5-2013

**Siblings and Discrimination: A Qualitative Exploration**

Jessica L. Szweada

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/etd](https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/etd)

Part of the Family, Life Course, and Society Commons
ABSTRACT

Research has found that experiencing discrimination is linked to a plethora of mostly negative individual and relational consequences. While a few studies have focused on its impact on interpersonal relationships including marital and parent-child relationships, none have explored its impact on sibling relationships. Siblings play a major role in individual development (Dunn & Plomin, 1991; Sulloway, 1996; Whiteman, Bernard & Jensen, 2011) and positive sibling relationships have been found to act as a buffer to environmental stressors (Gass, Jenkins & Dunn, 2007; Jacobs & Sillars, 2012). The aim of this study was to examine how siblings manage, utilize and are impacted by discrimination experiences. **Methods:** Qualitative methods were utilized. Face-to-face, semi-structured, interviews were completed with a convenience sample of 11. Interviews were transcribed, coded and examined for common themes and sub-themes using the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). **Findings:** A major finding was that positive sibling relationships, but not negative relationships, provided an important source of support. Emotional support and advice giving were utilized most often. Participant responses were organized by the choice of whether or not to share their discrimination experiences with siblings. Subthemes were identified for both sharing and not-sharing. Implications for future research, family practitioners, counselors, program developers, schools, and parenting, are considered.
SIBLINGS AND DISCRIMINATION: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION

Thesis
For
M.A. in Family & Child Studies

by
Jessica L. Szweada

Montclair State University
Montclair, NJ

May 6, 2013
DEDICATION

For my thesis sponsor, Dr. Caspi, for always pushing for me to do my best and finding the best in me.

For my thesis committee, Dr. Stewart and Dr. Brown, for always being there to guide and support me through this entire process.

And my family members, my mother and father, and especially my siblings. Without them I would not know what a great support system really is all about and would not have been inspired to do this thesis research.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to my thesis sponsor, Dr. Caspi and committee, Dr. Stewart and Dr. Brown. If it was not for their guidance, support, and positive attitudes, I would not have been able to complete this project.

Dr. Caspi, thank you for being supportive, positive, and for always answering my many emails, even if that meant reading ten different versions of the same paper in which I would title, “Last one I promise.” You eventually learned that it was not the last one and to wait until the fifth version came. Thank you for sharing your knowledge and expertise of the sibling world and for influencing and motivating me to continue learning and working with this important area of families.

Dr. Stewart, thank you for always having your door open, for guiding me, always reminding me there is another way to look at things, and for pushing me to stick to important deadlines.

Dr. Brown, thank you for always sharing your information, for being supportive, and always having literature on hand to help me explain things that I could not seem to put into words.

Finally, thank you to my mother Christine, father Thomas, brother Thomas, sister Jamie, Fiancé Joseph, and son Joseph Jr. for reminding me everyday that we are nothing without our support systems. I would not have been able to do any of this without your love, kind words and guidance. Without my supportive and positive sibling relationship, I would not have had a topic for this thesis project.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1: Introduction............................................................................. Pg. 1
Chapter 2: Literature Review................................................................ Pg. 4
Chapter 3: Method................................................................................... Pg. 18
Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Discussion........................................ Pg. 22
Chapter 5: Conclusion and Implications........................................ Pg. 47
References .......................................................................................... Pg. 55
Appendix A ......................................................................................... Pg. 64
Appendix B ......................................................................................... Pg. 65
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Despite the increase in awareness, addition of laws and amendment changes to our constitution, discrimination is still an issue impacting individuals of all ages all over the world. The ways in which discrimination influences interpersonal relationships has been increasingly garnering attention in the research literature. Discrimination is a universal phenomenon with known negative consequences to individuals overall health and even interpersonal relationships such as parenting and intimate couples (Murray et al., 2008; Riina & McHale, 2012; Riina & McHale, 2010). Its influence on sibling relationships has yet to be examined.

Research has shown that sibling relationships play an essential role in the social and human development of individuals whether in a positive or negative way (Howe, Rinaldi, Jennings, & Petrakos, 2002; Ensor, Marks, Jacobs, & Hughes, 2010; Whiteman, Bernard, & Jensen, 2011). Not only is the relationship important, but it is also one of the most long lasting relationships that most individuals which sometimes include genetic ties that cannot be broken, even in the case of an emotional cutoff (Bank & Kahn, 1997). These relationships provide opportunity for individuals to learn from their siblings and build skills that can be useful in other life domains (Anderson, Hetherington, Reiss, & Howe, 1994).

This thesis project will explore individual’s experiences of discrimination and its impact on sibling relationships. Specifically, this study inquired about the ways sibling relationships were both utilized and influenced by these experiences. Since this is an area of research that has not had any prior investigation, qualitative methods using semi-structured interviews were utilized which are appropriate for previously unexplored
phenomenon. It is hoped that this research can provide a foundation for understanding and guiding future research related to this aspect of sibling relationships.

Ecological & Family Systems Theories (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bowen, 1978) provide the framework to guide this research and put forth to explain the relationship between discrimination and sibling relationships. Through the lens of Ecological Systems Theory, relationships occur within multiple systems that have both a direct and indirect impact on them. These systems include the microsystem which is described as relationships that have a direct impact on an individual such as family or schools, mesosystem which can be described as connections between micro systems (e.g., a child’s teacher and parent), exosystem which an individual does not have a direct experience but is ultimately affected by (e.g. a partner’s work schedule) and macro system which is the outer most system that impacts all of the other systems through people’s culture, customs, or laws (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). People are impacted by their involvement within these interlocking systems, which can result in an impact on their interpersonal relationships. Specifically, experiencing stress in a system such as discrimination within the school environment can alter the way people act or react toward their siblings. This framework offers a great explanation as to how other experiences from the outside world can impact interpersonal relationships, specifically the sibling relationship.

Through the Family Systems Theory lens, it is understood that the family unit has the largest impact on human development (Caspi, 2012). Families are governed by rules that develop within the family. These rules are often unspoken and may not even be understood by the family until it is brought to their attention (Jackson, 1968). Family
rules guide the way individuals act and react towards one another, the boundaries they have within the members of the family and other systems outside of the family unit (Minuchin, 1974), and which family members have alliances with one another and are involved within triangulation (Caspi, 2012). Rules also govern sibling subsystems. How siblings manage harsh experiences, such as discrimination, depend upon sibling rules related to the provision of support and possible hostility. Family dynamics provide the immediate context for understanding sibling relational behavior related to discrimination. Ecological systems theory provides environmental considerations for understanding family dynamics.

These frameworks help guide and give explanation to the belief that a stressful experience like discrimination can ultimately impact a sibling relationship, whether in a positive or a negative way. This void in the literature needs to be explored however research has yet to investigate how sibling relationships manage discrimination and the processes and dynamics of the relationship in relation to these experiences. This study addresses this void by utilizing qualitative methods to investigate how sibling relationships manage the experiences of discrimination, and how these experiences may help or hinder the relationship. The following questions were used to guide this research.

RQ1. How do individuals utilize their sibling relationships to manage experiences of discrimination?

RQ2. What are the consequences of individual experiences of discrimination on the sibling relationship?

RQ3. Why or why do not individuals choose to share these experiences with their sibling?
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, previous research on discrimination and its affect on interpersonal relationships as well as personal health will be presented. Discrimination comes in many forms such as racial or gender, and many of these forms will be addressed. Also, research on the importance of sibling relationships to individual development will be discussed. In particular, sibling support will be reviewed. Since the impact of discrimination on sibling relationships has yet to be explored, the literature will be used to support the research for this thesis through findings of the effects of discrimination on individual development as well as the impact of discrimination on other family interpersonal relationships.

**Discrimination**

Discrimination is defined as “unfair or differential treatment of people or groups of people based on distinct labels or categories” (Kassam, Williams, & Patten, 2012, p.103). Discrimination comes in many forms including racial, religious, gender, weight and age. Discriminatory acts come in different forms as well and can include the use of name-calling often with profane words, which can be demeaning and embarrassing. There are two types of discrimination, direct and indirect.

**Direct.** Direct discrimination includes actions that are acted out intentionally to hurt or marginalize an individual for his or her involvement in a distinct group. This type of discrimination can also include social exclusion from activities and resources, or threatening remarks and harassment (Anderson, 2013).

**Indirect.** Discrimination can also be acted out in ways that may not be as obvious. Predetermined beliefs about a specific group can cause unintentional actions such as social seclusion or presumptuous statements that are hurtful experiences of
discrimination that still send demeaning messages. Research by Guyll, Matthews, & Broomberger (2001) found that women introduced to indirect discrimination, specifically when dealing with racism, had higher levels of cardiovascular reactions compared to more blatant forms of discrimination. Similar findings were found in a study done by Bennet et al. (2004) in which participants exposed to less obvious forms of discrimination had higher negative behavioral reactivity levels compared to being exposed to more blatant forms. It is believed that discriminatory acts that are less conspicuous and less subtle are a form of discrimination that is considered more chronic and results in cognitive and emotional strain (Bennet et al., 2004). These less obvious experiences cause people to spend an unnecessary amount of time and emotional strain processing and debating whether or not these experiences were intentional or actually forms of discrimination (Bennet et al., 2004).

Whether these experiences of discrimination are blatant and severe or subtle and unintended, they still can be very stressful, emotionally draining, and damaging to the health of the individuals on the receiving end of these actions. Individuals can experience discrimination from multiple areas of their life as well. People can be included in more than one marginalized group in which they can experience discrimination, which could cause more emotional, cognitive, and psychological strain in their daily lives.

**Effects on Health.** Experiencing discrimination can have detrimental outcomes on mental and psychological health, as well as physical health and an individual’s perceptions of their own health (Hnilica, 2011). A study done by Cristini and colleagues (2011) found that there were harmful effects to the psychological well being of immigrant adolescents when they perceived that they were being discriminated against.
They found a significant relationship between experiencing discrimination and symptoms of depression (Cristini, Scacchi, Perkins, Santinello, & Vieno, 2011). Individuals that fall into more than one sphere of influence could be experiencing these negative effects at larger rates due to experiencing discrimination in more than one aspect of their life. Similarly, research found that adolescents that reported higher levels of discrimination reported more distress and depressive symptoms (Huynh & Fuligni, 2010).

Being labeled as an individual within a marginalized group can affect the way other people in the social world interact, treat, and respond to that individual or group of people. These experiences can alter their overall experience of interpersonal interactions. The way in which people view or feel about another, especially with predetermined beliefs about a specific group of people, can impact the type of relationship they have with these individuals. In addition, people who are discriminated against also experience every day social interactions differently such as social relationships, education and level of expectations associated with their actions and abilities. In a study on students by Fischer, Wallace & Fenton (2000), a large majority of African American and Hispanic students reported being discouraged from entering advanced level courses, graded unfairly, and being disciplined wrongly, which they believed was a result of their race. Research has also found that in countries where gender discrimination is prevalent such as Pakistan, the population of females in school decreases as they increase in age (Ara & Malik, 2012). It is believed this is the case because there is a large disparity between the treatment and expectations for the future of women culturally in terms of gender roles. With such differential treatment, women view education differently and have less acceptability to continue their education. Women have a completely different experience
in the education system and are treated differently than their male peers based on the gender group they are apart of. This research along with research done on African American families show that experiencing discrimination can have negative health effects but also limit an individual’s ability to access resources, their ability to further their education and job attainment (Ara & Malik, 2012; Murry et al., 2001).

**Race**

A common form of discrimination, specifically experienced by minority ethnic groups, is racism. Racism is “the erroneous belief that all members of a specific race possess characteristics, abilities, or qualities specific to that race, especially as to distinguish it as inferior or superior to another race or races.” (Hoyt, 2012, p 225). Research suggests that in the lives of minorities, the prevalence of experiencing racism is high in that 61% of African American adults reported racism at some point in their lives (Kessler, Mickelson, & Williams, 1999). Another study, specifically dealing with African American college students, found that 59% of students reported having racial insults used against them at least once (D’Augelli & Hershberger, 1993).

Constant stress related to dealing with discrimination can have many negative effects on individuals over all health. Racial discrimination is associated with stress frustration, depression, and anxiety (Brody et al., 2006). Research on discrimination in the form of racism finds that it has many negative effects on individuals and this social phenomenon presents daily challenges (Brody, Yi-Fu, Murry, Simons, Xiaojia, Gibbons, & Cutrona, 2006). According to research conducted by Paradies (2006) and Williams, Neighbors, and Jackson (2003), minorities who perceive themselves as victims of racial discrimination have poorer outcomes in terms of their mental health, hypertension, and
cardiovascular disease (Pachter, Bernstein, Szalacha, & Garcia-Coll, 2010). Research conducted by Cozier and colleagues (2009) found an association between experiences of racism and obesity, particularly in African American women.

Some research has found that the stress related to experiencing racial discrimination is so severe and prevalent in the lives of minority that the stress is comparable to that of posttraumatic stress disorder. A study done by Wei, Wang, Hepper & Du (2012) found that perceived racism had a positive relationship with posttraumatic stress symptoms, after controlling for general stress (Wei, Wang, Hepper & Du, 2012). This suggests that racial discrimination is a very traumatic experience for people who encounter it. With such a prevalent amount of African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, and other minority groups experiencing this phenomenon in their lives, this finding demonstrates just how detrimental these situations can be to individuals and how it can impact their overall health.

Stress related to discrimination in the form of racism also affects individual self-esteem and overall work and educational performance (Huynh & Fuligni, 2010). Experiencing discrimination can affect an individual’s academic attainment by lowering their levels of motivation, participation and expectations (Wong, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2003). Employers and teachers treat individuals that come from minority groups differently and often have diminished expectations for achievement (Huynh & Fuligni, 2010). In a recent study, discrimination from both peers and adults predicted lower GPAs for Latin American, Asian and European high school, even after controlling other factors such as gender and ethnicity (Huynh & Fuligni, 2010).

Weight
Research finds that weight discrimination is as prevalent as race discrimination and occurs with greater severity than age and gender discrimination (Puhl, Andreyeva, & Brownell, 2008). Individuals experience weight discrimination from strangers as well as from family members, coworkers, and even health practitioners. These individuals are often concerned and believe they are helping individuals by making demeaning remarks towards their health and lifestyle (Puhl, Andreyeva, & Brownell, 2008). However, negative comments about weight affect psychological and physical health of overweight individuals (Puhl, Andreyeva, & Brownell, 2008). In a study by Puhl, Andreyeva, & Brownell (2008), individuals reported engaging in unhealthy behavior such as avoiding doctors appointments and becoming uninvolved in any form of physical activity in order to avoid these negative comments made by health practitioners, family members, and other people they may interact with in social domains such as in the work place. Carr & Friedman (2008) found that although most obese people report experiencing discrimination in the work place, only extremely obese people (labeled as having a BMI of 30-35 or higher) reported experiencing weight discrimination from health professionals.

Experiencing weight discrimination, specifically in the United States, is associated with a negative self-perception (Carr & Friedman, 2005). It is found that with extreme obesity, this characteristic overrides other facets of identity that otherwise may be perceived as negative (Carr & Friedman, 2005). Being severely obese tends to become the main source of discrimination to people with multiple identity characteristics that could be a source of discrimination.

Gender
Women have been the target of discrimination and unequal treatment throughout history in the United States. Women have come a long way in terms of rights since early traditional America. It is not unlikely that you will see women working in once male-dominated careers. The fact that women even work outside of the home was once considered a huge feat in equal rights for middle and upper-class women. Nevertheless, women are still the targets of gender discrimination (Nadler & Stockdale, 2012).

According to the census in 2009, the median earnings for women were 78.2% of men’s earnings, which was an increase from 2008, but still a disparity (Getz, 2010). Gender discrimination, like other forms of discrimination, can exist within and outside family life, such as in the work force by employers, former colleagues, teachers, and within recreational sports leagues.

Similar to other forms of discrimination, gender discrimination has negative effects on women’s health and overall experiences and opportunities. In 2007, women made up seventy-five percent of the 1.3 billion people living in poverty (Keskinoglu et al., 2007). This can be attributed to unequal pay, unequal employment opportunities, and unequal treatment in education.

Data analyzed in a mixed method study done by Matope (2012) found that gender discrimination exists in the education system and is evident in placement of responsibility and the promotions, expectations, and appointments of women in the system. Gender discrimination in schools affects both students and female professionals in the educational system (Matope, 2012). For women who find a way to make it past the negative experiences of discrimination and the unfair treatment and access to resources are negatively impacted by the jobs in which they can receive, due to continued
discrimination.

Effect on Relationships

Negative Consequences. Discrimination is a universal phenomenon in which people of all ages can experience. It can include unequal treatment based upon an individual’s ethnicity, gender, weight, age, or other identifying characteristics. Just as individuals are affected by their families and the people they interact with, relationships also do not exist in a vacuum. They are constantly being altered and affected by other individuals and personal exchanges in the social world (Murray et al., 2008). This occurrence can be explained using the Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Experiencing discrimination in relationships within the mesosystem such as interpersonal relationships with peers and colleagues can cause tension buildup and result in conflict brought into an individual’s microsystem or family relationships. All relationships do not exist without being influenced by other relationships or social factors and Ecological Systems Theory can help explain how different relationships in people’s lives can interact and interfere with one another (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The extant literature has suggested that romantic couples and parent-child relationships are affected negatively through experiences of discrimination (Murray et al., 2001; Cummings & Davies, 2002; Murray et al., 2008; Riina & McHale, 2010; Riina & McHale, 2012). According to the spill over hypothesis, the negative affects that result from the experiences of discrimination have damaging effects on family relationships such as having an impact on a person’s ability to parent their child due to the stress imposed on this relationship (Murray et al., 2008).

Research by Otis et al. (2006) also found that the same holds true for couples in
same-sex relationships. Experiencing discrimination by being associated with marginalized group has negative effects on overall romantic relationship quality such as increased tension brought into the relationship as a result of experiencing discrimination (Otis et al., 2006). Experiencing discrimination is a stressor that impacts individual psychological health and well-being which in turn affects couples relationships, which ultimately affects their ability to parent, for those who have children (Murray et al., 2008).

**Positive Consequences.** While most outcomes of discrimination reported are negative, contrary research by Murray et al. (2001) reported some interesting results in terms of experiencing discrimination and family relationships in a positive form. When this experience was used as a shared experience, individuals found this as an opportunity to open up about their experiences and used this moment as a way to bond with one another (Murray et al., 2001). Individuals looked to one another for support and utilized this otherwise negative experience to create a more positive experience with their family members, found a positive outlook on sharing their experiences and looked to one another for support. Having similar experiences created opportunities for individuals to come together bonding, sharing their experiences and feelings, and the providing and receiving of support. Some described that it made them come closer (Murray et al., 2001).

**Siblings**

The influence of discrimination on sibling relationships, however, has received no prior investigation. If research shows that discrimination affects other family relationships like romantic relationships and parent-child (Murray et al., 2001; Cummings
& Davies, 2002; Murray et al., 2008; Riina & McHale, 2010; Riina & McHale, 2012), it is likely that sibling relationships are similarly impacted. Sibling relationships have a long history of being overlooked by researchers but have begun receiving close attention in recent years (Caspi, 2011) and it is now clear that they play a major role in individual development (Dunn & Plomin, 1991; Sulloway, 1996; Whiteman, Bernard & Jensen, 2011). During childhood, siblings spend more time in their siblings than with any other relationship (McHale & Crouter, 1996) and it is frequently described as an intense relationship, in which hostility is a common experience (Caspi, 2012). With a vast array of diverse sibling relationships and the unique nature in which they interact and influence one another, the impact they have on individual development within specific social domains is an important area of research (Conger & Kramer, 2010). While discrimination may serve to raise sibling hostility, it may also provide opportunities for bonding and support. There is increasing evidence that positive sibling relationships provide a compensatory effect or “buffer” to environmental stressors (Gass, Jenkins & Dunn, 2007; Jacobs & Sillars, 2012). Individual experiences of discrimination can impact sibling relationships by either creating an opportunity for discussion, advice giving and shared experiences or can foster a growth or give way to tension and conflictual interpersonal experiences.

An estimated 80 to 90% of individuals will be raised with a sibling (Branje, van Lieshout, van Aken, & Haselager, 2004). These sibling relationships are constantly changing as they go through different stages of development. As children age, siblings tend to show less companionship towards one and another (Davis & Meyer, 2008).

Siblings however, play an important role in human development in both positive
and negative ways (Whiteman, Bernard, & Jensen, 2011). They play, argue, console, commiserate, advise, and share family events and many other common experiences. Through these emotional interactions, children learn how to navigate in a social world through trial and error, guidance, and advice. Such experiences provide opportunities for siblings to learn social skills and behaviors (Whiteman, Bernard, & Jensen, 2011). They learn what is appropriate behavior when interacting with other people and learn how to solve their social problems through interaction with one another in which they bring into other interpersonal relationships. The act of support from siblings can be an important tool for individuals in time of stress (Kramer, 2011). Researchers have suggested that support from a sibling can be beneficial for individuals coping with discrimination experiences (Kramer, 2011).

Sibling Support

Siblings are a prime source of support (Dunn, 1983; Tucker et al., 1997). Sibling support lacks a consistent definition in the research literature. It is hard to define as one specific concept because it can come in various forms. Kramer (2011) took some steps in the direction of trying to list all the forms of support that can be found within the sibling relationship but mentions how there is still some work to be done (Kramer, 2011).

Support consists of a variety of different behaviors. A specific example of support is called instrumental support, which is defined as assistance that is concrete or tangible such as lending money, giving food assistance or any form of specific aid (Taylor, Sherman, Kim, Jarcho, Takagi, & Dunagan, 2004). For siblings, instrumental support could be teaching a younger brother how to swing a bat for his first baseball practice or instructions on how to handle mom and dad when they get angry (Kramer, 2011).
Another form of support is emotional support. Emotional support is providing comfort through listening, venting, empathizing, and providing praise (Gorman-Smith, Henry, & Tolan, 2004).

Adolescents may look for advice from siblings who are closer in age than from parents, a relationship that maybe experiencing a lot of tension and conflict (Tucker et al., 1997). Research carried out by Tucker et al. (1997) found that discussing personal problems with siblings was an important facet to the sibling relationship during this time in their life. If siblings look to one another for advice, emotional support, and guidance during crucial and problematic times in their life, it can be suggested that during a stressful time of experiencing discrimination that siblings can play an important role.

Support can also be perceived as something as simple as lending an ear to listen while a sibling vents about an aggravating event that took place during school or a big smile and cheer from the stands during a track meet (Kramer, 2011). This form of support is an example of emotional support. This support, although can be very subtle, can mean a lot to an individual who is experiencing a stressful life event.

Defining support is challenging because every individual perceives it in a different way, depending on the nature of the relationship. For a family who may not share their feelings or talk about their problems may find support in a sibling through their aggressive reputation. They may not show support from an emotional aspect. Although they may not share their experiences and hear kind words from one another, through loyalty and a strong reputation, children may feel secure and safe knowing that their siblings will defend and stick up for them in times of need (Kramer, 2011). This can be perceived as a form of instrumental support. No matter how it is perceived,
support is positive notions that can help give confidence or assistance to a sibling experiencing stressful situations.

Over the life course, even during infancy, older siblings can be a source of comfort or guidance to younger siblings during times of stress (Teti & Ablard, 1989; Bank & Kahn, 1997). Research shows that positive sibling relationships can act as a buffer to environmental stressors such as “parental conflict (Caya & Liem, 1998; Jenkins, 1992), domestic violence (Lucas, 2002) stressful life events (Gass, Jenkins & Dunn, 2007), and peer isolation (East & Rook, 1992)” (Caspi, 2012, p. 20). Research done by Jacobs and Sillars (2012) showed that following divorce, supportive sibling relationships acted as a protective factor to the stress, conflict, and role altering events by providing a sense of shared experiences and continuity during a time when the family was reorganizing. This supportive sibling relationship took the place of support they were not receiving from their parents in time of stress (Jacobs & Sillars, 2012).

It is possible that siblings may also serve as an important source of support for managing discrimination. Specifically, supportive sibling relationships may act as a buffer to the harmful effects of discrimination through commiserating, venting and sharing of experiences, which can lead to advice giving. These interactions can promote positivity within the relationship by creating moments in which siblings can bond together. Conversely, it is also possible that discrimination may heighten negativity, tension, and conflict in non-supportive relationships. This thesis project will explore the roles that siblings play when experiencing discrimination and how it may affect or benefit them.

Research has shown that as siblings grow older and enter adolescence, their
level of companionship begins to decrease (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985). Adolescence is a vital time in an individual’s development and however, siblings were found to still be important in the area of socialization and support during this important time. Despite showing lower levels of companionship, levels of disclosure about personal experiences to their sibling(s) remained at a significant level (Tucker, Barber, & Eccles, 1997; Tucker, McHale, & Crouter, 2001).

This chapter included an in-depth literature review on discrimination, its impact on individuals and its impact on interpersonal relationships. The importance of sibling relationships to human development was also discussed as well as social support within the sibling relationship. Literature on social support within sibling relationships and it entails was discussed. Support can come in many forms. Although it lacks a clear definition, individuals perceive support differently and utilize different forms of support. Siblings can show support by being there emotionally, sharing advice, instructional support, and instrumental support. Through this connection of the literature in this area, it can be assumed that sibling relationships are impacted by discrimination, both in a negative and a positive way. How sibling relationships are impacted by discrimination has not been explored. The next chapter will discuss the methods and the sample of participants used to explore this uncharted area.
CHAPTER 3: METHOD

Participants

Participants consisted of a convenience sample of eleven undergraduate students from a mid-sized mid-Atlantic college campus. Each participant had to meet certain requirements in which they had to be at least eighteen years or older, have at least one sibling and could identify as being a victim of some form of discrimination. Discrimination was open to all forms and the definition of the word was left up to the individual to interpret. Although demographic data was not specifically asked of the participants, some was collected through interviewer observation and participant’s informal responses. The sample consisted of eleven females. The number of participants originally consisted of twelve. However, since the definition of discrimination was up to the discretion of the participant to interpret, it seemed as if one participant confused sibling hostility with discrimination. This interview was not included in the data analysis.

Participants came from many different ethnic and racial backgrounds as well as diverse sibling configurations, full-, half-, and stepsiblings. They also represented families with both small and large numbers of siblings. Participants ranked diversely in terms of their birth orders as well. Although not specifically asked about their racial backgrounds, seven out of the eleven participants identified as being from a minority group such as African American, Hispanic, and Asian, specifically Philippine. Eight individuals described their siblings as being full siblings, one as half, one as step, and one as blended (both full and step siblings). Of the participants that came to be interviewed, four were the youngest sibling, one was the middle child, and six were the oldest sibling.
Procedure

After approval from the IRB was obtained (see Appendix A), participants were recruited by posting fliers around campus. Emails were also sent out through the campus-wide listserv. This method of recruitment was utilized in order to reach the campus community in a timely manner in order to have a quick response rate as well as a large response rate. Utilizing both paper fliers and electronic fliers increased the likelihood of individuals reading about the study and becoming interested enough to partake in the process.

Interested participants participated in one face-to-face semi-structured interview that took about 30-45 minutes where they were asked questions pertaining to their sibling relationships and their specific experiences with discrimination. Before the interview process began, all participants were required to sign a consent form that discussed the aims of the interview, described the interview process and what exactly they would be expected to do, addressed their rights as an interviewee, the number and location of counseling services available to them, and the names and contact information of all the people involved in the thesis project.

All the interviews took place in the office of the thesis committee chair or in a reserved, private room in the building of the department. These locations were chosen in order to keep the identity of the participants confidential and to make sure that they were comfortable with the interview process. Participants were asked to create pseudo names to use throughout the interview to ensure that they could not be traced back to the interview and their confidentiality was completely safe.

Using a semi-structured format, a preset list of open-ended questions (see
Appendix B) guided the interview but the discussion was permitted to follow the lead of the participant in order to collect any unique data-producing conversation related to the research topic, depending upon information the participants shared. The questionnaire was "tested" using former graduate students prior to formal implementation. The aim of the test run was to gain feedback about whether or not the questions were clear and captured their intended purpose. All questions flowed and seemed to obtain the information that was important for this thesis project. As a result, all questions were kept and no revisions were made.

The interviews began with a focus on the sibling relationship (i.e. "How would you describe the relationship you have with your sibling(s)?"). Using open-ended questions allowed for the sharing and retelling of specific events as experienced by the participants. This has advantages over a structured format, which may limit the kind and amount of information participants shared to the researcher's predetermined ideas about siblings and discrimination.

Semi-structured interviews often make use of prompts. In this study, prompts were given if a participant needed clarification or more information about the question. Prompts were also used to raise possibilities the participant did not think of on their own. The interviewer also selectively shared her own discrimination and sibling experiences as a prompt. Although prompts may bias or alter responses, they have been put forth as an important technique of supplying examples that clarify meaning as demonstrated by Patton (2002), however, guided questions and prompts were used to keep the participants on track, rather than to interfere with their responses to questions. Questions about specific experiences of discrimination were asked if it seemed that the interview was
going off track. Questions were asked gradually starting with simple questions about their sibling relationship but then eased in to more sensitive issues such as their experiences with discrimination in order to keep participants comfortable. The final phase of the interview asked specific questions about the role of siblings related to discrimination experiences.

All participants were aware that their interview would be audio taped beforehand and this had the potential to alter the way individuals answered the questions or result in the omission of information with the fear of consequences of sharing important information about their relationship. In order to lower the chances of the audio tape interfering with the participant’s answers or behavior, the audio tape devise was placed in area that was not in direct eye sight during the interview. In order to lower the chances of the audio tape interfering with the participant’s answers or behavior, the audio tape devise was placed in area that was not in direct eye sight during the interview.

Participants were also told beforehand that their identities would be kept confidential and all audio material collected would only be heard by the interviewer and the thesis chair. None of the participants seemed to get uncomfortable or make eye contact with the device during the interview process and it seemed to have minimal to no affect on the individual’s interview responses.

Despite the chance of this disadvantage, the advantages of using an audio tape to collect the data allows the interviewer to listen to the data numerous times to make sure that every word and experience was heard, observed, and noted. Being able to hear a response is different than seeing it written on paper. This gives the interviewer a different perspective about a response compared to when it is written down on paper.
CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The data analysis process involved the use of qualitative methods to analyze the personal accounts of the participants. An inductive process was used to guide data analysis. This data was culled for common themes using the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This qualitative method is used to analyze data in order to develop a grounded theory by comparing incidents from different individuals based on the same phenomena (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Audio-taped accounts of personal experiences of discrimination and sibling relationships were transcribed word for word in computer documents where they were analyzed using manual techniques. No software assisted analysis. Interviews were reviewed sentence by sentence to identify common themes which were interpreted as meaningful or vital connections between the experiences of discrimination and experiences within the sibling relationship. After each theme was identified, axial coding was utilized which entails breaking up and relating emerging themes to one another and the overall major phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Themes were organized into more broad and encompassed categories, confirming that each group had its own meaning and not intertwined in one another. In order to provide verification that these themes were present, a sample of the data was given to a second coder, the thesis faculty sponsor. This second coder looked through the sample data either confirming or refuting the results and coding process carried out by the I.P. Any disagreements were addressed and worked out through the critic and guidance of the second coder.

While exploring the transcribed data, a few themes emerged about what happened within the sibling relationship as a result to experiencing discrimination. Two major
themes were identified that involved whether or not siblings shared their experiences; sharing and not sharing. These two categories were used to organize data and identified subthemes related to when and why individuals chose whether or not to share.

This section will present the major themes and subthemes identified during analysis of the data. Participant quotes will illustrate and provide support to organization of the findings, which will also be discussed in relation to the extant literature. A pattern of giving and receiving support in relation to positive sibling relationships was discovered. The data was organized into themes of positive or negative sibling relationships in response to a specific question in the interview that required individuals to describe their sibling relationship(s). Responses to this question included words such as supportive, positive, close, negative, and conflictual to name a few. Individuals' responses gave clear descriptions of the relationship that allowed for easy organization into these two categories. The type of support that was described within positive sibling relationships came in the form of emotional sharing, condolence and advice giving. Two relationships were described as being negative. These negative relationships did not include these forms of support, but rather one unique case provided accounts of instrumental support in the form of sticking up for a sibling with the use of aggressive and physical behavior towards the individual acting out the discrimination.

Two overarching themes emerged that included either sharing or not sharing their experiences of discrimination with their sibling in which sub-themes arose. These sub-themes give specific explanation of when and why siblings shared or did not share their experiences. These themes and sub-themes will be discussed in detail along with quotations from participants to give a better understanding of what role the sibling plays
when dealing with discrimination.

Another major finding that emerged from the data was the use of the sibling relationship as a source of support when dealing and coping with discrimination. Of the eleven interviews, nine participants talked about sharing their discrimination experiences and this interaction involved giving and receiving support. The other two participants did not share their experiences or exchange support. Support comes in many forms (Kramer, 2011) and the two main forms of support that emerged during these sibling interactions were emotional support and advice giving. The majority of the participant’s responses about support aligned with findings from the literature suggesting that provision of support was found in positive sibling relationships, and less often when the relationship was described as negative (Jenkins, Smith, and Graham, 1989; Jenkins and Smith, 1990; Gass, Jenkins, & Dunn, 2007). Although this pattern emerged in this study, there was one exception to this finding that will be discussed later. These research findings add to the literature with specific and detailed descriptions of accounts of sharing and receiving support. Support is an important aspect of positive sibling relationships when experiencing stressful life events, specifically discrimination.

**Sharing Experiences**

A majority of the individuals chose to utilize their sibling relationship(s) during times of stress after experiencing discrimination, although there were some exceptions. The discrimination described ranged in severity but no matter how severe or minor the discrimination, the sibling relationship was a source of coping with these stressful experiences. Sub-themes emerged as to what occurred within the relationship and why individuals decided to share or not share their experiences with their siblings.
Out of the eleven people interviewed, nine of them mentioned sharing at least one experience of discrimination with their sibling. Two other participants described not sharing their experiences but for specific reasons such as being involved within a negative sibling relationship or experiencing discrimination from their siblings that make their relationship different from the other nine participants. These participants were involved in a negative sibling relationship that included conflict and physical altercations. They did not share intimate information with their sibling about their lives including their experiences with discrimination and this was the same when their relationship as well included forms of discrimination.

Individuals that were involved in positive sibling relationships however chose to share their experiences with their sibling. Within the larger theme of sharing, specific subthemes were identified related to the type of support provided included emotional and advice, understanding, perception of sibling which include sub-themes of self-esteem and self-control, shared experiences, and selective sharing. Sibling relationships were utilized for different forms of support, for just the act of sharing their experiences, for giving and receiving of instructional advice, and it was found that during this intimate time in the relationship, this sharing experience was used as a form of self-control. These personal interactions of sharing experiences, although used for different reasons, were utilized as a coping mechanism for dealing with the stressful event of discrimination. Through the Family System’s Theory lens, sharing of experiences with a sibling can be defined as a specific role of the relationship (Bowen, 1978). Family subsystems have rules for how they govern and the role they play within the family. For these individuals, the sibling subsystem was governed by rules that allowed for and welcomed sharing
personal experiences which resulted in giving and receiving support (Jackson, 1965).

**Support**

As mentioned earlier, support can come in many different forms. Participants mentioned they were looking for and received some form of support that was organized into three categories here; emotional, advice-giving, or instructional guidance, which includes advice that entails very specific instructions on how to handle situations. These themes of support were identified from the interviews and used to organize the participant’s responses. Each of these themes is discussed in detail.

The two forms of support, emotional and advice giving are not mutually exclusive in that emotional support and advice giving can co-occur within intimate interactions of sharing experiences. However, one can give advice without giving emotional support or give emotional support without giving advice. A majority of individuals who described moments of advice giving usually described or used this moment to segue into providing forms of emotional support as well. On the other hand, participants described moments of sharing emotional support but not giving advice. Each theme is discussed in detail starting with positive sibling relationships which fosters both forms of support; emotional and advice giving which are discussed further in depth.

**Positive Sibling Relationships.** Previous research has found that support from a sibling is an important coping mechanism. Specifically, when individuals are faced with stressful life events such as interparental conflict (Jenkins and Smith, 1990), familial experiences of stressful life events (Gass, Jenkins, and Dunn, 2007) and even entering foster care (Jenkins, Smith, and Graham, 1989), the sibling relationship was a vital form of coping and support if the relationship was described as a positive one. This particular
sample of participants had similar experiences and conformed to the literature. Support was given to siblings if the relationship was described as being a positive one.

Although all relationships were described by this study’s participants as including strife and some minor conflict, when asked to describe their sibling relationship(s), they used words such as positive, supportive, and close. One sister described her relationship with her brothers as always being positive: “We’re really close... From the time we’ve been younger we’ve been really close knit and we have each other’s backs and stuff.” One older sister described her experience within a positive sibling relationship “I would say really close, I’d like to think I’m a guardian almost because I’m a lot older than her.” Relationships are always changing as well and one participant described how although it was not always positive, it is growing to become a closer relationship: “I mean it’s conflictual but we’re getting better as we get older... He’s entering high school so we’re getting closer.” Relationships are constantly changing as the people evolve, grow, mature, and learn. Although relationships can be described in one particular way, they are very complex structures that entail a lot of different interactions that can include both positive and negative experiences. However, the perception of these interactions and what they mean for the individuals involved in the sibling relationship are what is most important.

**Emotional Support.** Emotional support entails providing comfort through the use of positive words, listening, venting, and empathizing about personal experiences as well as providing praise (Gorman-Smith, Henry, & Tolan, 2004). Four participants talked about sharing their experiences of discrimination and how this was therapeutic for them. While they were venting about what they had experienced, they were also being
consoled, and given positive words and feedback about their negative experiences. As mentioned by an African American first-born female sibling, Jasmine, when asked how she handled stressful situations involving discrimination from the outside world she replied,

“We would always talk about it together [discriminatory experiences], like for example, if I want to rant, I would rant to my brothers and they would just listen, and then I feel better about it and in the end I’ll turn it into something positive.”

For this individual, talking about stressful events from outside her sibling relationship caused her to turn the negative experience into a positive interaction within her sibling relationship and furthermore, a positive outlook on the situation at hand. For her, just being able to utilize her siblings as a support system, specifically emotional, she was able to handle her experiences of discrimination in a positive way. Another young lady, Sydney, mentioned the role of her relationship with her older brother as being emotionally supportive when she would vent about her experiences of racial discrimination,

“When I was younger, I was a lot more sensitive, so you know I would cry to my brother if someone would pick on me because of this [racial discrimination]. He would be like “Oh who are they, I’m going to beat them up,” but he never really did, you know, he was just you know, very protective, but basically I would, you know, I would vent out to my brother.”

In these two cases, siblings utilized their relationship for emotional support and they knew they would be able to vent but also be consoled about the issue. Hearing kind words from their sibling reassured them and turned a negative situation into a positive
one in which they were able to share their experience with their sibling and receive support in return.

One participant, Theresa, talked about sharing her experiences of religious discrimination with her brother and how they found this time to educate one another.

“Religion [discriminatory experiences] we do talk about, we do talk about all the time, um whatever it is we may have learned or come across in the news regarding our religion, I do like to talk about because we do you know, I guess try to educate each other.”

For this particular sibling relationship, they found this time to commiserate and share their experiences, and at the same time they were able to educate one another and create a positive bonding experience. Experiencing discrimination about their religion opened up conversation within their relationship that also included talk about current events or public stories of discrimination as well.

Within one specific relationship, a young girl, Michelle, an undergraduate in her late teens, talked about being able to vent to her older sister about her situation even though she would not get anything in return from a sibling that was not as emotional as her.

“She was more quiet about it but it was more like, I’m very emotional, so it would be like I would talk to her more than she really wanted to talk. She would listen but then she would kind of be like, “Okay, well you shouldn’t be dragging on about it.”

This particular individual talked about emotional support in a different way. Her sibling would allow her to vent and she would listen but in the end she would not hear positive
words. Although it did not create a positive outcome, she still described this situation as helping. When asked if this situation within their relationship helped her with experiencing discrimination she replied: “Sometimes, I get most of what I needed out, so it’s like easier to confide in her.” Just by venting, she was able to feel better about the situation at hand.

This form of support, emotion regulation, is found to be one of the many ingredients of a pro-social sibling relationship. Being able to identify a challenging and emotionally upsetting situation together and learn to manage these emotions together is an important aspect of a positive sibling relationship (Kramer, 2011). In line with Kramer’s (2011) research findings, emotional regulation and support are important for coping with difficulties, and it appears that these relational functions are important for handling discrimination as well.

Research has suggested that males in sibling relationships are less likely to discuss and share any feelings or issues (Tucker, Barber, & Eccles, 1997). Two of the four descriptions of sibling interactions of emotional support included the interaction of a brother with their sister. More recent research has found no association between withholding emotional disclosure based on the gender of the sibling (Howe, Aquan-Assee, Bukowski, Lehoux, & Rinaldi, 2001). Future research should continue exploring sibling dyads regarding male disclosure with siblings.

**Advice Giving.** Another form of support that was mentioned was giving and receiving advice. Six participants described either giving advice to their sibling or receiving it. The advice given was given ranged in complexity. Some advice was as simple as guidance to ignore the discrimination. Some advice, however, was
experience. One participant, Brenda, talked about giving advice in a way that prepared her younger sister for the gender discrimination that she knew she would experience within her own family.

“People in our family put us both down for being women, seeing it happen to me and my mom and now she’s starting to see it because she’s getting older and looking at colleges to go to and stuff, so like I always tell her all the time to not listen to my grandparents and go after what she wants...It’s definitely advice giving, I want her to be happy with what she does and not be bullied around by other people’s expectations so, I guess it’s more that I’ve prepared her for it.”

As mentioned earlier, people’s expectations about discrimination can alter an individual’s experience of life and this individual noticed this was happening within her family but she was able to over come it. Knowing that she found ways to be resilient, she wanted to share this experience and gave specific advice to her sister on how to navigate her interactions with her grandparents that could have otherwise been very hurtful experiences. It could be suggested here that the sibling support is a feature of individual resiliency in which people are better able to cope with and thrive in discriminatory environments because of this sibling support.

Another individual, Christine, talked about experiencing racial discrimination for being Hispanic and sharing advice with her younger brother. She shared these experiences and gave specific advice because she knew her brother also advises their youngest brother. She knew that helping the middle brother would ultimately help both of her younger brothers in the long run. This advice was very instructional in that she gave specific tips and advice on how to handle certain situations and this idea of
instructional in that siblings gave precise instructions on how they should handle these particular situations. Advice giving, specifically for individuals experiencing racial and ethnic discrimination, can be a very important tool utilized through the sibling relationship (Kramer, 2011). However, in this study advice-giving was related to additional types of discrimination such as weight, gender, and religious.

As mentioned earlier, some advice that was given was very simple such as to have a positive outlook. Some individuals described telling their siblings to have a positive attitude on things or to ignore the people that were discriminating against them. One female, Sydney, the oldest sibling talked about the strong, positive advice she gave her younger sister about weight discrimination,

“I just try to tell her you know what, people that are going to say stuff to you are going to say stuff to you and you know it takes a long time to accept yourself for who you are and it’s a lot of work, and trying to change your mentality is really difficult but I’m like well, you know, you could do it.”

These can be very powerful words to hear from a sibling and this specific quote shows just how advice giving could go hand-in-hand with emotional support. Emotionally siblings are there for one another to give supportive words but also, they can help them by giving advice on how to have a different outlook about the situation at hand just as this sibling mentioned. These words are even stronger because this particular sibling had experienced the same type of discrimination and knew exactly what she was going through. Her words of advice came from experience, which can give a stronger meaning attached those words.

Some siblings gave advice to prepare their siblings for what they would
preparation is brought up again.

"I'd rather tell him beforehand, like oh, this is what's gonna happen, this is what might happen, if it does happen, here's how you should deal with it, or you should just ignore it and let it go on, and I just don't want him or the little one, cause I know he also handles the little one, so I'm just like, you know what, these are little things you should know, these are little tips."

For this particular sibling relationship, giving advice was important because she had already experienced racial discrimination and she knew her brothers would too. For her, sharing her advice was vital because she knew it was something that would be passed down from one sibling to the next.

These findings follow research findings in that the older sibling was the one to give advice to a younger sibling (Tucker, Barber, & Eccles, 1997). In this case, the sibling that was described as giving the advice was the older one in the family. This also follows findings in that older siblings described sharing their experiences but for the purpose of giving advice and teaching their younger sibling (Dolgin & Lindsay, 1999).

**Understanding.** When participants were asked why they chose to share their experiences with their sibling, a common response was that they felt their sibling would understand them better than anyone else. One participant even mentioned how the strong bond that included a strong understanding that existed with her brother took the place of an understanding that was missing within the parent-child relationship. One particular participant, Stephanie, who is the older sibling talked about how it is important to have someone in the house [her younger female sibling] that you can talk to but who is not a parental figure.
“Absolutely, like having, having somebody in your house who understands what you are going through or can comprehend and isn’t a parental figure, is, it’s like having my best friend down the hall. It’s really nice and I appreciate that she is always willing to listen.”

For adolescents, it can be hard to speak to a parent about certain things. This particular individual appreciated being able to share her experiences with a sibling because she was not a parental figure but someone who knows her and understands her since she is still a family member. This is important because this shows the different role that a sibling can play in terms of a support. They can take the place of a parent since they are family but they are not in the position of power; that of which is involved within the parent-child relationship.

Another individual, Jasmine, when asked why she chose her siblings, described choosing her brothers because they know her best and that creates a level of understanding and comfort with sharing information.

“Probably because they know me the most, and I’m most comfortable with them and my guard is down so I don’t really have any sensor when I’m talking to them so, they already know how I am and I know how they are. It’s just easier.”

Sharing information for this individual is easier because of that level of comfort and understanding. This could be something that a peer relationship or other interpersonal relationships lack such as the parent-child relationship.

One particular individual, Sydney, had mentioned that she did not have a close relationship with her mother but her relationship with her brother took over for that missing bond. Again, this idea of being understood by her sibling was her reason for
sharing her experiences. This finding follows research by Howe et al. (2001) that found emotional understanding was related to disclosure within the sibling relationship and also with research by (Bank & Kahn, 1982; Tucker et al., 1997) that found sibling relationships often took the place of an unsatisfying parental relationship. This finding also aligns with suggestions by Kramer (2011) that social and emotional understanding is an important component of a pro-social, supportive sibling relationship. Positive sibling relationships offer a space for sharing personal and intimate experiences.

Another young lady, Sydney of Philippine decent, described how her older brother always understood her and why this helped her utilize him for support after experiencing racial discrimination.

“I was very comfortable with him, I knew he would understand, I always looked at him like, he was my brother, he was my best friend, but he’s also like my mentor and um, I look up to him and I feel, ever since I was younger, I feel like he was, he knew most of the answers to my questions and I knew he’d be there to you know, help.”

This example shows how powerful the sibling relationship can be in replacing a supportive relationship that is lacking in other familial relationships, such as a parent. As previously mentioned in the literature, siblings can take the place of the support that is missing from parental figures in times of stress due to divorce (Jacobs & Sillar, 2012). This shows that this support can also take the place of parental support in other times of stress such as experiencing discrimination.

**Perception of Sibling**

**Self-Esteem.** Another theme, perception of their sibling, emerged when individuals were asked why they shared their experiences or support with a sibling. One
particular individual talked about how she felt her younger brother had a low self-esteem and that her support would help him overcome issues of discrimination. Particularly, this sibling, Christine, mentioned the idea of “looking more Hispanic,” and how this affected his experiences of racial discrimination.

“Because he has a low self-esteem, so it’s like I don’t [have low self-esteem] especially because he looks more Hispanic looking than I do, um, he’s like um, his skin’s a little lighter than mine but he has the uh, the looks, the features, so I’m like, cause he’s like, he’s really insecure about himself.”

For this particular sibling, her perception of her brother is that he does not have enough self-esteem to deal with the stress of racial discrimination and that looking more Hispanic may cause him to deal with more discrimination. In this way, her perception assisted and was a reason for her sharing her experiences and giving advice in order for him to gain some self-esteem and confidence.

**Self Regulation.** Participants were also influenced by a perception of their sibling’s personalities. Some siblings perceived their brothers or sisters as being aggressive. Four participants brought up this idea that giving advice either prevented their siblings from acting out physically or that the advice they were given helped them to gain self-control. One individual, Sydney, talked about what would have happened if she did not receive the support from her older brother when experiencing racial discrimination,

“I probably would have um, answered back physically you know, I wouldn’t have as much self-control as I have, I would probably have other if it didn’t come out like that, I would probably have a lot of bot, a lot of things bottled in and you
know, and it might have come out in the wrong way.”

In this case, venting with her brother and sharing her experiences plus receiving his support helped her build self-control. This shows how an individual can perceive the support as a form of self-control. She knew that if she did not gain this self-control from his support and being able to vent her anger, she would have resorted to other negative forms of coping with her stress.

Another participant, Christine, mentioned how she gave her support in order to prevent her younger brother from acting out physically after his experiences of racial discrimination. She had perceived her brother as having strong characteristics, which she felt, would have influenced him to act out against discrimination in a physical manner.

“So then he might need advice, especially cause like men, they have like quick reactions, so I’m like, it’s okay, they don’t mean anything by it, or just let it go, stuff like that. Especially because he has a really uh, strong character, so he’s really sweet at times, but if you tick him off, it’s really hard to get him back to like, so I’m like, calm down. It’s got a lot better now cause he’ll take like the situation and he’ll come home and he’ll be like, “oh this happened to me, but I did it like this, but this is how I wanted to do it,”” [act out physically]”

This recall shows the opposite. This demonstrates how support could be shared because of the perception of the sibling receiving the support. This older sibling shared her experiences and gave advice in order to give the support because she perceived her brother as being aggressive. This shows how it can be perceived in both directions. The participant Michelle mentioned that receiving the support helped give her self-control while another individual, Christine, discussed giving the support in order to pass on self-
control to a sibling who needed it. This finding coincides with research that suggests a positive sibling relationship is related to a child being able to self-regulate their emotions, which is believed to be a learned skill through this relationship (Brody, Stoneman, Smith, & Gibson, 1999). These learned behaviors could be understood from the Ecological Systems Theory (Bowen, 1978) in which interactions and exchange of support within the microsystem of the family, specifically the sibling relationship, had a direct impact on individual’s ability to cope and handle a stressful situation. These learned behaviors resulted in gaining self-regulating skills in order to control physical reactions.

**Shared Experiences**

Four participants that talked about sharing incidents of discrimination mentioned that their sibling was or had experienced similar forms of discrimination. One participant, Kay, when asked if she ever talked about discrimination experiences with her younger brother replied: “Yes, because he experiences a similar thing.” Her younger brother was discriminated against for his weight and this is something that she was able to relate to. Since she had gone through the same experiences as him, she looked at these experiences as vital information to share with her younger brother. This experience follows research, particularly a study by Tucker, McHale, and Crouter (2001) in that older siblings, particularly older sisters, usually provide great support around peer relationship issues and social life because they tend to be perceived as more experienced by previously experiencing these situations.

Although people still shared their experiences if the discriminatory situations were different from one another, there seemed to be more information to share when individuals were giving advice, particularly when the situations involved shared
experiences. All the individuals that mentioned giving instructional advice did so because they had experienced the same phenomenon and had specific advice to share based on their own experiences. These shared experiences allowed for the passing down of useful and vital information that could assist the other sibling when having to deal with these stressful, discriminatory experiences. This was particularly true for experiences of gender discrimination, racial discrimination, and weight discrimination.

**Selective Sharing.**

Participants talked about specific situations in which there were times of contemplation where they would make decisions on what discriminatory situations they would share and which ones they would choose not to share. One particular individual, Theresea, discussed how she could talk about her experiences of religious discrimination with her brother because it is something that they have similar views on and have shared experiences. On the contrary, when it came to her experiences of gender discrimination, she chose not to share because her brother had different views than her about the role of women in society. Here she shared her experience.

“I don’t think I’ve ever talked to him specifically about that [gender discrimination] because of the fact of I know how he would react, so I’ve become hesitant to talk to him because I feel like, like he will automatically blame me... like I’m the one, like I asked for it basically. So I try not to, I try to avoid, that’s something that we, I’ve been trying to not talk to him about, and not really get into it because we will get into a very big argument because of our different views.”

This offers insight into the thought process of sharing discriminatory experiences for
siblings in a positive and thoughtful relationship. This particular recall demonstrates how there are specific reasons as to when and why siblings share their experiences, specifically when it comes to discrimination. Participants talked about this idea of not sharing in order to prevent conflict and hurt within their own sibling relationship. Sharing was only necessary if it would keep a positive relationship. If the process of sharing would bring strife or conflict in, it was not worth sharing their experiences. This finding suggests that shared experiences are an important component of positive sibling relationships and interactions (Kramer, 2011), particularly when dealing with discrimination.

**Not Sharing**

When siblings chose to not share their experiences of discrimination, this decision usually arose with some precise thought process. As mentioned in the previous section, siblings that described sharing certain experiences sometimes mentioned how they chose not to share other experiences of discrimination and for very specific reasons related to the context of their sibling relationship. For two other individuals interviewed, sharing was not even an option within their sibling relationship. Through the understanding of Family Systems Theory (Bowen, 1978), the boundaries and the rules of their specific relationship were explicit in that sharing experiences and expressing emotion were not a role for their sibling relationship.

**Negative Sibling Relationship.** Some participants recalled their childhood relationship with their siblings in a negative way. Two participants described the interactions between their siblings as conflictual negative, not close, and one even used the word hate to describe how she felt towards a sibling. One younger sister, Natasha,
recalled her relationship with her older sister as children: “We fought a lot... we were verbally abusive and it did get physical sometimes.” For both of these participants, their childhood experiences included a lot of arguments, both verbal and physically abusive. In this case, they did not share their experiences with their sibling about discrimination. When asked why she did not share her experiences with her sibling Natasha responded: “For the most part, we don’t really get deep, I guess both of us aren’t willing to go there.” For this young woman, sharing is just not the role of her aggressive sibling relationship.

**Timing.** For some participants, the timing of the experiences interfered with them being able to share their experiences with their sibling. The participants brought up two precise reasons why the timing was not right for them to share certain experiences of discrimination: (a) their sibling was too young to cognitively understand the situation to share it with them and (b) their sibling was not around or available when the discrimination was occurring. For the individuals that mentioned that their siblings were too young at the time did eventually share their experiences as a form of support and advice to their younger sibling. One particular participant, Stephanie, mentioned how a lot of the sharing happens now that they are older because her and her younger sister were both too young to understand the situation enough to talk about it:

“Yes not much when we were younger, we weren’t at the point where we could talk to each other much about it I mean we were little kids...I don’t know that either of us really understand what was going on as a kid... I guess we didn’t really understand that we could say something.”

In this situation, both siblings involved were not able to understand the situation enough to speak up about it or that they could rely on one another for support. This particular
individual experienced weight discrimination not only from peers but from school personnel as well. For her, this was a part of her everyday life and to her, these experiences happened on a regular basis. Here she describes how normal these experiences became in her life: “I thought this was a regular thing and I thought this happened to everybody so I guess I didn’t really see the need to tell my sister.” These discrimination experiences became so normalized to her that she did not understand that it was something she could talk about or even discuss with her younger sister.

Timing also interfered with individuals sharing information with a sibling because of a sibling being out of the home. One participant, Michelle, an undergraduate in her late teens, mentioned that her reason for not sharing her experience of discrimination with her older sister was because her sister was away at college. This participant described experiencing racial discrimination for being the only Caucasian on her high school step team. This form of discrimination existed while she was on the step team and the specific incidents took place during the school year. When asked if she talked about these experiences with her sister she replied:

“No, it didn’t really seem like something I would talk about with her especially she wasn’t there [at college] and when she came back for the breaks, it would be breaks, so it wasn’t during the school time.”

For this individual, the experiences of racial discrimination were not chronic, every day experiences. They would happen during a specific time frame of her life and during these times, her sister was not present. To this participant, bringing up these experiences would be irrelevant and her sister would not be able to assist her in anyway.

**Discrimination Within the Sibling Relationship.** A theme that resonated within
negative sibling relationships was discrimination that existed within that relationship. However, this also existed within relationships that were described as positive. The only two participants that described their sibling relationship in a negative way also described experiences of discrimination acted out by their sibling. The third participant, Theresa, described having a positive relationship with her younger brother but he still discriminated her for being a female. Not only were these individuals experiencing discrimination from the outside but they were also experiencing discrimination from within. One woman, Trisha, described her experiences of discrimination within her sibling relationships. Her sibling relationship was already different because she did not live with her sisters. The youngest sibling in a large sibling dyad recalls her experiences of racial discrimination from her older sister:

“...I am the uh, darkest in color of my siblings and they are very fair skinned. The one next to me, we’re like opposite but we love each other. She used to pick on me, and pick on me but she would pick on me and say nasty things, that people outside were saying, you know they used to call me spooky, or blacky, or you know, whatever so it kind of made me feel um, it kind of really... cause within my family, I was looking around at all these light skinned people and you know, I got, I got the kids on the playground calling me names and then now I got a sister who used to always call me the black spook or whatever so it was um.... it wasn’t pretty.”

For this individual, the discrimination within the sibling relationship was as severe as the discrimination outside of the relationship from peers. When asked why she did not share or talk about these discriminatory experiences with her sisters she responded: “I already
felt isolated because they didn’t live with me, so I think I just wanted them to like me.” She felt that bringing up the issues of the relationship may make a distant relationship even more distant as a result of sharing her feelings and hurt from their discrimination.

This phenomenon goes with research that states a sibling is more likely to share or disclose information with a sibling that they trust (Kramer, 2011). A negative sibling relationship that is full of anti-social behavior and discrimination may not be a relationship that one may look to find help and support, especially about an issue that is also happening within the relationship.

Theresa’s experience was a little different when it came to discrimination within her sibling relationship with her younger brother. She described her relationship with her younger brother as fairly positive: “We have a pretty good relationship for the most part... we get along, you know we joke around, nothings ever serious.” Because of this positive relationship she would share experiences of discrimination but as mentioned earlier, she would select which cases she chose to talk about due to the discrimination that existed within the relationship.

**Unique Cases**

Two participants mentioned experiences that did not fall under any other theme and was unique to their specific experiences. Although their situations did not match other individuals involved in this study, future research should address these specific themes.

One participant mentioned the role of culture, which impacted the nature of her sibling relationship. This cultural aspect ultimately impacted her willingness to share information of discrimination with her brother.
**Culture.** Culture played an important role for one sibling dyad. Sydney, the baby of the family, mentioned that culture played a big part in her older brother acting as a guardian and advising her as she grew up.

“He was more of like, uh, a parental figure. In my culture, like, the older siblings has, have more power and he basically raised me, so if I did something wrong like in high school, middle school, when I was a kid, he would sort of, punish me… We would always talk it out.”

With such a large age gap between the two, the older brother guided her, reprimanded her, and taught her right from wrong. She strongly described the relationship as a positive one, even more of a positive bond than that between her and her mother. For this sibling relationship, their culture guided the roles in which they took within their sibling relationship. This can be explained through an Ecological Systems Lens (Bowen, 1978) in which the larger system, culture, impacted the sibling relationship in a positive way. Their specific culture guided the roles that the siblings played within the context of their relationship. Although only one individual brought up their culture as impacting the role and utilization of the sibling relationship through a time of discrimination, it has been urged in recent empirical literature that the role of culture needs to be explored in more depth when dealing with the complexity of sibling relationships within different cultural contexts (Conger & Kramer, 2010). This is a small start to research in this area and continuing research would greatly benefit this aspect of sibling relationships that is unfortunately lacking empirical exploration.

**Instrumental Support.** Instrumental support includes assistance that is concrete or tangible such as lending money, giving food assistance or any form of specific aid
(Taylor, Sherman, Kim, Jarcho, Takagi, & Dunagan, 2004). For one sibling dyad, there was no sharing of emotional support or advice. They did not seek to share experiences or engage in intimate conversations. The form of support that was perceived however was instrumental support in that the older sister would defend the participant, Natasha, and “take care” of the situation.

“She’s a bully, like an aggressive person and I’m more passive...And when I got to middle school, her reputation like protected me...She was protective of me, in that way like she, it was okay for her to do stuff to me but other people...”

For this individual, she received support in a very different way from her conflictual sibling relationship. When asked why she did not talk to her sister or how she coped with the situations she responded: “I guess I think part of me is like so dependent that my mother or sister is going to stick up for me.” So although she does not receive emotional support or advice, her sister’s actions and aggressive behavior is perceived as a form of support when dealing with discrimination.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Sibling relationships play an important part in individual lives and human development. This exploratory thesis project has examined these relationships in more depth to gain a better understanding of the role of these relationships when dealing with experiencing of discrimination. Of the eleven participants, nine described how their sibling relationship was utilized as a form of support after dealing with experiences of discrimination in the outside world. Specifically, emotional and instructional advice were forms of support gained through the sibling relationship in order to cope with these stressful interactions. Support was only given when the relationship was described as a positive one which follows research on positive sibling relationships and support (Jenkins, Smith, and Graham, 1989; Jenkins and Smith, 1990; Gass, Jenkins, & Dunn, 2007). Siblings involved in a relationship that was described as negative, did not share their experiences or share emotional or instructional advice. However, one sibling involved in a negative sibling relationship received support from a sibling through her aggressive reputation. This sibling received support from her older sibling when her sibling stuck up for her after learning of the discrimination that was taking place.

Participants chose to share their experiences of discrimination with their sibling for many reasons, which were broken up into subthemes. Participants described sharing their experiences with their sibling when they felt there would be an understanding. A few participants described that their sibling would understand them better than anyone else and felt this would make talking to them or sharing personal experiences easier.

Additionally, individuals also described that their perception of their sibling
was their reasoning for sharing experiences with them. An older sibling’s perception of their younger sibling’s self-esteem was a reason as to why they decided to share their experiences. They looked at their experiences with the situation, discrimination, as important advice that could help their younger sibling deal with a stressful event that they may not have been able to deal with on their own. Some participants also felt that their sibling would need help self-regulating and the advice they gave them was perceived as a form of self-control. Respectively, siblings that had shared experiences or common reasons for being discriminated against were more likely to share their experiences but utilize this opportunity to give support in the form of advice.

Sharing experiences of discrimination was done if it was perceived as helping the situation such as gaining support or a tool for coping. On the other hand, if the experience was perceived as something that would hurt the relationship, cause more tension, or cause more stress on the individual, than they did not share their experiences. Individuals did not share their experiences for specific reasons such as the relationship being a negative one or the timing of the experiences. When the relationship was described in a negative manner, it was perceived that sharing their experiences would cause more conflict or stress. In this case individuals did not share. Also, the timing of the experience was important. Individuals that did not experience chronic forms of discrimination did not share their experiences if their sibling was not around during these interactions. They felt that sharing would not help or be useful.

This idea of selective sharing came up during the interviews, in which siblings would choose to share certain experiences over others depending on the nature of their relationship with their sibling. This happened for certain reasons such as if
discrimination was happening within a sibling relationship. If a sibling was being
discriminated against by a sibling in addition to people within other interpersonal
relationships in the outside world, they would not share these discriminatory experiences
with their sibling. This interaction gives a look into the cognitive planning and
understanding individuals go through when it comes to sharing things within their sibling
relationship. One individual mentioned how sharing this discriminatory experience
would just raise more tension and conflict within her sibling relationship due to the
discrimination that exists within that relationship.

In contrast to research finding discrimination’s impact on interpersonal
relationships in a mostly negative way (Murray et al., 2001; Cummings & Davies, 2002;
Murray et al., 2008; Riina & McHale, 2010; Riina & McHale, 2012), siblings were found
to be more of a support system for individuals experiencing discrimination. Siblings,
more involved within positive relationships, acted as a positive support system for
individuals experiencing discrimination from the outside world. Research should
continue in this area to prove if there is a relationship between positive sibling
relationships and support.

Implications

Implications from this research can be helpful for family therapists, counselors,
educators, program developers and future researchers. Research in this area may help aid
family practitioners in creating strategies for dealing with discrimination, particularly
when working with siblings. For example, intervention strategies can be designed to
build supportive sibling relationships and foster the idea of bonding through sharing
experiences. Adolescents, at a very important time in their lives, have minimal coping
strategies to utilize compared to adults (Juang & Alvarez, 2010). Family practitioners can teach adolescents to utilize an effective coping strategy, built right in their own sibling relationship(s), which could be in the form of social and emotional support from one another.

This research also has an implication for parenting as well. Parents could benefit from this research by helping to assist them in creating and applying supportive and positive strategies with their children. Although not intended to force a supportive relationship with siblings who do not usually get along, this idea could help parents understand that continuing and fostering a positive relationship is helpful for siblings in times of need.

Results of this research could also be beneficial to school counselors and other program developers. These results could assist with the formation of programs in schools that utilize the use of supportive sibling relationships and help continue this bond in time of discrimination or conflict from outside sources.

**Implications for Future Research.** Future researchers could also benefit from this work by creating a foundation for continued research and literature in this area. Identified themes may inform quantitative study by providing variables and identifying the prevalence of experiences and the connections between them.

Additionally, future researchers could use the results of this study to continue empirical work in this area. Future research utilizing quantitative research methods using themes identified in this study can employ probability samples to give more justification and reliability to these findings. Specifically, continued research in the area of support and positive sibling relationships should continue in the form of quantitative research to
investigate whether or not an association exists. How siblings utilize their sibling relationships change as their individual needs change. Specifically, for dealing with discrimination, the role of the sibling has yet to be explored until now. Continued research in this area can explore this topic in more depth to learn what the role of the sibling relationship is, in relation to discrimination, over periods of time. Longitudinal work can show how siblings utilize their relationship over time. Probability sampling would help this area of research by making sure these results are free from researcher bias and will also make it possible to estimate the level of sampling error in hopes of coming as close to no error as possible (Babbie, 2010).

Continued research should also embark on areas that this research did not explore. Future qualitative research should address questions such as how did sharing these experiences and receive support affect and whether or not they change sibling relationships, Future research should also continue working on the area of self-regulation bolstered by sibling support, which seemed to prevent individuals from acting out or retaliating against perpetrators in this study.

This research study did not define discrimination and as such allowed participants to share at their discretion any form of discrimination. Future research should look more in depth into specific forms of discrimination to identify if there are any differences across various forms and whether or not the sibling relationship plays a unique role.

As discussed earlier, positive sibling relationships are related to specific family dynamics, such positive family relationships and parental support. Three individuals had mentioned that their strong family values and their parents supporting a positive sibling relationship influenced their close sibling relationship. However, one individual
described her being close to her sibling as a result of her having a distant relationship with her mother. Another participant mentioned that her negative sibling relationship stemmed from differential treatment acted out between her and her sister by their mother. Although each situation is different in terms of the type of relationship, these results provide insight into the importance of parental relationships and their influence on the nature of the sibling relationship. Future research should look into the role of parental support or lack thereof in relation to sibling support.

Research in this area would benefit from more qualitative and quantitative work exploring gender differences regarding the provision and receiving of sibling support when dealing with discrimination. Research has found that there is a difference between females and males within a sibling dyad when giving and receiving support, specifically emotional support. It has been found that females are more likely to engage in emotional support (Tucker, Barber, & Eccles, 1997). This qualitative exploration found sibling relationships that included males giving emotional support, however these sibling dyads included a female. Future research in this area should address different sibling dyads, specifically male dyads to find what the role of the sibling relationship is in the face of adversity.

Finally, discrimination and sibling relationships should be looked at across different contexts. The role of the sibling relationship when dealing with discrimination can be different for people living within poverty, for individuals living in different states, different age groups, and different family dynamics. Future research should include a sample from different regions of the United States, as well as individuals from urban and rural areas and international samples as well. Participants should include individuals of
different socio economic status as well as participants of different age ranges such as adolescents, school aged children, and adults. Future researchers could also look into the role of a sibling involved in stepfamilies, blended families and nuclear families. Having a participant sample that includes a wide range of individuals from different life experiences may yield different results. Qualitative work should also include interviews that have more than one sibling perspective in order to get a better understanding of the dynamics of the relationship as well as other family members such as a parent’s perspective of the sibling relationship. Although this research touched upon this uncharted area, future research should continue to look into this area in more depth.

Limitations

Although the current study is an important contribution to the literature of sibling relationships when dealing with discrimination, there are some limitations that arise that need to be addressed. First, the sample of the study accounted for personal experiences only from female participants. Answers from the male perspective could yield to different results and information. Future research in this area should look into male’s experiences of discrimination and how these experiences influence or impact their sibling relationships.

A second limitation to this study is that the word discrimination was open to all forms of discrimination. Future research should look into specific forms of discrimination to see whether or not there are different influences on the sibling relationship. Participants that deal with racial discrimination may have different experiences with their sibling compared to individuals who deal with religious or gender discrimination. There were also some forms of discrimination that were not addressed
such as discrimination based on disabilities, age discrimination, or sexual orientation discrimination. These are all unique experiences of discrimination that should be explored.

The nature of qualitative research in that data is collected through participants responses due to recalling past experiences can be a limitation. There is a chance of respondent bias due to the nature of the questions and the inability to recall situations properly which can limit the accuracy of the data (Cresswell, 1994). Although this can be a limitation, the social sciences utilize this form of research to gather data. Future research could use a participant pool that include participants that can explain experiences that are more recent instead of recalling past experiences. Longitudinal research could also benefit this field of study. The results from this study could give way to quantitative research, which can give validity and reliability to these findings.
REFERENCES


Huynh, V. W., & Fuligni, A. J. (2010). Discrimination hurts: The academic,


doi:10.1111/j.1741-3729.2010.00602.x


August 31, 2012

Ms. Jessica Szweada
158 West 9th Street
Bayonne, NJ 07002

Re: IRB Number: 001253
Project Title: Sibling Relationships and Discrimination

Dear Ms. Szweada:

After an expedited review, Montclair State University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved this protocol on August 9, 2012. The study is valid for one year and will expire on August 9, 2013.

Before requesting amendments, extensions, or project closure, please reference MSU’s IRB website and download the current forms.

Should you wish to make changes to the IRB-approved procedures, prior to the expiration of your approval, submit your requests using the Amendment form.

For Continuing Review, it is advised that you submit your form 60 days before the month of the expiration date above. If you have not received MSU’s IRB approval by your study’s expiration date, ALL research activities must STOP, including data analysis. If your research continues without MSU’s IRB approval, you will be in violation of Federal and other regulations.

After your study is completed, submit your Project Completion form.

If you have any questions regarding the IRB requirements, please contact me at 973-655-4327, reviewboard@mail.montclair.edu, or the Institutional Review Board.

Sincerely yours,

Dr. Debra Zeilner
IRB Chair

cc: Dr. Jonathan Caspi, Faculty Sponsor
Ms. Amy Aiello, Graduate School
APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How many siblings do you have?

2. Can you describe your siblings in terms of age, gender, birth order, and whether or not they are full, half or step siblings?

3. Describe the relationship you have with your sibling(s). [Prompt e.g. is your relationship close, competitive, conflictual, close with one but distant from another?]

4. Describe your sibling relationship during times of stress or conflict. [Prompt e.g. do you support one another, solve problems together, become more conflictual as in arguing, yelling?]

5. Describe your relationship when you or someone in your family encounters a stressful event in life. [Prompt: Examples might include the loss of a loved one, losing a job, not being accepted onto a sports team.]

You were aware beforehand that this study was interested in learning about discrimination and how it affects sibling relationships. I now want to ask you a few questions about experiences with discrimination.

6. Tell me about a specific time that you experienced or were the victim of discrimination. [Prompt e.g. To prompt by giving example, will share own experiences of mistreatment related to being female, short and looking young.]

7. How did you cope or handle the situation?

8. Did you talk about it with your sibling(s)? Which sibling(s)?
If they did talk about it with their sibling: (If they did not, proceed to question #12)

9. Why did you decide to share your experience with your sibling(s)?

10. What did you talk about?

11. How did talking to them help you?

If chose not to speak to a sibling:

12. Why did you choose not to share your experience with your sibling?

13. Was there ever a time that you did choose to discuss an experience with discrimination with your sibling(s), or that a sibling decided to share their experience with you? Can you tell me a little bit about that?

14. Do you think talking to them about it would have helped you in any way? Why or why not?

15. What advice would you have given to your sibling(s) about this experience?