Episode 190 - Dr. Geoffrey Greif and Dr. Michael Woolley: Adult Sibling Relationships

[00:00:08] Welcome to in social work the podcast series of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work at www.insocialwork.org. We're glad you could join us today. The purpose of social work is to engage practitioners and researchers and lifelong learning and to promote research to practice and practice research. We educate we connect. We care. We are in social work Hello and welcome to in social work. I'm your host for this podcast Charles Syms. Anyone who has worked with families knows how exciting and challenging it can be. Families are complex and dynamic system of relationships which continues to evolve over time. When addressing the topic of family were often the focus is on children or adolescents in their parents or the marital or partner relationship. This podcast is centered on a different family system. The adult siblings are guest for this podcast. We'll be discussing the results of their study of adult sibling relationships. Dr. Geoffrey Greif is a professor at the University of Maryland School of Social Work. Dr. Greif received his MSW from the University of Pennsylvania and his Ph.D. from the Columbia University School of Social Work. He is the author of more than 125 journal articles and book chapters as well as 12 books. He was the associate dean at the University of Maryland School of Social Work from 1996 to 2007. Dr. Greif has received numerous awards for his teaching and scholarship a clinical social worker trained in family therapy. Dr. Greif has served on the Board of Social Work examiners in Maryland. His service to the university.

[00:02:08] His community and the social work profession has been and continues to be extensive. His current research teaching and practice interest include child abduction family therapy parenting issues adult friendships and adult siblings Dr Michael Woolley is an associate professor at the University of Maryland School of Social Work. Dr. Woolley earned his MSW from Virginia Commonwealth University and his Ph.D. from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His scholarship is focused on the use of research methods to inform and advance data driven and evidence based policy programming and practice in public school settings. A fellow of the Society for social work and research Dr. Woolley has received numerous awards for his teaching and scholarship. He has published dozens of articles and book chapters on both educational issues and clinical practice with children and families. Dr. Woolley is a clinical social worker who is also trained in family therapy. In this podcast Doctors Greif and Woolley share their findings and what is generally the longest relationship we have that of a sibling. Their intention is to shed light on the adult siblings and important family relationship which has received little attention. They described their study design an approach that employs both qualitative and quantitative elements. They explore and provide their insights to the study's findings. Admittedly complex. Their hope is to offer the social work clinician a useful way of understanding adult sibling relationships and provide a lens to understand key developmental issues that confront them doctors Greif and Woolley were interviewed in February of 2016 by Jacqueline McGinley a Ph.D. student at the University of Buffalo School of Social Work.

[00:04:17] I'm Jackie McGinley a licensed social worker and Ph.D. student at the University at Buffalo School of Social Work and here with me today to talk about adult sibling relationships. Our Dr. Geoffrey Greif and Dr. Michael Woolley from the University of Maryland School of Social Work. And I want to thank you both so much for joining us today. Jackie thank you. So Jeff I want to begin by asking you how did you become interested in adult sibling relationships. I had been doing a series of books on horizontal relationships to specifically on friendships one on men's and women's friendships but mostly on men's. And then one on couples friendships and when it came time to do this book on sibling relationships also a horizontal relationship. I knew that I needed the expertise of a very good researcher. Given how complicated these relationships are so I approached

Mike to help me out with this mixed methods approach. These are also Jackie just to add the longest relationships that we have so this is an incredibly important topic to our clients as well as to everybody else who is not our client and has good relationships that we want them to be able to understand the length of these relationships makes it one that will hopefully carry over into our dotage. Yeah and this is Mike if I can add to that when Jeff came to me with this topic I was immediately intrigued. Although my prior research was mostly about kids and families and specifically what leads to kids succeeding in school sort of the social context of school success.

[00:06:02] I was fascinated by this because we discovered as we talked about it that Jeff and I had some similarities in the way we thought about this and some complementarities that we had to work out like for example both of us are trained family therapist so we both had interest and you know the complexities of large families and parent child relationships but also sibling relationships. We also talked about the fact that I'm a kind of a quantitative researcher he's a qualitative researcher and so we bring two different skill sets to this mixed methods study. Not only that we have very different personal experiences of siblings in our family that I think allowed us to have very different contributions to interpreting our data and understanding what our data meant and would either of you feel comfortable sharing a little bit with us about your own adult sibling relationships and how that may or may not have influence how you've looked at this issue. Sure this is Jeff and I'll go first. Mine is fairly straightforward. I'm the youngest of three. I was raised by two parents and I'm very close with my older brother and older sister were three years apart. In each case so I'm six years younger than my sister and three years younger than my brother. They all live in Baltimore and we all agree about how to take care of my 97 year old mother who has dementia. My father died about 11 years ago so we are very close and I bring that background and Michael will talk about his background to trying to understand the qualitative interviews the 262 qualitative interviews that we went through in order to get our arms around this topic. I'm going to ask Mike to go next. Okay so I have a blended family we call it in the profession. I have two full siblings.

[00:07:54] I'm the second of 6 so I have an older sister and an immediately younger sister and we're three years apart. And then I have three half siblings who start in age six years younger than my younger sister and I have a younger sister and two younger brothers and siblings. So I have a fairly large age range among my siblings. I like to quip that I have 252 years of experience as a sibling. If I add the years that I've been alive with my five other siblings and so you know we have all the complexities you have in a complex family. Step parents and we share a dad. But three of my siblings have different mom Mia and I get along with some of my siblings and there are conflicts among my siblings fairly significant ones and I noticed when I was reading her book adult sibling relationships that you really do look at a variety of different types of relationships and if you wouldn't mind can you speak to them maybe it will go if you like first. Can you tell us a little bit more about how you think about these relationships. That's a great question Jeff and I's initial goal when we started collecting data is we had a plan that would involve analyzing the data and coming up with a type palagi or clustering sibling relationships into groups and describing those different types of sibling relationships. And we actually came up with a couple of rubrics in that regard.

[00:09:21] Both Jeff and I and to let you know as we went about collecting data over 3 years we would collect a wave of data we would analyze Jeff would analyze qualitatively I would analyze quantitatively we get together and talk about what we found when Jeff would find something in the qualitative data. I would go see and test see if that showed up in the quantitative data and vice versa. So we came up with different ideas about how to group the siblings. And every time we did a couple of them we kind of thought oh this really works. And then the further we try to make that fit our data the more we realized that lumping these sibling relationships into groups wasn't possible. They were too complicated that one individual with even just two siblings could have two very different relationships with those two siblings and that's how we came up with this overarching sort of description of what the range of what sibling relationships looks like. And that is the affection

because we found in our data an overwhelmingly large percentage of the folks we interviewed reported positive relationships with siblings at least part of the time those relationships were important. They were affectionate they were mutually supportive and caring but then most sibling relationships also had aspects that were ambiguous and ambivalent ambivalent in that. Sometimes you're really not sure exactly how you feel and ambiguous in that you're not really sure what your siblings. Are saying or doing and why. And they may not understand you about what you're thinking and saying and why. And now I'm going to pass this to Jeff to see if he wants to add to that.

[00:10:55] It's interesting because with any researcher you can decide what lens you're going to use if we had come out of a lens paying great attention to the Bible and Cain and Abel we could have used a competition lens. Obviously you know Cain does Abel and in the Bible but there are so many examples of that could have driven how we looked at the data or there are the ideas about looking for affection and love and everything that goes on and we have a chapter with a family that gets along very well. Family of siblings and they drive their relationship with love. So from a research point of view it's very interesting what lends anybody decides to pick up and we had one lens that we had to drop because it just didn't fit the data. And then the data started to speak to us or we were open to the data speaking to us in these lenses of ambivalence and ambiguity along with affection. This is why if I could add one more thing to that we were also looking for a way to describe these relationships that was useful in a clinical sense that practitioners could apply to us and we really felt that these three ways works for that and that clinicians can take this and they can help adults who are struggling with sibling relationships understand that they can hold at the same time in the air the fact that they have a great deal of affection for a sibling and their sibling may have affection for them but they can be ambivalent and ambiguous in having trouble understanding why a sibling does what they do or understanding who they are and what motivates them. So it's almost giving people permission for their adult sibling relationships to be complicated.

[00:12:37] It may be the nature of trying to research this incredibly complicated topic that also led us in this direction. At times we had interviews with the oldest of two other times the middle of 10 maybe the youngest of three. Maybe it was a sister who had two brothers or two brothers who had one sister. There's every possible format you can have in a sibling set and we haven't even talked about the step and half siblings that plus the age gap. So there are so many different family forms out there that we had to figure out what's a way to get in here and as Mike said drive this towards What Clinicians Need To Know. But the book also has great appeal to lay readers because they will undoubtedly see a piece of themselves in many of the case studies so it's driven both by the quantitative analysis and the case studies that we have. As you speak and after reading the tax too I just kept reflecting on the fact of 262 interviews Nick's methodology is complexity of relationships. I want to invite Jeff why don't you go ahead and tell us a little bit about some of the design decisions that you made drop the study and perhaps a little bit about how long you have been involved in this work to get at the complexity of these relationships. We began working on the questionnaire in early 2011. The first wave of interviews took part in 2011 in the fall so my students who were enrolled in their research course went out and interviewed people who they knew or found in public places. They asked them to complete a 110 item questionnaire and then they conducted a qualitative interview with them around certain questions that we had given them.

[00:14:32] So it was an open ended qualitative interview and they were allowed to follow the speaker wherever she or he went. We would then as Mike said look at the data and decide what questions worked on the questionnaire and what questions were giving us rich context and data in the qualitative interviews and then the next year ask largely the same set of questions because you can't vary it and have a useful sample. But we were tweaking it around the edges to try and zero in on some things that we began to learn. And then as any researcher knows by the time you're finished after the third wave you think of 20 more questions you wish you had asked but had not

asked that emerged from the data because every time you look at qualitative data and quantitative data you realize what you don't know. We have a huge amount of information and from the notion of what a researcher does with this we had to then figure out how do we tell the story what's the arc of this story. How do you put this into a book that is readable avoiding some of the weeds that we could have gone into. I think we were sociologists looking at this. We would have gone with greater depth into the weeds and not thought about what did clinicians and laypeople need to know in order to work with and ameliorate these issues if they need improvement. And Mike is there anything that you want to add in terms of the design decisions that you made throughout the study.

[00:16:07] So we knew when we designed our measurement instruments we were looking at gathering a lot of different information and it ranged from you know the obvious things like What are your sibling relationships like. Now we asked questions about what the siblings relationships were like in childhood. We also asked about the role of parents vis a vis the siblings. Questions like Do parents show favorites do they interfere in sibling relationships today support sibling relationships. We also asked our respondents to tell us about that both in their memory from childhood and they now. We also asked them about how they communicate with their siblings what kind of things they are comfortable talking about and not talking about. We asked them questions about the behaviors and the feelings and the perceptions and thinking that they engage with about their siblings. And Jeff is holding up our survey that we designed. It's long it's extensive and it's in the book. So you know exactly what questions we ask. And in the book when we run analysis we tell the readers which questions we're using and how we're using those. But then when I started trying to analyze the quantitative data I realized that we had multiple dynamics going on. In other words our respondents ranged from 40 to 90 and we realized informed by understanding developmental trajectories into adulthood that sometimes what you think and feel and believe is a function Glen Elder taught us this of the time in which you were raised. So we had siblings who were raised and depressionary in World War II.

[00:17:42] The Silent Generation all the way up to Gen Xers and so we wanted to look at whether those siblings according to the time and the nature of the world and the state of American culture when they grew up they were different. And we found that we also anticipated gender differences and we anticipated that from our reading of the literature that other researchers have found that sisters tend to be to put it bluntly and briefly better siblings than brothers. They're usually more involved in keeping the siblings that organized being supportive and caring and reaching out and communicating. And in fact since I'm on this one of the interesting things we found is we found those gender differences in our older respondents. And we found less differences in the respondents in their 40s and that we hypothesize that there needs to be more research to confirm this that gender differences in adult sibling relationships are narrowing. And in fact what happened was his brothers became better siblings over time. Sisters remained about the same across our age ranges. We also analyzed the data about parenting and we found some interesting patterns which fit with other research about families that when parents show favorites or interfere in sibling relationships that not only predicts were sibling relationships in childhood. It predicts worse sibling relationships all the way into adulthood and in fact the folks who said their parents showed favorites and interfered in sibling relationships in childhood. Those parents tended to continue to do that into the siblings adulthood and further that's linked to whether siblings agree and work together in taking care of their aging parents. So one of the core takeaways from my book is if you want your children to work together and take care of you when you're old and need that you need to work not to show favoritism and interfere in their relationships.

[00:19:28] I think social workers we so often are especially and please for educating students as to encourage them to think about how early life experiences are influencing the behaviors that they might be seeing in a client that they are working with and it seems that the research you've done really continues to support that hypothesis and ask if you wouldn't mind speaking a little bit to how

your findings related to birth order. And if that had any impact on adult sibling relationships. In a word we don't know. Yeah it's hard to with a sample size come to great conclusions around birth order. And here's some of the impediments we came up with. Whether or not you are the oldest boy or girl may affect how your parents interact with you in a first born parent may naturally connect with a first born child of the same gender but he or she may not connect as well with a child of a different gender. We had the issue of large families versus two sibling families. We had the issue of age gap. So you may have an older child and then ten years later a second child comes along. Well if the older child is leaving the house seven years later eight years later that's going to elevate the younger child to a position that's almost half a generation later. We didn't only interview oldest child or middle children or youngest children so there's so many variables that with a sample of 262 it's difficult when you weigh in on gender age gap and sibling said gender mix that you can really come to any good conclusions. We do review the literature on that in one of our chapters.

[00:21:24] But we did not focus definitively on that in our book. And this is Mike if I could add to that one of the things we were trying to do here was bring some light to an important family area that's gotten little attention little attention by researchers and even less attention by clinicians. And one of the one of the few here he has a sibling research that has been done for a while is birth order and in childhood. And you know and maybe our original idea of finding typologies was informed by that they've made typological sort of statements about first born last born in middle children but we weren't looking at that. We were looking at adult sibling relationships. We only interviewed one sibling out of respect. We do know that person's birth order. But as Jeff said the data is so complicated because of the complexities and numbers of relationships. All our respondents had we were more looking for what those relationships looked like and about 40. Oh and I want to add the reason we picked 40 is we theorize that at 40 most individuals have settled in their adult life. They may be settled in some kind of partnership. They may be settled in their career. And we thought that might be a time when the individuals in the sibling sects have fairly stable lives and then we can get a look at what those sibling relationships look like after that. Has that sort of middle age has set in. That's also when siblings begin to struggle with taking care of their parents.

[00:22:51] So a lot of siblings we found in their 20s and 30s can sort of drift along not have to deal with each other that much if they struggle but in their 40s or 50s they are called to task in terms of taking care of ill and dying parents. That was actually my next question because we know that we started that cohort of 40 and above the responsibilities of caregiving and parental death become a reality for this group of individuals. And I was curious and wanted to ask you what does the death of a parent do to adult sibling relationships. We have an article that came out in a journal on that in 2015 just as the book was coming out also and we found that as you might imagine it can have a variety of impacts on how well siblings get along some siblings got along better when the parents weren't there and the more they were able to deal with each other more clearly and more upfront without going through the parents other siblings though we found had enormous upheavals when their parents died not only suffering from the loss of a parent which is obviously one of the most significant losses anybody can have but also with the aftermath of the will how clearly was a we'll written how fairly or equitably there was the will written were the estates divided Well sometimes a parent will keep siblings together and siblings will always gather at mom or dad's house over a holiday. Out of respect for the parent but once the parent is gone they may feel it's each other start to drift away or there's not glew there that is holding them together so there can be an enormous range of reactions and we come up with seven apologies.

[00:24:40] Finally there we have our typologies or seven common patterns that these relationships tend to follow that can be. It's an article that is referenced in the book that help clinicians to sit down with families and predict or suggest possible ways that their relationships may unfold now that their last parent has died or even if the first parent has died. So we try and help clinicians along those lines to know what to expect when their parents are ill and dying. Most of the siblings we

interviewed did agree about how to take care of parents as they were dying though there was about a third of the siblings had pretty significant disagreements around the caretaking. This is my I would add to that. In those seven sort of patterns that we found among siblings Satch after the death of the parents predicted I think by the idea that these are very complex relationships and struggle with ambiguity and ambivalence. Some relationships get better. Some aren't changed very much and some actually get cut off or become worse. So there is no single pattern here. I mean the truism that every family is different is true. There are two interesting things. If you are a parent and you have one child that's doing incredibly well or has married incredibly well and another child that is struggling and has always struggled do you compensate one child differently in your will. And that's we can't say what somebody should do but very well-meaning and loving parents may have totally different approaches to how to handle that and that's going to redound in some way to the sibling relationship. We don't know how it will affect it but it will have an effect.

[00:26:25] And as Mike said there are families that don't change. My siblings and I get along very well and we agree about how to take care of my mother so I don't anticipate her death causing us any upheaval because we're pretty much on the same page already. But that would be an example of a family that would not change and their sibling relationships. If you think about it it's a relationship that struggles if you apply stress to that relationship and the serious illness and death of a parent is certainly a significant life stressor. You apply stress to those relationships. Sometimes they become more problematic if the relationship is good. That stress may not do that. And I think that's essentially what we found in our data. I also would differ. I think it was Dostoyevsky who said all happy families are the same and troubled families are all completely different. I think he got that wrong. I think all happy and struggling families are different and from what you've shared in reading your work it seems like that is very very much what you've seen in speaking with these 262 different siblings right. Yes and remember just to add a research note. They are reporting on 7 100 and 4 sibling relationships and we have data on all 7 104 of those including we asked the siblings to describe in a few words each of their siblings.

[00:27:49] So there's a total complexity in how you begin to put your arms around so much data and then figure out how to talk about it how to present it in a useful way and that actually leads to one of my last questions for you which is thinking about practice and it's very clear that you read this book with practitioners in mind in addition to lay individuals who can read it and reflect on their own family dynamics. But I wanted to know what should a social worker know when thinking about and considering adult sibling relationships we offer and we are family therapists by training as Michael said. We offer some lenses based on family therapy theorist's Salvatore Menuchin Murray Bo and Virginius a tear about what social workers can do in terms of advising their clients that are struggling with those relationships. We also have the notion of if you're reading the book on your own and are not in treatment you should think about education inside and in action. As the three steps to take education you should read about other siblings you should know that whatever you're experiencing with your sibling. Believe me someone else has probably experienced something very similar. You should look at your own past. We found as Mike said many of these patterns are handed down from parents but they're also handed down generation to generation. As we made clear in the book some problems do emerge Denovo but a lot of other problems and it doesn't take much of a post hoc analysis to conclude that they had their roots. Maybe a generation or two back among parents who did not get along with their siblings or grandparents who were strange from their siblings. And finally the action is where the social worker can also help. Does the client sitting in front of you want to get closer with a sibling. Does the client want to pull away.

[00:29:46] What's the client want and if they want to have stronger boundaries then you're going to use of structural family therapy approach if you want to clarify communication than Virginius tears. Communication work is going to be helpful to you and if you're going to want to look for that family tree and see where the acorns are falling you're gonna want to use Bowan and I'm going to

have Mike now say a few things too. So yeah I'm going to contradict myself period of time. So first it's hard to give a formula for how an adult who's upset about their sibling relationships and want them to be different to change them because we've been talking a lot of the time about how different every family is. So now I'm going to contradict myself by saying the first thing that someone who wants to change the sibling relationship should do is buy our book. No. No. They might consider going and getting some professional help to help them think through these things get some objective input come up with a plan and I have three brief things that I would suggest. The first thing is a lot of times sibling relationships because they're so intense in childhood. It's been said that there are first friendships and our first spousal type relationships the first people we share bathrooms with on a day to day basis. But then we move apart and we develop our own lives so one of the first things we all can do is forgive your siblings for slights they did two decades ago.

[00:31:11] The second thing we can do is try to learn who they are now not who they were when we lived with them and accept who they are now. And the third thing is if your sibling relationship is very explosive if it becomes instantly conflictual interpersonal interactions and you have some things you'd like to say to that sibling that are positive and supportive and would start the relationship in a different direction. Put them in a letter and mail them to your sibling. Thank you. I think those are real tangible things that an individual that has a complicated adult tippling relationship are a clinician who is working with someone who has a complicated relationship could immediately utilize as we close I want to ask you both and I'll start with Mike. Would you mind sharing where your research is currently taking you. As you all mentioned earlier there is a lot of lot. Here's a lot to be explored within the information you've already gathered but I'm curious about that and also if there is new tenets of research that you're pulling on now. Yeah that's a great question. I almost threw it to Jeff but I think I'm going to answer it but I'll give Jeff credit. So Jeff we look within this book. Really squarely on the sharp end of his research continuum and I jumped at the chance to work with him on this book. I have my own research agenda. Like I said earlier about kids in schools and the social environment and how that affects kids in terms of their neighborhood their family their social climate and their school and I'm still working on that and I also work with the state of Maryland around doing large longitudinal data analyses to inform education practice and programming.

[00:32:48] But where this trajectory of this collaboration Jeff and I is going emerging from this book Jeff came up with the idea next to look at in-law relationships. So we looked at siblings in adulthood and now we've actually started the first wave of data collection interviewing adults about their in-law relationships. We had a great time doing this book together the sibling book and we have basically a similar process in mind to do three waves of data collection. And again we're going to have a complex dataset with issues of age and gender and gender match between relationship etc.. But yeah we're hoping in three or four years you'll do another podcast with us in our book about in-laws. I look forward to that and Jeff you want to speak more towards that. It's a really interesting topic when you consider the roles of in this feeds back into the adult sibling relationships book about what roles do women and men play in families across the lifespan and that's what we're continuing to look at and that sort of is what links these two books together. Are these two studies together the siblings and the in-laws a lot of this is about gender roles that different people feel comfortable playing in the family. We hope to be speaking with you again and we can call you Dr. McKinley. I will have that too.

[00:34:15] I want to before I close ask if there's anything about the work we've done or the work you foresee doing in the future that you think is important for our audience to know about but I haven't asked you about one of the things that we found from Mike's analysis of our sibling data is that if you perceive your father to have been close with his siblings you're likely or more likely to be close with your siblings that seeing a dad many years ago. Again our sample is 40 to 90. Many years ago being engaged father has a powerful impact on how you are going to engage with your

own siblings. 30 percent of our sample said they perceive their fathers that way 80 percent perceive their mothers that way and mother closeness was not a predictor father closeness is. We don't know how the younger generation will play out with this but we encourage dads as well as moms of course but dads in particular to be mindful of the messages they give their children today about the importance of being close with their siblings. What an interesting finding and Mike is there anything as we close that you wanted to add you know when you started asking that question the first time I thought of exactly the same outcome that Jeff had that was one of the more interesting findings that we hadn't discussed I would say this I think are finding and I mentioned it already that brothers are becoming if you will better siblings over the three year generations. We actually separated our sample into like three sometimes two sometimes three different age groups and analyzed the differences by both age and gender across those three different age groups. And I find it very promising and intriguing that brothers are more likely to communicate about difficult subjects they they're just becoming better siblings over time.

[00:36:11] And I would like to think given that dad's role model better sibling relationships then brothers becoming better siblings are more likely to role model of sibling relationships as fathers and that maybe we're looking at a positive change over time in the nature of sibling relationships. It's a really interesting finding as it relates to gender and also over generational change and what's happening in these family dynamics. I want to thank you both so much. Any final thoughts you have no doubt. Thank you Jackie. We very much enjoyed talking to you. You have been listening to doctors Geoffrey Greif and Michael Woolley describe their research on as well as implications for adult sibling relationships. We hope you have enjoyed this discussion. I'm Charles Syms. Please join us again. In social work. Hi I'm Nancy Smyth Professor and dean at the University of Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. We look forward to your continued support of the series. For more information about who we are as a school our history our online and on ground degree and continuing education programs we invite you to visit our Web site at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. And while you're there check out our technology and social work research center you'll find it under the Community Resources menu.