys themselves invest in the sibling camaraderie that these journeys make possible.

When parents, grandparents and siblings prioritize holidays to the extent that they do, it becomes even more important that everybody participates. If you do not want to go, or if you allow other things to stand in the way, the others may experience it as a rejection. Holidays can generate disappointment and disharmony in the sibling group and indeed the entire family if the financial investment is not met by the social investment of all family members. For Søren, Juliane and Jon, all of whom are approx. 18 years of age and all of whom are from long and wide siblingships, this proves complicated. They are finding it difficult to contribute to the shared investments in the holiday planning for the coming summer. They are tempted by other things, e.g. Roskildefestiva-

## CHAPTER 2: THE IMPORTANCE OF THINGS

len (a huge, annual music festival in Roskilde, Denmark), by interrail travel as well as the Trans-Siberian Railway. While at the same time, their families talk about trips to various summerhouses, Southern Europe and a bicycle-trip in Jutland. They would like to be part of it all and do not feel like saying no to any of it, but they need to make it all come together somehow. They want to, partly because they know that having lots of younger siblings obliges: it obliges their parents to arrange holidays for everybody and it obliges them to go along. Partly, because shared holidays bring them close to their siblings. A successful effort pays dividend in the shape of sibling solidarity and it constitutes them as a family of brothers and sisters.

When we go on holiday the group feeling is underpinned by other people viewing the group as tightly knit by a strong family bond. Strangers cannot see whether or not members of a sibling group have always been siblings or if it is a recent constellation. Which is why holidays are great for generating a sense of communality. You are presented as siblings by having identical nametags on your suitcases, by staying in the same hotel, at the same camping site or in the same summerhouse – even using the same credit card and withdrawing money from the same account is a material expression that emphasises the perception of togetherness. In exactly the same way as the nameplate on the Hansen-Jensen-family's mail box.

### Summery

Siblingship is embedded in materiality. Powerful and less powerful positions in siblingships are constituted by way of bits and pieces. Abundance and scarcity are important dimensions when siblings negotiate their mutual positions, and when parents distribute material goods. The way things are distributed and used as a framework for time spent together generates both satisfaction and disappointment. Previous experiences with – and future hopes of – having or not having, getting and not getting, have an impact on sibling relations as ways of understanding each other and as narratives about being together.

Materiality is a resource that siblings use. Their parents regulate access to specific user patterns and the distribution of material goods. This regulation takes place in the shape of continuous considerations of how to distribute the material goods in a fair and just manner. And there are different arguments involved in the distribution. Whether children obtain a footing by way of possessions is important, as is gender. Age, however, seems to be the most legitimate argument for an uneven distribution of goods. Both children and adults accept this as normal, and this normality is reproduced in the execution of fairness and justice. Normality also includes specific material goods and user privileges. Individual rooms and shared holidays are significant. Individual rooms or defined spaces enable children to make distinctions between their siblings. When we use things collectively, especially on holidays, it strengthens the sibling group, it can even shape sibling groups by way of investments as well as in the meeting with and gaze of the outside world.

### **Theoretical Inspiration**

The British anthropologist Daniel Miller has inspired our approach and understanding of materiality in the shape of his understanding of how objects create subjects, as well as his claim that an integrated and inseparable relation is generated between objects and subjects. It is not merely a matter of subjects creating objects, objects are also co-creators of subjects, and an integrated and inseparable relation between subjects and objects is generated. Materiality actively participates in the aesthetic order people create. Miller does not see materiality as representations – and symbols – of people’s relation to the world, rather things become co-creators of people and social relations (Miller 2008). The Danish anthropologist Inger Sjørlev describes how people connect with one another through things: ‘Relations with different subjects – friends, family members, present, absent and dead – are maintained through relations to

## CHAPTER 2: THE IMPORTANCE OF THINGS

different objects, whereby the lives of things and people merge' (Sjørøsløv, 2013: 60).

In the article, 'The Idea of Home – A Kind of Space' (1991), the American anthropologist Mary Douglas describes how a home is run by way of a scale of justice and fairness (a mental economy). The regulatory systems have not been written down, but they are implemented by way of the concept fairness, which is also a central distribution principle within the household (Douglas, 1991:299). Douglas focuses on the relativity of fairness, how it can change and is something that on the one hand is negotiable, yet on the other hand it is also something that is embedded in the rooms. Another source of inspiration is her attention to the importance of the distinction between for example in- and exclusion. Attention to the fact that siblings are shaped and recognised as siblings in the meeting with their surroundings and by the gaze of strangers is also central to the British sociologist Rosalind Edwards and her colleagues (Edwards, et al 2006).

# Chapter 3

## Mediated Interactions

By Mads Middelboe Rehder

*'Before going to sleep at night, we would knock on the wall until either he shouted good night or I shouted good night. Because the wall, you can just knock on it ... His lamp, you could usually hear when he switched it on or off. So I'd be able to hear when he went to bed. The walls are very thin (...)', (Frederikke, 18 years old)*

Frederikke and her elder brother August, who has now moved out, grew up in the same house with their parents, and they used to share a room when they were younger. The door to Frederikke's room still has very visible markings of her brother's nameplate from when they shared the room. As they grew older, August moved into the room right next to their old bedroom. He placed his bed against the wall between his and Frederikke's rooms, with Frederikke's bed right on the other side. This physical closeness enabled them to hear one another on either side of the wall. In the mornings, Frederikke was also aware of her brother waking up because his lamp would make a clicking noise when switched on. These experiences of being in close proximity to one another and being aware of each other's daily rhythms have changed because they no longer occupy adjacent rooms.

Their knocking on the wall has transmuted into written messages on Facebook. Each day, they sit with their computers and write to one another either before going to bed at night or first thing in the morning. So, when August writes good night in the evening and Frederikke replies with good morning the following morning, they both refer to their

## CHAPTER 3: MEDIATED INTERACTIONS

shared experiences. The trivial, everyday interactions, which they practiced face-to-face for years, have become a shared history which grounds their mediated interactions. Writing each other on Facebook no longer has to take place at the same time; this asynchronous media allows August to write good night and Frederikke to see it eight hours later and only then reply.

They do not merely say good night and good morning to one another. They also stay informed about what is going on in their lives by writing to one another during the day. They exchange typical everyday doings, such as what happened in school, who they spent the afternoon with, what happened at work, or what homework Frederikke needs to do:

*'Sometimes, it's just "Hey", and I'll see it four hours later, and then I'll reply, "Hey", so it's not necessarily long conversations ... sometimes it's just, "How are you doing?", "I'm doing my science project", "Is it boring?", "Yeah", "Okay, I guess I'll just get my bass out and play a little". Sometimes we just have conversations like that. You don't get much from them, but it's practically every day that I have conversations like that [chatting on Facebook]. You get a sense that he's out there, somewhere.'* (Frederikke, 18 years old)

These mediated everyday interactions can be understood as substituting chitchats that would normally have taken place in their room, in the kitchen, the hall, or on the couch in front of the TV. When siblings use their computers or mobile phones to write or call each other and use social media such as Facebook to interact by way of chats, wall posts, likes, photos and comments, a mediated interaction is established. This mediated interaction is woven into everyday life, taking its point of departure in existing experiences and shared history. These experiences are central to understanding how simple exchanges can carry much more weight than immediately presumed from the short messages.

### Caring Interactions

Katrine is sitting at the desk in the living room, bent over her computer, chatting on Facebook with her brother, who is sick. The old laptop makes a lot of noise and she knows how to place it so that the worn plug will light up. Katrine does not have a smartphone she can connect to Facebook, and so she has to use her old laptop to go online, and it only works at home or at school.

- Katrine:           Feeling better?*  
*Brother:           Not really, but Nurofen helps ☺*  
*Katrine:           ☹ Too bad.*  
*Did you stay at home today?*  
*Brother:           I am nothing but coughing and runny nose so*  
*Well, most of the day*  
*But had to hand in maths project*  
*Katrine:           Bummer ☹ Hope you feel better! Okay*  
*Brother           And then we just finished the report*  
*Great*  
*Katrine:           We miss you <3, it's our gala tomorrow :)))*

Katrine is 19 years old, and she has three siblings. Her parents are divorced. She has an elder brother, Mikkel, with whom she has both parents in common, and two elder sisters, Signe and Anne, from her father's previous relationship. Katrine lives with her mother, while Mikkel has lived with their father since the age of 13, though recently he moved out. Katrine and Mikkel are used to not spending weekdays together, but they know each other really well, and they share a long history and lots of experiences, memories and references.

Their experiences are framed by a sensuousness that is activated when Mikkel writes 'I am nothing but coughing and runny nose'. Katrine has a bodily understanding of what her brother looks like when he is ill. She has mental pictures of him in bed, with a runny nose. This connects their written interaction to her sensory experiences and to her empathy

## CHAPTER 3: MEDIATED INTERACTIONS

towards him, and thus the few words they exchange become a way of practicing their emotional interconnectedness.

Young siblings have an embedded bodily experience of voices, sounds, smells and physical expressions which afford them an intimate physical and emotional frame of reference, which then constitutes the resonator of their mediated interactions. Bodily expressions and memories are activated and enable the few actual words exchanged in these mediated interactions to gain a sensed meaning and thus influence the experienced togetherness.

By utilizing Facebook's chat function, the interaction between Katrine and Mikkel is hidden from their parents, friends and other siblings. Nobody else in the room can see what they are actually doing on their computers, and although Katrine's mother knows that she is on Facebook, this is no direct indication that she is having a caring interaction with her brother who is sick. In much the same way, the privacy of the chat room makes it impossible for anyone else on Facebook to gain access to their interactions, which enable the siblings to interact in a private manner. They are only recognized as siblings on Facebook because Katrine has placed Mikkel in the category of brother in Facebook's systematisation of family relations, and because they have the same family name.

### **Becoming Visible as Siblings**

When siblings use technology to keep in touch, it does not merely take place by way of private interactions only visible to those included, but it also happens via public interactions.

Public interactions cover social gatherings such as family gatherings face-to-face, having friends over who then see the siblings together, or interactions on Facebook's public platform, which includes public wall posts, tags, comments, likes, and much more. These all constitute social gatherings with a potential audience consisting of family, friends and networks on Facebook.

On the other hand, mediated interactions such as phone conversations and chatting on Facebook do not have an audience, and thus they

provide quite different premises for intimacy and closeness without having to consider the presence of other people. Private, mediated interactions allow for the establishment of stronger connections between some siblings as well as the disconnection of other siblings, without it necessarily becoming evident or explicit within the sibling group. Siblings tell each other different things, and they communicate differently, but private interactions allow these differences to stay invisible.

Katrine interacts with her sisters, Signe and Anne, on Facebook's public platform, which they use actively to keep in touch. Katrine only lived with Signe and Anne for brief periods of time, eight-nine years ago, when their parents were together. They do not share an experience of living together that compares to Katrine and her brother Mikkel's shared experiences as they lived together for many years. Katrine is very keen to maintain a relationship with her two elder sisters and she is happy when they upload photos of all of them together or post something on her Facebook wall. They all publicly comment on shared photos, and this appears to generate a sense of community between them, which is also visible to their friends, family and network. Katrine can look back down over her timeline and view shared photos and affiliated interactions on Facebook, including likes and comments others have added to their sibling activities.

Facebook makes her sisters visible to her friends and network, which is not otherwise the case, because Katrine does not see her elder sisters face-to-face very often. By categorising Signe and Anne as siblings on her Facebook profile, it becomes easier to recognise them as siblings even if they do not share a family name.

Thus Katrine and her sisters manage to create a sibling history to underpin their siblingship. The visible social interaction and communication on Facebook becomes an element of their efforts to generate a sense of community as well as a shared history and shared references.

Frederikke, whose elder brother has left home, explains that it is only very rarely that her brother comments or likes any of her posts or pictures on Facebook's public platform. Their interactions primarily take

### CHAPTER 3: MEDIATED INTERACTIONS

place as private chats. She has only ever experienced that he liked something on her Facebook wall twice. The latest like was that of her profile picture, where she was dressed like a sailor.

*‘Then this fantastic thing happened the other day. He liked my profile picture. It was after the school party on Friday, where it was “Pin-up Girls” and “Sailors”. And we thought that it would be cooler to dress up as sailors. So I had bought waders and a full beard, and I think he thought it was quite cool.’ (Frederikke, 18 years old.)*

To Frederikke, this public like means that her brother is publically linked to her photo on Facebook, showing both her and her friends that he has seen the photo, and that he likes it. To understand the importance of these electronic likes and comments, they could be viewed as presents given as part of a mutual exchange that ties siblings closer together. These likes are given and reciprocated among siblings as ways of tying closer bonds through positive expressions. A like from an elder brother, who very rarely interacts publically on Facebook, is thus considered a great gift. However, Frederikke does not feel comfortable responding in kind and instead sends him a photo via their Facebook chat to which he does not respond. They do not talk or write about this incident, but it is highly evident that her brother’s like was very important to Frederikke, but also that her reciprocation did not make him like or comment on any of her other public postings on Facebook.

These public interactions on Facebook are not just important to the siblings who are directly involved. Katrine’s brother Mikkel is not part of the many public posts, likes, comments and tags that the sisters share on Facebook. He is, however still able to keep up with what they post on Facebook and thus gain an insight into elements of their everyday lives.

To Louise, Facebook is also a means of keeping up to date with her sister’s life. She describes how she can feel connected to her sister when she follow her posts on Facebook, even without actively engaging in interactions with her.

*'You don't always like or comment, but you know, just seeing it and stuff ... it somehow makes it not so long ago since you last spoke ... It's not that I speak to her that way ... It's just that you sort of know, what is happening, that she's alive and stuff. Just, you know, what's happening in her life, and that might also be what I wanted to ask her about, if she was in fact here, you know, "So what are you up to these days?" Then you just read something, and then you feel that you've been in touch.'* (Louise, 19 years old.)

By being physically separated, many siblings experience a sense of disengagement, of no longer having access to information about how the other siblings live, and how their everyday lives unfold because they do not meet face-to-face. By seeing photos, descriptions or 'small signs of life' as Louise describes it, they are afforded an opportunity to keep in touch and get an idea of what goes on in other sibling's everyday life which they themselves are not part of.

Siblings use both public and private social interactions to stay connected. They are used to maintain connections between siblings but also to build and strengthen siblingships. Online, siblings can be viewed as a group on Facebook without meeting face-to-face, which in some instances reinforces the sense of connectedness and community.

### **Different Connections**

Siblings can thus use mediated interactions as different ways of connecting. It also allows for different ways of interacting within the sibling group. To some young people, mobile phone conversations are a means of generating a strong sense of togetherness and caring.

Frederikke describes how her brother used to phone her after he moved away:

### CHAPTER 3: MEDIATED INTERACTIONS

*'I remember, right at the beginning, when my brother moved away, he would call me every day. And it was every single day, and we did it for quite some time, we'd talk to each other on the phone every day, but we never do it anymore. It was actually quite nice because he would just say, "What are you up to?" Because it was like, you were used to seeing each other all the time ... So it was just like still having the same every-day in some way because we'd talk. You establish a stronger connection when you talk to the person and sense their mood, which you don't really when you write. So I find that a little sad that I don't do that anymore.'* (Frederikke, 18 years old.)

Even though Frederikke expresses a wish to have more contact with her brother via mobile phone because she experiences a stronger connection that way, she does not phone her brother. She primarily stays in touch with him on Facebook, just as she uses Facebook to keep in touch with most of her friends. She rarely calls anyone even though she herself appreciates a phone call.

Katrine does not talk to her siblings on her mobile phone either. Nor does she expect the others to keep in touch by way of mobile phones. Yet in a group interview, it is revealed that her two older sisters, Signe and Anne, talk to each other on the phone on a daily basis which Katrine experiences as something very different from the way they interact with her on Facebook.

*Signe:* 'So, do you phone each other every day?' (asking Katrine and Mikkel)

*Mikkel:* 'Me and Katrine? Not at all.'

*Katrine:* 'No, not at all'.

*Signe:* 'I don't think, we've ever talked on the phone' (to Mikkel)

*Mikkel:* 'No, not very often. But I generally don't talk very much on the phone'.

- Signe:* *'(...) I mean, if I'm bored, I'll always call someone. And it's always like my mother, father or Anne ... I should get better at phoning my (...).'*
- Katrine:* *'Us (...)', (laughs)*
- Signe:* *'But I think perhaps, I think, yeah, like, I don't really know. I'm not very good at phoning friends. I always end up phoning Anne.'*
- Katrine:* *(Laughs)*
- Signe:* *'I talk to Anne three times a day, I think, when she answers that is'*
- Katrine:* *'Right' (laughs)*
- Mikkel:* *'You can call me, I'd like to (...).'*
- Signe:* *'Yeah, that's it, I should get better at phoning you guys (...).'*

Katrine and Mikkel are not part of the interaction the two sisters share on their mobile phones. Thus they are excluded from parts of the social interactions within the sibling group, which appears to be of a certain character. Phone conversations, as opposed to, for example, Facebook chat, require both parties to be present, and it usually only takes place between two people. Furthermore, phone conversations are often considered closer and more caring, as explained by Frederikke.

Because phone conversations and chats are both private and hidden, Katrine and her siblings have managed to interact internally in different ways without the entire sibling group knowing. Technologically mediated interactions can thus be used publically to enhance and illustrate siblingships, making them visible to others and consequently generating a sense of community, which can also include those who may not actively participate in the exchanges. At the same time, mediated interactions can also be seen to be excluding because they take place within a certain mediated framework.

### Time, Place and Age

The possibilities afforded young siblings in relation to interacting and connecting with one another without being face-to-face enable them to spend time together when it suits them. Being physically present in the company of siblings is no longer the only way to spend time together. Interactions are no longer connected to a physical place, to timekeeping or the calendar. They can play out at the same time (synchronously) on media such as talk on mobile phones and Skype video chat, or they can play out at different times (asynchronously) by way of continuous texting, Facebook chat or wall posts.

To siblings, interactions are therefore not dependent on whether or not all siblings are online or offline at the same time. The term, *syncline*, is used to describe an everyday that takes place both on- and offline, simultaneously. It includes an understanding of technologically mediated and face-to-face interactions as ways of being together that are interdependent and supplement each other. The communication that takes place offline, affects that which happens online, and vice versa. This enables sibling interactions to exist continuously, regardless of time and place.

19-year-old Ari lives with his mother in Copenhagen. His sister also lives in Copenhagen, but his older brother lives in Island. The way he interacts with them differs. He uses Skype to synchronically video-chat with his elder brother in Island, something they arrange by way of their continued asynchronous communication on Facebook. They use Skype to talk because Ari's brother writes in Icelandic, and Ari is no longer good at writing Icelandic, and so he prefers to talk with rather than write to his brother. Ari communicates asynchronously with his Danish-speaking sister by way of small sound bites and pictures throughout the day. The asynchronous messaging means that they never constitute an interruption; rather they can be enjoyed when there is time. This accumulates into a lot of messages throughout the day sent via specific Apps to which they both have access because they have the same kind of smartphone. Calculations on Ari's phone tell us that Ari and his sister

share hundreds of messages each month. To Ari, the numerous sound bites and pictures enable him and his sister to feel that they are a big part of each other's everyday lives, in the same way that the Skype conversations allow him to spend time with his brother, 'just hanging out' as he explains it, without cost to either of them.

The syncline everyday that many siblings inhabit thus allows them to experience being an integrated part of each other's everyday lives, even if they do not live together or see each other face-to-face.

Yet this is not true for all siblings. Age and technological access are central elements to being included in mediated interactions. To be on social media such as Facebook and Skype, you have to be at least 13 years of age, which in principle excludes all children under the age of 13 from taking part in the interactions that play out on these platforms. Access to mediated interactions is also limited by text messages and mobile phones, as these conversations in practice require each sibling to have a mobile phone of their own.

Nine-year-old Karl is not on Facebook, and he does not have a mobile phone. His two elder siblings, Bodil and Kasper, who do not live together on a daily basis, are friends on Facebook where they stay in touch in addition to phoning and texting each other. Karl is not included in these mediated interactions. His age and lack of access to technology mean that Karl cannot partake in the interactions of his elder siblings, but because their interactions are not visible to him, he is unaware of the social interactions that he misses out on.

11-year-old Ditte has two elder siblings who have both moved out of the family home. She is not old enough to be on Facebook, and she does not have a mobile phone. Yet as the youngest of her siblings, her parents have allowed her to have a Facebook account. On Facebook, she is 'friends' with her two elder siblings, but in her experience, they do not want to have contact with her. She is privy to the things they write to each other on their Facebook walls, and everything else they post about their everyday lives, but she experiences total exclusion because they do not respond to her inquiries. And thus, she is neither included in her

## CHAPTER 3: MEDIATED INTERACTIONS

siblings' public nor private exchanges on Facebook which limits her interaction with them to their home visits.

Young people such as Ari and his siblings are capable of handling their need for interactions on their own. Which is why they are not dependent on their parents creating the frameworks, routines or the physical proximity that younger children need. Both Karl and Ditte are excluded from their elder siblings' mediated interactions but are unable to act on their own to satisfy their need to be with their siblings. Thus, it is not possible for all to partake in the syncline everyday, which enables siblings to interact across time and space. In much the same way, parents are only rarely allowed to engage in the young people's mediated interactions. This means that parents cannot take part in or gain a direct understanding of the social practice that unfolds when siblings interact with one another via mobile technology and social media. Which is why parents are not always privy to the inclusions and exclusions that take place among siblings in mediated interactions.

### Summery

Siblings, who are separated, use technologically mediated interactions to connect, care for, and surface as small signs of life in each other's everyday lives and to keep each other posted on everyday happenings. Chats, likes, conversations, comments and uploaded photos enable young siblings to be a part of each other's lives, across time and place. This flexible form of interaction enables them to maintain a sense of togetherness on a level that fits into their everyday lives.

The technologies available to siblings are of significant importance. It is central to young people whether or not they have the same smartphones with access to the same programmes and data, or whether they have to be at home in front of a computer to go online and stay in touch. Exclusions from mediated social interactions can easily occur, as some siblings do not have the same possibilities as other siblings. This makes separated siblings particularly vulnerable as mediated social interactions afford them a unique opportunity to connect with one an-

other. Because these connections take place in a social space that parents have little or no access to, they often go unnoticed by parents.

Mediated interactions among siblings can only be understood in relation to an offline context consisting of materiality, surroundings, shared history as well as physical and sensed experiences. Syncline everyday life is practiced as an interlacing of mediated and face-to-face interactions. Mediated interactions can become visible to others on platforms such as Facebook, where siblings do not have to be physically present in the same space to be viewed as an interconnected sibling group. But it can also take place in private, in the shape of an invisible temporality between individual siblings that does not involve anyone outside the specific interactions. Social relations and practices will penetrate mediated ways of interacting. This means that we encounter different ways of interacting and different technological modes of operation in sibling constellations and internally within individual sibling relations.

### **Theoretical Inspiration**

This chapter is written with an analytical approach inspired by symbolic interactionism (Goffman 1959). It springs from an interest in how young siblings act and interact based on the meaning they afford mediated interactions. In order to understand how mediated interactions are included in everyday life, we rely on the idea of syncline, which describes an everyday life in which social practices take place in the shape of interlacing online and offline interactions, both synchronously and asynchronously (Rehder 2013). William Rawlins and Daniel Miller also inspire our focus on relations as concurrent, communicative practices, whereby continued reciprocal exchanges not only build but also constantly renegotiate close relations (Rawlins 2008; Miller 2011). Finally, our attention to the importance of the body in terms of the perception of technologically mediated interactions is inspired by Maurice Merleau-Ponty's corporeity, which emphasises that how our bodies perceive is the central point of departure for human perception (Merleau-Ponty 1994).

# Chapter 4

## Siblings Between Spaces

By Ida Wentzel Winther

Annika is 12 years old. She lives with her mother for nine days and then spends five days with her father. 14-year-old Kirstine also lives at Annika's mother's house, and she spends seven days with each of her parents and two younger siblings, seven and eight years of age respectively, who both stay in one place all the time. At Annika's father's house, there is also a younger sibling, 6-year-old Jens, and currently, he is also subjected to a shared parenting arrangement along the lines of seven days at each place. Annika moves between homes and siblings each Monday and Wednesday. Everything is meticulously arranged to allow her and her siblings to spend most of their days together, in both places. At her father's house, she spends five days with Jens, and at her mother's house, she spends seven days with Kirstine. Christmas is celebrated at her mother's house every other year, and at her father's the rest of the time. Every four years, they all spend Christmas together. Birthdays are similarly subjected to shared parenting arrangements. There are many systems simultaneously on the go, and they include the siblings of both parents as well as their divorced families. Everyone is aware that you cannot make sudden changes, as this will cause utter chaos all around. All systems come together to form what could be termed a choreography that includes many dancers. Annika's life on the move between several homes and sibling-groups is not outstanding in Denmark, but a way of living she shares with a great many other children.

### Bags

Bags are filled, bags are carried, and bags are emptied between her different home spaces. From a very tender age, Annika brought her bag to kindergarten and now she brings it to school. Previously, she did not bring many things, and she kept clothes in both homes. She still does. Only now there are quite a number of special garments that she would like to bring along, which is why she also moves an extensive part of her wardrobe. The day before changing bases, Annika packs a small bag with clothes and other items such as cleansing cream and a charger. Every other weekend, 15-year-old Asbjørn travels across Denmark with his siblings to visit their father. He always carries a huge bag with sports gear, a badminton racket, clothes, school things, his computer, and numerous chargers. His siblings carry similar bags, though not as huge, and they get annoyed that his bag takes up so much room on the bus. Despite the difference in bag size, the children share a common fate in as much as they have to pack and unpack their bags, they have to carry them, and make sure that they bring everything from one place to the next. The youngest one, Sofia, just turned seven when she started travelling across Denmark with her siblings, who at the time were nine and twelve years old. Sofia's bag was heavy, and her siblings had to help her get it on and off the bus, through the Central Station, as well as onto the regional and local trains. Many children who catch trains on a regular basis will be driven to school on Fridays, on account of the bags, others will drag their bags from busses and city trains, and in some schools, they even have a storage room for pupils' weekend-bags. There are also bags in staircases and bike-sheds waiting for parents to come by and pick them up. It appears to be primarily fathers who do the pick-ups. 12-year-old Zenia lives in her bag. She usually carries whatever fits into her bag between her two homes.

Bags circulate between homes and can be seen as a manifestation of mobility. There has to be room for things in the bags and children must be able to carry them. Previously, the father of Juliane, Ditte and Arendse would pick up their bags from their mother's house, and then bring them

## CHAPTER 4: SIBLINGS BETWEEN SPACES

all back a week later. However, in later years, they do their own packing – sometimes together and sometimes individually, depending on what their timetables look like and what other activities they have planned. Juliane and Ditte pack their bags routinely and speedily. They practically throw their things into their bags. For Juliane, the most complicated items are her books, because she is doing her A-levels at High School and therefore has to carry lots of heavy books back and forth. But fortunately, her school is not far from her mother's house, and so if she forgets something important, she can always pick it up from her mother's, which is where most of her things are anyway. Ditte's main items are computer and school things etc., which she then carries back and forth. She has clothes in both homes. Her parents only live a few miles from each other, but she very rarely picks up forgotten things. She would rather do without, because she does not want her two homes to become mixed-up. When Arendse packs, she goes about it slowly. Every little thing, every piece of clothing is carefully considered. The weather may change, as may her mood. Which is why she has to fit everything into her bag. And she allocates time for packing.

### **In Between Time**

Juliane gets annoyed because of her sister's slowness and steadiness, and travelling between homes has always included a great deal of bickering between the two of them on subjects such as: packing-tempo, deciding on whether to go by bus or train, walking fast or slow, being late or on time. Asbjørn is annoyed because of the train journey. He drags all his stuff along, his two sisters are constantly on his case, and he feels that the journey is nothing but wasted time. They have crisscrossed the country for the last six years, and they know exactly who is in charge of the seating, food, chocolate, and water. Everything is neatly orchestrated from the moment they leave one home until they arrive at the second home. They all agree that they do absolutely nothing on these journeys, except spend five hours seated next to one another. They spend hours and hours doing nothing, waiting in some sort of in between space. All

three children want to visit their father, but all three of them also regret having to say no to football matches and social events time and again because their parents chose to set up home at either end of the country.

Moving between homes involves lots of routines for these commuting siblings: how they pack and travel, how they leave and arrive, and how they decide on who sits where (Winther 2015). Routines are characterized by being something you do over and over again; from being something that demands attention, certain actions can become integral parts of your body movements and your pulse. Commuting siblings spend time together in what could be termed in between time, which several of them class as wasted time over which they have no say. Travelling together and being part of the same movement denotes a shared bodily experience. Routes and tracks are shared with some siblings, but not the siblings they leave behind. Asbjørn, Rigmor, Sofia, Juliane and Arendse have travelling and not least being the ones others travel to or from in common. They become acolytes in the street of their childhood. They witness each other's ways of being siblings in different family constellations, and despite their frequent bickering, they like the idea that at least one other person is familiar with their entire life and family history. Their shared physical journey affords them knowledge of each other's emotional shifts, which are also part of the commute. The in between time becomes a zone of mutuality.

Ditte travels between her siblings on her own. She talks about having breaks – i.e. time without her younger brother and elder sister, who live permanently in each their own home. Moving from one place to another provides her with a break from her siblings. She is very fond of both of them, but they also wear her down. Knowing that she will soon have to move to her other home is tiring, yet, it also revitalises her, as she knows that she is the one who is on the move, enjoying time away from the others, when they start to get really annoying. She shares routines and routes with no one. Moving between homes and siblings is a condition of her life – and in her own narrative, there is no indication that she thinks it should be otherwise. She does, however, stress that it *matters*, and not

## CHAPTER 4: SIBLINGS BETWEEN SPACES

least, that it *is* a hassle. Ditte moves from one home to the other every two weeks. When she arrives at her 'other' home for the first time, she rings the doorbell. Naturally, she has a key, but having been away for two weeks, she prefers to announce her arrival. Her mother is expecting her and lets her in. They always have some sort of welcoming dinner. From then on, Ditte uses her key. To Ditte, the act of arriving – ringing the doorbell, being welcomed and sharing a welcoming meal – becomes a ritual, which she does not have to reinvent each time, yet at the same time, it marks a passing, an everyday 'rite de passage', - and not just for Ditte, but also for every other member of the household. It is very different for Annika. She packs, moves and arrives all alone. No ringing the doorbell and no welcoming committee. To her, moving between homes, which includes her and her sisters arriving at or leaving their different bases and their various siblings, are common occurrences. So, leaving and arriving can become routine, but whichever way you go about it, it includes an emotional repositioning.

### **In Between Being**

Children move between homes, between parents and possible siblings, whereby they also journey between the cultural logics, rules and routines of each household. They organise themselves with their bags; they pack and unpack; they are aware of whom they will be spending time with now; they orientate and re-orientate while commuting between different ways of *doing home* and being siblings. Knowing these logics, rules and routines and not least becoming co-creator of them requires regular presence. Juliane has this to say about moving back and forth:

*'I think that it's been hard to ... having to be Juliane in two different places. And being part of a family, I mean, that's very much about more or less taking each other for granted. Not in a negative way, I just don't know how to put it. But where everybody belongs as much as everyone else in the family that you're part of. And I certainly feel – and I don't*

## CHAPTER 4: SIBLINGS BETWEEN SPACES

*think it's possible not to – but being the one who moves back and forth, you, just a little ... you belong just a little bit less.'* (Juliane, 18 years.)

From her point of view, it can hardly be any different. When she is at her father's, she asks permission before taking anything from the fridge, and she will call to let him know if she is late coming back from somewhere. Her younger siblings, who live permanently in each their own homes, are 100% part of the family, and if they are not at home, the family seems incomplete. But if Juliane is missing, which she often is, the family will still seem complete. Karl and Selma live permanently in one home, and their three elder siblings live there sometimes. The eldest, Cecilie, who lives in London, appears to be a greatly appreciated guest when she is home for Christmas. Karl, who moves nowhere, except onto the couch when his elder brother comes home and takes over his room every other weekend, is never considered a guest or anyone special.

The metaphor *guest* can be used in order to understand what it means to belong less; to not be taken for granted; to be someone who only counts on occasion; to be the one who comes and goes; and one who perhaps, like Ditte, is welcomed by a reception committee. Being a guest or visitor means being someone who arrives from the outside and who is then afforded hospitality by a host. You can be a more or less welcome guest, a tolerated guest, or a regular guest. To commuting children, their parents, whom they move between, are often the hosts. But it can also be the siblings who live permanently in either home, and who may therefore experience the children who are only there occasionally as belonging less. The way to be a guest depends mostly on the degree of hospitality you encounter. And your position as a guest will be reduced the more familiar you become with the logic of the household, your siblings' rhythms, and whether or not you take part in practical duties, whether or not you feel that you belong and can actually inhabit the space, and if it is possible for you to feel at home – home oneself - there.

Commuting children can shift from the position of being potential guests to being actual guest or reversely, to be included in the group who

## CHAPTER 4: SIBLINGS BETWEEN SPACES

belong and occupy the space. The children do not refer to themselves as strangers or unexpected visitors, but as newly arrived or re-arrived, as not fitting in 100%, taking on the part of s/he who has to adapt, which most of them find easier when moving with siblings. We are talking about a sense of being that unfolds in relation to someone else. Being expected, of being important. Having to re-arrive and re-establish yourself *is* demanding. Some of the children mostly experience it as being hard work, others enter into and are familiar with different ways of performing family and siblings, and several of the children feel at home in both households.

### In Between Spaces

Children who move between several homes are top-notch commuters and logistics. They move between different family constellations and they follow different patterns, routes, logics and routines. They take part in different types of family and sibling choreographies, which demand attention and a willingness to reorganize. As opposed to those children who live permanently in one place, they have to stay alert to the choreography they are currently part of. The children commute between several spaces, between 'mother's house' and 'father's house'. According to Ditte, her home is her body, which then moves between spaces. Linguistically, parents have a right to spend time with their children in dedicated spaces, by way of, for example, holidays. Children often say, 'my mother's got the autumn half-term', 'my father's got Christmas', 'my father got to have the boys', and 'my mother has no children this weekend'. You get a sense of units floating around, being exchanged and transported. The children are exchanged between places, with which they are familiar and over which they hold more or less ownership, and often they leave siblings behind who then move to other spaces, they know absolutely nothing about. Because quite a few children with complex siblings groups never visit their siblings in their other homes. Their shared parenting arrangements differ and are often not in sync. Periodically, they share an everyday existence and they share the condition of

not knowing the others' other spaces, their routines, dynamics, and ways of being siblings somewhere else. Carlo, who is seven years old, spends half his time with his one brother at his mother's and the second half with five other siblings at his father's. Three of them have a different father. Neither he nor his siblings know each other's other parent, and none of them have visited the other's other home. Carlo would like to see how his siblings live, to get a sense of what it is like there. But he does not like to ask. It is quite different for Annika and her siblings. She will sometimes pick up her various siblings, who all attend the same school, and her brother Jens calls her siblings, who are not biologically related to him, cousins. Her different spaces are intertwined.

Commuting children do not merely occupy several spaces, they also occupy in between spaces. But what are in between spaces? Among other things, it is a sign that marks the space between other usually more important signs, i.e. something that marks an ending as well as a new beginning. A sentence will be rendered meaningless without the spaces that separate the words, and it is imperative that such spaces are 'empty', i.e. that they carry no meaning other than being in between something. It is a pause, an interval. It emphasises that which surrounds it, but it also carries value in and of itself. It is not an empty pause, mere silence; it is a space of possibility, which allows for something else to happen. The composer John Cage wrote a piece of music, '4'33', as one long pause, which lasted four minutes and thirty-three seconds. He was not interested in the absence of sound, but in everything that happens while seemingly nothing happens (you hear nothing). In this seemingly empty space, this in between space, there is always something to listen to and see. In between spaces can be a space for pause, for rest, a space between other spaces, a transition zone (a threshold), some third sort of space (a heterotopia), which can turn into its very own, real and important, but more fluid space. The children move in transit between spaces, and this transitory space becomes an in between space in its own right, a fluid zone of in between, in which they have been placed, and where many children spend time with their siblings. The transitory

## CHAPTER 4: SIBLINGS BETWEEN SPACES

space is not merely a waiting space or waiting time, it is also a space where they do things individually and together – where in between being may occur – a space, where they practice their ability to shape routes and handle routines that are at times laborious and liberating.

### Conditions and Fatigue

This moving in transit between siblings, family and homes is not something the children can change; it is a condition, which does not merely set the individual sibling in motion, but also the entire sibling group. Because when a sibling group moves so radically both in and out of spaces, the entire siblingship is set in motion, which becomes quite obvious when Cornelius, aged seven, during an interview shouts out the window, 'I can't play right now. I'm being interviewed, I'm a divorced child, you know'. His parents are a little surprised, because Cornelius has always lived with both his mother and his father. He explains that his two elder sisters commute between two families, and he has to do without them every third week. He is often separated from them and hence he is a divorced child. Cornelius' point is that the children who are left behind also live two different everyday lives: one life when all siblings are together, and another life when half of them are not there. Although he also recognises that it is very different for himself and his brother, who do not have to move, and his sisters who do. He has his base, at which his sisters arrive and then leave again. He is not exhausted by all the practical aspects, which these journeys entail, including the packing of bags, the repetitive journey itself, having forgotten something, and not least having to put your ear to the ground to get a sense of the atmosphere in one place, which will enable them to (re-)arrive there. However, like all other siblings who are left behind, Cornelius and his brother Eigil, also have to find a way of being together, they also have to go through some sort of regrouping, in order to function without the siblings who have moved elsewhere.

And on the subject of fatigue; 13-year-old Kalle has no stomach for any more siblings; he has plenty as it is. 18-year-old Isak refuses to move

back and forth, and 11-year-old Lasse is frustrated. Juliane, aged 18, is looking forward to leaving home, because then she will no longer have to live a fragmented existence, re-arriving in various family logics. Asbjørn who is 15, finds constantly crisscrossing the country a waste of time, it exhausts him. Ditte wants long intervals between her shared parenting arrangements, in order for them to not have to talk about the next move all the time. In spite of the fatigue though, most of the children appear willing to engage in their siblingships. They keep on the move, between homes, they re-orientate, both because their parents have decided that that is the way it is going to be, and because otherwise they will lose the shared closeness as well as their sense of the siblings who also live elsewhere. Being a sibling in many different ways has become a priority, something they want, work for and are inclined towards.

### **Summery**

Over time, journeying between homes becomes routine and something not necessarily afforded any real degree of importance; it is rather experienced as a waste of time. Yet, these journeys, with the inherent coordination and practicalities, appear to be points of reference for being together. Although moving from one home to the next also frequently frames arguments and irritations, the in between time and in between space allow for an in between being, which can be used to share reflections on everyday issues, big and small. It is not a question of simply moving between two points. With the distance of travelling, siblings can become interpretive partners in the way they interpret life in their shared home(s). As opposed to their parents, siblings who commute together, gain insight into the everyday life and conditions in both homes, which clearly makes their relationship special. At the same time, they also move from someone and something (parents and non-commuting siblings as well as a space that contains everything that belongs in a home), to someone and something (other parents, siblings, and spaces).

## CHAPTER 4: SIBLINGS BETWEEN SPACES

Off hand, you would think that this is primarily a life condition for the children who commute, but when one or more siblings move, it sets the entire siblingship in motion, including the siblings who are left behind, as they also live different everyday lives, depending on whether all siblings are present or somewhere else. Routines, movements and rituals are important for all children, not only commuting children. They do, however, become more conspicuous to children, whose families change shape and are re-organised with new siblings. Some children will transform routine to rituals, for example, when they arrive at one home after having spent time at the other home. Welcoming rituals may occur, where the potential guest is welcomed by the host(s) and then goes from being a potential guest to a fully-fledged member of the family. Something that can be experienced as having two homes. At the same time, the freedom that comes with being a guest, i.e. having the right to leave and not least knowing that soon, you will be going somewhere else, can provide a space of mental and physical autonomy. Departures, goodbyes and arrivals can turn into routine, but regardless of how they are practiced, they all require emotional repositioning. Central to many of these children is the strict framing of their everyday lives, including fixed shared parenting arrangements and specific movements, familiar to all and quite difficult to change. At the same time, they are constantly on the move, bodily – on the move between spaces but also between ways of being in the world.

### Theoretical Inspiration

This chapter was inspired by the Swedish cultural analysts Ovar Löfgren and Billy Ehn, and particularly by their focus on routine in the book, *The Secret World of Doing Nothing* (2010). The philosopher Jacques Derrida's concept of being a guest in the book, *Of Hospitality* (2000), informed the discussion on guest, host and hospitality. The concept of regrouping is taken from the historian Leonora Davidoff, who in *Thicker than Water – Siblings and their Relations, 1780-1920* (2012), describes what happens internally in a sibling group when one or more siblings disappear (she

## CHAPTER 4: SIBLINGS BETWEEN SPACES

talks about deaths), and how the siblings left behind have to regroup. Our material does not cover deaths, but the condition of regrouping as some siblings move in or out is similar in many ways. The concept of a more fluid space – heterotopia – comes from Michel Foucault. In the report, *Children in Shared Parenting Arrangements* (Børn i deleordninger (2001), Mai Heide Ottesen et al.) reveal how siblings can be a stabilising factor for children in shared parenting arrangements. Furthermore, we draw on the logic of home, being able to inhabit, doing home and homing oneself from Ida Wentzel Winther's book, *Homeliness – cultural phenomenological studies* (Hjemlighed – kulturfænomenologiske studier, 2006).

# Chapter 5

## Intimacy

By Ida Wentzel Winther and Charlotte Palludan

Juliane is 18 years of age and has just left home. There is a photo collage of her siblings on the wall in her new apartment. Of the six children she has left behind. Her siblings live in two different homes, and she used to move between them. Even though being separated from her siblings is nothing new, she nonetheless experiences moving away from home as generating new frameworks and possibilities for maintaining the relatedness she shares with her younger siblings. These are close relations that matter to Juliane, and the photos on the wall are meant to illustrate this and simultaneously, they become a continuation of these relations.

To Gry, who is the same age as Juliane and who has also just left home, engaging in close relations with her siblings does not appear to be a theme neither she nor her siblings contemplate. They appear much more concerned with the new distance between them. One of her younger brothers proudly explains that he has only visited Gry once, and with an ill-concealed irony he talks about how Gry is living the big city life. 'She goes to restaurants to eat porridge', Jacob says while laughing his head off, and we are to understand that this is a far cry from what everyone else in the family does.

That distance appears to be of much greater interest in Gry's new life, while the possibilities of intimacy are thematized in Juliane's life, is most likely due to their different stories. Gry and her brothers grew up together, in a shared family home. This current expansion of their sibling-ship, in terms of space and time, is due to the eldest sister leaving home. As opposed to earlier, their intimacy is broken for a while, only to be

rediscovered when Gry brings her washing home and moves into her younger brother's room for a short spell. To Gry and her brothers, this newly discovered possibility of distancing themselves from their sibling(s) is exiting, while to Juliane it is the possible re-establishing of intimacy that attracts attention.

Juliane has two homes. She used to move between the two and thus she is greatly experienced in what could be termed exchangeable relations. Being with some of her siblings, always meant being far away from her other siblings. For further information, see the previous chapter, *In Between Spaces*. Throughout the last 14 years, Juliane has established, re-established and balanced sibling relations in the tension field between distance and intimacy. To her, the novel thing about leaving home is more related to having a space that can contain all her sibling relations. Establishing a place where her siblings can meet each other – in much the same way they meet in her photo collage; her own space, where she can continue to invest in the shared intimacy with her siblings, who are all very important to her. And experience tells her that these relations have to be continually maintained.

Gry and her siblings recognise the importance of intimacy and a sense of connectedness, but in their lives it is obviously much more related to a sense of naturalness and continuity. This is expressed – and smartly maintained – by the younger brother as he casually talks about Gry's distant life, and when he effortlessly and with a big grin talks about her visits to the family home. When Juliane explains about her experiences, she emphasises how enjoying close sibling relations is linked to the necessary efforts made by all involved. By way of example, she is very explicit in explaining that while living at home, she was adamant not to give up moving from one home to the other, to see her younger siblings, even if it was quite laborious at times. From Juliane's point of view, being present is a prerequisite for maintaining intimacy.

### When Intimacy Becomes Intimidating

Juliane is very aware of how primarily her mother and her siblings' mother have made an effort to maintain the interconnectedness between the children. By way of example, her mother encouraged the children to tell each other what they have been up to during the time they did not spent together. And the mother of her younger siblings encouraged the children to do their homework together and share evening baths. For a long time, Juliane has been aware of the possibilities lodged in creating opportunities for closeness herself rather than adhering to their parents' wishes for a certain kind of intimacy. Because it can, to the detriment of all intentions, seem intruding and somewhat forced when parents interfere too much and overdo things. We call this parenting practice of being 'too much', *mothering*. As is indicated, we consider it a feminine practice, with the potential of being performed by both men and women. However, throughout our material, it is particularly prominent in relation to how children talk about their mothers and stepmothers. The wish for intimacy is pushed too hard and tends to become intimidating instead.

This is also a theme in 17-year-old Peter's story. He talks about how siblingship is not just something that is there for the taking, it contains relations that you have to want, and they may also come to an end. Peter has himself toned down his relationship with one of his brothers. Despite his mother's efforts to bring her children together on a regular basis, Peter finds the relationship between himself and one of his brothers chilly. They have moved in different directions, both physically and emotionally, and Peter's attitude towards his brother is best described as distancing rather than distant. Distancing describes a more explicit intention. Peter does not say anything about how his brother experiences their relationship. Peter's mother's efforts and eagerness to maintain a sense of intimacy within the siblings group can possibly, and mostly likely unintentionally, be experienced as intimidating and thus it supports Peter's need for distancing.

However, parents' preoccupation with upholding intimacy and a shared history between children can become too comprised and poten-

tially suffocating if the orchestration of closeness is not sufficiently sensitive to the processes that children themselves generate. Perhaps the act of *mothering* is particularly prominent in situations where children are not allowed sufficient time to readjust, to find each other again, after being separated, and when the children's own emotional room for manoeuvring is limited. There are many good reasons why parents may feel the need to speed things up, intensifying the time children spend together, including if their children are regularly or soon to be separated again. However, if this is at cross-purposes to the children's need to balance intimacy and distance, the will to facilitate intimacy may instead lead to a distancing between the children, and the children may well experience it as intimidating.

### **Parents Contributions to Balanced Intimacy**

Whereas Juliane believes that she is strong enough to create her own relationships with her siblings, 11-year-old Liv would actually like to involve her parents. She considers having to create relatedness with her newly 'acquired' sister, who is the same age as herself and the daughter of her father's partner, a huge task. At first, Nanna moves in to Liv's room. Not only do they have to share the remote control, the dining table and the coat rack, they also have to share a bedroom. Liv finds this complicated. They are very different, and Liv is having problems maintaining the peace and quiet she needs. She would like to be able to withdraw and only deal with Nanna in pleasant and inspiring doses.

At the same time, Liv has to share a bed with her mother's partner's daughter, when she visits them. Which is something she does effortlessly and experiences as easy to do. In Liv's life, apparently identical demands of intimacy are experienced as intimidating in one setting but not in another setting. Perhaps it is first and foremost due to the girls' different personalities, but it is also possible that previous history and future prospects play a part. Nanna is moving into Liv's childhood home, with the prospect of the beginnings of a new family. Liv visits her mother's partner and his daughter without any of them expecting the girls to get any

## CHAPTER 5: INTIMACY

closer than that. In other words, the spatial proximity and the tempo in which relation building is expected to take place differ greatly.

Liv needs the concrete involvement, mediation and regulation that her father and Nanna's mother contribute. She also needs to reflect on and talk to her mother about her relation to her new sister, Nanna. Without this there can be no balancing of intimacy and distancing, which is how long-term intimidation is avoided. As we have shown, the interference of mothers (and fathers) can border on *mothering*, but it can also be decisive and necessary in order to establish a balance. However, all adults are not always aware of the risk of intimacy turning into intimidation, i.e. they are not aware of when their help is required, because adults are not always privy to information about potential problems.

Seven-year-old Carlo spends every other week with his brother and father, his father's partner and the partner's three children. This home displays no apparent expectations that the children should build intimate relations across existing sibling groups. The children all have separate rooms and they are still considering whether or not they should refer to themselves as one big family. Nonetheless, the missing key in the bathroom door is important in Carlo's life, because he finds it potentially intimidating. He is afraid he might be embarrassed. Carlo – as the youngest child – can see no obvious way to change the situation and he does not share this information with the adults. Which renders them unable to help solve the problem of an absent key. If he asked for a key, it could signal a wish for distance, and that would be wrong, because he would, in fact, like to be closer to his new cohabitants.

Carlo enjoys having the other children in his home, and he sees many opportunities for closeness and interconnectedness. While recognising his own boundaries, Carlo would also like to insist on more intimacy, as it does not simply happen out of the blue in a busy everyday existence marked by distance. Different homes every other week, different biographies and different parents are three significant social and physical distances, which frame the shaping of interrelations between Carlo and the other children. Add to this the fact that his parents, as opposed to

those of Juliane, Peter and Liv, choose not to be actively involved in establishing intimacy between the children. In other words, there is no risk of *mothering* in Carlo's home, which leaves it up to the children themselves to establish the degree of intimacy, Carlo dreams of.

And thus, Carlo becomes more dependent on the older children's will to and engagement in fulfilling his wish for greater intimacy. Carlo is lucky in the sense that several of the older children actually engage and invest, as we saw with Juliane, in establishing close relations to the siblings involved. It is primarily Carlo's new siblings who take an active part in this relational work. Carlo is already close to his elder brother, with whom he shares both parents, as they always live together and they travel between homes together. An experience that affords them the opportunity to build a shared narrative tied to a shared time and a shared space. It is a kind of intimacy not unfamiliar to Juliane.

### **Ruptured Intimacy**

Being the two siblings out of a group of seven in all, who come and go, and who live with the fact that their other siblings are in their respective homes, is a condition for both Juliane and her sister Arendse. As opposed to their other siblings, who know only one home-logic and one type of intimacy, Juliane and Arendse are stretched between different kinds of intimacy. In their experience, the closeness and intimacy they share with siblings in one home is more of a natural given than the closeness and intimacy they share with their siblings in the other home. They stay in one place more often than the other. Here they come and go, their friends live in the neighbourhood, everybody is a busy bee, and they rarely eat together. But sometimes, inadvertently, they still end up slouching on the couch and watching a film together, or going to swim classes together, because that is just the way it pans out, when you belong together, which they do. This type of intimacy is much like the type of intimacy Søren, who is 18 years old, categorises as being 'everyday-siblings'. It is a type of intimacy that arises when siblings spend much time together, look after one another, slouch on the couch together and throw each

## CHAPTER 5: INTIMACY

other out of the bathroom. They are coupled by way of an everyday rhythm. At their second home, Juliane and Arendse have no friends and they are not part of the local community. When they spend time there, their zone of engagement limits itself to their siblings and close family ties to a much greater degree, with everybody eating dinner together and telling each other stories that underpin their belonging together. This type of siblingship is much more like an intimacy project.

Neither Juliane or Arendse have ever talked about these different ways of being siblings, but throughout their entire childhood, both of them have moved between different types of intimacy, which over time, have settled in their bodies as well as in their siblings' bodies. For Juliane, it has resulted in her ability to connect and disconnect. According to Juliane, she is really adept at quickly getting a sense of the atmosphere and then adapting to the given relations. At the same time, she places the relations she has left on hold. She detaches herself, as she cannot be mentally and emotionally present in two places at the same time. The intimacy she shares with one set of siblings, demands that she distances herself from her other siblings by placing them in a temporary parenthesis. The only sibling she never places in a parenthesis is Arendse, which is most likely the primary reason why it is her relation to her sister that provides her with a type of intimacy, we could call verbal fist-fighting, i.e. bickering, irritation and squabbling. See also the chapter on *Conflictual Closeness*.

### **Interwoven Intimacy – with Siblings as Actors**

Some children retain a sense of intimacy across their otherwise fragmented sibling-existence. One of them is 12-year-old Annika. She sees all her four siblings as entangled even if they do not share the same address. Annika does not disengage, neither practically nor mentally. She weaves all the threads together. Her younger siblings on both her father's and her mother's side, all go to the same school, and Annika will pick them all up and walk them to one of her homes. In one home, she also has a sister called Kirstine, whom Annika experiences as her closest

sibling. They do things together, regardless of whether or not they are together in one home or stay with their other parents. Annika and Kirstine maintain their relations independently of the spread across time and space.

Another girl, 13-year-old Christine, also insists on an unbroken intimacy, at least mentally, although her elder brother, Søren, only rarely stays at home with her and their father. She does not call herself an only child, she is a 'live-alone-child', and thus she reveals that they are connected and close, regardless of whether or not he is present. Søren agrees and feels very close to Christine, a relation he maintains by way of prioritising trips to cafés and other ways of spending a nice time with his sister. He actively chooses to spend time with his sister, because he finds it necessary, as they do not share an everyday existence in the same way that he shares an everyday existence with his everyday-siblings at his mother's house. Experience has shown Søren that his sibling intimacy with Christine will only ever be created, preserved and maintained if they do something themselves; if they choose to spend time together. They spend time together at their shared home, but because both of them have reached a certain age, these days, they frequently meet up away from home. Peter has also experienced that it is possible to choose to spend time together and thus maintain close relations to siblings in spite of break-ups and distance. At least in relation to his 15-year-old sister, Maria.

They are siblings, but they only lived together for a few years when they were teenagers, before their parents split up again. They shared great intimacy during those years, and they insist on maintaining that closeness despite their parents' divorce. They do not need help from the adults or from their other siblings. In addition to Maria, Peter has other siblings, who do not share his relation to her. But according to Peter, he and Maria are very close and he loves her. When Søren and Christine and Peter and Maria manage to maintain a strong relation and avoid distancing, it is very possibly down to Søren and Peter's age, but also to their active efforts. Natasja is a third teenager, who engages in similar efforts.

## CHAPTER 5: INTIMACY

Natasja and her brothers have been separated because of social events in their family and their parent's inability to take care of them. The three siblings now live in three different places. Their sibling intimacy has been rendered homeless. Despite difficult circumstances, Natasja creates situations where she can spend time with her younger brother. Her younger brother does not have the same possibilities.

The younger children in the families are at the mercy of their parents or other adults for help and facilitation, which will always be orchestrated around the adult's view of how much/little time children can/should spend together. Younger siblings, like Annika or Christine, can also choose to spend time together with siblings they would otherwise be separated from by both time and space, but it requires their parent's agreeing to an interwoven family structure, despite divorce, as in Annika's family, or that elder siblings take responsibility and thus take care of younger siblings in public spaces, outside the family structure, as in the case of Christine. As also described in the chapter, *Mediated Interactions*, the older children in particular are able to phone, text and contact each other, without ever engaging their parents. Finally, the older siblings, who move out of the family home, can ensure that sibling intimacy is not rendered homeless. Like Juliane, they can offer their own new abode as a meeting place for siblings, where intimacy can be established and preserved.

### Summery

Intimacy is a central phenomenon in sibling relations. It comes in many different varieties and is shaped by children when they share an everyday existence and create narratives about what they do as siblings. The effort to establish a sense of intimacy is born both by the children's individual hopes as well as their parents' and siblings' expectations and demands for intimacy. Demands and hopes are each other's prerequisite and change over time in step with changing circumstances and life stories. When children regularly move between different sibling groups and families, they rarely find a safe haven, where there is no apparent de-

mand for intimacy. They have to stay constantly aware of their efforts to establish closeness and intimacy first in one place and then in the next. In other words, intimacy is established inside current and highly complex family constellations. Some children handle this complexity by way of establishing blinds and detaching themselves from one set of relations only to attach themselves to another set of relations. Other children are afforded the opportunity to interweave sibling groups and accompanying demands and hopes for shared intimacy. All of them are concerned with balancing relations in order to establish a sense of intimacy that does not become intimidating while simultaneously ensuring a distance without distancing. Parents also get involved. Directly by way of practical involvement and facilitation of sibling intimacy. Indirectly by respecting that intimacy can be tiring and therefore occasionally rejected. Parent's efforts have to be as balanced as those of their children. Most parents are eager to establish the best possible balance, but there appears to be a danger of their engagement losing sight of the children's perspective and participation. Not only parents but also older siblings are seen to take responsibility. They make themselves available with the added bonus of intimacy training, as they move shoulder by shoulder with their sisters and brothers.

### **Theoretical Inspiration**

In her book, *Personal Life*, the British family sociologist Carol Smart points to emotional engagement and love as central aspects of family relations, something only sporadically clarified in classical sociology, however (Smart 2007). Smart recommends that we intensify sociological and anthropological studies of 'how love works' within different types of relations, for example sibling relations. This recommendation and presentation of a research question includes the drive to understand how intimacy is practiced in the concrete, practical and close everyday life, which constitutes social cultural processes. How is this love expressed and afforded meaning in everyday processes by way of talking and being together? When researchers take up this challenge and clarify

## CHAPTER 5: INTIMACY

intimacy in sibling relations, we contribute to the visibility of emotional engagement as an important and dynamic part of social relations. And thus we counter the tendency to view emotions as mistakes and dissonance in reason-borne arguments. The Swedish cultural researchers, Johan Frykman and Orvar Löfgren, put it another way, as they view emotions as an ambiguous phenomenon, which takes place between people, and which should be viewed in light of the relations they are part of. Emotions should not be analysed separately from cognition, belief and thought. Because emotions are part of our human life-world, as are our thoughts and interactions with others (Frykman & Löfgren 2005). This makes emotions a useful point of entry when we want to understand the relations and everyday life of siblings.

# Chapter 6

## Conflictual Closeness

By Mads Middelboe Rehder

‘ ... you always feel that you have someone close to you, and someone who can help you – you never feel, you know, all alone ... We know each other really well, and because we love each other so much, we also fight a lot.’ (Louise, 19 years old)

Louise, who is 19 years old, grew up with her big sister, Benedikte. They have a good relationship but engage in constant bickering. As is implied in Louise’s statement, this conflictual interaction is perceived as a natural part of their close relationship.

When siblings experience emotional closeness, friction will occur, which is often coupled with a physical closeness. Friction occurs, physically, when two bodies move in relation to one another, while being pressed closely together; this creates a frictional resistance which generates heat and energy. Sibling relations are constantly moving, boundaries are being marked, and there is a continual and reciprocal testing where they experience and note similarities and differences, something we will develop further in the chapter, *Mobile Positions*. It is through this testing and continued movement that sibling relations continue to develop and change, but it is also this close movement that generates heat in the shape of conflicts and separateness as well as a special kind of heat in the shape of increased closeness and a sense of togetherness.

Liv is 11 years old, and she spends equal time at her father’s and her mother’s places. She is her father’s only child and every other week, she would be alone with him. But a few years back, her father’s partner and the partner’s daughter, Nanna, moved in with them. Now, when Liv stays

## CHAPTER 6: CONFLICTUAL CLOSENESS

with her father, Nanna, who is the same age as Liv, is also there. There have been many conflicts and arguments between Liv and Nanna, and this has been of great concern to the girls themselves as well as their parents. However, over time, the arguments have lessened, and they have grown closer, and now, Liv considers Nanna her sister.

*'... I mean, when you're siblings, you can get really mad at one another, and then, well, you know ... you still love each other, inside, and when you're friends you have to be a little more careful ... siblings, they're just ... a lot closer than friends, I mean, you're just so much closer, even if I haven't known Nanna for as long as I have some of my friends, it's like, me and Nanna are still closer than I am with them ...'* (Liv, 11 years old)

To Liv, close sibling relations are about not having to be (excessively) careful because the relation is less fragile. Because Nanna is always there, and she will not disappear just because they fall out, which affords the two sisters time and opportunity to become friends again after a fight. This constant closeness, however, also enables friction between them to build up and erupt in regular, conflictual clashes. These clashes, and not least the fact that they will not destroy their relationship, are important reasons why Liv is now able to regard Nanna as her sister. It also means that they have established an emotional closeness. They needed time to establish the relationship they now have, and their conflictuality helped clarify the strength of their relation, and it has enabled Liv to develop a close and loving relationship to Nanna.

Markus and Christian are six and seven years old, respectively. They have two older brothers: 11-year-old Morten who lives with them, and Paw who is 14 and away at a boarding school. Markus and Christian are close in years, and they spend much time together. When describing what being siblings means, they talk very specifically about how they regard fights, teasing and kisses as central elements of being siblings.

## CHAPTER 6: CONFLICTUAL CLOSENESS

- Christian:* 'I work to make them [siblings] happy.'
- Markus:* 'So do I ... sometimes ... Sometimes they tease me.'
- Christian:* 'They do tease'.
- Markus:* 'Yeah, sometimes we fight because we're angry with each other, and sometimes we're just messing about'.
- Christian:* 'And Morten ... he just leaves when we get angry with each other, then Morten just walks by and hits us'.
- Interviewer:* 'Will he also hug and kiss you sometimes?'
- Christian:* 'Yeah!'
- Markus:* 'Yeah. A lot. He often does that to me.'
- Interviewer:* 'He often kisses you?'
- Markus:* 'Yeah. Especially the back of my neck. It's because I've just had my hair cut.'
- Interviewer:* 'Do you also kiss your friends' necks?'
- Markus:* 'No... no...'
- Christian:* 'No.'
- Interviewer:* 'In other words, brothers are people you kiss?'
- Markus:* 'Yeah. And hug'.

For Christian, Markus and Morten, interactions appear to be of a physical nature. Their age links their emotional closeness to a bodily closeness, and their experiences of conflicts and love are easily revealed through bodily expressions.

Frictions between Markus and Christian result in concrete actions that are interwoven; it is exactly the duality of love and conflict that generates the sense of security that lessens the danger of being teased or hit because you also receive kisses on the base of your neck. This also means that their interrelation is constantly moving, as these intense expressions are practiced, and their relational dynamics thus perpetually changed.

Siblings are often specifically positioned in relation to each other because their relations reveal exactly what they have to do to tease and annoy but also please one another. This knowledge also strengthens the

## CHAPTER 6: CONFLICTUAL CLOSENESS

experience many siblings have of being close. They can become each other's closest confidantes, sticking together and helping each other out, exuding a closeness, which William Rawlins in his studies on friendships describes as an *Inner Circle*. Inside this *Inner Circle*, siblings can stand shoulder to shoulder, looking out on others, who will be perceived as being less close, while they experience their own positioning as a stable and safe relation.

Having lived together and having shared a physical proximity will often be of importance to the emotional closeness of siblings. Once they have lived together, they will share a frame of reference as well as experiences and memories, which they can draw on and talk about. Conflictual situations can be called upon as memories that form the basis of an emotional closeness in later life. Arguments and confrontations can awake strong feelings, and when situations are recalled, these strong feelings will confirm the emotional closeness of siblings as well as the strength of their relation. Furthermore, the narratives about such situations will often include descriptions of the individual siblings' particular characteristics, and thus they also become a concretisation of unique differences and similarities between the siblings in question. Thus, conflictual situations also function as accentuations of sibling similarities while simultaneously stressing their uniqueness and differences.

### History of Friction

When siblings spend time together, conflictual material is continuously accumulated. By sheer repetition, little everyday incidents will build up and generate tension within a history of friction, which can suddenly be expressed by way of arguments and confrontations.

Asbjørn who is 15, Sofia who is 13, and Rigmor who is 17 years old are used to traveling together between their parents' homes in Jutland and on Zealand. They travel together, and they stay with their parents together. The train ride is routine to them, as are the conflictual situations that often occur on this journey by way of allocating seats in the train carriage. Seat allocation is part of their history of friction, and frus-

trations and disagreements about who sat in the aisle seat last time are touched upon and afforded new strength as the problems arise again.

*Sofia:* 'I'm in the seat in there.'

*Asbjørn:* 'No, I want to sit there. I was in the aisle seat last time.'

*Sofia:* 'So was I.'

*Asbjørn:* 'No! I was in the aisle seat. This is not fair. I was in the aisle seat last time.'

*Sofia:* ' (...) I won't let you sit here.'

*Asbjørn:* 'You can't just say that because I had the aisle seat last time.'

And thus, accumulations, of what may offhand appear as insignificant conflictual material, will lie hidden away only to resurface days, weeks or months later. This history of friction enables some arguments to almost become routine, and as such they may appear to be intense, yet they are quickly over and done with.

Even if Asbjørn feels frustrated by his sisters ganging up on him in relation to the allocation of train seats yet again, the conflict quickly settles. Shortly after being really upset, Asbjørn is in the window seat massaging Rigmor's feet while talking and sharing the chocolate they brought along.

Fighting among siblings is often based on their frustration with being interdependent. In connection with her sibling research, Rosalind Edwards emphasises how frustrations do not merely occur as a consequence of wanting to be independent and free of one's siblings, they also arise as a consequence of feeling left out of the sibling community. Friction is thus accumulated as an integral part of being interdependent, both willingly and unwillingly, and when neither independence nor dependence is a satisfactory state for all to be in simultaneously. Instead, the different wants are negotiated in a continuing history of friction, which concurrently brings potential conflicting situations to light. In sibling groups the need to be independent will sometimes arise simulta-

## CHAPTER 6: CONFLICTUAL CLOSENESS

neously with other siblings' need for proximity. These opposing movements generate friction as an acceptable way of being together is negotiated. The negotiations come in different shapes, but often, as was the case with Asbjørn, they will be handled by way of an open and emotional conflict, after which the dispute is put aside and closeness can be re-established.

Several siblings describe how they want to be able to have arguments without their parents interfering to try and make them stop, as it denies them the opportunity to fully vent their accumulated frustrations as well as the opportunity to express themselves emotionally.

*‘This is something Arendse and I have complained about a lot. You know, this thing about not really being allowed to argue, and we actually don’t argue that often. But when we do argue, it’s been over completely immaterial things. You know nothing more than just splitting hairs over something, really. I remember that we’ve sometimes sat together and complained about not being allowed to finish our argument and be upset. Sure, it creates a bad atmosphere, but why is that not allowed? It’s part of being siblings after all, and having to spend so much time together. That it’s okay to bicker a little because that’s also part of finding out when you’re being over the top, and when it’s just because we’re siblings. Of course, it’s okay to have adults saying, here’s where we draw the line, but children should also be allowed to find that line.’  
(Juliane, 18 years old)*

18-year-old Juliane and 15-year-old Arendse have grown up together and are used to spending a lot of time together. As far as Juliane is concerned arguing is unavoidable when they spend so much time together, and it is not something that should be interrupted. The physical closeness entails an accumulation of friction between Juliane and Arendse, as was the case with Asbjørn and his sisters. Juliane describes how their arguments may be about something that to others may seem insignificant, like having to wait for one’s sister before leaving the house togeth-

er. But because these small, insignificant things are allowed to occur by way of continual repetitions, friction will build and culminate in a conflictual situation, which is experienced as necessary. Conflicts between siblings who spend much time together are experienced, as both Liv and Louise point out, as not all that serious. Conflicts and arguments thus occupy a natural space between siblings. Which is why it is central to Juliane that she and Arendese are allowed to set their own boundaries and solve their mutual conflicts without their parents interfering. In much the same way that Asbjørn and his sisters are left to their own devices when travelling between their parents. However, this pattern requires siblings to spend time together on a regular basis which is why changing the frames within which siblings spend time together may have consequences.

Having moved out of the family home, Louise's sister, Benedikte, tries hard not to get into arguments with Louise, and as a result they have fewer arguments, but Louise also expresses that she experiences their relationship as being more superficial.

*'Yeah, well it might be more positive because we don't fall out as often. But (...) as it gets more positive, in my opinion, it also becomes more superficial ... But because, when she's here, we try to not get into arguments because we don't see each other that often ... but it's not like I miss arguing with her, it was just something that happened because everything else was good.'* (Louise, 19 years old)

The fact that Louise and Benedikte no longer argue can, from Louise's perspective, be experienced as a result of her efforts to restrain her frustrations and grievances with her sister, which simultaneously generates a distance between them. Making an effort not to fight is also touched upon by other siblings who do not live together, who argue that it is because their parents expect the family to have a nice time when they all finally get together. Though at the same time, the children also express a desire not to spend the limited time they have together arguing. The

## CHAPTER 6: CONFLICTUAL CLOSENESS

problem with this scenario is that friction does not evaporate; instead it becomes illegitimate to express the frustrations and grievances that arise, as there is no time or space to have arguments and make up before the family members have to go their separate ways again.

As a consequence, Louise experiences a sense of superficiality sneaking in because she, her sister and the rest of her family do not want them to spend the limited time they have together arguing. Louise and her sister do not share continual time together in the way that Liv, Asbjørn or Juliane do with their siblings which is why they do not want to fall out when they do get to spend time together.

### Separation and Friendship as Alternatives to Conflicts

Conflicts and fighting among siblings can sometimes escalate out of control. Friction must be balanced in order to maintain an emotional closeness. Which is why the physical frames may have to change in order to allow the friction among siblings to find a level that allows them to maintain an emotional closeness.

Conflicts are the reason why 20-year-old Jon and 18-year-old Isak have not lived together for many years. They have chosen to live with their mother and father, respectively, because there are too many conflicts when they live together, and in their experience, being emotionally close excludes engaging in too many conflicts.

*'No, but we've always argued a lot, or not like, but you know, how brothers fight and argue, so it's better if we only see each other in smaller doses. We also have practically the same friends which is quite good fun, that is at school, we hang out quite a lot at parties and stuff, it's not that we're like, best buddies (...). But we're like friends and like brothers (...).'* (Jon, 20 years old)

Jon and Isak only spend limited time together within a family frame, i.e. on their weekly visits to the other parent. This frequently takes place on

weekdays, which means that they do not have time to watch a film, but rather their time together focuses on less time-consuming activities, which are quite similar to the things they do with their friends. They watch TV-series, comedies or listen to music, as these are areas where they share preferences and interests. The two brothers are aware of not spending too much time together within the family framework as they cannot spend more than one evening together before friction between them leads to actual confrontations. On the other hand though, they do enjoy the evenings they spend together, and they both make an effort to avoid confrontations, which has made it possible for them to engage in a friendly relation.

That Jon and Isak are able to establish this kind of time together, where they both thrive, is partly due to the flexibility of their family. They have been able to live in different places, and they have also been allowed, on more than one occasion, to change abode. These changes have been due to several practical issues, and because both brothers have wanted to try living with the other parent for a while. The family is flexible enough to allow their voices to be heard when decisions are being made in relation to where they will live and how best to support their sibling relation. This differentiates their sibling relation from that of Liv and Nanna as they had to find a way of living together, but their relation also differs from that of Juliane and Arendse who regard their conflictuality as a necessary aspect of being siblings.

For most siblings their home, their family, the close physical proximity and spending time with their siblings are givens that cannot be changed which makes finding different ways of handling friction and conflictual situations integral to their emotional and physical closeness.

Jon states that he and Isak are 'like friends' which is concurrent with the comparison between friends and siblings as also expressed by Liv, Louise, Christian and Markus because Jon has to be more aware when he is with Isak as their relation cannot withstand their conflictual confrontations.

## CHAPTER 6: CONFLICTUAL CLOSENESS

Markus, who is six years old, briefly describes the difference between friends and siblings by way of physical closeness: 'Brothers are always at home, best friends are not'. Jon and Isak are not always at home at the same time, but with their friends they can spend weekends and holidays together, as long as the presence of their friends ensures that they do not get close enough to generate conflictual situations. Then again, within these friendly constellations, Jon can mark his emotional closeness to Isak, and he was proud to hand over the position as president of their boys' club to his younger brother. Their friendship and shared interests provide a framework for the way they can practice their relation, and it is also a way whereby they can describe their relation in a positive manner.

That friendships are always *about* something, about *doing* something together is one of William Rawlin's main points in his research on friendships. *Doing* something together allows you to focus on shared interests which points to a sameness that strengthens a relation. Because friendships are usually based on choice, siblings can describe their relation as a friendship by pointing to the fact that they actively choose to spend time with one another. This changes their relation from being a given and framed by their family to being the result of their individual will and effort. Thus it becomes a relation based solely on individual, reciprocal and continued investments of time and energy.

For Liv and Nanna, seeing each other as potential friends became a steppingstone to building a relationship between them, by way of shared interests and activities. '... then suddenly we had this really good friendship because we did ... we started doing all sorts of things together.' They would find things they had in common and thus similarities, which they could use to build their sibling relation.

Sibling relations can be strengthened by way of strength-markers such as choice and sharedness when they are verbalized and practiced as friendships. In this manner, friendship can be used as an alternative, positive description of sibling relations, which focuses on solidarity, equality and choice, or as a way of being together that can tone down the

physical and emotional closeness, which also enables a lessening of friction. And thus the fact that Jon and Isak can talk about themselves as friends and emphasise their shared group of friends becomes a sign of strength as it reveals how they actively choose each other even though they cannot share a home. When siblings call each other friends, it can, however, also indicate fragility, as Liv explains, 'When you're friends you have to be a little more careful ... siblings, they're just there'. In this light, friendships can be viewed as being more fragile than siblingships, and the term friendship can thus point to a relation, which cannot contain the same degree of conflictuality.

### Summery

Children argue, they have conflicts, and they develop together as well as individually along the way. When siblings are physically close together, it often becomes a closeness that also causes friction. Most people describe conflictual situations between siblings as being unpleasant, unwanted and sometimes painful, and they affect everybody involved in the conflict. Movements of closeness and conflictuality can spread like ripples within a family in the shape of friction with the arrival or departure of a sibling, but also as friction between children who travel together between homes. As a context for siblings, the family can be a densely interwoven network, where friction between two siblings can affect the rest of the network making everyone else 'rub up against' one another in a different way.

Expectations both in relation to siblings and families can, as was shown in the first chapter of the book, reveal themselves through concrete family relations. These expectations can exist as normative ideas about what these relations must contain.

Expectations of harmonious and close sibling relations devoid of conflicts can reveal themselves as directives about getting along and bans on arguing. Which can be viewed as restrictions that counteract emotional closeness between children in a family, and obstacles that prevent children from getting a sense of one another and finding out

## CHAPTER 6: CONFLICTUAL CLOSENESS

who they are. Conflictuality can be both part of being close as siblings, but it can also be a way for siblings to get close to one another. Children who have not yet established close relations but are in the process of getting to know each other can use conflictual situations to get a feeling of who the other person is, and what their boundaries are.

Conflictual shapes change over time, perhaps in the shape of fewer and fewer arguments. However, this may also result in a diminished sense of closeness. A degree of superficiality may even creep in and challenge the closeness between siblings when they themselves and the rest of the family wish for and expect that their time together will not be spent arguing.

When siblings, who are physically close, move shoulder-to-shoulder, they rub up against each other. This frictional closeness enables them to sense one another, and it can be experienced both as loving closeness, which strengthens the bonds between them and makes them feel connected and close. However, it can also be experienced as friction that generates arguments and conflictual confrontations that challenge the emotional closeness and the strength of the relation. As siblings strive to establish valuable relations, shared interests or activities can be used to inscribe an element of will and choice in their relation. This allows for an emphasis on what they themselves do to bond with one another, free from the family's expectation of emotional and physical closeness. Standing shoulder-to-shoulder and being able to lean on one another is something many siblings emphasise as their ideal relation. And with this ideal, it is important that the history of friction and the conflictual frustrations between close siblings are viewed as an integral part of this closeness and as part of the route that may eventually lead to closeness.

### Theoretical Inspiration

The analyses and points made in this chapter are inspired by Janet Carsten's concept of relatedness (Carsten 2000, 2004), by William Rawlins' dialectic analyses of friendships (Rawlins 1992), as well as the further development of points included in the article *Emotive Siblings* by

## CHAPTER 6: CONFLICTUAL CLOSENESS

Winther, Gulløv and Palludan, which draws attention to the fact that friction between siblings contains both resistance and inertia (Winther, Gulløv and Palludan, in press). Furthermore, perspectives from Rosalind Edwards' specific research on sibling conflicts (Edwards, et. all 2006) are also included.

# Chapter 7

## Mobile Positions

By Eva Gulløv

Oskar and Laurits, nine and eleven years respectively, have lived together all their lives. Their mother and father were divorced many years ago and ever since they were little, the two boys have alternated between their parents' houses each week. Two years ago, their father moved in with Linda, who also has two boys, Jonas and Thomas, currently 13 and 16 years old. These two boys are also part of a shared parenting arrangement where they alternate between homes on a weekly basis, which means that the four boys have spent every other week together for the last couple of years. This change of life circumstances has strengthened the relationship between Laurits and Oskar, but it has also changed their relation. They have, both of them, had to establish relations with their new brothers, a process that has been far from frictionless. There were many arguments and fights during the first year, which generated tension throughout the entire family. In these conflicts, Laurits and Oskar would stick together, even when they had differing takes on the situation. As his older brother, Laurits felt that he should protect Oskar, and for his part, Oskar tried to obtain a more playful younger-brother-relation to the new boys.

Thus the meeting with other boys have also entailed changes in existing sibling relations. From being unequivocally elder brother, at the age of nine, Laurits became a younger brother to two new elder brothers, who showed him that there was another, wider world, outside the world that he and his brother Oskar had shared up until now. Jonas, who was previously the younger brother, has become an elder brother in this new family. Judging by the way he, while Laurits listens, talks about his life

with friends and girls, trouble and coolness, you get the impression that having met someone who is interested in his abilities and knowledge matters a great deal to him. This impression is confirmed when he talks about his transition from initially opposed to the addition of two new brothers in his family to actually liking them and regarding them as his brothers.

Even though Jonas is only 1.5 years older than Laurits, he is by virtue of his relation to his elder brother, Thomas, much more aware or and oriented towards teenage life. When Laurits spends time with his schoolmates and friends from the after school club, they visit each other's homes and play computer games or football, build stuff with Lego or simply 'play around outside'. Jonas does not use the expression 'play around outside'. Instead, he explains how he cannot be bothered to stay at home without his friends; he does not want to go to the summerhouse, but prefers to 'spend time with my friends' who hang out in the mall, and 'like to tease people or make trouble sometimes, just for fun'. He emphasises, partly directed at Laurits, that Laurits – and sometimes Oskar – can join in, but as they are so much younger they cannot hang out with him and his friends when they are with girls. 'Then it's only me and my friends and the girls.' Laurits is silent during this part of the interview. He seems to accept the assigned position as uninitiated.

Positions are not fixed. As the case shows, it gradually becomes clear to Oskar that Laurits might be his most important brother, but there are also other ways of being an elder brother representing other values than being good at building things with Lego or climbing trees. Even to him, the relation to Jonas in particular, opens up new perspectives, which will invariably affect his perception of Laurits, Jonas and indeed himself. Birth orders do not in and of themselves say anything unequivocal about relations or the abilities of those who assume the different positions. This point becomes expressly visible in families that have encountered changes to their constellation. When parents find new partners who also have children, the birth order will often change, whereby elder siblings become younger siblings and vice versa, as shown in the example above.

## CHAPTER 7: MOBILE POSITIONS

Therefore, it is necessary to take a much more dynamic approach to sibling positions that also includes family narratives and social contexts outside the home. Of course being either elder or younger brother matters in terms of self-perception, responsibility and social conventions. However, the point here is that roles can be fulfilled in different ways. Being an elder brother does not simply make you into one specific 'kind' with a predetermined responsibility or behaviour. Nonetheless, the category will often be invoked in the social interactions undertaken by a family, in the shape of an argument or an opportunity or simply as a means of explaining behaviour.

### Strategies and Identifications

Sibling positions are continually moving, even within families that have not experienced changes to its constellation. Children position themselves in relation to one another, i.e. they interpret themselves and each other and continually try to establish ways of being together, that concur with their own wishes. A common theme in our empirical material has therefore been reflections on the strategies siblings use to get their own way or obtain privileges. In a group interview with four 13-year-olds, Jakob, by way of example, talks about how his 18-year-old elder brother delays doing his chores, which means that Jakob ends up having to do them. Emma underpins this narrative with a story about her younger sister: *'At the end of the day, when my younger sister really should do it, she never does. I mean, for example, if she clears the table then she tries really hard not to, clear the table that is, and then I always have to do it. And then my younger sister, she tries to talk to my mother and father or say something completely different, and that annoys me'*. And 9-year-old Josephine tells how her 4-year-old younger brother gets his own way: *'When me and Niels fight, he always gets his own way in the end, because he can yell really loud, and I can't be bothered to listen to that. So he's always, "aaaaargh" and screaming "no", ... and then it's like me, who has to give in, because I can't be bothered to shout as loud as he does'*.

*Interviewer:* *'Is that because you're older?'*

*Josephine:* *'Yeah, it's you know, I don't want to be the one yelling and screaming and shouting, because it suites a little boy better than a slightly bigger girl'. (Josephine, 9 years old)*

Whether intentional or not, it would appear that Niels gets his own way by yelling in a way that Josephine connects to younger children. She feels unable to do the same, but exactly by distancing herself from his screaming, she manages to emphasise her own position as 'big' and maintain her status although she may lose out to him in concrete situations. Positioning strategies are not only about positioning oneself; it is also about positioning the other, and here the well-known opposition between 'big' and 'small' can be useful for the older as well as the younger child.

Several of the children also talk about their own strategies to obtain certain things, including getting their siblings to do things for them or just being allowed to join in. As 13-year-old Sigrid explains, *'It's also a little ... with siblings, if you do them a favour, it's, you know, you are the world's best little sister'*. And she elaborates by telling how she sometimes asks her elder brother if he would like a 'smoothie': *'Yes, he'll say, because sometimes I make smoothies, and then, well then he's happy and not as annoying. It helps'*. In this way, favours become part of a social exchange of rights and status. They can become a point of entry in relation to participation and a way of expressing a sense of togetherness, but they can also become expectations and emphasise an unequal relationship. Which is why children pay explicit attention to what a favour expresses: making a smoothie for your brother is, by way of example, a gesture that will get you recognition, but it is also a gesture that could signal subservience, unless you make sure you get something in return, such as being left alone, or being allowed access to your elder brother's room. In general, assessments of equality or inequality appear to be part of the considerations children make when interacting with their siblings.

As the informants describe it, the trivial quarrels of everyday life are included in their interpretations, interactions and self-understanding.

## CHAPTER 7: MOBILE POSITIONS

Banal actions, like dodging having to empty the dishwasher or not doing someone a favour, are included in the children's interpretations of their siblings, their interrelations, and their sense of self in relation to their siblings. This becomes apparent when for example 13-year-old Jakob stresses that his brother is '*impossible*' because '*he is only interested in computers and sleeping*', and Jakob does not believe that he himself will ever turn out like his brother. At the same time, he explains that it will be quite boring when his brother moves out of the family home, because sometimes they play '*card games and do all sorts of creative stuff*' and they have '*a really good time*'. In this narrative, Jakob underlines both a distance and a sense of belonging, which at one and the same time represents their relation as well as Jakob's perception of himself as being both different from and similar to his brother.

Thus positioning is closely related to identity. Perceptions of the strategies and actions of one's siblings become the indicators of how you see yourself and how you would like other people to see you, in much the same way that you afford importance to how they perceive your actions. Josephine does not want to be identified with her screaming younger brother, and Jakob stresses that he is not lazy like his elder brother. Positioning is about obtaining possibilities, but also about seeing yourself as others see you and marking both differences and similarities. And this is where siblings mean something special. Due to the dominating position of the family as an institution, siblings are almost per definition relevant others against whom you can identify yourself. Regardless of whether or not siblings have been there all your life, or have entered at a later stage, they will often occupy an important space in your everyday existence. You have to relate to them, not least because the remaining members of your family are also watching, and their reactions and actions also bear witness to relations, positions and identities.

Sibling relationships give rise to continuous interpretations of why others do as they do, but also of what it leaves oneself in terms of possible actions and identifications. This interpretation is also contextual. Roles and possibilities change from situation to situation, and thus in-

terpretations, strategies and reactions continually have to relate to the current surroundings and the people who participate in and watch your interactions.

### **Changing Circumstances and Mobile Relations**

That roles and possibilities change with contexts is particularly pertinent in an interview with sisters Laura, eight years of age, and Mathilde, ten years of age. Mathilde begins by explaining that she does not have any particular need to be with Laura. She does not believe that Laura has any business being in her room, and she does not want to spend time with her when she has friends over. Unaffected by this explicit statement, Laura stresses that she wants to spend time with Mathilde, and she expresses her frustration at Mathilde's behaviour towards her. Discontented, she talks about how she is not allowed into Mathilde's room while Mathilde walks into her room whenever she pleases; how Mathilde leaves the washing of dishes to watch TV; and how Mathilde will not lend Laura her things. Mathilde explains that it is because she is older. It is obviously important to Mathilde to present herself as the independent elder sister.

However, their descriptions of their everyday lives in two very different households leaves another impression, namely that of a relation that changes in relation to context. Rather than one being distanced and the other dependant, they appear to be closely related, spending much time together while staying at their father's. They only spend every other weekend with their father, and he lives far from their school, leisure activities and friends. At his house, there are different rules and duties, and they appear to stand together as they face the expectations expressed by their father and his new wife. And they also appear united when they spend time with their father's new wife's two boys, who are the same age as them, and who live at their father's on a more permanent basis. Then there is no fighting, and both describe how they prefer to share a bed when going to sleep. This unity seems to evaporate each time they stay with their mother, which is the household they consider

## CHAPTER 7: MOBILE POSITIONS

home. It is close to their school and leisure activities, and their friends live in the neighbourhood. The child-friendly surroundings also allow them to roam freely and hang out with their friends without much interaction between them. Generally speaking, Mathilde does not believe that friends and siblings should mix to any great degree. Laura does not define it quite as categorically, but in practice they do not appear to spend much time together, while staying at their mother's.

This example illustrates a particular dynamic of sibling relations, a kind of pulse between closeness and distance, dominance and caring, continuity and changeability, similarity and difference, identification and independence. Some contexts call for intimacy, while other contexts underpin autonomy. In some contexts siblings are relevant, in others they are not. The positions we take in relation to one another reflect our self-perception, which is invariably linked to how we look at others and perceive their way of looking at us. And this again is related to the history we share and the concrete situations in which we find ourselves. In this interpretative dynamic, not only siblings play a part. In the example above, the girls' relation to their mother probably calls for other independence markers that the ones called for in the more unfamiliar relation(s) to their father's new family members. Changing homes also changes the audience. When they stay with their father, emphasising their independent autonomy becomes less important than stressing their mutual identification and intimacy. Thus positioning also reflects a relative social adaptation to the norms and expectations of changing circumstances.

We find a similar dynamic in the many descriptions of holiday time as opposed to everyday life. Being away from friends and social media leaves one with only siblings for company and this activates sibling relations in new ways, often in some sort of interplay between solidarity and irritation, intimacy and distance, relevance and indifference. Esther who is 11 years of age expresses it in this way:

*'I mean, if you, when you're on holiday in another country, you just have one another and not, you're not with that many other people. And then in the beginning, it's always like this with me and my sister, we fight an awful lot, because we have to share everything. And then after some time we just learn that okay, now we'll do this and then we just become, we learn how to be really good friends, and then we're just friends for the rest of the holiday. It's really nice, because we travel around a lot, and we do not get to go home in between, where there are friends and stuff.'*

In this manner, even unproblematic variations of family life shift the balance of social relations. In relation to an everyday life filled with activities and chores, holidays provide a framework for an entirely different way of spending time together. It is necessary to find a way to be together, and several children describe that it takes a few days. Everyone is placed in the same situation with the consequence that even little things like clearing the table, handling the remote control, or going somewhere together can give cause for marking rights and hierarchy. Several children explain that once you have found a way, a strong sense of togetherness emerges, which becomes especially strong in the meeting with other – strange – children and in relation to parents (see also chapter 2, *The Importance of Things*). If the markings of distance and difference are toned down, a shared identification emerges.

What is shared and what is individual thus changes depending on the situation. Experiences of being closely linked or not, and deliberations on when you are similar and when you are different, cannot be understood isolated from the contexts you are part of and adapt to. Your perception of closeness or distance is influenced by where you are, how much time you spend together, what the alternatives are, and whom else you are with. In some situations the personal identity will be at stake, in others it makes little difference - probably because the people around are of little importance. Identity does not encompass an unchanging solid core or specific characteristics that float unchanged between places

## CHAPTER 7: MOBILE POSITIONS

and social contexts. Identity is contextually and relationally conditioned. Identity expresses how you act and perceive yourself and others in the light of changing circumstances. Within these processes, siblings matter, as they allow for both identification and distancing. But also other people who watch and interpret your actions and interactions influence your perception of a given situation, how you position yourself in relation to others, and how you choose to present yourself.

### **Sibling Relations and Family Dynamics**

Rhythms and frameworks have relational consequences and in this investigation it is primarily parents who frame the settings. However, equally important for the characteristics of sibling relations are the roles of parents (and others) as observers and determiners of norms. The inavailability of all positions and actions is due to the well-established codex of behaviour enforced by others present. As is discussed in the chapter *Conflictual Closeness*, the informants stress in several interviews how their parents dislike harsh infighting and arguments among siblings. There are limits to what you can call your siblings, how much you are allowed to yell at them and tease them, and there are often clear demarcations of when fights are no longer justifiable. Social interactions between siblings are observed and witnessed, and this, more or less obviously, provides frameworks and norms for the way siblings behave when they are together. And this attention influences the way children interpret themselves and others and see their relations and possibilities.

The mutual positioning of siblings is therefore not merely an internal concern among themselves; it involves all members of a family. As both observers and participants, others play a part by interpreting, questioning or underpinning interactions that take place, whereby they confirm or challenge those very positions as well as the self-perception and understanding of each individual. Concurrent interpretations of siblings' actions and strategies draw on an established ethos, which also includes assessments of what other family members find acceptable and fair. Thus other people matter to the norms established between siblings.

Whereby it follows that children who move between homes invariably have more people they have to position themselves in relation to; there are more assessments to take into account when appraising their interactions with their siblings. It is demanded of them that they engage in more decoding and adaptation, but it also allows for different positionings (a theme also discussed in the chapter, *Siblings In Between Spaces*). In very diverse families there will often be several norms at play, and not all will be considered equally relevant. In which case each individual will perpetually assess towards whom they would prefer and find it most relevant to orientate themselves - something that often change depending on context and over time.

At the same time, this dimension of family-dynamics means that interrelations between siblings also influence parent-child relations and relations between the adults in a family. This is, by way of example, made clear in an interview with Jonas and Thomas' mother, Linda. She talks about how difficult it has been to balance a family with four boys, who did not really know each other. Jonas' anger on account of Laurits and Oskar moving in caused many conflicts - also between the two grown-ups. Laurits' and Oskar's father had difficulties accepting that Jonas would hit his boys, and Linda considered his perception of the conflicts as far too one-sided. In this way the relations between the children of the different marriages were important to the family as a whole and nearly caused the adults to split up. And so, children's relations are not merely determined by the frameworks and priorities established by parents, they also influence family dynamics and intergenerational relations. These complex interactions cause reactions and shape the positions taken, which then influence the interplay between the siblings and the family as a whole.

### Summery

The nature of interactions between siblings reflects the formation and dynamics of the family. Positions change over time and depend on context. Changes in family configurations mean altered relations, but also

## CHAPTER 7: MOBILE POSITIONS

relocations, change of school, new friends, or new interests cause new expectations and means of orientation. Positioning is about identity. Marking yourself as similar to or different from your siblings and assessing their actions and behaviour becomes ways of accentuating your own perceptions, assessment criteria and sense of self. Positioning is a form of self-presentation and therefore any given positioning depends on whom you are with and where you are, i.e. relationally and contextually. Some features will be emphasised, others toned-down, and these choices reflect your own assessment of whom and what is relevant in the situation. Sibling positions cannot be reduced to questions of birth order, gender or qualities. They reflect far more dynamic and contextually defined social interactions, which do not merely involve the siblings in a given family, but all members of that family who by way of participation and observation help set up norms and confirm actions, relations and identities.

### Theoretical Inspiration

This chapter was inspired by sociological and anthropological theories on social identity (see for example Erving Goffman (1959), *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*; Richard Jenkins (2006) *Social Identity*; or Laura Gilliam (2013), *Identity, Self, Category and Community*). Here the importance of the dynamics between how one perceives oneself and others as well as how others perceive oneself, is central to identity. The theoretical argument is that neither positions nor identity are static but changeable over time and dependent on social context. Transferred to the analysis of sibling relations, these theoretical points challenge the idea that it is possible to map how birth orders influence the development of personal characteristics. By including the many diverse family structures and the children's descriptions of changes in their relations, this theoretical perspective has contributed to an understanding of the strategies, self-presentations and interpretations the interviews encompass.

# Chapter 8

## Doubting the Obvious

By Charlotte Palludan

To 17-year old Peter, siblingship is not a given or naturally related to sharing parents, childhood history or a home. To him, siblings are something he creates and maintains – or not, as the case may be. Siblingship is about choosing to belong together, which are choices he makes in relation to people who are potential siblings, because they may share a parent or because their parents are in a relationship. To him, the criterion is whether or not he recognises something in the other person that he likes. If he does, he experiences a feeling of siblingship and will engage in a brotherly fashion, which to him entails acting in a caring, loving and responsible way towards the other person, as he explains. If, on the other hand, he continually experiences that there is something he does not like in the way the other person behaves or feels about life and other people, his feelings will cool down over time. Peter has many experiences with many different shapes of siblingship: he has biological siblings, he has lived with some siblings at either his mother's or his father's home, and there are other siblings whom he has never lived with, yet they still share a childhood history. The members of this large group of siblings do not hold equal sibling status for Peter. He relativizes his relations and feelings towards them. Those he and others terms his sisters and brothers are not necessarily permanently viewed as such, and they do not necessarily mean the same to him. In other words, from Peter's perspective, sibling status is not obvious.

Not everyone shares Peter's perspective. Sigrid, Jakob, Philip and Emma are friends and they all see their sibling relations as absolutely given and of the same kind. They, each within their own sibling group,

## CHAPTER 8: DOUBTING THE OBVIOUS

experience reciprocal engagement in the shape of love, care, pride, intimacy and a willingness to tease, argue and get annoyed with one another – in balanced doses. The concurrence of love and conflicts is further illustrated in the chapter *Conflictual Closeness*. All four children link their unquestioned involvement to the fact that they share parents as well as childhood and childhood conditions with their respective brothers and sisters. Among other things they say that, 'I'd definitely say that you were a bit more sibling-like if your parents had equal say and the same rules applied, right' (Emma) and 'there is something about, if you have lived through your entire childhood together' (Sigrid). To them, being siblings is simply something they are. It is characterised as natural and not, as it is for Peter, something you have to take a stand on. Unlike Peter, having to relate to the personalities and lives of one's sisters and brothers and then based on these findings assess and relativize whether or not you would class them as close siblings appears to not even enter their thinking as an option. Sigrid's, Jakob's, Philip's and Emma's sibling relations are marked by continuity, community and consensus, whereas break-ups, scattering and conflicts also enter the equation of Peter's sibling relations. And the conflicts do not merely include teasing and bickering, but also jealousy and falling out. Observing some of the internal conflicts among his siblings has urged Peter to explicitly relate to his siblings as individuals and assess his relation to each one of them. His concrete sibling experiences have caused doubts about the relatedness among siblings that appears so obvious to Sigrid, Jakob, Philip and Emma.

### **Common Assumptions Can Be Challenged**

To Lise, her relation to her elder brother was as natural as expressed by the four children above. He would protect and defend her. She would seek and find help and comfort when life proved difficult. They did not live together and they did not have the same father. Nevertheless, Lise felt very closely related to her brother and believed the closeness to be reciprocated which was also why it came as a big surprise to her that her

brother suddenly distanced himself from her, offering no explanation. It happened concurrently with the termination of her brother's prison sentence, but she does not know what the real reason is. She needs explanations but cannot get any. He does not want to talk about it. And thus, she can simply conclude that he is not the brother he used to be. It has incurred doubts about their sibling relation, and this doubt is wearing Lise down. This is why she wants her brother to take an explicit stand on whether or not he considers her his sister. She wants to know if she can depend on him or not. 'Either he has to stand by the fact that I'm his sister, or he should say that he doesn't want to know me – because this is tiresome' (Lise).

Both Lise and Peter know the feeling of being naturally related to siblings. However, they have also experienced how feelings of naturalness can be challenged, which allows doubt to sneak in and upset the relational balance. This happens when relations are filled with conflicts and reveal personality traits and ways of living that do not match their own understanding of being a good sister or brother. Both of them address this doubt when they either take a stand themselves or demand that their siblings make a decision on what the character of their relation should be like. Their intention is to lessen the emotional consequences of being in doubt – not least for themselves. At the same time, they further challenge the common assumption about the relation. Both Lise and Peter are well aware of whom their siblings are and thus also which sibling relations are disputed. For some of the other children, it is a lot less clear who their potentially obvious siblings are. In their lives, doubt is not so much something that occurs or happens at a certain point in time, as in Lise and Peter's lives, it is rather a basic condition of their sibling relations.

### **When Sibling Relations Are Influenced by Doubt**

When asked, 10-year-old Dan cannot provide an immediate answer to how many siblings he has. Thinking about it a little longer, he reaches the conclusion that he has three siblings. One is his twin, but he did not

## CHAPTER 8: DOUBTING THE OBVIOUS

know that he had a twin brother until he was approx. five years old. He met him at their mother's place. Since then, they have spent time together at their father's and paternal grandmother's house and over the years, they have managed to establish a sense of relatedness. He has always known about his other brother, but he lives in an institution and because Dan never sees him, he is not really part of the family picture. Finally, he has a little sister, who lives with his mother, whom he rarely sees; his mother usually visits him alone and only very occasionally does he visits his mother. The family history and its social construction has left Dan with an inherent doubt about whether or not he has anymore siblings, apart from his twin brother. Hence his relations to his other siblings are not obvious at all. When sisters and brothers do not see each other and do not share an everyday life or have places where they can meet, there is room for doubt.

This was also true for Jonas. He lost a brother because his brother lost his mother. Jonas and his brother shared an everyday existence and were given participants in each other's lives, because their parents had brought them together. When his brother's mother died, the brother moved back in with his father and there was little occasion for the two boys to remain part of each other's lives. This specific social event and the concrete consequences it had in terms of living conditions and relations planted a fundamental doubt in Jonas' mind in terms of whether or not they really are brothers and if he will ever see his brother again.

Karl, who is nine years old, also talks about an explicit doubt in relation to a couple of his siblings. He does not doubt that they are related. He lives with both of them, shares one parent with each of them and his everyday life with one of them. He does not doubt his own sense of relatedness. Rather, his doubt is centred on whether or not it is reciprocated. He would very much like to feel related to his elder siblings and appears to need them to confirm their relationship by sharing experiences and everyday activities with him. As a result, he is very aware of being rejected and of not being treated kindly. The fact that they do not explicitly acknowledge him causes doubt in him. Greater access to their rooms,

playing musical instruments together more frequently or being allowed in when they hang out together in their rooms would very possibly limit the doubt that Karl experiences when he contemplates his sibling relations. As opposed to Dan and Jonas, Karl's situation does not include doubt about whether or not a sibling relation exists, his doubt relates to what that sibling relation means to his siblings. To Karl, simply being siblings is not enough. He wants to know about his siblings' interests, and he constantly explores what he can do with them and how much their family structure can encompass.

### **From Doubt to Common Assumption**

In similar fashion, the children at Blåmejsevej have explored their family structure and slowly realised what they can do together. This group consists of Kalle, Alberte and Conrad, and together with their mother, they have moved to Blåmejsevej, where Alexander and Carlo and their father have also moved in. The first time we ask them if they consider themselves siblings, they are very doubtful. They look to each other for answers, searching for words, until the eldest takes responsibility and answers that it depends. Sometimes he feels related as a family and sometimes not. These changes are closely related to physical proximity. When they have spent a week together in their shared home, they become siblings of sorts. When they spend time apart, in their other homes, he does not consider them siblings. The others nod their confirmation of Kalle's interpretation. On our return a year later, their doubt seems to have been replaced by a greater sense of a common pre-understanding. They do not call each other siblings, but their relatedness appears to be much more obvious to them. The five children lie entangled on the couch. They fondle each other's hair and laugh amongst themselves. Bodily interconnectedness as we recognise it from Sigrid's, Jakob's, Philip's and Emma's stories about how simply being siblings is concretely expressed.

Over time, the children at Blåmejsevej have minimized doubt. This process is most likely helped by the fact that their relatedness has been

## CHAPTER 8: DOUBTING THE OBVIOUS

strengthened by way of a shared youngest brother. Several children talk about how having a shared third, primarily in the shape of a person but a dog will suffice, is defining for their sense of being a family of siblings. The shared person can be a parent but a shared sister or brother is what most strongly generates sibling relations according to the interviewed children. Sharing a relation to a person, however, is not the only way to create and maintain sibling relations. Signe, Anne, Mikkel and Katrine do not have shared younger siblings, they do not share parents, and they no longer share a home. As children, they did at one point share a home, when their parents were together. During those years, they developed a sense of belonging and common assumptions about being siblings. They have managed to maintain this sense, even after their parents split up. They are still related, which is why they are still together, now that they have grown into young adults and they cannot imagine that it would change in the future. They are simply siblings.

### **Of Course We Are Siblings Forever – Or Are We?**

12-year-old Johanne concurs: she cannot imagine that her relations to her siblings could be broken sometime in the future. Johanne's parents divorced when she was little, and both of them have new partners and each couple has provided Johanne with younger brothers. Furthermore, Johanne has elder sisters, whom her father had with his first wife. All sisters and brothers are part of Johanne's life, regardless of huge age differences and their being spread across several homes. The sibling relations are either tied to a shared father or a shared mother as well as to a shared history and the relatedness to a shared family. In Johanne's life, which along these parameters is quite similar to Peter and Karl's lives, this is no cause for concern, in the manner that it is for them. Personal arrangements of self in relation to the sibling arrangements one is part of, vary. People focus on different things, they feel differently about things, and they reflect differently on given circumstances. And sibling arrangements also unfold differently and call for different reactions, even when they may appear similar. Johanne does not experience the

little rejections and the inconsistent attention in her everyday life the same way as Karl does. Perhaps because she is an elder sister and the one who includes her younger siblings while Karl is the younger brother who is potentially excluded. The importance of mutual positioning is also discussed in the chapter, *Mobile Positions*. Neither does Johanne experience conflicts between her elder siblings nor that some of them display characteristics or live their lives in ways she needs to distance herself from, in the way Peter does. Therefore, she has never been placed in a situation where she felt it necessary to question a sibling relation. And unlike Peter, Johanne has not had to connect to a sister, with whom she shares no parent. A sister, about whom Peter has this to say: 'Don't quite know what will happen with Maria – perhaps we'll be together, a lot can happen' (Peter). Rikke is older than Peter and she is one of the young adults who have learnt that much can happen. When her brother was getting married, it turned out that she was not invited. As the daughter of her brother's mother's former husband, Rikke was not considered a family member naturally invited to the wedding. For Rikke it was obvious: she and Olav were siblings, because they shared their childhood, home and younger sisters. However, now, she is no longer certain.

Knowing that much can happen, and that much has happened, is an important ingredient – not in all siblingships, but in some. To these siblings, complexity and change is a condition with sensitive effects that call for sensitive initiatives. The different types of initiatives should probably be viewed in the light of the situation and their parents' approach. When Peter dares to verbalize the doubt he has about his relation to a brother, it is perhaps because he knows that his mother is keen to maintain their relation and ensure that they stay related. And therefore it is not necessarily a life-long break he is instigating, which may give him the courage to actually do it. When Lise sees no other alternative but to compel her brother to reject her, it is possibly because she is very much on her own due to her parents being ill or dead, and she cannot cope emotionally with being on stand-by. When Dan focuses on the brother with whom he

## CHAPTER 8: DOUBTING THE OBVIOUS

sometimes shares his father's house, but does not take any initiatives in relation to his other siblings with whom he shares a mother, it is most likely not least due to his parents' highly conflictual past history. The conditions that shape parents' ability to influence sibling relations vary, and they have many different thoughts on their children's sibling arrangements. They also have differing expectations and hopes about the way their children relate. Not least because they also doubt what expectations and hopes they can actually entertain.

### Parents' Doubt

Johanne's father, Steen, who has children with three different women, is uncertain of how he should interpret the relations his children have with one another. To him, they are indisputably siblings, and he knows that they feel the same way. Yet, he is also aware that they are not siblings in the way that he would expect them to be. There are subtle details in the way they talk to each other and the way they interact with each other that differs from what he would expect, and this makes him doubt the character of siblingship. He explains that it is something he has considered, but that it has not changed his practical efforts to create and maintain a close and given bond between his children. He does what he believes is right, based on his own experiences with having siblings. He does so because he would like his children to be close. This ambition is not something he has explicitly voiced to his children. If they are aware of it, it is because they sense it. Partly in their everyday life, where Johanne and her younger brothers, who also live there, and the elder sisters who come visiting, are interwoven by way of shared routines and interactions; and partly, by way of holidays and festive traditions, including Christmas, 'which all of my children always spend together', as Steen contentedly explains. In much the same way, Karl's parents create annual recurring events where all the children meet up, but they do not connect this to any ambition they may harbour that their children should consider themselves siblings. In fact, they are clearer about not considering the children they each bring to the family as siblings. Neither have

they entertained the idea that they had to do something special to ensure that their children would become siblings. However, Kasper and Bodil, the children referred to here, do consider themselves siblings, and this makes their parents a little doubtful. Karl's relationship to his other siblings, on the other hand, appear to be a little more obvious to his parents than to Karl himself perhaps because he is their shared child.

At Blåmejsevej, there is a clearer concurrence between how the children understand their interrelations and how their parents see them. The doubts entertained by the children in relation to their relatedness and their possible sibling arrangements resonate in their parents' narrative. It was new to them all, and the parents were not sure about whether they were one big family or rather two families living together. Over time, this changed. And according to Peter, time has also changed his father's understanding of the character of his children's sibling relations. When the children were younger, they were considered siblings, including those children with whom they only had a mother in common, and not a father. At the time Peter installed doubts about one of his siblings, his father followed suit. A doubt that is not rediscovered in Peter's mother, who like many of the other children's parents, encourage a given relatedness by way of regular and recurring activities, among other things, to avoid the doubt that circulates.

Parents doubt the nature of sibling relations, but they do not necessarily share the doubts of their children. There is far from always concurrence between the way children and parents understand sibling relations. Which is also why we cannot be sure that the assumptions, which for some children are connected to their sibling arrangements, are reflected in their parents' experience of those very sibling arrangements. A possible doubt for parents concerns whether or not their children have and will continue to have a good and close relation to one another. For many parents this is a great wish. At the same time, they are perfectly aware that many things can happen, also in terms of sibling relations.

## CHAPTER 8: DOUBTING THE OBVIOUS

### Summery

A sense of relatedness between siblings is obvious to some children, but not to all. Relatedness is relative; it can cause doubt and be rejected. Rejections can be based on the will to take a moral stand about someone else's way of living. They can also be a consequence of having to ascertain that it is emotionally too stressful to have to acknowledge that the relation did not contain the qualities one thought it did. When sibling relations are rejected, it generates doubt about the longevity of the arrangement. There is a common cultural assumption that siblingships last forever, but rejections of siblings in fact mark that it is a relation that only lasts until it no longer exists. The transience of relations, however, is not always the consequence of free choices. Social events in families are also important. Particular life circumstances dominated by lack of time spent together can even mean that children can have doubts about whether or not they actually share sibling relations with children with whom they share parents.

Doubt about the character of sibling relations is not always explicitly expressed; it can also constitute a silent partner in a shared everyday existence. Here it may be related to rejections or lack of attention or limited knowledge about each other. It can give cause for doubt in terms of what you mean to other people, or what they mean to you. And over time, this doubt will occasionally change and turn into a sense of obvious affinities.

Connections between siblings are mobile, both in terms of quality and existence. There appears to be no unequivocal connection between movements in sibling dynamics and family histories. Doubts thrive in many places and in many different guises. However, it is probable that children who have never experienced any changes to their family arrangements also have a tendency to consider their sibling relations as continual and completely natural. It does not immediately occur to them that being siblings is something you can be until things change. We cannot exclude that the biological relatedness plays a part here. And regardless, it is interesting that the children who talk about doubt all do so in

relation to siblings they are not biologically related to or siblings with whom they only share one parent. At the same time, the children for whom doubt about the character of their siblingship barely exists are primarily children who only have biological siblings. That biology may influence the way children understand their own role in sibling groups may also help explain why many children emphasise a 'shared person' as important to their relatedness. And by shared person, they refer to someone with whom they also share a bloodline, e.g. a shared younger sister or parent.

The complexity of family arrangements and the familial order usually include that mental perceptions and emotional experiences of sibling relations are ambiguous. Children and parents alike have to ascertain and relate to the fact that connections are not unequivocal. Not even in a biological sense. Siblings are not something you are by definition, it is an arrangement that requires specific investments.

### **Theoretical inspiration**

The chapter's analyses of different ways of experiencing and perceiving siblingship(s) are inspired by the British anthropologist Janet Carsten's concept of *relatedness*, the Danish psychologist Ole Dreier's concepts of *personality* and *life conduct*, as well as the Swedish researcher Jenny Ahlberg's analyses of the experiences of children of divorced parents. Relatedness is a concept that allows us to study relational relations in ways that differ from classical anthropology, where family is understood as a social order, based on the order of nature and the order of the law (Tine Tjørnhøj-Thomsen 2004). According to Carsten, we should rather view sibling relations as an expression of people's creative negotiations (Carsten 2000). The concept of relatedness has thus opened up our ability to shed light on how children define sibling relations and how they feel about them. This approach is further unfolded by adding Ole Dreier's concept of life conduct, which also focuses on human behaviour and includes the connection between the social and the individual. Life conduct is an individual's practical approach to minding themselves in rela-

## CHAPTER 8: DOUBTING THE OBVIOUS

tion to the social arrangements they are part of, which is closely related to the understanding of the self said individual develops (Dreier 2011). In her research, Jenny Ahlberg has thematized the part of children's life conduct that includes doubts, choices and rejections in divorced families (Ahlberg 2008). Inspired by the British sociologists Carol Smart and Anthony Giddens, she shows that when families break up, the people involved stop perceiving family members as people with whom they are obvious related. Because their experiences reveal that relations do not always last forever, they last only *until*.

# Postscript

## Practical and Sensitive Relations

In this book we discuss what siblingships involve in contemporary Danish society. Through our empirical study, we have tried to highlight how children experience and handle their sibling relations and how these vary in relation to biographies, constellations and individual preferences. In our work with the material, we have time and again, been struck by this level of variation, but also by how significant the will to siblingship is. Many children put in a lot of effort to maintain relations and overcome obstacles and counteract conditions that hinder their relationships. Their efforts can, as shown in the chapters, be expressed in many ways.

However, it is not always up to the children to fill out the sibling relations they are part of. Parents' notions of good siblingships provide context for the (inter)actions of children, as do social conventions and cultural understandings. The room to manoeuvre and interpret is limited. Siblings are expected to relate to one another, to be close and to get along. They are expected to be positively inclined and to tone down possible conflicts. Siblings are also expected to support each other while maintaining a great degree of individual autonomy. These cultural norms influence children's concrete interpretations, practices and emotions.

The organisation of families also plays a part in children's interrelations. Some sibling groups are relatively short and narrow, as the family only includes few children who are close in age. Other sibling groups include many children, of different litters, which make the sibling groups longer and wider. The complexity of families and sibling groups is further enhanced by changes and social events such as divorce. The degree

## POSTSCRIPT

of complexity is important in terms of how a child can perform as a sibling. In the different chapters, we have been interested in what siblings do together, i.e. how siblings relate by way of a series of practical actions and time spent together, which over time transforms into a complexity of emotions, memories, classifications, positions, identifications and beings, both for each individual child and between siblings.

In the summery below, we point out the insights into siblings as a cultural phenomenon this study has revealed and we draw attention to more general issues in family relations. We especially wish to point out how experiences of long and wide siblingships provide children with an opportunity to develop specific, socially relevant knowledge.

### **The Importance of Time**

The potential duration of sibling relations affords them a particular character. Many people imagine that sibling relations last for life. When the informants in our study talk about what is special about their sibling relations, they often refer to time. A shared personal history presents itself as a guarantee that the relation will stretch far into the future. Children whose siblings have always been around rarely express any doubts as to whether or not the relation will last. When the shared past is of shorter duration, however, a shared future is less of a given and considered more of a potential. This is why children who have experienced movements in their families regard time as a pivotal point for assessing the character of a sibling relation. Many children hope that the relations will continue, but their experiences reveal that this requires effort as well as commitment. Some children have experienced several divorces and the arrival of more than one set of new siblings, which has made them selective in terms of which relations they hope to maintain in the future. Similar experiences have left other children sceptical about placing any faith in the longevity of sibling relations in general. Which is why a potential shared future is described as rather utopian. At the same time, it is almost astounding how far the interviewed children will stretch to overcome potential barriers, establish contact, and try to live

up to the idea of the life-long relationship; knowing full well that their efforts may be based purely on hope.

Shared personal history has impact on how relations are interpreted, but in the interviews it is also striking how differently time is perceived. In some of the narratives, an adult perspective would define the time perspective as rather short, while the children apparently perceive it as long, which enables them to consider their relations as cemented. Relations are established and consolidated over time, but there are no set guidelines as to what time constitutes or how much time is needed to establish weight in sibling relations or when it is proper to refer to relations as siblingships.

Time is also part of everyday practice. Being together in the same place(s) matters in terms of the character of the relation. When spending time together, children can choose to do something together, but when they are separated that is not an option. Children who commute at different times are rarely afforded opportunity to spontaneously do things together. In these cases, parents' organisation of activities and logistic structuring of time and contact have decisive influence on siblings' opportunities to be together. Thus, sibling relations are inextricable linked to the family's rhythm and temporal organisation.

However, siblings also have their own time structures and rhythmic dynamics. This is true for children who live together, who share afternoons together watching TV, being on their computers or getting to school on time, etc. Children's own time and particular rhythms are, however, particularly distinctive in the part of our material that deals with siblings who move between homes. Over time, journeys between homes turn into rhythmic routine. They are often referred to as a waste of time, yet these journeys nonetheless stand out as special sibling time. Time filled with arguments and grievances but also shared reflections on greater and smaller aspects of everyday life. With the distance afforded the traveller, siblings can become interpretive partners in their reading of life.

## POSTSCRIPT

Even children who either have moved out of the family home or have siblings who live by themselves talk about particular, often asynchronous, types of communication and ways of being together. Through different social media they keep up with each other's lives and thus become part of one another's everyday time. From being framed by parent's initiatives and ways of organising family life, sibling relations gradually become more detached and self-organized; perhaps the vitality is even reinforced by the fact that parents are out of step. Similarly, it is probably essential for the creation of intensity and weight in the sibling relationships that there are times when parents are not present.

In siblingships different rhythms intersect: the rhythms of life and the rhythms of everyday, household rhythms, the rhythm of journeys, parents' rhythm and children's rhythms. Siblings handle the contrasts arising by concurrent rhythms and create relations to one another in the ways possible for them. Not just physical and practical but importantly also emotional bonds. Siblings have an effect on and are affected by one another.

### **An Emotional Bond**

Feelings constitute a much more important component in our material than we had expected and we have been struck by the degree to which even the younger children are able to verbally explain even quite complicated emotional relations. The children talk about what they like, what makes them happy or sad, what annoys them, what generates doubt, and what makes them angry. But emotions are not just an individual matter. There are cultural norms for emotional articulations indicating which feelings will be relevant and legitimate under which circumstances. Similarly, the idea that emotions are important aspects of siblingships is not a natural given. Looking through literature on siblingships from other parts of the world, it is far from evident that the relations are defined by the emotional experiences of individuals.

In Denmark, there appears to be a general tendency to consider emotions central to the nature of the social relations between people – and

much more so than work sharing, care, influence, rights and finances. And this is not least true in relation to children. There is a pronounced focus on children's emotions and emotional wellbeing, which among other things, reveals itself in the counselling of parents and the strong emphasis in families, childcare institutions and schools on teaching children how to acknowledge and talk about their feelings. It is this training of children's abilities to talk about their emotional state that we encounter in the interviews, and from which we profit in the sense that we are informed about the particular feelings individual children have towards their siblings as well as more general cultural norms on feelings between siblings. Yet emotions do not just take a prominent position in the children's narratives because they reflect culturally established ways of talking about and relating to relations. They are also recurrent because they are complex and difficult to clarify on an individual basis. As is apparent in several chapters, the informants talk simultaneously about love and doubt, closeness and conflict. The experience of belonging together is mixed up with considerations about the depth of reciprocity and the character of the relation. To some, doubt is the prominent feeling, to others, siblings constitute a given that leaves them in no doubt about the relation; they merely consider its current expression.

Complex and ambivalent emotions become more predominant when relations are loose. This is true not only of families that rearrange their constellations. It is true of all families. Relations change over time and must be interpreted anew. And this is perhaps particularly true in a cultural context, where the nature of relations is shaped by individuals' concrete choices and actions rather than through predetermined and solidified work and responsibility distributions. The sibling relations of the children interviewed do contain aspects of helping and looking out for each other, not least in connection with journeys from one home to the next. Nonetheless, we have been surprised by how relatively difficult it has been to consider siblingships as routinely performed communities of practice, and how much emphasis we must in fact place on the individual's initiatives, actions, sense of responsibility and understanding of

## POSTSCRIPT

others' positions when we describe siblingships. Sibling relations call for interpretations and negotiations as they are formed through the actions of the involved within particular social and practical frames. Our study points to the fact that in a current Danish context, actions and interpretations are centred on emotions.

In continuation hereof, it is not surprising, although we were a little surprised, that the children we followed uttered such great concern for whether or not their siblings were all right. They do not necessarily feel able to do much, but they express a concern and a sense of responsibility. Rather than pointing to chores and specific doings in relation to their siblings' wellbeing, this type of responsibility concerns empathy and support.

Our interviews with parents provided insights into the reservations presented by many parents in terms of burdening their children with duties related to their siblings. On occasion, they may ask a child to pick up a younger brother, bathe a younger sister or help with their homework. But in many instances such demands will be explained by way of providing space for establishing emotional attachments between siblings and only rarely as practical necessities. These duties should indeed be parents' tasks, because children should not be obliged to relate to one another. Instead, siblings should benefit from their relations by way of having fun together, listening to and respecting each other as well as taking an interest of their own accord. And when listening to the children's narratives, they appear to have adopted this understanding themselves. This is what they do in relation to their siblings, and it is also what they wish to do - and preferably without meddling parents. Parents who prompt their children to show appreciation of a sibling's state of being and situation can be disruptive. Children know that their parents' support for sibling relations by way of cosy arrangements and other activities is based purely on goodwill. But the timing of their support is not always right and sometimes there appears to be no consideration of the fragility and mobility at stake when siblings tune in emotionally.

## **Distributing Things and Spaces**

Emotions are not only expressed verbally or bodily. They can also be expressed through things. Things can be shared or denied and thus come to express closeness or distance, which then generates new feelings of joy or disappointment. Things are part of the relational order and are therefore included in the narratives we encounter as explanations of a relation's current character. We are told about room sizes, about new or handed-down clothes, about whose photo is on the wall, and how grandparents distribute presents. And we encounter narratives about the fact that who gives presents matters, whether or not you exchange a gift is a matter of importance, and how parents will assist in obtaining things that allow for the expression of closeness. There is an outspoken focus on the symbolic statements of things in relation to sibling relations and thus their social importance. Which is also true for parents who talk about their deliberations in terms of a just distribution of money, things and privilege. And it is clear that this theme is so extensively covered in counselling and handbooks that parents cannot help but pay attention to the fact that materiality is part of the moral order and as such read relationally.

Especially in divorced families, there appears to be a strong focus on children ideally not missing out or feeling ignored. It appears as if parents generally try to ensure that each child has their own things to avoid battles over having to share. Even the different homes will be arranged along the principles of equality and justice. Emphasis is on everybody belonging in equal measure. Each child should be afforded her or his own space and preferably in the shape of their own room in each home. Collectively, these priorities result in a massive presence of things – at least in families who are materially affluent. And even though one can reflect on the massive material consumption that surrounds children, it appears as if the investments actually perform as hoped for. In our collective material there are not many stories of feeling disadvantaged or unjustly treated. Parents' attempts at balancing and distributing according to what is considered fair seem to be working to a great extent.

## POSTSCRIPT

This attention to equality and the efforts to avoid experiences of inequality combine with the children's experiences of having material rights in terms of having their own room, a seat in the car, a photo in the family gallery – quite literally, a space of their own. As they perform sibling relations in their everyday lives, they are informed by culturally acceptable material standards, notions of equality and by way of the material conditions they are afforded.

In siblingships, symbolic, social, emotional, moral and material orders are interwoven, and they inform the ways in which siblings can be together while also underpinning or challenging their individual positions.

### **Complex Communities**

When we generally think about siblingship or encounter sibling relations in books, films, adverts, etc., the images we see are often informed by a norm that presents siblings as biologically connected and relatively simply positioned in relation to one another, in the shape of elder brother to younger sister or elder sister to younger sister etc. This sibling study, however, has made it clear that it is not that simple. Siblings are far from always biologically connected, and the importance of a possible biological interconnectedness is culturally constructed and may be quite differently performed in different sibling groups as well as individually. As is apparent in the analyses presented in the various chapters, the children we have interviewed do not unequivocally refer to biological relations when they talk about siblings. Many describe the children they have grown up with as siblings, whether or not they in fact have parents in common. They hesitate to use terms such as half-siblings or stepsiblings, which indicate a distance they do not themselves experience. Some children develop new terminology such as 'everyday-siblings' or 'live-alone-child', which are more concurrent with their own experiences. Others again, talk about how they feel compelled to use the well-established categories to make it easier for other people, outside their family, to understand their relation(s). Handling complexity is thus not

merely a question of being able to orient oneself. It also entails paying attention to the fact that others need to orientate themselves in the complexity of connections that constitute one's relations.

The concept of birth order is also more complex than it immediately appears, as an individual can be the elder sister in one home, while being a younger sister or the same age in the other home; and as the position of elder brother changes to a position of younger brother due to the arrival of new siblings, etc. It makes a difference to the relationship whether one is the elder or the younger sibling, whether there are more siblings the same age, or whether you are the only little one. Age is afforded importance per se in society, in families and by individuals, an importance rediscovered in this study. The point is, however, that in siblingships the way age interacts with the construction of relatedness is highly dynamic: in practice, it varies how age is referred to when responsibilities, tasks and things are allocated or used as an explanation when time-honoured privileges are challenged. Immediate and conventional references to age and size as fair and just arguments are not necessarily feasible in the siblingships we describe as long and wide. Here, established systems of privilege collide when sibling groups are brought together and new figurations are formed. In these changeable structures, privileges and positions are open to negotiation. Age and biology are not unimportant. On the contrary, they are subject to continual interpretation and assessment, keeping siblingships dynamic and complex.

There is no indication, however, that the diversity described here leads to increased individuality or a sense of separateness between siblings. In fact, we encounter an approach to siblingships that, in ways different to friendships, is based on conceptions of an emotional obligation, responsibility and the wish for an existential relatedness. This insight challenges the impression left by the public debate that modern-day children are individualistic and self-centred. It also challenges the counselling parents are given when in divorce proceedings, they are encouraged to see their children as the individuals they are, with their individual needs and experiences. Our study points to the fact that chil-

## POSTSCRIPT

dren should indeed be seen as individuals, but we must not ignore the strong sense of relatedness they share with their siblings. They work to maintain their emotional bonds and their materially shared fates, which make up siblingships and on which they are based. Even though it may prove difficult, friction filled and sometimes conflictual, siblings have the commitment to be a part of a collective, and they invest in that which binds them together. A narrow focus on the child as an individual is at the risk of overlooking how interrelated children can be with their siblings – regardless of whether or not they are biologically related.

### **Potentials and Possibilities**

We have already touched upon how emotionally complex siblingships are and what they demand in terms of attention on the part of the involved children. This complexity is also very practically expressed when the different rhythms of many different people and different spaces all have to be coordinated. On the surface, it would appear that it is the children who commute between different homes, families and sibling groups in particular, who practice strategies that enable them to handle a highly complex everyday existence and from which they gain a core competency in logistics. And looking a little bit closer, it is true of many of the children who in each their different ways are part of long and wide siblingships. Short and narrow siblingships may call for the same competences, but there is less insistence on practicing these competences, if all siblings are located in one place and the household includes a smaller number of children. Complex sibling constructions call for abilities to navigate and master diversity on many levels. Being part of a sibling relation that is not physically present at all times, affords expertise in relating to and maintaining relations to people who are located elsewhere and live by different rhythms than oneself. It is also a useful point of departure for improving one's ability to handle in- and exclusion processes, an expertise, which is also generated through siblings' experiences of handling conflicts.

Many of the children who figure in this book have developed such competences. They manage to bond while being separated, and they are concerned with coordinating and being proper and predictable persons. They are able to handle complex situations and asynchronous relations. Such competences, generated by the sibling configurations we call long and wide, are not only important to given individuals, they are also relevant from a societal perspective. We actually think that in this manner, siblingships are potentially supportive of civil society, in as much as they develop and unfold different types of civil responsibility, reciprocal care, social coordination, as well as the independent/individual handling of conflicts and oppositions between people who are not necessarily present at the same time. Such skills developed in the family and private sphere can prove important in a society where global interdependence, wide networks and transit movements to an ever increasing degree will inform human interrelations and modes of communication.

### **Rethinking Siblings and Family?**

Our focus in this book has been siblings, and we have underlined the importance of a horizontal perspective on family relations. The voices and perspectives of children have characterized the study. By focusing on children as actors and by implementing a horizontal perspective on family dynamics, we have gained access to experiences and knowledge about modern families, which have hitherto been underexplored. We have come to understand that having many siblings can become a great emotional resource and having many homes can prove enriching. We have also come to understand that moving between several homes is hard work, and that being part of such an intricate web of relations, demands great responsibility on the part of the children involved.

Naturally, parents also play a major part in relation hereto, although we have, throughout the book, placed them in the background. Parents create the material frameworks within which children in a family can be and become siblings. And parents underpin and shape atmospheres and

## POSTSCRIPT

interactions based on ideas about what siblingship is, could or should be, coloured by their own experiences and sibling narratives.

We were surprised by the solidity of the figure of the nuclear family with a permanent address. It still appears to be the dominant perception of proper family life, and it also informs sibling relations. This figure of the nuclear family appears in the family narratives of both children and parents, and it is also revealed in the practical ways of creating a home. When children move between several homes, in most cases, they move in and out of nuclear families. Sometimes it is nuclear families on standby, waiting for the child/children to make it complete. At other times, it is continually functioning nuclear families, to which extra life is added, by way of a room opened, an extra chair at the table, an addition to the birth order, when the child/children step back in the line that makes up this particular arrangement.

What is striking is the fact that although we have come across a diversity of different life situations in the families we have been in contact with, most choose to organise as a nuclear family, regardless of the changes to structure and adult partners. Rather than establishing new family configurations, they repeat the model we call the short and narrow family. Practically all the children we spoke to live in or change between narrow and short families. And this takes place simultaneously with the ever-increasing and continual branching-out of modern siblingships. In practice, they are long and wide. Perhaps it is the difference between sibling configurations and family configurations that underlie the reasons why more children distinguish between being siblings and being related to someone, and differentiate between their own families and their siblings' families. In this way, there is a mismatch and non-simultaneity between contemporary siblingships and the parallel and/or serial short and narrow families within which they unfold. Alternative ways of practicing family and home, which to a greater extent reflect the length and width in sibling relations, could perhaps address this.

Perhaps the siblings in our study will have the experiences and skills related to complex communities needed for them to unfold, as adults,

other ideas about the right way of performing families and as a consequence thereof, they may engage with other ways of living and develop new ways of talking about family. Family configurations which to a higher degree reflect and match loving relations that last for *the time being* as well as sibling relations that are established and maintained *all the time*.

# Reflections on a Sibling Study

We wanted to study the phenomenon, siblings. Even from the outset, this contained a significant challenge: we wanted to know what being siblings meant to the children we were in contact with, and for them to understand what we were talking about, we had to use the common word, siblings. However, by using the category of siblings in interviews there was a risk that our own relatively implicit understandings of the nature of the phenomenon unwittingly would be at play and thus limit rather than open up their understanding of the phenomenon. In order to deal with this challenge and break away from our own preconceived understandings, we carefully tried, whenever possible, to substitute the category of siblings with other words and to maintain a curious and inquisitive approach to the children's stories. We strived to respectfully listen to their perceptions of siblingship, how they themselves shaped and afforded siblingship meaning, their personal experiences with conflicts and joy, dreams and disappointments, as well as their conceptions of the more general perceptions and ideals relating to siblingships. At the same time, we inspired them to associate in other ways than perhaps seemed immediately obvious to them. Which also helped us ensure that we were not just confirming our own preconceptions.

In the analysis, our strategy has been a kind of double-hermeneutics, which included breaking with their interpretations of what being siblings entails and breaking with our own immediate interpretations of their interpretations by way of posing self-critical questions to the reach of our own interpretations. We did so by seeking oppositions and dilemmas and paradoxes internally in the individual children's narratives and by crisscrossing between the different narratives. We wished to orientate, disorientate and re-orientate ourselves. And on top of this, we added inspiration from other studies. In this interplay between material

and analytic inspirations from other research studies, we have come closer to an understanding of the phenomenon, siblings.

In the introduction to this book, we have described how we generated the empirical material. In this postscript we would rather reflect on the kind of knowledge contributed by a multifaceted material such as ours. We wish in particular to discuss the inclusion of visual material and the deliberations behind the production of a film as well as the way the film relates to the book. Finally, we wish to reflect on some of the challenges and points generated by working as a research collective.

### **Bricolage**

Empirical material is always generated in the light of the research questions posed, the theoretical and analytical perspectives that the researchers bring to the project, and that which is practically possible in any given field. As already stated, we were interested in shedding light on the diverse interrelations between siblings, their ways of managing siblingships, and to gain knowledge about how these relations materialize, and how conflicts and intimacy play out. As experienced ethnographers we knew that a classical ethnographic approach, which consists of participant observations over long periods of time, could prove profitable in terms of getting close to the way siblingships unfold under different circumstances. This approach had, however, the limitation that it would be difficult to cover wide ground and encompass sufficient variations. In order to clarify the subject matter in a nuanced way, it was important to include children with many siblings as well as children with few siblings, siblings who continually lived together, and siblings who were separated for periods of time. We also wanted to include children who experienced the arrival of new siblings, and children who rarely saw their siblings. These were the variables we looked for, more than the classic parameters such as gender, class and ethnicity.

Variation became a higher priority than in-depth examinations of the interrelations between few people, and rather than engaging in fieldwork, we conducted qualitative interviews combined with other more

## REFLECTIONS ON A SIBLING STUDY

ethnographically inspired methods. We conducted interviews in the children's homes, thus gaining insight into their surroundings, and we conducted interviews with several children from the same sibling group and with their parents, which allowed us to encounter different perspectives on the same relations. We also spent time observing in a family-counselling centre in order to get close to the conversations children have about their families, and to gain a sense of counselling priorities in practice. And finally, we conducted filmed observations with a smaller number of sibling groups and families. This has left us with a bricolage of material, which contains written observations, footage, and interview transcriptions of many children's thoughts and reflections on their relations as well as on their private doings and concerns (narrated on tape and/or film). The combination of observations, participation and interviews has enabled us to get closer to the everyday practices of the informants rather than solely having their descriptions on, for example, moving between homes and siblings. In addition to this primary material, we have snapshots from the media landscape (children's books, adverts, films and Facebook), where siblings are presented and visualised, discussed and assessed. This material forms a background that informs an understanding, which has also guided our attention. Finally, we have parents' statements and statements from a selection of professionals about own or other children's sibling life. Which, all combined, affords us a chorus of diverse voices, some stronger than others. It is these voices we have listen to and tried to extract meaning from.

In the introduction, we briefly described how we recruited children to the project by way of what is usually referred to as the snowballing method. As our point of departure, we had constructed a matrix to ensure great variation, and our goal was 12 types of siblingships. We wanted to include siblings characterised by having experienced changes in their everyday interactions with siblings, due to their parents divorcing; siblings who were denied a shared everyday life; and siblings who had spent their entire lives together in an unbroken nuclear family. Qualitative studies of this kind, however, are not always easy to manage, and

therefore all parameters of variation originally decided upon are not necessarily fulfilled. In spite of the many differences included in our material, there is a majority of ethnically Danish, middle-class children. We have not been able to go deeper into the connections between class and siblingships, as we did not have enough information about the families' situations. On the other hand, we can conclude that within what we term the middle-class, there are greatly differing life circumstances, which in our material reveals itself as differences in the families' life style. We consider this variation a quality in terms of understanding the many facets of siblingship.

The research approach drawn on in our study enables the transformation of empirical material to research-based knowledge to take its point of departure in the material. Rather than predetermining which theoretical inspirations and analytical concepts should frame our analyses, we have allowed inspiration from existing family and sibling research to help us locate themes within our material. And from here, we have sought concepts that productively could help us twist what appeared recognisable and open up for new understandings of contexts and perspectives. We have not searched for results and findings like gold diggers; we have interpreted contexts. Our empirical work and our analyses have afforded us insight into a complexity of threads, connections and part-elements, which we add to the already existing knowledge in this field. We have not come out on the other side with a complete blanket of knowledge, all knots tied. Rather, we are about to weave a larger blanket of knowledge about siblings and siblingships that includes reels, thread, yarn, slides and frame. Our analyses produce patterns and allow us to decipher different sibling formations and figurations.

### **The Visual Material**

Part of our empirical material is visual and it is included on par with transcriptions and observations in the collective amount of knowledge that we work with. It is not particularly unusual to use video tapings as a means of observation on par with audio recordings of interviews or

## REFLECTIONS ON A SIBLING STUDY

photos taken during fieldwork. But wanting to make a film and allowing it to stand as an independent analysis, opens up a number of questions: how was the visual material produced and which considerations informed the final product? What kind of knowledge does the film represent? What is not seen and which criteria determined what was opted in or out? Is it merely a presentation of data or does it constitute an independent analysis? How can a film be presented alongside a written product such as a book?

We chose to edit the material into a film, which resulted in '(Ex)changeable Siblingships – Experienced and Practiced by Children and Young People in Denmark'. The film can be viewed as an appetizer, providing the viewer with a sense of the ethnographic field, and as an analysis of which aspects are at stake in siblingships. In addition, the film can point to what would be interesting to look closer at. The format of the film allows us to move the viewer, while at the same time presenting significant aspects of the phenomenon. In much the same way that we have coded the interview material, all footage (21 hours) has been logged, i.e. we have produced an overview of all clips, complete with dates, time codes, length, participants, actions, themes and possible comments about the visual and auidal quality. With this and from a thorough examination of the additional material, the research team looked through every single clip and decided on themes. From then on, the editing process and the creation of the film itself, was conducted as a movement between thematic analyses and the filmed material in total. When watching your own recordings, you are completely dependent on the sound and auidal quality of the different sequences, as they form the basis of the presentation. In written material, it is possible to work with a quote, even when the auidal quality is poor. When working with filmed material, one is unrelentingly dependent on existing material. It is possible to patch things up, create cover-frames, fade in and out – yet the audios and visuals need to function. In practice, this means extensive (and time-consuming) work, consisting of inserts and excerpts, cross-

cuts, audio fades, and numerous adjustments, which slowly merge pictures and sound into a final film.

Add to this the question of ethics. Working with visual material and editing the material until it becomes a final film challenges the ethical responsibility of researchers, as it is not possible to use the tried and trusted forms of veiling or rendering participants anonymous, most common to the scientific processing of empirical material. Usually, people's names are changed. Place names, times, family constellations, gender, etc. can be altered, or different people are presented as one. Often, researchers will choose the veiling procedures that appear least intrusive to the analytical points. These tricks are not feasible when working with visual material, unless black beams are painted across people's eyes or faces are blotted out, all of which would radically change a film such as this one. We have incorporated several strategies to ensure that the participating children are presented in an ethically sound manner. Initially, we secured written consent from both the participating children and their parents, having first sent them a thorough description of what their participation would involve. After filming and editing, we have shown each sequence to the individuals involved, after which they consented to the footage being used in the final film. While editing the film, we activated a highly ethical gaze, which also means that there are sequences and themes we have had to leave out, despite being aware that we also left out important analytical angles. We had to balance our ambition of communicating knowledge and the fact that the children involved must be able to live with our presentation.

We have tried to organise the film-sequences in a manner that allows the chosen themes to reach across each other: *siblings are people you hit and kiss on the back of their neck; conflicts; between two homes; new siblings; missing siblings/getting tired of siblings; the will to be part of and maintain sibliingships; hope/future*. These themes are primarily illuminated by filmed interviews supplemented with recordings of siblings' everyday activities as an indication of the contexts we have been allowed access to. Thus, we have tried to balance ethical, analytical and aesthetic

## REFLECTIONS ON A SIBLING STUDY

considerations in our presentation. We regard the visual material as an integral part of the entire research project, and the film as part of our interpretation of what the phenomenon siblings currently entails. It is, however, also an independent ethnographical film, which in itself talks about facets of siblingships, with an emphasis on children's perspectives and voices, which in terms of genre, matches the book.

### Researching Collectively

From the very beginning, the project was designed as a compressed process, in order to ensure a dynamic and flowing research process. Within a timeframe of three years, we wished to bring siblingships out onto the open seas. And not just for a short cruise. We wanted to visit many ports, including the phenomenon of siblings, siblings in broken families, siblings more generally and sibling perceptions. We have come part of the way but are still far from having circumnavigated the entire concept. When we nonetheless consider ourselves to have covered substantial mileage, it is very much due to a collectively lifted research process. Many research projects are conducted by way of a group of researchers sharing an interest, who then come together in an overall project consisting of individual sub-projects. We wished for a different model, in order to ensure that the individual researchers contributed to the overall illumination of siblingship. We wished to maintain and further develop what we have tried on a lesser scale in smaller research projects: to produce a collective project, which allowed all of our professional and personal approaches, perspectives and experiences to interact in every process. We therefore decided to jointly consider the project, create the empirical design, collect the empirical material, analyse, develop themes, read and orient ourselves in the theoretical landscape and write this book.

The material and practical conditions must be in place, which among other things includes the presence of a granting body. The grant by the Egmont Foundation in Denmark as well as their faith in our ideas and our work has thus been a determining factor. On the one hand, it is

greatly rewarding to generate knowledge collectively, as the process is infused with much manpower, existing insights and experiences as well as synergy and dynamics. On the other hand, it is quite ambitious to make a research project dependent on the synchronising of the involved parties' work schedules (especially when these researchers are employed at universities where they also have to teach and administer), and on the will and ability of said researchers to coordinate their thoughts, approaches and differently styles. We have, however, managed to create compressed work periods, long working days, intense week-long work trips that have clearly defined the project and moved it on. We have also managed to overcome the times when we were out of step with one another, wandering off in different directions, getting lost, and not only in the piles of material generated, but also in the wilderness of theoretical positions, analytical ideas and ways of understanding the academic genre. It may seem both private and inconsequential, but it is important to understand how the interaction between coordinated and uncoordinated efforts both reflect the basic conditions of our research and the fact that it has most likely been absolutely necessary and determining for the final output. Another reason why collectively has proved successful, is possibly the fact that we all have similar disciplinary training and basic research interests. Our background is anthropology or cultural sociology, our approach is cultural analysis, and we are all concerned with studying children's perceptions of everyday life, both in and outside institutions. Theoretically, we have different inspirations, yet this has proven productive to our work with the empirical material and various theories.

In addition to this specific ambition to work collectively, research projects are always collective in the sense that although you think on your own, you are not alone, and most certainly not in a void. We stand on the shoulders of other researchers, and we inherit theories, concepts and insights from our theoretical forefathers and foremothers. In addition to generating knowledge collectively, our drive and collective ambition has been to illuminate the collective character of this kind of study;

## REFLECTIONS ON A SIBLING STUDY

i.e. to contribute more broadly to the development of new (or perhaps the reintroduction of traditional) ways of collaborating in academia. We have, naturally, presented our work at scientific conferences; but we have particularly benefited from inviting relevant researchers to take part in a constructive and enriching exchange. This has been rendered possible because, among other things, the funds granted by the Egmont Foundation provided the financial foundation that enabled us to invite Danish as well as international researchers with professional expertise to supplement the expertise of the research group. These discussions have been incredibly giving on a professional level and have simultaneously functioned as a kind of quality assessment – and thus a reinterpretation of the quality assessment format, which in this manner changes from being some sort of point-administering control apparatus to professional sparring. In much the same way, we have, along the way, invited selected professionals who work with children and child related matters (family therapists, health visitor, pedagogues, teachers, employees at the regional state authority dealing primarily with issues concerning family matters, the National Council for Children and Children's Welfare as well as volunteers who work within the field), to discuss and put our preliminary analyses in perspective. The purpose of this was to afford us the opportunity to delve deeper into the material and simultaneously to allow ourselves to be challenged and moved by each other as well as a number of knowledgeable actors within the field.

The material has been analysed, ventilated and thoroughly revised over and again, and with this book, we throw our explorations out there, in much the same way that you throw a stone into the sea, hoping that rings will spread.

# **(Ex)changeable Siblingship – Experienced and Practiced by Children and young people in Denmark**

**Film (28 min.)**

By Ida Wentzel Winther, Mads Middelboe Rehder, Charlotte Palludan  
and Eva Gulløv

The film features 30 children and young people from 10 constellations of siblings, covering siblings who live together with all of their siblings and siblings who live in multiple homes or on boarding schools. Through children's own voices, the focus is on the experience of being siblings, and how everyday sibling relationships can be demanding, challenging and difficult; yet also create closeness and emotional support.

<https://youtu.be/a6vXpmpz008>



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