Chapter 1

Theoretical Themes

Strictly speaking, Simon became a brother when Asher was born at 8:16 A.M. on December 27 (4,0,3). Yet role transitions take time. Simon began the psychological process of becoming a brother many months earlier, when he first learned that we were expecting a baby, and he continued developing his new family role long after Asher came home from the hospital.

This book concerns Simon's emotional, cognitive, and social adaptation to his baby brother. But before presenting Simon's story, I outline three theoretical themes that I weave through the book and ultimately draw together in a model of the early sibling relationship: In this chapter, I briefly examine family systems theory to highlight the reciprocal influences of family roles and to show how the arrival of a second child dramatically increases the structural complexity of a family. I then propose that the birth of a brother or sister—like any other life transition—can be viewed as an instance of role acquisition; the suggestion is hardly radical, but, surprisingly, its implications have not been explored in the literature. Finally I advocate that a personal-narrative approach to self-concept is useful for describing a preschooler's transition from only child to big brother or sister.

Family Systems Theory

While conducting this case study, I tried to observe Simon and his emerging relationship with Asher in as realistic a light as possible. I could have seriously biased my observations if I had adopted a strict theoretical orientation. Yet one framework—family systems theory—actually enhanced my view of possible influences on Simon and his new role. The nuclear family is a social system nested within broader systems such as the extended family, a circle of friends and acquaintances, and the community, each of which is reciprocally related to the nuclear family; for example, changes in the nuclear family can affect the extended family and vice versa (Bronfenbrenner 1979). The

family itself consists of members in different positions: wife/mother, husband/father, daughter/sister, and son/brother. And they participate in various subsystems, based not only on their positions—husband-wife, parent-child, or sibling-sibling—but also on other criteria such as gender—the boys or the girls—and interest—the skiers, the musicians, and so on. Finally, family members and subsystems reciprocally influence other members, other subsystems, and the total family system (Feiring and Lewis 1978).

Figure 1.1 diagrammatically shows a three-member family: a wife/mother (WM), a husband/father (HF), and a child (C). Actually two diagrams are possible—one for a son and one for a daughter—but possible differences between them are irrelevant here. All the lines in this and subsequent system diagrams should be understood as double-ended arrows. The heavy black lines stand for reciprocal influences between pairs of individuals; for example, a mother and child both affect each other. The hatched lines stand for reciprocal influences between individuals and relationships. These may be second-order effects in which individuals influence the relationship between two other parties; for example, the father's presence reduces interactions between the mother and baby (reviewed by Belsky 1981). But individuals also reciprocally affect relationships in which they participate (D. M. Klein et al. 1978); for example, a mother's self-esteem may influence and be influenced by how well she interacts with her baby (Goldberg 1977). The thin black lines designate reciprocal influences between relationships, for example, between parenting (M-C or F-C) and the marriage (W-H) (Belsky 1981, Hinde and Stevenson-Hinde 1988).

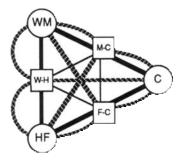The arrival of a second child alters the family structure and conse-

Figure 1.1
System diagram of a three-member family (WM = wife/mother; HF = husband/father; C = child).

quently affects existing interactional patterns (Kreppner et al. 1982).
The baby establishes two parent-infant subsystems, places the first-
born in a sibling relationship, modifies the parent-firstborn relation-
ships, and probably disrupts the marriage. Like every other system,
the family responds to new demands to maintain a steady state. Spe-
cifically, it regulates itself through three spheres of activity: access to
space, time, and energy (Kantor and Lehr 1976). But a baby may dis-
turb all three, and a new equilibrium will have to be established: liv-
ing space may have to be rearranged, schedules will have to
accommodate the baby's needs, and parents will have less energy
until they learn to care for two children (LaRossa 1983).

A system diagram of a four-member family is extremely complex
(figure 1.2). Adding a second child increases the number of rela-
tionships from three to six, and each individual is reciprocally influ-
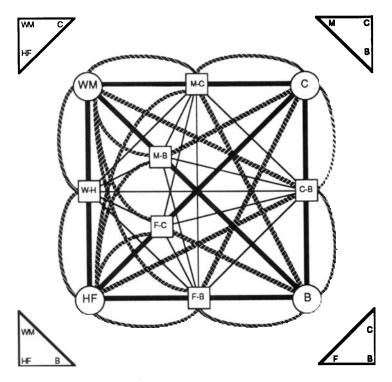enced by the three other individuals and by the six relationships. A
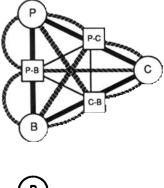

Figure 1.2
System diagram of a four-member family (WM = wife/mother; HF = husband/
father; C = child/sibling; B = baby/sibling).

family of four also includes four triads, each reciprocally influenc-
ing the other triads, the six relationships, and the four members.
Although the triads are shown in the figure, their reciprocal influ-
ences are not. Yet the figure is probably still too complicated to be
useful.

Figure 1.2 can be simplified for my purposes by ignoring the triadic
subsystems, disregarding the marriage, and combining the parents
into one node. Thus, figure 1.3 (top) shows the family members—
parents, child/sibling, and baby/sibling—and the subsystems—
parent-child, parent-baby, and child-baby—all reciprocally related.
Although the diagram graphically illustrates the context of the child
and the sibling relationship, it can be simplified further to highlight
my main concerns: figure 1.3 (bottom) emphasizes the two most rel-
evant nodes—child and child-baby—and retains only the reciprocal
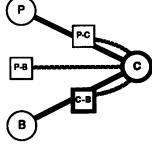influences that I found to be most important.

Figure 1.3
System diagrams of a four-member family (P = parents; C = child/sibling; B =
baby/sibling). The top diagram is complete; the bottom diagram is a simplified ver-
sion that retains the elements most relevant to a discussion of the child and the
child-baby relationship.

Life Changes as Role Transitions

The birth of a brother or sister is a common yet significant transition that shares structural features with other life changes (A. J. Stewart 1982). It may transform the firstborn's everyday routine, and it demands new behavioral, cognitive, and emotional responses, including symbolic shifts in the child's conception of family and self (Dunn and Kendrick 1982a). Generally a life change can be characterized as a crisis, a stressor, or a role transition (A. J. Stewart et al. 1986), but psychologists who have discussed preschoolers' reactions to the birth of a brother or sister have focused primarily on crisis and stress.

Psychodynamic theorists have forcefully argued that the transition to sibling status is a crisis in the sense of a traumatic event because it necessarily involves dethronement or displacement within the family (Freud 1909/1955, Levy 1937). But the facts belie such a one-sided view; many children respond quite positively to a new sibling, and those who do not show considerable variability in the intensity of their reactions. Thus, the arrival of a sibling may herald a crisis in the sense of a turning point when development must move one way or another (Erikson 1968). Regardless, virtually all researchers have viewed the transition to sibling status as a stressful life change that may or may not elicit coping (Dunn and Kendrick 1982a, Field and Reite 1984, Feiring et al. 1983, Gottlieb and Mendelson 1990, Kramer 1989, Legg et al. 1974, Nadelman and Begun 1982, R. B. Stewart et al. 1987, Thomas et al. 1961, Trause et al. 1981).

As a whole, investigators have asked what aspects of the transition might be stressful and what personal or social resources might account for differences in children's coping. Certainly they have acknowledged that the changes in family roles associated with the birth of a brother or sister are potentially stressful, especially for firstborns. But no one has actually examined the transition to sibling status as an instance of role acquisition; no one has attempted to understand the processes whereby children adopt the sibling role.

When I started my study, I did not envision the value of role theory for explaining either a firstborn's reaction to the birth of a sibling or the initial relationship with the baby. But analyzing my data drew me inexorably to just that conclusion. My primary theoretical goal in this book is to elaborate how processes of role acquisition are central for understanding the transition to sibling status.

Before proceeding, I should define some essential terms from role theory (Shaw and Costanzo 1982). A role consists of behaviors associated with a position in a social context, and, as in the family, it may be paired with a reciprocal or complementary role of another posi-

tion. Behavioral norms, which are prescribed expectations about the functions, obligations, and rights associated with the role, are defined by a social group and are presumably internalized by individuals; for example, the role of big brother may be understood in terms of companionship, teaching, being admired, and so on. Enactment of the role consists of the behaviors actually performed by an individual; a given brother may provide companionship by engaging in fantasy play or by roughhousing. And based on experience, individuals acquire predictive expectations about how others will respond to them or to particular situations; a child may expect a sister to enjoy playing house or learn that a baby brother enjoys being tickled. Last, an individual's role enactment may be evaluated either by others with reference to social norms or by the individual with reference to internalized values; a brother who disrupts his sister's tea party may be sanctioned by their mother, while a brother who successfully amuses the baby may be pleased about his own role performance.

It is probably impossible to fully define a role, like brother or sister, that not only varies across families and cultures but also changes with time. Yet even if the functions served by the relationship and its overall affective tone differ across sibling pairs, the relationship between brothers and sisters may have several positive qualities (Bank and Kahn 1982, Dunn 1983, Goetting 1986). Table 1.1, which partly defines the roles in a sibling relationship, presents nine such qualities

Table 1.1
Qualities of a Sibling Relationship with Corresponding Attitudes, Feelings, and Behaviors

Quality	Attitudes, Feelings, and Behaviors
Friendliness	not rivalrous, not jealous, not competitive
Getting along	not hurting, not domineering, not fighting, not teasing, not quarreling
Acceptance	inclusion, interest, pride
Identification	want to be similar, try to do similar things, imitate
Affection	love, warmth, admiration
Help	assist, share, teach, encourage
Protection	provide security, look out for, stick up for
Nurturance	comfort, show kindness, caregive
Companionship	want to be together, enjoy each other's company, cooperate

Source: Adapted from Furman and Buhrmester (1985), Mendelson et al. (1988), and Mendelson and Gottlieb (1988).

along with attitudes, feelings, or behaviors associated with each. Two of the qualities—friendliness and getting along—are construed here as the absence of rivalry and conflict. But the remaining qualities are defined positively. Some of them refer predominantly to feelings (friendliness, affection, approval, and identification), some to the general quality of interaction (getting along and companionship), and some to specific functions that may be served by the sibling relationship (help, nurturance, and protection). The list is not exhaustive; for example, loyalty and intimacy are missing, two qualities that are relevant in middle childhood and beyond. Yet the list does characterize the potential richness of a preschooler's role as brother or sister.

But how does a young child acquire the role? Fortunately the literature on maternal role acquisition provides an appropriate model for an answer. Mercer (1981) framed a description of maternal role attainment (R. Rubin 1967) within a general theory that proposed four phases of role acquisition: anticipatory, formal, informal, and personal (Thornton and Nardi 1975). The foundations for the maternal role are likely established during childhood (Ricks 1985). Yet pregnancy serves as a more immediate anticipatory phase. A pregnant woman begins to adjust socially and psychologically by learning role expectations. She mimics appropriate models—perhaps her mother or her friends—and she may role play with someone else's child. More significant, she fantasizes about being a mother and relates to her unborn baby, especially when she starts feeling fetal movement. Finally, she seeks information not only about pregnancy and childbirth but also about motherhood (Deutsch et al. 1988).

The formal phase of maternal role acquisition is initiated by the baby's arrival. A woman begins to identify her baby and to assume maternal tasks (Gottlieb 1975). Yet her role performance is mainly influenced by the prescribed expectations of a variety of experts: her mother, doctor, nurses, friends, books, and so on. Thus, she seeks information about motherhood more during her baby's first month than at other times (Deutsch et al. 1988). Gradually a new mother enters an informal phase, during which she begins to perform her role in her own way. She acquires predictive expectations that are relevant to her baby, so she no longer rigidly follows the prescribed expectations or advice of others, and she can evaluate the extent to which a recommendation or a model is appropriate for her and her baby.

During the personal phase of role acquisition, a new mother establishes her own enactment style that is generally accepted by others. She gains a sense of identity within the maternal role, a sense of

where she has been and where she is going. Yet adopting a new role involves giving up competing aspects of previous roles; for example, a first-time mother must let go of her role of bride. In relinquishing prior identities, a woman reviews associated attachments and events—"grief work" that presumably loosens ties with her former self (R. Rubin 1967). Second-time mothers often find this quite difficult since they must also disengage from their firstborn to some extent (Walz and Rich 1983).

The model of maternal role acquisition is useful for considering the transition to big brother or sister. In becoming a brother, Simon experienced anticipatory, formal, informal, and personal phases of the transition. Within this framework, I will explore a number of relevant issues: Simon's understanding of the new baby and the baby's role; Simon's concept of his own role as big brother; relinquishing his earlier role as only child; acquiring the behavioral skills associated with his new role; and finally, changing his own self-concept, a topic that requires some elaboration.

Personal Narratives

A child's self-concept develops in a social context. Self-identity is tied to social identity (Sarbin and Scheibe 1983), and knowledge about the self is acquired concurrently with knowledge gained about others through social interaction (J. M. Baldwin 1897, M. Lewis and Brooks-Gunn 1979). Therefore a firstborn's self-concept should be influenced by the birth of a baby brother or sister, a life change that creates a new role, establishes a new relationship, and modifies existing relationships. And as the two children develop, their identities may become more and more intertwined (Bank and Kahn 1982).

Theorists have distinguished between two aspects of the self-system, between the *I* and the *Me* (reviewed by Harter 1983). The I is the self as subject—the active observer-knower or the structure of its defining cognitive processes; the Me is the self as object—the product of the observing process or the content of the self-system (James 1890/1963, M. Lewis and Brooks-Gunn 1979). Most research on children's self-concept has concerned the Me, and the scant work with 3- to 5-year-olds has usually involved self-descriptions (Keller et al. 1978, Mendelson et al. 1987), although there are notable exceptions in which self-understanding has been cast in a social-cognitive framework (Fischer et al. 1984, Pipp et al. 1987).

When I started my case study, I suspected that Simon's understanding of himself and his family might be relevant, and I initially focused on the content of his self-knowledge. But it soon became

clear that a number of issues—not only those related to self-concept—were best understood in terms of self-narratives. The narrative is a root metaphor. People think, perceive, imagine, and dream in narrative structures—meaningful patterns that organize otherwise chaotic meaningless input. As a result, storytelling, oral traditions, fables, and myths are universal, present even in the earliest cultures. The narrative metaphor can also be applied to the self-concept; the I can be conceived as the storyteller and various Me's as roles within the story (Mancuso and Sarbin 1983).

The term *self-narrative* has been used to refer to individuals' accounts of self-relevant events across time (Gergen and Gergen 1983). According to this view, individuals actively construct and reconstruct their self-concept and understand themselves as historically emerging beings. Their identity is therefore not a sudden and mysterious event but a sensible result of a life story. Self-narratives are social; they emerge from social events, not from intrapsychic processes. Finally, they reflect social connectedness because an individual's life story is necessarily related to the life story of important others.

It is useful to distinguish between macronarratives—about extended sequences of events such as a lifetime or a nation's history—and micronarratives—about short-lived events such as social encounters (Gergen and Gergen 1983). A life story is an example of a macronarrative. It reflects an individual's attempt to represent the past, present, and future as a coherent narrative. It may begin generations back, perhaps with a famous, or notorious, ancestor or with great-grandparents who emigrated from the old country. Even if it lacks an extended history, a personal narrative still includes information about the past—about parents and childhood circumstances. And it is also projected into the future through goals and expectations or even beyond death through a will and through expectations for children and grandchildren.

Narratives are embedded in narratives. A life story includes narratives of each relationship, which include narratives of different aspects of the relationship, which include micronarratives of specific encounters. Narratives about relationships are not simply retrospective accounts; they contain information and predictive expectations about both role partners. And like event schemas or scripts, micronarratives represent the dynamic frameworks of experienced events (Mandler 1983, Nelson and Gruendel 1981, Schank and Abelson 1977). Thus, narratives about relationships enable individuals to plan, anticipate trends, and conduct themselves in social encounters.

The narrative approach is certainly consistent with previous theorizing about the self-concept: It distinguishes between the I and the Me, it stresses the importance of the self in relation to others, and it provides a constructivist account of the development of the self-system (Harter 1983). The narrative approach is also apt for considering young children. It is consistent with preschoolers' knowledge both about scripts (Nelson 1981) and about roles in fantasy play (Bretherton 1984, P. Miller and Garvey 1984); it can be used to explain their knowledge about other people; and it is compatible with recent theorizing about young children's relationships with family members (Bretherton 1985).[1]

As I discovered, a new brother or sister may prompt a child to revise or construct personal narratives. The baby's arrival highlights the child's own biological origins and infancy; it also creates a new present by dividing social time between a past without the baby and a future tied to expected developmental change. Modifications to the family and to existing family roles may require the child to revise narratives about family routines and relationships. And in adopting the role of big brother or sister, the child will probably acquire scripts for interacting with the baby and construct narratives that include the newcomer.

1. Discussing attachment to parents, Bretherton (1985) linked the notion of internal working models to scripts and to a scientific-theory metaphor of the self (Epstein 1973, Epstein 1980). The narrative metaphor shares many of the advantages of the scientific-theory metaphor for self-concept. Most notably, both provide a means for organizing and interpreting self-relevant information, but the narrative metaphor accommodates social roles more directly and is more plausible for preschoolers' self-concept. Young children's scientific theories are probably more akin to stories or myths than to systems of postulates and deductions. And children have considerable experience comprehending and generating narrative forms before they understand even the most basic hypothetico-deductive argument.