

Sibling Violence Silenced

Rivalry, Competition, Wrestling, Playing, Roughhousing, Benign

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In this article, sibling violence and the silence surrounding it is explicated through professional literature and research findings, exemplars from clinical practice, and statistics. Theoretical positions and discourse analysis have been used to help explain how regular broken bones, bruises, lacerations, and verbal humiliation can be minimized as normal sibling rivalry or roughhousing, which does not cause serious consequences. Nursing should be on the front lines of ending practices of violence. Recognizing sibling violence as such is part of this work and is a social justice issue. **Key words:** *attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, Butler, discourse, Foucault, masculinity, physical abuse, roughhousing, sexual abuse, sibling rivalry, sibling violence, trauma*

...there will be resistance to giving things "rights" until it can be seen and valued for itself; yet it is hard to see it and value it for itself until we can bring ourselves to give it "rights."

Stone^{1(p9)}

DISCOURSES on sibling violence that name practices of verbal, psychological, physical, and sexual violence in relationships between siblings as *violence* are marginalized in multidisciplinary professional discourses and barely visible in consumer and popular culture discourses. Much more common are the private, public, and professional discourses that code violent practices between siblings as *benign* by using language such as "sibling conflict," "rivalry," "competition," "wrestling," and "aggression." These everyday

cultural conversations are readily available as explanatory frameworks for violent sibling behaviors, they are generally assumed, taken up, and employed.

The extent to which dominant discourses in the US function to *inhibit* societal attention to sibling violence can be seen in the small amount of research and literature on sibling violence over the last 30 years compared with the high prevalence rates of violence between siblings found in the research that has been conducted.²⁻⁵ Most literature on children and violence is on child victimization in the family by adults, bullying, adolescent violence and homicide, or is related to children witnessing domestic violence. In one of the first family violence studies that included violence by siblings, Steinmetz⁶ found that rates of physical and verbal "aggression" among siblings were highest in the United States compared with Finland, Puerto Rico, Israel, and Canada. Moreover, rates of the use of discussion for resolution were the lowest in the United States. Statistically, Straus and Gelles⁷ estimate that more than 29 million children use "physical strategies" in "conflict" against a sibling each year.

In a US national sample of 2030 children, Finkelhor and colleagues⁸ found that 594 children ages 2 to 17 reported being assaulted by

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a sibling, 23 children reported being robbed by a sibling, and 87 children reported being vandalized by a sibling. Nationally, these numbers translate into approximately 22.5 million sibling assaults, 903 000 robberies, and 3.3 million acts of vandalism. Study results also showed that sibling violence was more likely to be a chronic violent practice and that younger children were the most likely to experience 5 or more episodes of sibling violence per year (chronic). The age group most at risk for chronic sibling violence victimization was the group ages 2 through 9 years.

Siblings of children with psychiatric disorders may be at special risk as victims of sibling violence.⁹⁻¹² Research¹⁰⁻¹² shows that children diagnosed with autism, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), conduct disorder, oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), and intermittent explosive disorder are more likely to behave violently than children without these diagnoses. Kendall¹¹ found that 13 siblings from the 11 families in her study were aggressively victimized by their siblings with ADHD. The siblings reported feeling worried, afraid, controlled, and powerless and that victimization was minimized or overlooked in the family. Moreover, victims suffered mental health effects and were diagnosed with depression and anxiety.

Herzeberger and Rudd¹³ also report on similar effects of sibling violence and argue that trauma is "exacerbated the longer the sibling abuse goes on, [and] it often goes on over several developmental stages of a child's life, therefore having major impacts on the child's development."^(p925) Likewise, a significant aspect of the Finkelhor et al⁸ study is that it provides clear evidence that sibling victimization, and especially chronic victimization, contributes to psychological trauma symptoms. Sibling violence was associated with more symptoms for younger children and for older youth than symptoms associated with peer-perpetrated violence. Similarly, Kettrey and Emery⁴ found that 83% of study participants in their study who had experienced or perpetrated "mild" or "severe" sibling violence reported psychosocial consequences. Partici-

pants reported short-term consequences such as loneliness, poor peer relations, and problems at school. Long-term consequences included difficulty with interpersonal relationships, repeated victimizations, oversensitivity, eating disorders, substance abuse, depression, and posttraumatic stress disorder. Perpetrating aggressive behaviors have also been found to be a consequence of sibling violence.¹³⁻¹⁶

The critique of the cultural silence surrounding sibling violence and the analysis of discourses constituting relationships between siblings as nonviolent, when they are in fact violent, build on the work of a small number of studies that also question the language used to describe sibling violence and the effects of this language. Wiehe¹⁷ reports, for example, that many sibling violence survivors in his study thought that "the [sibling] abuse was normal."^(p125) Similarly, Kettrey and Emery,⁴ who explored discourses constructing physical violence among siblings, found that many of the 200 college students in their study who had experienced sibling violence "utilized terminology in a manner that failed to recognize their experiences as a form of violence."^(p407) The researchers argue that "individuals who experience violent acts at the hands of a sibling may ignore the reality of their experience by conforming to a dominant discourse that does not recognize this as a form of violence or abuse."^(p409) The students described the violence as "conflict, rivalry, and aggression."^(p3) Similarly, a participant in Wiehe's¹⁷ study commented, "[W]hen asked if I was emotionally abused by a sibling, my inclination is to say No, that it was not significant. However, I used to say the same thing about sexual abuse [by sibling]."^(p37)

Sibling violence occurs within a larger social framework, that is the individual and social, and its place within this framework is in need of critical analysis. Kleinman,¹⁸ in "The Violences of Everyday Life" analyzes multiple forms and dynamics involved in social violence (violence between social beings in society) and argues that "current taxonomies of violence—public versus domestic, ordinary

as against extreme political violence—are inadequate to understand either the uses of violence in the social world or the multiplicity of its effects in experiences of suffering, collective and individual.”(p227)

For example, when siblings are violent toward each other these practices often stay behind the *closed/private/silent* doors of the family. This is not necessarily because the children and family members are embarrassed by the behavior and try to keep it a secret or because the behaviors are illegal and they will be incarcerated. Often, it is that the children and family members do not recognize the behavior as a form of human violence or as a serious problem that needs to be addressed. Although sibling violence is the most prevalent form of family violence,^{17(p3)} it is coded or verbally dismissed when words like “playing,” “boys will be boys,” and “sibling rivalry,” are used to describe violent acts between siblings. People immersed in a society with these explanatory frameworks or discourses may not *see* or *think* violence when words like these describe violent acts. In other words, these common discourses and code words function to deny the lived experience of violence perpetrated by brothers and sisters. If the child being hit, choked, bitten, or kicked by a sibling is immersed in common cultural discourses that constitute rough, aggressive, violent behavior between siblings as rivalry, play, wrestling, and normal, what is the “lived experience of *violence*”? What are the effects of physically, sexually, emotionally, and/or psychologically experiencing violence at the hands of a sibling in the context of societal denial of the violence of the experience?

Cultural denial about violence between siblings functions at the individual and societal level, consciously and unconsciously. It is our contention that without a visible, pervasive, and articulated intervention on each level of society, violence between siblings will continue to occur at high prevalence rates under a misconception that this form of violence is *natural, normal, not harmful, has no lasting consequences*, and is *acceptable* in society. First, however, as Kettrey and Emery⁴ ar-

gue, “in order for a new discourse [on sibling violence] to emerge, the existing discourse[s] must be identified and challenged.”(p407)

To these ends, this article is about sibling violence and the injustice done by its invisibility and by participation in the discourses that render it invisible. The authors identify and challenge existing cultural discourses on sibling relationships and call out discourses that do not name violent practices in sibling relationships as sibling violence but talk around it, mask it, and code it in ways that deny its seriousness and harm. We claim that these processes, or ways of writing and talking, result in decreased interventions to prevent sibling violence and increased probability of its negative consequences for human relationships and for individual mental and physical health. We use a discourse-analytic approach from a critical, feminist, and poststructural perspective. This approach surfaces ways that violent practices between siblings have been predominantly constituted nonviolent and/or not harmful through professional and popular cultural discourses. Data sources are professional literature including research findings and exemplars from clinical practice anecdotal notes. Theory and methodology on language and discourse analysis begin the article, followed by several sections of analysis of data sources from the professional literature, research, and clinical notes. This is followed by a section on effects of silence surrounding sibling violence. Next is a discussion section that includes theory-explicating factors such as identity politics and the home and family as contributing to the invisibility and nonattention to violence in relationships between siblings. Last is an implications section.

What constitutes sibling violence is marginally contested discursive territory. Although only a small percentage of the literature reviewed for this article uses the phrase “sibling violence”^{4,5,19} explicitly as the subject of study, the authors of this article use the term “sibling violence” throughout this article to describe all types of violent behavior between siblings.

METHODS

Discourse is “a particular way of talking about and understanding the world (or an aspect of the world).”^{20(p6)} Discourse analysis in general is the analysis of written and spoken text (discourses or groups of statements) for the purposes of exploring what is said/written/performed and how. There are many philosophical and theoretical approaches to language, discourse, and discourse analysis methodology. The approaches used in this article are primarily drawn from Foucault^{21,22} and Butler.^{23,24}

From a Foucauldian perspective, discourses are *systems* of language that create and regulate what is accepted as knowledge in a society and what constitutes prevailing cultural assumptions. Foucault’s^{21,22} theory on knowledge as power is a way to understand how language is productive. Under the guise of neutrality, language as authoritative discourse functions to impose ideas about things as *the way those things are*, *the truth of the thing*, and *the only possibility from which to understand the thing*. Many people believe that there is a single or finite number of ways of understanding (discourse) something. However, there are countless cultural discourses about any particular thing but some discourses are more dominant than others. It is the dominant discourses that structure and order society and the prevailing ways of understanding things like self/other, what is right/wrong, differences in things and people, and knowledge/authority or truth on every subject.

Drawing on Foucault’s work, Butler^{23,24} developed a theory of language as *performative*, which is useful to deconstruct language’s creative/destructive force. She explicates how language is a performative act in that it is both an action that creates what it describes and an achievement, in that the action functions to constitutively achieve a particular kind of thing or being (ie, roughhousing, heterosexual man). Butler argues that performative acts (language) are never performed

exactly the same way every time, thereby pointing to the contingency of knowledge and to the discursive space for alternative conversations, knowledge, and understandings, albeit all contingent as well. Epistemological foundations, cultural representations, identity categories, and everyday conversations are critiqued by poststructuralists such as Butler if they pose as *natural*, *truth*, and *unified* and/or *noncontested*.

Although Butler’s discourse-analytic critique focuses on “innate” gender and the construction of heterosexuality as natural and tied to biological sex, her discourse-analytic approach is useful in critical thinking exercises such as dismantling taken-for-granted, foundational knowledge. Butler’s methods uncover the history, agency, and *ability* of language and discourses to constitute objects and subjects of discourse in particular ways that are neither neutral nor without consequences. Language, from this perspective, is not situated in the here and now; rather it has been historically and culturally shaped and changed so that one can never say something outside of a particular historical and social context.

In the instance of violence between siblings, using the phrases “sibling rivalry” or “roughhousing” to describe violent practices, for example, is not necessarily a conscious “free” choice on the part of an individual. It is one result of the way violence between siblings is constituted, reproduced, and validated in and through language—all simultaneously as the minimization of sibling violence is performed when “we” speak/write/read/act it—thereby reinscribing its acceptance and normalization as “roughhousing.” Butler argues, “the performative needs to be rethought not only as an act that an official language-user wields in order to implement already authorized effects, but precisely as a social ritual.”^{23(p159)} In other words, language constituting sibling relationships as nonviolent is legitimated as the dominant discourse and will continue to be accepted as authority until it is challenged and changed

across society in ways that are visible and pervasive.

Changes in cultural discourses occur and marginalized discourses emerge into more public arenas where they are taken up and reproduced, thereby changing social institutions and practices. The current dominant discourse constituting sibling relationships and the violence in those relationships is a social institution in need of change. Butler²³ describes that “the form of social institutions undergoes change and alteration [when an invocation with] no prior legitimacy can have the effect of challenging existing forms of legitimacy, [and of breaking] open the possibility of future forms.”^(p147) Butler uses the example of Rosa Parks taking a seat at the front of the segregated bus to expose how subversion of established codes of legitimacy can occur. Parks’ actions were necessary to challenge the dominant social institutions and the discursive ways of constructing social relationships that positioned blacks sitting in the back of the bus and whites in the front of the bus.

ANALYSIS OF THE CONSTITUTION OF SIBLING VIOLENCE IN LITERATURE, RESEARCH, AND CLINICAL NOTES

Professional literature describing research and theories on aggression, conflict, and violence in sibling relationships contributes to the construction of the coded discourses on “sibling violence.” These discourses vary and conflict in the language they use to define and measure violent behavior between siblings. However, as the reading audience will see, different study definitions declare which behaviors are violent and harmful and imply which behaviors are not violent and not harmful or less harmful.

This section begins with discussing definitions and then provides exemplars and analysis of “sibling violence” definitions found in the literature. Next are findings and analysis from research with siblings and anecdotal data from clinical experiences with child and adolescent psychiatric patients.

Defining and categorizing “sibling violence”

Although unpacking issues surrounding sibling violence and abuse involve saying what sibling violence and abuse *are*, this practice of defining is problematic in itself because definitions set limits and boundaries that appear fixed and exclusive. The implied message, as in the case of defining sibling violence, is that the experience is violence only if it happens in a certain way, and that only then can it legitimately be called sibling violence.

Conversely, defining sibling violence and abuse is critical to demystifying and challenging these violent practices. Because the term “sibling violence” is marginalized, use of the term, *descriptions*, and examples seem vitally important to identify so that the violent practices that occur between siblings can be named and stopped.

Constitution of sibling violence in interpersonal violence literature

Kiselica and Morrill-Richards²⁵ define “normal sibling conflict” as a *mutual* disagreement over resources in the family, like parental attention, whereas “sibling abuse” consists of “one sibling taking on the role of the aggressor in relation to another sibling.”^(p149) Psychological/emotional abuse is also defined by Kiselica and Morrill-Richards, who describe it as “ridicule, which involves both words and actions that express contempt, and degradation, which deprives the victim of a sense of self worth. [. . .] The sibling who is able to exacerbate a fear gains control in the relationship through minimizing the other’s self-esteem.”^(p149)

Caffaro and Conn-Caffaro²⁶ define sibling violence by taking the position that “sibling *abuse* [italics added] occurs when one member of a sibling dyad non-accidentally causes harm, injury, or *death* [italics added] to a brother or sister.”^(p12) Kiselica and Morrill-Richards²⁵ are more specific and define physical abuse by a sibling as “one member of the sibling pair deliberately causing physical

harm to the other member.”^(p150) This “harm,” can take the form of shoving, hitting, biting, punching, scratching, hair pulling, slapping, and tickling. Physical abuse can also involve the use of weapons and other devices like sticks, belts, scissors, and guns to threaten and to inflict injury and pain.²⁵

Recent research⁵ aimed at distinguishing between “severe” and “less serious” sibling violence concluded with defining “sibling violence” and “sibling aggression.” Using the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS),²⁷ the researchers assessed and categorized sibling violence, using 8 behavior items drawn from the CTS’s reasoning scale, the verbal aggression scale, and the violence scale. Among the behaviors included in the verbal aggression scale are “threatening to hit or throw something at the other one,” and “smashed, hit, threw, or kicked something.” The CTS includes 8 items on the violence scale. Studies that have used the CTS to measure sibling violence have divided the 8 items on the violence scale in various and conflicting ways to classify violent behaviors into categories like severe, mild, less serious, more potentially dangerous, and less potentially dangerous.^{4,5}

The researchers⁵ divided the 8 violence scale behaviors/items based on the researchers’ assumptions regarding potential for injury from the behavior and defined 3 behaviors as “most potentially injurious.” Those 3 behaviors/items were labeled “severe sibling violence” and included the items “beating up a sibling, threatening to use a weapon against a sibling, and actually using weapons against a sibling.”^(p191) The remaining 5 items/behaviors were defined as “less serious and potentially injurious” and placed in the “less severe violence” category. These were “threatened to hit or throw something at the other one; threw something at the other one; pushed, grabbed, or spanked the other one; kicked, bit, or hit with a fist; and hit or tried to hit with something.”^(p191) Of the 994 families in the study, 79% (785) reported “some instance of physical *conflict* [italics added] between the referent child and another sibling in the form of hitting and other

‘less injurious’ forms of physical contact” in the study year.^(p193) Sibling violence defined as “severe” and “potentially injurious” by these researchers was reported by 13% (125) of the families.^(p193) Although neither the CTS nor this study measured effects or consequences of the items/behaviors in the “severe” or “less serious” sibling violence categories, the authors assumed and proposed that “less severe forms. . . those less likely to cause injury, such as threatening or actually hitting or throwing something, pushing and grabbing might be better understood as sibling aggression . . .”^(p205) They also suggested that “more severe forms of sibling aggressions—beating up a sibling, threatening or actually using a gun or knife—be understood as sibling violence.”^(p205) In their concluding sentence, study authors imply that what they have labeled sibling aggression (less severe forms that they assume are less likely to cause injury, such as threatening or actually hitting or throwing something, pushing, and grabbing) is “mere child’s play” when they state, “Rather than mere child’s play, the unexplained nature, and significant ramifications of, sibling violence [beating up a sibling, threatening or actually using a gun or knife] warrants continued attention. . .”^(p205) Unintentionally, inadvertently, and disregarding the context of sibling violence perpetration beyond the small number of variables they considered, these authors have dismissed violence perpetrated by one sibling against another in 785 families. By defining “threatened to hit or throw something at the other one; threw something at the other one; pushed, grabbed, or spanked the other one; kicked, bit, or hit with a fist; and hit or tried to hit with something”^(p191) as less serious, less likely to cause injury, as “child’s play,” and as *not* sibling violence but *only* sibling aggression, they imply by their stated opinion that these actions do not warrant attention.

There are consequences to the proliferation of this particular professional discourse on sibling violence. First, the study replicates definitions used by the CTS which relies on predetermined, noncontextual definitions of

violent behaviors. Second, this article was published in a top-tier multidisciplinary international journal on interpersonal violence, and it is one of a small number of studies on sibling violence in the last 10 years. So, at a time when sibling violence is mostly ignored, the authors seem to be arguing for dismissing all but what they have determined are the most serious and potentially injurious violent behaviors constituted by the narrow, though dominant, professional discourse within which they are operating and without knowing context such as individual and family histories, family dynamics, sibling dynamics, power differentials within the family and sibling relationship, and effects on the victims and the perpetrators.

Constitution of sibling violence in research

Qualitative research helps surface violence in sibling relationships (D. A. Phillips, PhD, PMHNP, and K. H. Phillips, BA, unpublished data, 2009).^{11,17} In a small study with college students (D. A. Phillips, PhD, PMHNP, and K. H. Phillips, BA, unpublished data, 2009), 6 students described physical, verbal, and/or psychological violence perpetrated by siblings. Physical violence included being tickled by a sister “for minutes on end,” which would stop only if the victim was able to get away or if a parent intervened. This participant also described that her sister tied her wrist to a doorknob “to get [her] to behave.” Another student described that her brother would sit on her as she yelled and cried and regularly taunted her. The 6 participants victimized by a sibling described being afraid of the perpetrator and wanting to protect themselves by trying to escape, isolate, and/or hide from the brother, in 5 cases, or sister, in 1 case.

Findings from a case study (D. A. Phillips, PhD, PMHNP, and K. H. Phillips, BA, unpublished data, 2009) on sibling violence describe a young woman “Sue,” who was in long-term residential treatment for chemical dependency and who was diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder and panic dis-

order. Sue described severe, repeated physical, verbal, and psychological violence perpetrated by her older brother “Joel.” She was abused from the ages of 6 years to 21 years. When asked about Joel’s behavior, Sue described it as “real abusive,” “out of control,” and “just wild.” She reported that he “beat me up all the time. . . . He would start a fight . . . mean like, head-butting me ten times in the face. . . . And cracked three of my teeth, chipped a tooth. . . .”

A participant in Wiehe’s¹⁷ research describes experiences that resonate with some of Sue’s experiences:

A minor argument would erupt into violence when I wouldn’t do what my brother wanted me to or I *wouldn’t agree with his opinion* [emphasis added]. I was shaken, hit, kicked, and slapped. I was *never badly hurt* [emphasis added], but the level of my brother’s rage was such that I was always afraid of it. I knew what was happening was wrong, but I don’t think I thought of it as abuse at the time. I have *blocked out my memories of these events for many years* [emphasis added].^(p17)

Constitution of sibling violence in clinical notes

Violent behavior among siblings, as perpetrators and as victims, is described sporadically in the histories of children and adolescents in mental health settings, although there is very little research on this to date.¹⁰⁻¹² In addition, when violent behavior in general is noted and/or has caused a child to be removed from school (violence toward peer, teacher, or property) or other settings and the child is hospitalized, the same type of violent behavior against siblings does not appear to instigate any type of formal investigation or procedure to remove violent siblings from the home or to protect the ill child’s siblings. For example, child protective services are rarely involved when children are perpetrating violence against a sibling.

Healthcare professionals intermittently note “sibling violence” in arbitrary areas of the patient file including observations such as the following: threatens to harm siblings,

attempted to drown sister in tub, bites and hits sister, pulls out sister's hair, slams sister into walls and tables, threw 1½-year-old sibling on couch, threatened to chop up siblings, makes strange marks on siblings' bodies, shows increased aggression with 13-year-old sister and 6-year-old brother, hits brother with sticks, picked up knife and attempted to lunge at sister, told brother he could kill him with a butcher knife, older 11-year-old brother so afraid of him that he locks himself in mother's bedroom, repeatedly goes after sister aggressively, threatens to kill little sister with stabbing, hits 6-year-old sister and performs sexual play, and performs oral sex on 4-year-old brother (D. A. Phillips, written communication). However, these notes are usually isolated and obscure in the files and there is no indication that steps are taken to protect the victims or prevent future violence. The children perpetrating these behaviors are described as 7-year-old boy, bipolar and Asperger's disorder; 6-year-old boy, bipolar, ADHD; 12-year-old girl, psychosis; 12-year-old boy, pervasive developmental disorder, ADHD, intermittent explosive disorder; 11-year-old girl, ODD; and 8-year-old boy, ODD, ADHD (D. A. Phillips, written communication).

EFFECTS OF SILENCE SURROUNDING SIBLING VIOLENCE

The dominant, commonsense, and accepted cultural discourses about sibling relationships in the family are the discourses that are available for public and private consumption as well as to understand and explain sibling relationships and the behaviors that occur within those relationships. In these discourses, siblings can have *conflicts* and *rivalry* and compete with each other, and young children, particularly child and adolescent boys, may wrestle and roughhouse as siblings even to the point of one sibling getting hurt regularly. In general, these behaviors are commonly accepted and overlooked as anything other than normal individual and rela-

tional development in a normal child-bearing, child-rearing family.

For example, picture this scenario:

A child is taken into the emergency room with bruises and a bleeding wound on the face. The parents are questioned regarding how these injuries occurred. If the mother were to state that the father hit the child, [government] legislation requires that a report be filed with the local child protective service agency by an attending staff member in the emergency room. This report would initiate an investigation of the parents for child abuse by child protective services that could end in prosecution of one or both of the parents.^{17(p13)}

Let us go back to the scenario in the emergency room:

The same child is brought into the emergency room with the same injuries. The parents are questioned as to how the injuries occurred. If the mother were to state that the child was fighting with a sibling, most likely no further investigation would take place. The case would be considered closed. . . .^{17(p13)}

The fact that there would be no intervention to protect the sibling violence victim is a negative effect of not having a visible and authenticated discourse constituting sibling violence as a type of human violence that warrants prevention, intervention, and criminal justice attention thereby symbolizing legitimacy in the context of US society.

Similarly, when Phillips²⁸ conducted a study with adolescent males exploring cultural discourses of masculinity and preventing male violence, a 12-year-old middle school-aged participant shared his experience of violence at the hands of his older brother, although he did not name it as violence. He described that his 17-year-old brother regularly whipped him with a belt, leaving red marks on his skin and causing pain. His brother would laugh when he whipped him and would also make derogatory comments toward him, causing him to feel embarrassed. He said that he felt particularly bad when his brother whipped him with the belt in front of his (the brother's) high school friends. The 12-year-old described this account in a monotone voice with very flat affect, and when the

researcher asked about parental intervention, the middle school student responded that his parents did not stop his older brother's behavior. Although there is no way of knowing what discourses the parents or brother were participating in to understand and to enact these practices of violence, likely discourses include ones that constitute the older brother's behavior as "boys will be boys," "roughhousing," "learning to be a man," and "just playing" within social context of sibling and brother relationships and of male adolescence. For the researcher and first author of the present article, whose clinical work and research is in violence and who is immersed in discourses explicitly naming violent behaviors and context, the teen's narrative was understood as a description of sibling violence, and it was reported to child protective services with the 12-year-old's knowledge.

Victims and perpetrators of sibling violence, as well as witnesses and those who hear of violent acts between siblings, may *bold* particular language and understandings of sibling relations that seem to have a direct correspondence with the truth. This correspondence, however, is present only in relation to the obscured, unfamiliar, and marginalized language that names sibling violence as violence, which is circulating out of view. The injustice constituted by the prevailing dominant/visible discourse on sibling relationships is expressed by many sibling violence survivors when they reflect on the abuse they suffered, the invisibility of the crime against them, and the nonprotection from their parents, healthcare professionals, teachers, police, neighbors, and other adults who should have intervened and protected them.

Research shows that parent responses are dismissive, victim blaming, and harmful (D. A. Phillips, PhD, PMHNP, and K. H. Phillips, BA, unpublished data, 2009).¹⁷ Responses include punishing the perpetrator and the victim, dismissing the violence victim's plea for assistance, and excusing or rationalizing the perpetrator's violent behaviors (D. A. Phillips,

PhD, PMHNP, and K. H. Phillips, BA, unpublished data, 2009). Wiehe¹⁷ found that parents do not pay attention to the abuse and they minimize the violence. For example, a young woman reported that no one seemed to notice that she was being assaulted by her sister and said, "I didn't dare cry because no one believed me anyway. Most of the time I just got away from [my sister] and hid."^(p28)

Research from the case study (D. A. Phillips, PhD, PMHNP, and K. H. Phillips, BA, unpublished data, 2009) mentioned above shows "Sue" did not receive comfort and protection from her parents. She described that her parents "...put me in trouble too. ... He'd [brother] turn it around to somehow look like I did it. And I still remember—whew! ... I had no one to go to." Sue said that her parents' response to the violence was to punish both Sue and her brother. Sue also described that the city police knew about her brother's violent behavior because they had been called to her home many times when her brother got too big for her father to control, and her brother began to assault the father and/or mother. Sue reported, however, that her parents had never called police to intervene when she was being hurt but she was sure the police knew that her brother hurt her. Similarly, Sue said that her neighbors knew about Joel's violence, as did school personnel and peers.

Many victims of sibling violence do not use the language of *violence* or *sibling abuse* to describe their experiences, but they know that they are affected by the violence in that they are afraid of their siblings (D. A. Phillips, PhD, PMHNP, and K. H. Phillips, BA, unpublished data, 2009).¹⁷ Accounts include having to "watch what they said ... to not set them [the siblings] off" for fear of violence and "waiting for the sibling to blow up" (D. A. Phillips, PhD, PMHNP, and K. H. Phillips, BA, unpublished data, 2009). Perpetrators were described by victims as "quick to get angry," putting the victim on guard. Verbal abuse included use of cruel, derogatory language on a *daily* basis, such as "bitch," "stupid," and "failure." One research participant described, "It's impossible to separate out the physical

and emotional abuse for me. In particular, it was emotionally abusive to be waiting for the physical abuse to start again."^{17(p35)}

DISCUSSION: CHALLENGING THE DOMINANT DISCOURSE OF ROUGHHOUSING, SIBLING RIVALRY, SIBLING COMPETITION, WRESTLING, AND PLAYING

Many questions arise when one critiques discourses constituting sibling play, aggression, and violent behaviors. When does physical "play" become sibling violence, for example? Is play among siblings considered aggressive or violent behavior when these behaviors are typical and repetitive, or when the perpetrator reacts to the violence with a laugh or response that gives the message that the behavior was not accidental but was volitional, intentional, and seeks to humiliate and control?

Sibling rivalry, roughhousing, wrestling, just playing, and sibling competitiveness are pervasive in public discourses to describe actions, which may constitute violence between siblings. When used to describe violent behaviors, these words and phrases are euphemisms or "neutral, vague, and indirect language that function to replace direct, harsh, unpleasant or offensive terms."²⁹ There are consequences to using euphemisms or code words such as these and the cultural discourses that employ them. There are also structural social factors such as male and female gender, age and age differences, and traditional notions of the family and the home that lay the groundwork for and reinforce using these euphemisms and the public discourses that employ them.

Identity politics

There are power dynamics in sibling relationships, and identity politics are huge contributing factors to these dynamics and play a role in the silence around sibling violence in cultural conversations. Wiehe¹⁷ explores 2 factors in relation to sibling violence, gender and age, and claims "the abuse of power fo-

cuses on a more powerful individual abusing a less powerful one."^(p112)

Moving away from power as an inherent characteristic located "in" a person, Foucault^{21,22} and others argue that individuals are not inherently more powerful than others; rather, children/teens/adults are produced as privileged with power contingent on the particular sociopolitical and historical context and *social location* in that context. Age and gender factors come together in practices of sibling violence. The "less powerful" sibling, for instance, could be perceived as less powerful because she is female or because she is younger than the older, male sibling. Being younger and female is to be positioned as "less powerful" than if one is male and older. Scholars³⁰ argue that "the sibling pair with an older brother and a younger sister is at the greatest risk for serious *conflict* [italics added]."^(p188) It seems important to note here that even these authors who are focusing attention on sibling violence unintentionally perpetuate marginalizing and silencing the violence in the sibling relationships by using code words, "serious conflict," which may be read/heard/interpreted as a serious verbal argument and not physical or sexual violence.

The importance of gender in sibling violence cannot be underestimated. Eriksen and Jensen,¹⁹ for example, found that sibling violence perpetrators are more likely to be older and male. Hoffman and Edwards³⁰ argue that "When older sisters seek the benefits *entitled* [italics added] to them based on an age hierarchy, younger brothers are likely to challenge this authority on the basis of prevailing gender norms."^(p188) Social acceptance of practices of male violence also contributes to the identity politics involved in the sibling violence discourse. Masculinity norms like toughness, superiority, physical strength, aggression, ability to fight and win fights, and dominance are commonly accepted as natural and taken for granted as "normal," innate, male traits.¹²⁻¹⁴ These norms and the male stereotypes they produce proliferate in many cultural arenas such as the criminal justice, healthcare, and education systems and the media. Wiehe¹⁷

reports that a study participant recalled that his brother would call him names to embarrass him, "My brother would tell me what a sissy or faggot I was, that I wasn't a man, and then would laugh. He would tell others to taunt me, to bait me. He would bring me to tears."^(p45)

For males, perpetrating violence against a sibling can function to affirm normative masculinity in a cultural context in which practices that enact toughness, aggression, and dominance affirm the norm.^{31,32} Bullying and punking research shows similar practices of aggression and violence for the same effects affirming normative masculinity.^{31,32} Some parents, similar to many adults, including some healthcare professionals and teachers, assume that US circulating norms of masculinity are normal, inherited, and biological male traits—the product of "survival of the fittest evolution." These adults ignore or minimize unhealthy masculinity practices, such as risk-taking and practices of violence, arguing that *boys will be boys* and that acting out aggressively and at times violently is a *natural/biological* impulse that some boys and males cannot control.

For example, a young woman victimized by her brother's physical and verbal violence described that her father discounted her brother's violence toward her and said that her brother "was going through his wild boy years" (D. A. Phillips, PhD, PMHNP, and K. H. Phillips, BA, unpublished data, 2009). Another research participant described how, under the guise of *protection* of "his little sister at parties," her older brother would not let her talk to boys, and if she did, he would intervene, tell the boy to get lost, and call his younger sister a "whore." Wiehe¹⁷ reports that parents ignored and minimized the violence perpetrated by a son against another son. One parental response was "boys were boys and needed to clear their system,"^(p91) and another parental response from a mother to a sibling victim was that "my brother was not hitting me hard enough for me to complain. Or she would say that he is going through a stage and would outgrow it."^(p91)

Similar to gender, violence in sibling relationships is influenced by age of the siblings, as older children are more likely to perpetrate violence against younger children. Being an older child usually means that the child is "higher up in the birth order," usually physically larger and stronger and usually has more advanced cognitive and verbal skills. These factors position the older child in a more powerful position in a society in which the factors are valued compared with a child who is physically smaller and weaker and has less-advanced cognitive and verbal skills. Many participants in Wiehe's¹⁷ study reported that the issue of size was a factor in their victimization, and one respondent in particular recalled how his brother "put a pillow over my face and smothered me until I almost died. He was twice my size and very big."^(p23) Other research³⁰ shows that advanced verbal skills "can easily intimidate younger siblings, making psychological and verbal abuse more effective."^(p188) And, when the advanced verbal skills did not have the desired effect of power and control, the sibling perpetrator could then use practices of physical violence. One research participant recalls how "[her older sister] would be instantly angry over seemingly little incidents. If [the older sister's] assault of words didn't bring about what she thought was a submissive response, she became violent with her hands and fists. She would slap my face, arms, and shoulders."^{17(p25)}

Sibling relationships in the *home* and the *family*: Deconstructing *safe* and *sacred territory*

The fact that sibling violence is performed in a home and family setting affects the way this type of violence is recognized and received by society. Deconstructing the US heteronormative family and kinship practices as a context for sibling violence can show one reason why sibling violence lacks representation in dominant public discourses. For many historical and political reasons, the government only reluctantly intervenes in the

privacy of the home. This silence surrounding families, Minow³³ contends, has meant that “the Supreme Court’s constitutional interpretation, at least since the 1960s, preserves [the family as] an ordering of rights prior to the Constitution itself.”^(p960) Minow discusses how the United States prides itself on its consistent and enduring constitutional protection for the privacy and self-determination of families and their members. Minow’s argument is similar to Wiehe’s¹⁷ contention that a popular and common American perspective is “What happens at home is the family’s business.”^(p3) Minow and Wiehe’s perspectives are grounded in assumptions of patriarchy. Hoffman and Edwards³⁰ argue that patriarchy structures society, families, and thereby sibling relationships. Moreover, they claim that “the patriarchal arrangement of families, ideals of masculinity, and a cultural acceptance of the use of force to gain control over others or to resolve conflict all create and foster a social environment for wife abuse and other forms of family violence.”^(p187)

Characteristics of sibling violence, particularly the fact that children and teens are the perpetrators and victims, influence the intersection of bodies and language in this discourse. The child’s description and appeal for help may not even be heard because of the relative powerlessness of his or her embodied voice within the context of society that does not recognize children as legitimate stakeholders due to age and place in the family. Children and adolescents rarely have access to “legitimate” forms of expression, nor do they have an authoritative or legitimately powerful voice in society. If a child reports on a sibling for perpetrating violence, it will likely be read as “kids’ play” or roughhousing constituted by the dominant cultural discourse on sibling relationships in families.

Young³⁴ argues that our culture’s emphasis is on “vertical relationships,” such as parent-child, and marginalizes “horizontal relationships,” such as those with siblings.^(p22) Young’s categorization of sibling relationships as “horizontal” (neutral), compared with parent-child relationships as “vertical” (with

power), is limiting. This framework gives the impression that there are power differences inherent *in* individuals and *in* different kinds of relationships, and/or that power is absent in certain relationships. That is, parents/adults inherently have more power because they are old versus children inherently having less power because they are young. A poststructural argument, on the other hand, is that these are socially constituted positions constructing who has power and who does not. In other words, the traditional heterosexual, hierarchically structured, patriarchal family is an effect of a *particular* historical political social discourse that constitutes adults and children with differently invested power and contributes to the minimization of sibling violence.

SIBLING VIOLENCE AND SOCIAL JUSTICE: IMPLICATIONS OF THE SILENCE AND IMPLICATIONS OF VISIBILITY

Unpacking the language masking sibling violence is critical to understanding and then deconstructing normalization of this form of human violence. In exploring and analyzing cultural discourses on sibling relationships and violent behaviors in those relationships, we argue that definitions of violence and qualitative aspects of violence are tentative and contingent and, like all definitions, will never be finalized or complete because experiences of violence are not measurable outside of the context within which they occur. Language, words, and definitions are not tied to essential meanings anchored to an unchangeable societal structure. The similarities and differences in people’s experiences of violence are due to each person’s qualitatively different lived history immersed in changing social explanations for violence and victimization. Individuals’ lived histories have unique conscious and unconscious effects in the body and on emotions and cognitions that are continuously affected by new experiences and contexts.

James,³⁵ in “Giving Voice to Children’s Voices,” explores sibling violence as both

an individual experience and as a mostly invisible “normative” social occurrence. He urges researchers to *bear* simultaneously “children speaking both as individuals, with their unique and different experiences, and as the collective inhabitants of that social, cultural, economic, and political space that in any society is labeled as ‘childhood.’”^(p262) With similar complexity, adults remembering these childhood experiences are remembering from a different historical context than the “original victimization,” possibly with the availability of different cultural discourses (sibling violence vs sibling rivalry or just playing) to take up for understanding their childhood experience. That is, their understandings may be a particular convergence of childhood discourses and contemporary discourses.

Violence discourses coming into being: Mugging and domestic violence

Another way to think about and challenge the silence around sibling violence, and particularly its absence from pervasive, visible cultural discourses on human violence that include discourses on adult child abuse, domestic violence, and family violence, is to explore how other discourses on violence have come into being. In an analogy about the now widely visible discourse on *mugging* as a previously *new* strain of crime in England, Stuart Hall³⁶ explicates the multileveled identification processes in which something is simultaneously identifying and being identified. By naming certain actions, such as mugging or hustling in this case, these actions or crimes are given a new and visible meaning that is taken up by the media and the public. Hall explains, for instance, that although mugging happened long before the 1960s, it only became a *socially recognized* and publicized (public) problem once it had been identified and validated through widespread discursive publication. Similar to mugging, which existed as a violent practice constituted by language in a marginalized discourse that was not commonly available or publically recognized

before the 1960s, sibling violence exists as a practice constructed by a marginalized discourse that is not widely circulated or visible.

Similarly, the sociopolitical context of the 1960s and 1970s enabled the naming of male physical and sexual violence against women, which is now primarily constituted by discourses on domestic violence and rape. Effects of these discourses made visible include cultural shifting of the sanctity of the home as a safe haven for violent adult male perpetrators and parents as child abuse perpetrators. In addition, domestic violence and parental child abuse are more public and open to government/criminal justice intervention than 40 years ago.

Silencing interventions into sibling violence

On one hand, it seems that adults would intervene and stop sibling violence, and that mental healthcare professionals, teachers, parents, and adults in general would *know* that verbal, psychological, sexual, and physical violence can be severely damaging *even* when it occurs at the hands of siblings. However, detecting and stopping violent behaviors by a sibling appears to be inhibited by the fact that parents and professionals often *accept* these behaviors as a *natural* and *normal* part of sibling relationships and/or gendered biology, similar to acceptance of bullying and punking as a normal part of male childhood and adolescence.^{31,32} Violence between siblings does not trigger a public outcry or government response.

Conflicting perspectives on violence in relationships between siblings, with very different consequences for victims and perpetrators related to safety and protection, are evidence of the contradictory cultural discourses circulating in US society about children, siblings, sibling relationships, and about gendered behaviors. One significant effect of the normalizing discourses surrounding emotional and psychological abuse is that “accepted legal standards are not available either for proving that emotional or behavioral

problems resulted from emotional abuse or for determining the seriousness of emotional abuse."^{17(p36)}

What constitutes sibling violence is contested territory with profound consequences (severe, mild, less serious...). Sibling violence, like all forms of human violence, occurs on a continuum of seriousness relative to the amount of bruising it produces, blood it draws, emotional and psychological pain it causes, and effects it instigates or complicates. It is not for those of us "outside" the lived experience of sibling violence to determine where on the continuum a particular sibling violence experience is located. Trauma research, clinical observations, and now prevalence research on polyvictimization all point to the complexities of human violence and the *rarity* of isolated, one-time-only, single violence experiences. Often unnoticed and discounted in US society, sibling violence, we propose, can be violent touchstone experience causing severe mental, physical, and social consequences rippling through a person's life.

There are many reasons that healthcare professionals, other professionals, and parents look away from and do not *see* the violence in sibling violence. As Wiehe¹⁷ notes, "to seek a single cause for the problem [of sibling abuse] is inappropriate because there isn't a single cause for the problem."^(p111) It is clear, however, that as a society, we are immersed in cultural denial about the amount and extent of human violence in general, and sibling violence in particular, and unconsciously and consciously "choose" to *not see*.

In the 4 years from 1998 to 2002, there were 9.2 million people who sustained injuries from some type of family violence, and only half of these victims received medical attention for their injuries.³⁷ Many people who receive care for human violence-related injuries are not asked about violence victimization, and many people victimized by violence do not disclose that their injuries are a result of violence. Sibling violence, similar to other types of violence experienced by children and adults, is not categorized under

the rubric of *family violence* as measured by the Department of Justice. Without a *legitimate* experience of violence as defined by dominant discourse or societal authorization to speak about it, few children disclose that they have been hurt, and they do not seek assistance from anyone, including police, healthcare professionals, counselors, or lawyers. Moreover, very few of *these* adults and professionals recognize the victimization as violence, so they are not mobilized to act on the child's behalf.

Needed changes and social justice

However, this can and should change. Children come into contact with nurses and other healthcare professionals and visit healthcare settings throughout their lifetimes. Although the experience of violence as possibly related to the client's health problems often goes undetected³⁸⁻⁴⁰ clients seek care for many reasons that have their genesis in human violence. Routine assessment for violence and safety should be an aspect of every healthcare encounter due to the prevalence of human violence in the United States and its damaging short- and long-term effects.^{5,38-42} On a pragmatic level, nurses and other healthcare professionals are "mandated reporters" when child abuse is disclosed, assessed, or suspected. On the other hand, cultural discourses that define child abuse as physical injury of a child under 18 years "by a parent, household member, or person who has permanent or temporary custody or responsibility for supervision of the child"^{43(p385)} seem to exclude most sibling violence from mandatory reporting. This needs to change.

In the 21st century, much of the breadth and depth of human violence in the United States remains the property of marginalized discourses and, therefore, below dominant cultural consciousness. There remains much silence around human violence perpetration and victimization in general and some types of violence like sibling violence in particular. The silence does not protect us and it does not protect the children and adults whom

nursing is morally committed to serve. Critical research is urgently needed overall, and specific research that explicates gender, race, class, age, and other institutionalized social factors that influence violence perpetration, victimization, and their silencing is especially needed related to all types of violence. Fields like sibling violence are in their infancy as areas of research and as areas of nursing and healthcare intervention and practice. On an individual level, healthcare practitioners need to assess for psychoemotional and physical safety and for human violence perpetration. Nurses need to think critically at all times and deconstruct the taken-for-granted discourses

about families and sibling relationships that silence questions about physical injuries and psychosocial symptoms witnessed in children and that occur in families when siblings are "playing."

The research literature and clinical data provided here are a minuscule representation of the daily sibling violence occurring in the United States and described by marginalized professional discourses. Nurses, nursing, and other healthcare disciplines should be on the front lines of talking about sibling violence, preventing sibling violence, and stopping sibling violence. This *is* a social justice issue.

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