Critiquing Mones' "Exploring Themes of Sibling Experience to Help Resolve Couples Conflict"

Michael Petitti

Marist College

Abstract

This journal critique on Arthur G. Mones' 2001 article "Exploring Themes of Sibling Experience to Help Resolve Couples Conflict" will summarize the author's work and review its strengths and weaknesses.

Critiquing Mones' "Exploring Themes of Sibling Experience to Help Resolve Couples Conflict"

Through past relationships, people develop relational knowledge structures that include beliefs or standards about the qualities relationships *should* have (as cited in Vangelisti, 2002). A major relationship shaped by these structures is that with one's spouse. In "Exploring Themes of Sibling Experience to Help Resolve Couples Conflict," Arthur G. Mones (2001) examined the influence each spouse's sibling experience has on the martial relationship and related conflict.

Article Summary

Mones (2001) asserted that six themes exist for each partner in a marital relationship: power and hierarchy, complementary role development, proximity-distance, fairness and justice, communication styles and conflict resolution, and friendship, loyalty, and altruism (p. 456). To illustrate each theme, Mones provided an example of a marital conflict and sibling experience. By comparing each partner's sibling experience, marital couples can better understand each person's perspective, propelling a marriage "from one of…conflict to one of…empathy" (p. 455).

Power and hierarchy

Mones detailed a couple's power struggle for the last say in martial decisions. He tied each partner's stance back to the control each had over siblings. By uncovering this childhood dynamic, each partner could "better understand his or her emotional contribution to the conflict and…relinquish the need to come out on top" (Mones, 2001, p. 456).

Complementary role development

Mones (2001) argued that the rigidified roles found in many marriages are influenced in a major way by early sibling experiences (p. 456-457). The brother may be "the athlete" and his sister "the scholar," which divides up each person's psychological territory (p. 457). This complementarity of roles affects gender definition and how spouses view their roles in the home.

Proximity-distance

Fogarty (1978) wrote, "Couples often struggle immensely within [the] spatial dimension in a choreography of emotional pursuit and distance" (as cited in Mones, 2001, p. 457). Mones related this struggle to the experiences of a child of divorce with siblings and an only child. Exploring these formative differences can prove helpful in fostering understanding and empathy.

Fairness and justice

A person's sibling experience "profoundly effects" whether s/he carries a sense of entitlement or is satisfied only when s/he experiences equality (Mones, 2001, p. 458). Mones examined a couple's differing styles of parental discipline and asserted that not until each person explored his/her own beliefs regarding fairness and equality could their battle be overcome.

Communication styles and conflict resolution

"The manner by which couples communicate and resolve their differences looms large as a major area of difficulty" (Mones, 2001, p. 458). Mones held that a spouse's role as bully or victim as a sibling carries over and is reenacted during martial conflagrations (p. 458).

Friendship, loyalty, and altruism

Most siblings also experience transcendental moments that exemplify the higher elements of human nature (Mones, 2001). They share expressions of self-disclosure, protect each other, establish bonds of friendship, and provide emotional sustenance. These attributes also define successful marriages, where "differences do not divide but can…strengthen the union" (p. 459).

Strengths

Littlejohn (2006) wrote that transcendent communication involves "communicators [redefining] their issues, their points of difference, and their relationship" (p. 406). Mones seeks this ideal: "The centerpiece of the work in…therapy is in helping the couple out of their stuck

position of disillusionment and pointing each…toward ownership of the responsibility for self-growth" (p. 456). The closest relationship a child may have during his/her formative years is with a sibling. This closeness is a form of intimacy and, like spouses, "intimates engage in more joint activities and are more knowledgeable about each other, both of which increase the probability that incompatibilities will occur" (as cited in Roloff & Soule, 2002, p. 490). The relational dynamics established during this time act as rules that guide behavior in the future. Rules determine the evaluation a person makes of him/herself and of fellow participants in an encounter (Goffman, 1967).

Another strength of Mones' article are the six, easy-to-understand examples of martial conflict/sibling experiences used to illustrate each theme. Mones underscores the practicality and universality of his method through these anecdotes, which aids in reader comprehension.

Finally, Mones (2001) recognized that a skilled mediator is necessary for his method to be successful: the therapist must "understand each partner's struggles by fostering an understanding of their personality development within their family-of-origin context while prodding each to stretch to a fuller potential of…growth" (p. 458). This pursuit of self-growth aligns with the relational development model, where parties can only reach an agreement about issues through empowerment and recognition (Donohue, 2006). Mones also recognizes the need for narrative and transformative mediators to have accomplished listening skills (Donohue, 2006).

Weaknesses

The most glaring weakness of Mones' article is his failure to distinguish the effect of sibling relationships on martial dyads from parental and family relationships. Martial conflict is an even more important predicator of negative outcomes for children than parental divorce (as cited in Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2006). Also, "family conflict is an important determinant of

relationship quality" (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2006, p. 160). Yet Mones never directly touches on these issues. For example, in the "Communication styles and conflict resolution" section, Mones (2001) wrote that both of the spouses "came from families with verbally abusive fathers and capitulating mothers" (p. 458). Instead of elaborating on the influence of this parental conflict, he examines the trauma solely from a sibling-sibling perspective. He does the same for "Proximity-distance," glossing over the fact that the wife in the scenario grew up with divorced parents whereas the husband's "[encouraged] a self-absorbed family atmosphere" (p. 457). By not giving the parental relationship and family dynamic due attention, Mones overlooked major contributors to childhood identity, and thus to spousal identity.

The ambiguity of the scenarios Mones uses to illustrate his six themes also detracts from the value of the article. It is unclear whether these are real or if Mones has created them to coincide with his theories. If the latter, then his article loses value until actual martial/sibling conflict scenarios can be examined and, possibly, correlated.

Finally, sibling experiences are not applicable when considering a couple's sexual incompatibilities. Baring incest, siblings do not interact sexually, whether physically or emotionally. Considering the ramifications sexual difficulties can have on marital satisfaction, the inability to trace these incompatibilities to sibling experiences is a significant limitation.

Conclusion

This paper reviewed Mones' belief that examining sibling experiences during therapy sessions helps diffuse marital conflict. While investigating these childhood relationships does have value, the focus should remain on the parental relationship's influence on children. The nature of this relationship has the greatest impact on a child's development, and thus the sibling dynamic.

References

Caughlin, J.P. & Vangelisti, A.L. (2006). Conflict in dating and marital relationships. In Oetzel,

J.G. & Ting-Toomey, S. (Eds.). *The Sage handbook of conflict communication:*

Integrating theory, research and practice. (pp. 129-158). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Donohue, W.A. (2006). Managing interpersonal conflict: The mediation promise. In Oetzel, J.G.

& Ting-Toomey, S. (Eds.). *The Sage handbook of conflict communication: Integrating*

theory, research and practice. (pp. 211-238). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Goffman, E. (1967). *Interaction ritual: Essays on face-to-face behavior.* New York: Pantheon

Books.

Koerner, A.F. & Fitzpatrick, M.A. (2006). Family conflict communication. In Oetzel, J.G. &

Ting-Toomey, S. (Eds.). *The Sage handbook of conflict communication: Integrating*

theory, research and practice. (pp. 159-184). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Littlejohn, S.W. (2006). Moral conflict. In Oetzel, J.G. & Ting-Toomey, S. (Eds.). *The Sage*

handbook of conflict communication: Integrating theory, research and practice. (pp. 395-

418). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Mones, A. G. (2001). Exploring Themes of Sibling Experience to Help Resolve Couples

Conflict. *Family Journal*, *9*(4), 455-460.

Roloff, M.E. & Soule, K.P. (2002). Interpersonal conflict: A review. In Knapp, M. & Daly,

J. (Eds.). (Ed.). *The Handbook of Interpersonal Communication* (3rd ed.). (pp. 475-528)

Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Vangelisti, A.L. (2002). Interpersonal processes in romantic relationships. In Knapp, M. & Daly,

J. (Eds.). *The Handbook of Interpersonal Communication* (3rd ed.). (pp. 643-679)

Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage