

WHICH FAMILY WERE YOU BORN INTO?

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A major observation and group of assumptions in family theory is that the family is a highly dynamic system. A family and its members are constantly reacting to, adapting to the environment in which it is connected. Of course, grandparents are suffering, dying, or expecting their children to do certain things for them. One result is that siblings are seldom born into the “same family.” Some are more caught up in the emotional realities than others. Some even manage to remove themselves from it all, pretending that their environment doesn’t exist.

The Bowen concept that addresses this phenomenon is *sibling position*, which describes various patterns of reaction and various definitions of responsibility—both to others and to self. Dr. Bowen acknowledged and recognized the importance of the research of Walter Toman, a German psychologist and family therapist, and used his research to articulate a core concept in the Bowen Theory. Dr. Toman extended his research studies to include observations and predictions of marital patterns and therapist-patient patterns, both based on sibling positions.

Being in the oldest sibling position in a family is a major variable on the influence on the definition of self, of how one perceives reality, and one’s assumptions about responsibility for others. The oldest is especially vulnerable to two family dynamics. If the parents’ relationship is problematic, the oldest is often included (confided in) by one of the parents in the intense negativity toward the other, with the result being the child caught between the parents, being a caretaker or even a “therapist” to the parent. The other vulnerability concerns the oldest being the emotional and physical caretaker for the younger children, especially in large families. One end result of these two potential vulnerabilities is for the oldest to have little leftover energy to ask his or her own questions about one’s process and definition of self.

This letter is a response to a patient’s looking at her own functioning from the oldest sibling position.

April 10, 1966

Dear Mrs.

It has been writ—oldest daughters knew it even before it was writ—that oldest daughters are responsible for the welfare, well being, mothering, and for worrying about all the "children" in the extended kinship system, whether they need it or not. It is good to know you have finally recognized and openly accepted your assigned responsibility. It is all very simple. All one has to do is get the "children" to confess their need for it and then find a way to turn fishes and loaves into food for the multitudes, and you have it made.

It was good to get your letter with the humorous slants on the situation. Best wishes to you in your mission to fulfill your "responsibility."

Sincerely,

Murray Bowen, M.D.