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Chapter 11

Brothers and sisters in China: No longer the one-child family

Abstract

Following the end of the one-child-policy in China in 2016 and the gradual relaxation of only-one child per family in selected areas prior to that, family composition and relationship dynamics, especially siblings relationship within the Chinese familial context has gone through a rapid growth and some significant changes as a result of the introduction of the two-child policy. This policy change, leading to the possibility of adding another child into the family may have profound implications on the family system, its functioning and care relations among those living in China (Chen, 2018). First, this chapter considers the existing studies related to Chinese familial culture within the context of its population policy that has dominated family life in China in the past three decades. This chapter will then review empirical findings on role of Chinese parents in the development of siblings relationships such as sibling conflict and social comparison; how their personal siblings experience and co-parenting behaviour may hinder or promote better siblings relations and, the chapter will also draw on existing research findings on the adaptation and adjustments of Chinese firstborn children across the transition into siblinghood. Finally, the chapter summarised and discussed the unique characteristics of sibling relationships within the Chinese context and its implication to the family dynamics and development of the new generation in China. Themes for future investigation are also introduced.

Key words: Sibling relationships, only child, Chinese parents, China

In past three decades, the one-child policy, where couples were only allowed to have one child, dominated family life in China. As a result, there is limited research on sibling relationships in Chinese families (Chen, 2018; Chen, Wang, Liang, & Tong, 2016). However, in recent years, the population policy has been gradually relaxed in some areas in China (Wang, Gu, & Cai, 2016). In particular since 2016, the Chinese central government has reversed the one-child policy and has allowed couples to have two children across the whole country. Following this change, there has been a rapid growth in the percentage of two-child families. The statistical report from the National Health Commission (NHC) of the People's Republic of China showed that the number of newborns in 2018 is more than 15 million, and 50% of them are second-borns (NHC, 2019).

While the Chinese government's decision to allow families to have more than one child was more inclined to address concerns of shrinking labour force and population ageing, the policy change may have profound implications for the system and functioning of families in China (Chen & Shi, 2017; Chen et al., 2017), especially the long neglected family subsystems of sibling relationships. Hence, this chapter aims to clarify what is known about brothers and sisters in China and to explore what is happening today.

The first section provides an overview of the Chinese familial culture within the context of its population policy that has dominated family life in China in the past three decades. Against these backdrop, the chapter will then review empirical findings on 1) role of Chinese parents in the development of sibling relationships

such as sibling conflict and social comparisons; 2) how the parent's personal siblings experience and co-parenting behaviour may hinder or promote better sibling relations and; and 3) the adaptation and adjustments of firstborn Chinese transition into siblinghood. Finally, the chapter summarizes and discusses the unique characteristics of sibling relationships within the Chinese context and its implication to the family dynamics and development of the new generation in China. Themes for future investigation are also introduced.

Cultural contexts and population policy in China – What has remained and what has changed?

In the past four decades, China has experienced significant social, political and economic changes (Xinhua, 2018), characterised by rapid globlisation and market-oriented economy as a result of its reform and open-door policy. China's one-child policy was gradually implemented following the reform and the open-door policy, and this may have influenced familial and cultural values amongst Chinese families (Fong, 2004). Research showed that those who were born at the time of one-child policy were more likely to be affected by the individualistic values and the market-oriented economy. For example, research suggests that these children were more likely to pursue their own desires and go against their parents' expectations (Deutsch, 2006).

Following the introduction of the one-child policy, the only child in the family represented the only hope for the family, and their parents may have been more

likely to encourage their child to be assertive and independent in order to adapt to the competitive society. Empirical evidence from more recent studies has indicated a mixed culture amongst Chinese families, especially in urban areas. Although Chinese families encouraged their children to be autonomous and independent, they also continued to emphasize family responsibility in socializing their children (Chen, in press-b; Qu, Pomerantz, & Deng, 2016). A study on Chinese adolescent's cultural values showed that Chinese urban adolescents showed higher scores on both individualistic values (e.g., personal uniqueness and assertiveness) and collectivistic values (e.g., group orientation and social connectedness) as compared to those in rural areas (Chen, Wang, & Liu, 2012). In addition, the one-child policy seems to have contributed to greater gender equality in China. Cumulating evidence shows that girls without siblings received more parental investment, both material and psychological resources, than girls with siblings (Lee, 2012; Wu, 2016).

While, traditionally China is characterized as a family-oriented society, its cultural values that emphasizes family responsibility, does not appear to be a strong factor in predicting care of the elderly (Zhan & Montgomery, 2003). A Chinese study found that when an adult child had siblings to share parental care responsibilities, he or she tended to provide less support to their elderly parents (Zhan & Montgomery, 2003). But it should be noted that the study was based on a sample who were born before the one-child policy. China is now challenged with fast ageing population similar to developed countries in the West such as the UK, and East Asia such as Japan, Taiwan and Korea (e.g., Ogawa & Retherford, 1993; Tan, 2018). As such, the

one-child policy may have made elder care more challenging (Zhang & Goza, 2006).

Transitioning towards the end of One-child policy

There are more than 100 million Chinese families with only one child (Feng, Poston, & Wang, 2014), reflecting the profound effects of the one-child policy on the size, structure, and relationships of the Chinese family. The typical family structure in China is a triadic constellation (i.e., a father-mother-only child pattern) with a child-centred family relationship. Lone children are described as little emperors who experience extended support from parents into their adulthood and married life in terms of housework, child care and material resources (Cameron, Erkal, Gangadharan, & Meng, 2013).

However, the implementation of the two-child policy may change the previous family dynamics in China, leading to increased family size, more diverse family structure and a reorganization of family relationships (Feng et al., 2014). In terms of family structure, the arrival of the second child will have changed the family structure from a triadic to a tetradic constellation. From the children's perspective, children with siblings would be less lonely with more companionship and support while growing up. Siblinghood may also reduce the possibility of parents who are empty-nesters living in households without children in their old age (Zeng & Hesketh, 2016).

Since 1980s, prior to the introduction of two-child policy, the Chinese government begun to implement a partial relaxation of population policy, based on the demographic and political considerations. Families which had the following conditions were permitted to have more than one child: members of minority ethnic

groups, couples living in some rural areas, couples who themselves had no siblings, couples of handicapped children, or rural couples who had a daughter as a firstborn child (Hesketh & Zhu, 1997). In addition, some rural parents did not officially register the birth of daughters (Cai & William, 2003) but those who had more than one child could pay a huge sum of money as a penalty. These exemptions, together with the partial relaxation of the one child policy gave families an opportunity to have a second child (Hesketh, Lu, & Xing, 2005). A statistical report in 2007 estimated 1.5 children per couple further demonstrated that a substantial number of Chinese couples had more than one child (Gu, Wang, Guo, & Zhang, 2007).

Against this background, the next section explores the sibling relationships based on samples derived prior to the two-child policy. It focuses on the role of parents, their co-parenting behaviour, parent's own experience of having siblings and the adjustment of their firstborn child when transitioning into siblinghood.

The Role of Parents with two or more children

The parenting experience of raising two or more children within a family may involve more energy and effort and be different when compared with a lone-child family. Parents may experience more parental stress and even parental burnout (Le Vigouroux & Scola, 2018; Volling, 2012); hence, they need more supportive co-parenting (Chen & Shi, 2017; Kolak & Volling, 2013; Szabó, Dubas, & van Aken, 2012). In this section, we discuss how unique parental factors (e.g., parental involvement in sibling relationships and social comparison of siblings) and co-parenting influences

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sibling relationships.

Parental Factors and Sibling Relationships

In Chinese societies, parents are commonly involved in training their children to be obedient and to establish harmonious relationships in the family, including sibling relationships (Chao & Tseng, 2002; Chen, in press-b; Ho, 1986). Previous literature has shown that parental involvement in children's sibling relationships can be divided into two broad categories: positive guidance and authoritarian control (Chen, 2019a). Positive guidance includes encouraging children to explain their point of view when they have a disagreement, praising them for getting along well, making suggestions about how they can get along better, and coaching them to negotiate a mutually acceptable outcome (McHale, Updegraff, Tucker, & Crouter, 2000). Authoritarian control includes punishing siblings who fight one another, settling sibling conflicts without coaching, and using verbal and physical power to stop sibling disagreements (McHale et al., 2000).

A recent study based on the sample of Chinese adolescents explored how mothers' involvement in sibling relationships may influence adolescents' sibling relationships (Chen, 2019a). It found that mothers' positive guidance was negatively related to sibling conflict while on the other hand, authoritarian control was positively related to sibling conflict. Positive guidance from Chinese mothers served as tool for their children to effectively resolve conflicts and to enhance positive interactions between siblings. In contrast, mothers' authoritarian control (e.g., physical punishment) might be observed and modelled by adolescents and reflected

in their harsh treatment and negative interaction with siblings. Hence, while Chinese parents tend to be actively involved in sibling interaction, their involvement strategies can lead to different outcome in sibling relationships.

According to Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), individuals establish self-concept by comparing others with themselves and comparisons often occur when an individual's characteristics (e.g., gender, age, or educational background) are similar to the comparison target, including between siblings (Suls, Martin, & Wheeler, 2002). Chinese parents were often found to make critical comparisons as a form of child socialization (Camras, Sun, Li, & Wright, 2012; Fung & Lau, 2012), including comparing their own children with children's friend(s) or classmate(s) (Fung, 1999).

More importantly, when Chinese parents have more than one child within a family, they are more likely to make comparisons between siblings (Fung & Chen, 2001). Although the intention of social comparison between siblings among Chinese parents was to set up a good model for children, parental comparisons of siblings may have negative effects on children's developmental outcomes. A study, using a two-wave longitudinal design, explored how parents' comparisons of siblings were associated with adolescents' internalizing and externalizing problems (Chen, Qu, & Chen, 2019). Cross-lagged path analysis showed that parents' comparisons of siblings predicted more internalizing and externalizing problems in adolescents six months later. Moreover, the adolescents' externalizing problems, but not internalizing problems, predicted more parents' comparisons of siblings over time. Parental social

comparison of siblings may have significant implications on the interaction of siblings and children outcome in Chinese families, following the implementation of two-child policy in the country.

Parents' Cooperative Co-parenting

Co-parenting is considered as a type of social support when couples become parents (Feinberg, 2003). Cooperative co-parenting is conceptualized as a mutually supportive way for both parents to raise children (Schoppe, Mangelsdorf, & Frosch, 2001). Specifically, raising two or more children within a family may require more support from partners (Chen & Shi, 2017; Kolak & Volling, 2013; Szabó et al., 2012). In China, as a result of one child policy, parental investment in developing children's human capital has profoundly increased (Choukhmane, Coeurdacier, & Jin, 2013) so that they support their only child to be as competitive as possible in the future (Fong, 2004). Therefore, the change in Chinese population policy may have implications for parental investment in child development, leading to changes to traditional parental role differentiations (Chen & Chang, 2012) (e.g., fathers become more involved in domestic chores and in child care, such as feeding; Chuang & Su, 2008).

Because Chinese parents want to maintain their secondborn's human capital similar to the firstborn's, they may have to change their co-parenting behaviors to sustain their parental investment (Chen, 2019a). In a recent study, Chen (2019a) asked Chinese mothers to report fathers' cooperative co-parenting and examined how it was linked to adolescents' sibling relationships. The findings showed that a lack of cooperative co-parenting, such as undermining co-parenting behavior, was

associated with greater sibling conflicts. Another study showed that Chinese mothers' perceived parenting stress was indirectly associated with children's positive sibling relationship through the mediating role of mothers' warm parenting behaviours. However, mothers' perceived undermining co-parenting behavior moderated the association between mothers' parenting stress and their warm parenting behaviours (Chen, in press-a).

Parents' Sibling Status and their Children's Sibling Relationship

The Chinese central government began to implement the one child policy in the early 1980s. Therefore, the first generation of Chinese children without siblings are in their adulthood now - most are married and have become parents (Chen, 2019b). The recent change in the population policy has meant that their children may have a chance to have a sibling which provides a quasi-experimental context to compare individuals with or without siblings.

Some pioneer studies have yield preliminary understandings of Chinese parent's sibling status and its relevance to children's sibling relationships. A study was conducted by Chen (2019b) to examine how Chinese mothers' sibling status influence their children's sibling relationships. He proposed a model of intergenerational transmission of sibling experiences where he suggested that sibling experiences in childhood may influence parents' parenting competence and strategies in dealing with their children's sibling relationships. He found that the quality of sibling relationships among children whose mothers grew up with siblings

were higher than those whose mothers without siblings. It seems to suggest that mothers who experienced childhood with siblings are more likely to be exposed to interaction skills with siblings than those without; thus, childhood experiences with her siblings may have enhanced their ability to manage her children better in forming positive sibling relationships.

While, this seems to suggest that growing up with a sibling may benefit parents' competency in raising multiple children, when Chen and his colleague's (Fan & Chen, in press) investigated how both parents' and children's sibling status could separately or jointly influence parenting behaviors (i.e., authoritative and authoritarian parenting), the findings did not confirm this. The study showed that mothers without siblings who had two children reported more authoritative style of parenting (that is, warmer and more supportive parenting) and less authoritarian parenting (that is, highly demanding, but less supportive parenting) than their counterparts with siblings (Fan & Chen, in press). However, it should be noted that this study used a general measure of parenting rather than a specific measure to assess parenting style in terms of involvement in sibling relationships. Future studies should use more specialized measurements to assess parenting behaviors in the contexts of sibling relationships. The mechanism of intergenerational transmission of sibling experiences is complex. More work is needed to understand its process, especially in the rapidly changing Chinese families.

Firstborn Children's Adaptation to the Transition of Siblinghood

Before the two-child policy, most of Chinese children were lone-children who could enjoy all the family resources without sharing with another child in the family. The policy change providing parents an opportunity to have two children may lead to an unexpected event. That is, former only children may suddenly have a younger sibling. This transition may lead to more stress for the firstborn Chinese child, who may consequently relate badly to the birth of a little brother or sister (Chen, 2018; Chen et al., 2018). At the beginning of the two-child policy, a recent study by Chen (2019) recruited Chinese families who were expecting their second child. The preliminary findings indicated that firstborn Chinese children aged 2 and 6 years old showed an increase in aggressive behaviours reported by mothers one month after their infant sibling's birth (Chen, 2019).

Preparation for the arrival of a new sibling, may be very important for firstborn children to adapt well to the transition to siblinghood (Beyers-Carlson & Volling, 2017). This is especially so, when the firstborn child has no expectation that they will have a new brother or sister. An important factor in sibling preparation is having time to talk with the firstborn child about their mother's pregnancy and the possibility of having a younger brother or sister. An anticipatory stress hypothesis suggests that when children anticipate a future stressful event, they may have more time to prepare themselves for dealing with the stress that has not yet happened (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Therefore, if the firstborn children are informed early before the birth of their infant sibling, they may have more time to adjust to the idea of the upcoming birth of the new sibling. Chen and his colleagues (Chen et al., 2018)

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conducted an investigation called "Time to Inform about Mom's Pregnancy" (TIMP),

which examined whether firstborn children's positive feelings about their new sibling

before the birth was related to the time at which the firstborn children were

informed about their mother's pregnancy. The preliminary findings indicated that

firstborn Chinese children who were informed earlier in their mothers' pregnancy

were more likely to have positive feelings about their sibling before the birth (Chen

et al., 2018).

In addition, the firstborn child's 'effortful control' seems to be a protective

factor for their adjustment to the birth of a sibling (Chen et al., 2016; Volling, 2012).

'Effortful control' was conceptualized as "the ability to inhibit a dominant response

to perform a subdominant response" (Rothbart & Bates, 2006, p. 137). Children with

high levels of effortful control may be better at regulating their behaviour, feelings,

and thoughts (Eisenberg, Smith, & Spinrad, 2011). The TIMP project further

examined whether firstborn Chinese children's effortful control may moderate the

association between the time when parents tell the firstborn children about the birth

of a sibling, and their feelings about their sibling before the birth. The findings

showed that when firstborn Chinese children had low levels of effortful control,

being told later about their mothers' pregnancy was linked to lower levels of positive

feelings about the sibling. It seems to suggest that firstborn children with low level of

effortful control may need much longer to accept the upcoming new sibling.

The sibling relationship begins at the time of mother's pregnancy (Gottlieb &

Mendelson, 1990). However, existing literature tends to focus on the period of time

after the birth of the sibling. Children's feelings towards the new sibling before the birth plays a unique role in their relationships with siblings after the birth (Dunn & Kendrick, 1982; Szabó, 2012; Volling, 2017). Findings based on the TIMP project provided preliminary evidence that parents' preparation and firstborn children's effortful control may be interactively linked to the reaction to a sibling before the birth. This study has enhanced our understanding of the reaction of firstborn children to a sibling before the birth among Chinese families.

Implications and Future Directions

The implementation and current development of population policy has led to some unique characteristics of sibling structure in Chinese contexts. One phenomenon is that at the early stage of the implementation of two-child policy, some parents have had their second child when the firstborn was relatively older (e.g., adolescents or even emerging adults) than those in western societies (Volling, 2012). It means that the age difference between siblings is very large in China. The firstborn children can serve as caregivers, like their parents, for their very young siblings. It will be interesting to explore sibling relationships with a wide age gap, which, in some ways may replicate parent-child relationships. Another unique phenomenon is how parents' sibling status (having a sibling or not) and children's sibling status may interact to influence the family functioning (Fan & Chen, in press). The dramatic change in population policy in China may provide quasi-experimental contexts to examine how different sibling statuses play a role in family and children's

development.

With the implementation of the two-child policy in China, the 4-2-1 (4 grandparents, 2 parents and 1 child), and 4-2-2 (4 grandparents, 2 parents and 2 children) family structure will become the two main patterns within the Chinese society (Feng et al., 2014). The 4-2-1 structure seems to cause more stress for the only children because they must face challenges in elder care without support from siblings. In contrast, the 4-2-2 structure may cause more burden for the couples whereby these couples (commonly are only children) have to care for four older parents and two children at the same time. While, their children will have siblings to share care responsibilities in the future, these couples are considered the 'sandwiched generation' without siblings themselves, and must care for both their children and parents. Dealing with both child and elderly care may lead to more constraints and stress for the parents. Parents' stress in turn may adversely influence children's sibling relationships as shown in a recent study (Chen, in press-a).

Considering that the 4-2-1 and 4-2-2 patterns will become prevalent in Chinese families, grandparents should be considered as a good potential source of childcare support (Goh, 2009). This suggests that, three-generation living arrangements, in which grandparents, parents and children reside together or live closely, should be encouraged. Such arrangements are commonly acceptable in China. Most of grandparents seem to have enough energy and time to provide childcare, given the official retirement age is relatively young (i.e., 60 for most men, 55 for female white-collar workers and 50 for other employees) in China. Traditionally, Chinese

grandparents are highly involved in childcare responsibilities. But it is unclear about

grandparents' involvement when their children have more than one child. For

example, previous literature has shown that grandparents tend to have a grandson

preference (Wang, 2015), hence it is interesting to examine whether grandparents

may treat granddaughters differently.

In order to promote family functioning and welfare, including sibling

relationships, some issues ranging from macro to micro levels are of concern. In the

following section, we discuss sibling relationships with respect to its systemic nature

in Chinese contexts based on the relational developmental systems meta-theory

(Overton, 2015). The relational developmental systems meta-theory emphasizes the

process mechanism by which individuals and contexts mutually influence each other

(Overton, 2015). In particular, all levels of context where an individual lives, exist in a

mutually influential way across the life span (Lerner, Agans, DeSouza, & Gasca, 2013).

Therefore, to adequately understand the development of sibling relationships across

the life span, we should focus on the significant contexts at different levels. We

proposed a Developmental Contextual Model of Sibling Relationships (See Figure 1)

to promote future research. In this model, parents and grandparents directly

influence child adjustment and sibling relationships. Also, child adjustment and

sibling relationships, can also actively influence parents and grandparents. In

addition, the basic features of child (and siblings), parents, and grandparents are

portrayed as both influencing factors and developmental outcomes. Kinship network,

school/work, community, policy, and culture are five broader levels. Last, all

individuals and contexts change over time. Therefore, the mutual influential relations between individuals and contexts may subsequently change. Some points as future directions are emphasized in the model.

-- Figure 1 about here--

First, we emphasized that policy is a broad level context that influences roles in sibling relationships. Some family policies should be changed and new policies should be introduced to improve the two-child family's welfare. In the previous decades, Chinese governments gradually retreated from welfare provisions such as providing a daycare centres affiliated to the workplace and free apartments for employees. At present, both maternal and paternal leave periods seem to be too short for parents to effectively care for children. In particular, there are few explicit governmental initiatives to encourage and support fathers to be involved in childcare. Furthermore, elder care leave is extremely lacking. Therefore, more social support from the community and government is needed. For example, previous welfare provisions, such as child care and living accommodation, should be reinstated; maternal and paternal leave should be extended and should be transferable between the couples; and tax reduction or tax-free status should be provided for the family with two children.

Second, family responsibility as an important traditional cultural value should continue to be emphasized. Family responsibility in Confucian cultural contexts reflect not only care and respect of the elderly, but also care and respect between siblings. One of recent investigation showed that family responsibility might be a

buffer against the negative effect of parents' differential treatment of siblings (Chen, 2019). Specifically, children's perceived parents' differential treatment may lead to lower levels of positive sibling relationships which in turn may lead to lower levels of family responsibility. Programmes to improve children's sense of family responsibility are important. For example, formal or informal courses about family responsibility can be developed in K-12 schools.

Last, there are developmental variations across time within contexts and across contexts within time (Lerner et al., 2013). Therefore, the time factor together with contextual factors may lead to diversity of sibling relationships. In China, there is very limited investigation based on longitudinal designs. We do not know how sibling relationships develop and change across the life span. For example, it is unclear how sibling relationships in early childhood may influence its relationships in older adulthood, and how the changes and developments of sibling relationships may influence elder care. We believe that the use of longitudinal design in the future research has an important role in enabling us to understand sibling relationships.

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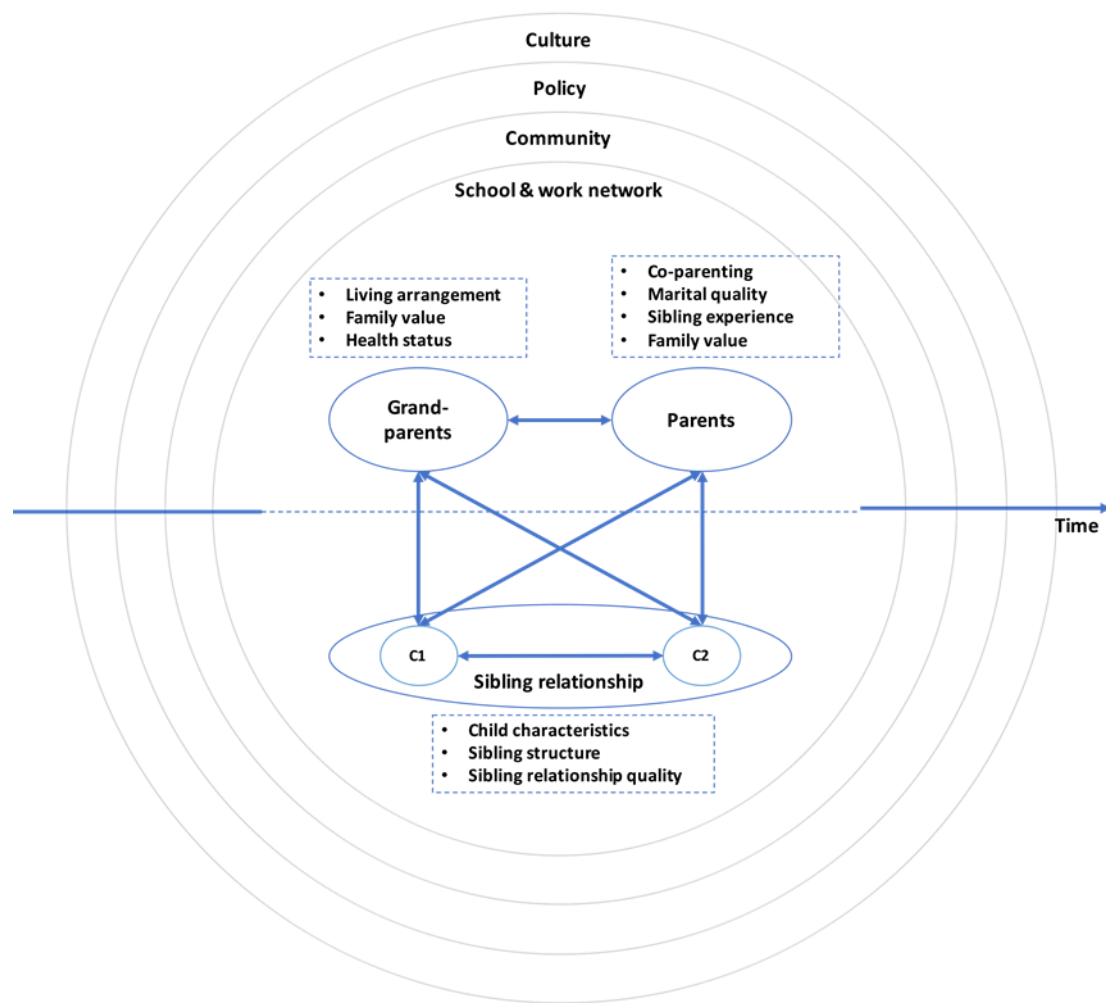
Figure 1. A Developmental Contextual Model of Sibling Relationships

Notes. C1= the firstborn child; C2= the secondborn child.