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## **'Barter', 'deals', 'bribes' and 'threats': Exploring Sibling Interactions**

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### Abstract

This paper investigates forms of strategic interaction between siblings during childhood. We argue that these interactions, characterised by notions of reciprocity, equivalence and constructions of fairness, are worked out in relation to responsibility, power, knowledge and sibling status. Birth order and age are not experienced as fixed hierarchies as they can be subverted, contested, resisted and negotiated. To explore these issues, in-depth individual and group interviews were conducted with a sample of 90 children between the ages of 5 and 17, drawn from 30 families of mixed socio-economic backgrounds in central Scotland with three siblings within this age range.

Keywords: birth order, children, siblings, sibship, strategic interaction

## **'Barter', 'deals', 'bribes' and 'threats': Exploring Sibling Interactions**

The study of siblings remains dominated by psychological perspectives (for example Dunn, 1984; Lamb and Sutton-Smith, 1982) whilst a sociology of 'sibship'<sup>1</sup> remains underdeveloped (exceptions include: Edwards et al. 2005a, 2005b; Mauthner, 2002; 2005). As Mauthner notes; 'the experience of being a sister or a sibling is largely absent from social research on family life' (2005: 623). This paper, then, does not deal with aspects of personality and/or pre-determined stages of children's 'development' but rather the analysis is rooted in processes of interaction between siblings and *their* accounts of this interaction. Psychological literature has tended to perceive siblings in relation to the 'roles' and 'expectations' of their birth order position (for example McGuire et al., 2000; Sutton-Smith and Rosenberg, 1970) and the prevalent view of the 'vertical' child-parent relationship is at the expense of 'lateral' relations *between* siblings (Mauthner, 2005; Mitchell, 2003). Such perspectives can gloss over much of the sibling experience and underplay children's agency within sibling relations. We have found that a focus on strategic interaction within these lateral relations, is a useful starting point through which to highlight children's agency in their routine negotiations with siblings.

To this end we concentrate on what can be described as, borrowing from Goffman (1970), 'strategic interaction' and various forms of exchange between siblings which we see as an important part of the experience of sibling lateral relations. This strategic interaction that is discussed below

invariably involves the 'bartering', 'deals', 'bribes' and 'threats' that are included in the title of this paper. Issues of power, status and the birth order hierarchy emerge as being central to the sibling experience of lateral relations. Until recently the status hierarchy of the birth order has often been perceived as ascribed and fixed rather than socially constructed. It has been argued that birth order can determine children's personalities as well as shaping their work and educational attainment (Berthoud, 1996; Sulloway, 1996). However, this paper emphasises the importance of social context and children's own understandings of the sibling order (Edwards, 2005a).

Much of the focus of extant scholarship concerned with siblings is upon rivalry, conflict and support networks (Bank and Kahn, 1982; McGuire et al., 2000). Forms of exchange and relations of reciprocity have been under-researched. Exchange relations between siblings are inextricably bound up with moral obligations and relations of power associated with the birth order (Dunn, 1993; Minnett et al., 1983) and this is a key difference between intra-generational sibling interactions and other forms of inter-generational exchange (Punch, 2005). Although age, birth order and strategic interaction are deeply interlinked, for purposes of clarity the paper is organised in the following way. It begins by exploring the forms and nature of strategic interaction between siblings. Subsequently, it considers the role and impact of birth order in relation to siblings' strategic actions. Finally the paper argues that power is negotiated in interactions between siblings and is not simply the product of birth order.

## **The study**

The study<sup>2</sup> was based on a sample of 90 children (52 boys and 38 girls) between the ages of 5 and 17, drawn from 30 families of mixed socio-economic backgrounds in central Scotland with three siblings within this age range. The children were all white<sup>3</sup>, non-disabled, full siblings who lived with both of their biological parents except for four single mother households. Hence, ethnicity and disability are not considered in this study and the limitations of the sample size mean that the impact of social class and different household forms cannot be fully explored. Nevertheless, the in-depth and exploratory nature of the research has facilitated an examination of the kinds of processes involved in children's experiences of sibling relations. In particular, the sample has allowed for a consideration of sibship and birth order in families with three siblings aged 5-17 from children's own perspectives. It is acknowledged that the dynamics between smaller or larger numbers of siblings may be different to the sibship interactions discussed here, and is an area which could be explored in further research.

The field work began with essay-based classroom research at three local Scottish schools where 180 children (aged 7-14) wrote essays about their experiences of sibling relationships. This stage informed the design of semi-structured interviews and, along with some additional snowballing, enabled access to be negotiated with 30 families. Each of the 90 siblings were interviewed individually in their homes, followed by 30 focus group interviews with all three siblings together, using a range of brainstorming tools including

spider diagrams, lists and ranking exercises (see Punch, 2007). The key themes explored were the positive and negative aspects of sibship and their birth order position, shared activities, household responsibilities, coping with conflict and parental interventions, and comparing sibling relations with friendship and the child-parent relationship.

### **'I'll give you a tenner if you don't tell Mum': Siblings and strategic interaction**

This paper goes on to argue that birth order and age are important in shaping the nature of strategic interactions. However, before considering the role of the sibling order, we focus on relations between siblings that have a 'strategic' character and intent. In this we were led by the terminology of the siblings interviewed and the way in which they themselves described and discussed particular types of interaction:

It's bribery but I'd ask them that much they'd have to do it. (Ian 14, oldest)

*Graham:* Janice wouldn't go to mum and dad if I was really annoying.

*Sam:* Why wouldn't she?

*Graham:* Because she would probably think that she could sort it out on her own. She'd probably try to make a deal. (Graham 11, middle child – Janice 13)

Thus the children in our research often used words such as 'barter', 'trade', 'swap', 'bargain' and 'deal' when discussing many of their interactions with siblings: "I'd probably persuade them to do it. ... I'd kind of make a bargain with them, like a few sweets if they did it or something" (Michael 11, oldest). The term most commonly used was 'bribe': "they might bribe me a little" (Douglas 9, youngest). The making of deals and bartering involved a particular type of knowledge and certain skills which some siblings were acknowledged to be better at than others and which could be learned and practised.

Goffman describes strategic action as involving a situation where two or more parties, 'find themselves in a well-structured situation of mutual impingement where each party must make a move and where every possible move carries fateful implications for all of the parties' (1970: 100-101). Further, he adds that:

Courses of action or moves will then be made in the light of one's thoughts about the others' thoughts about oneself. An exchange of moves made on the basis of this kind of orientation to self and others can be called strategic interaction. (Goffman, 1970:101)

We do not fully endorse Goffman's attempt in 'Strategic Interaction' (1970) to show the general applicability of 'game theory' nor do we intend to impose the overly rationalised [and masculine] (Vaughn, 1997) categories and perspective of 'social exchange theory' (Blau, 1964; Coleman, 1990) onto

interactions between children. However, our research shows that siblings regularly, even on a daily basis, exchange goods, time and services and do so with an, albeit approximate, understanding of reciprocity and equivalence in these exchanges (Cheal, 1996; Gouldner, 1960). They also take into account in these interactions notions of power, status and sibling hierarchy – which we discuss more fully below. They do this to an extent that it makes the utilisation of Goffman’s term a fruitful one. A sense of this can be gained from the following:

She seems to be more devious than Josh so I mean she like, she’s got blackmail on her side sometimes, very rarely needs to use it but she does sometimes. (Steven 15, oldest – Josh 13, Mandy 11)

Steven suggests that his sister can operate tactically when necessary, and he continues his discussion by illustrating that he and his brother can also manage their interactions in a strategic manner:

*Steven:* Well you can [trust him to keep a secret] up until like he gets in a row at which point he tends to blurt out everything, if it’s like, if there’s a chance of him dragging me down with him. If it’s like it’ll increase the blame or the punishment, or if he’s really mad at me, if we like get into an argument or a fight or that then afterwards it’s ‘oh well I’m going to tell mum that you did this you know’.

*Sam:* So if he does that what do you do?

*Steven:* Bribe, threaten, punch. I don't know it just depends on the severity of it, if it's like something major then I tend to like bribe him 'cos then there's no chance he'll tell. (Steven 15, oldest)

Such exchanges often necessitate, as the above extract indicates, a degree of calculation and judgement where actions are more considered, tactical and pre-meditated, displaying characteristics indicated in Goffman's definition of strategic interaction.

### **Reciprocity and equivalence**

Much academic, and lay, concern with exchange and reciprocity is based around those exchanges taking place within the context of a 'market' (McIntosh and Erskine, 2000). For many of us the word exchange is synonymous with market exchanges and it can seem somewhat incongruous to apply it to other areas of social life, particularly the family and relations between siblings. However, reciprocal exchanges have long been recognised as a central component of social life within and beyond the market place (Finch and Mason, 1993; Mauss, 2002; Nelson, 2000; Schwartz, 1967; Titmuss, 1970). As Simmel put it, '...all contacts among men [sic] rest on the schema of giving and returning an equivalence' (in Gouldner 1960: 162). It comes as no surprise then that understandings of reciprocity and equivalence permeate through sibling exchange and strategic interaction. In our study, goods, services and favours were routinely weighed up and balanced against



each other and working notions of equivalencies were formed. Gouldner has pointed out that :

The norm of reciprocity may serve as a starting mechanism ... when internalised in both parties, the norm obliges the one who has first received a benefit to repay it at some time. (Gouldner, 1973: 252-3)

Money is a key way in which siblings can encourage each other to do things and 'repay' favours:

*Nick:* Like getting Joanna to tidy up my room for me and things like that.

*Sam:* And does she?

*Nick:* Sometimes. I sometimes manage to persuade her by offering her something.

*Sam:* Like?

*Nick:* 20 pence. (Nick 11, middle child - Joanna 9)

It's like if I can't be bothered to colour in one of my projects, I'll say 'I'll pay you to colour it in for me'. (Gareth 13, oldest)

Various types of 'stuff' could be used to conduct 'deals', 'barter' and negotiate. Goods such as sweets or toys were a common currency of exchange, as these comments indicate:

'I'll give you a bar of chocolate if you go and get the coal out for me or clear the rabbit out'. (Jeni 13, oldest)

Sometimes you can like get him to do stuff, bribery, 'cos I mean I've got a Gameboy and Pokemon and he absolutely loves that so I like use that as a condition. Sort of like 'if you do this you can play that for tonight'. (Josh 13, middle child – Steven 15)

Thus money or specific goods, particularly food or the use of computer games or CD players, are often used as payment for the other sibling's time or labour. Persuading a sibling to do something may include carrying out a chore on their behalf: "I'll tell him [Daniel, 13] that I'll put the dishes away tonight" (Judith 11, middle child) or providing them with a particular service: "Make me toast and get my cup of tea" (Karina 12, middle child). Rather than offering labour, other exchanges involved a direct interchange of goods and/or money:

They have Gameboys and I've got a Gameboy advanced so Sarah likes playing that so I give her a game on that sometimes .... 'If you let me bring your CD player away to Edinburgh or something in the car then I'll let you use it or something like that'. (Martin 11, youngest)

Sometimes I want to buy some sweeties off them if they've got a selection box. 'You'll have to pay me a £1' or something like that. (Jeni 13, oldest)

In such ways, siblings often displayed a high level of competence in negotiating deals with each other. As Bauman argues, in the case of equivalent exchange, 'One is guided above all by concern with 'just' payment in exchange for the services one renders to the needs of the other' (1990: 90). To this extent the siblings in our research were aware of the ownership rights and values of particular possessions (see also Raffaelli, 1992) and had a strong sense of 'fairness' when entering into strategic negotiations. The moral underpinnings to such exchanges and dealings thus provided the context within which they were conducted and understood. So, as much as strategy, rivalry and calculation, such relations involve a sense what is fair and just:

I said 'if I get ten minutes [on the computer] then you can have ten minutes and then I'll have ten minutes etc'. (Susan 12, oldest)

Tim's actually got a CD player and I haven't in our room and it's quite useful. He usually lets me use it 'cos I've got some CDs which he likes to listen to and he's got the CD player. (George 11, oldest – Tim 9)

Notions of equivalence, then, are important in many of the sibship exchanges which they described in the interviews: "I'd probably give her like 50p but not a pound" (Kathryn 9, youngest – Erica 10). However, some siblings felt that they had perhaps been overly generous in fulfilling their side of the bargain: "I paid Craig to do my history project cover ... £2.50 and he did it. A bit of a rip off!" (Gareth 13, oldest – Craig 11). On the whole, children only agreed to the conditions of a particular exchange "if it was enough" (Jeni 13, oldest). Often

one sibling would have to increase their initial offer for the deal to be accepted:

She just puts on a sweet voice and she's like 'please' and then she's like 'I'll give you a bit of my chocolate' and she's like 'I'll give you five bits of my chocolate.' (Marina 12, middle child – Sally 15)

In this way a culture of reciprocity and reciprocal exchange was maintained and monitored. This was by no means precise and was often open to negotiation and could result in argument and recrimination. Berking makes the point that 'Reciprocity does not mean equivalence, but rather a culturally determined 'approximateness' brimming with different variants' (Berking, 1999: 28). This was evident in sibling exchanges and attaining equivalence between exchanges was the catalyst for much subsequent strategic interaction.

### **Learning about strategic interaction**

Some siblings had learned to be particularly resourceful in striking a good deal, for example by arranging to swop something which is of little value to them. As Bauman states: 'One bargains about the meaning of equivalence. One deploys all the resources one can lay one's hand on in order to obtain the best deal possible and tilt the transaction in one's own favour' (1990: 90). In our research we found that some siblings could often achieve greater

satisfaction by managing to exchange something that they dislike or do not need for something that they do want:

It usually works. 'cos I don't like the sweets I've got so I just flog them off on them. (Helen 10, oldest – Ken 8, Scott 6)

Well normally I'll scour round the house while she's doing it to look for 20 pence 'cos I don't really want to give away my own 20 pence. And eventually I'll find coppers and things and I'd give it to her sometimes. (Lucas 12, middle child – Annabel 8)

I told him if you got rid of Josh and you went and disappeared then I'd give him a can of Fanta, which worked. I didn't tell him it was off sell by but I just let him. (Mandy 11, youngest – Steven 15, Josh 13)

The ability to 'get a good deal' was also linked to birth order and will be discussed in more detail later. However, the above examples were from an oldest, middle and youngest child respectively, all aged 10 or 11, suggesting that perhaps age is as important as birth order in being able to barter successfully. For example, whilst some deals are straightforward, others were more complex and involved some manipulative tactics which siblings can learn from each other. It was the youngest siblings who were considered to be more easily deceived, particularly if they were not only in the youngest birth order position but also if they were in the lowest age range of siblings interviewed (approx. 5-7 years old). The following extract indicates how

younger children's more limited knowledge and shorter life experience can lead them to concede to 'unfair' or deceitful exchanges:

*Robin:* Well we once were playing rounders and we really wanted him to go in the other team so we said right, we had our fingers crossed behind our backs and like 'OK Tom we'll give you two pounds and an ice lolly if you go in the other team.' And he said mmm yes, and then like we were all laughing 'cos he didn't know that, that sign, what it meant, and at the end we told him it was the sign and he goes 'aaagh.' So that's the way we do it with Tom.

*Sam:* And could you do that sort of thing with Susan do you think?

*Robin:* No. Well you could do deals with Susan but by tricking her in a way wouldn't be so easy. You could deal with Tom much easier than Susan, I'm not quite sure how you can deal with Susan, money is probably the way,

*Sam:* And why do you think it's easier with Tom then?

*Robin:* Because Tom can be tricked much easier than Susan can, like train cards when they were in fashion, like you could do, you could trade something to Tom and do a like, you could get a best trade with Tom than you could with Susan. You could like say 'oh I'll give you, like something', and it's not that good, like something that you don't really need. And you could do that easily but with Susan you'd have to give her a good swap. (Robin 9, middle child - Susan 12, Tom 5)

Thus, it seems that younger siblings have a smaller range of tactics to draw on. Their repertoire of strategies is not as well developed when compared with their older siblings. However, as an oldest sibling said about her sister, 'She'll learn, she'll learn' (Lisa 16, oldest). Furthermore, there is evidence from the data that many of these strategies, negotiations and the doing of deals could be learned, in part, from parents' attempts at controlling, disciplining and encouraging their children's behaviour:

*Daniel:* Yeah they, well my mum anyway has figured out that physical attacks won't work as well any more. I don't think she's had any chance to like prove that physical attacks won't work any more but she resorts more to blackmail now.

*Sam:* How do you mean when you said physical attacks?

*Daniel:* Just like, she used to like smack you if you'd done anything wrong, this was like when I was six, seven, eight, but I mean now like I'm taller and I'm taller than her, I don't know just bigger apparently. (Daniel 13, oldest)

We don't usually get pocket money, it's just like if we're going out my mum gives us money depending how well we've behaved. If we've been really good for a week and we want to go to the pictures, she'll give us about ten pounds or something, it just depends. (Josephine 15, oldest)

Many children described their parents using pocket money as a way to encourage good behaviour or the completion of household chores. Others

reported more creative exchanges such as doing domestic tasks in return for computer privileges: “if they need any jobs done, it’s ‘oh I’ll give you a certain amount on the computer time for this and that’” (Steven 15, oldest). The children’s accounts suggested that the parents in our sample generally relied less on ‘smacks’ and physical power and chastisements as their children got older. Similarly some siblings indicated that they negotiate more and fight less as they get older:

Well it’s like I’ll take away the Gameboy or in the worst circumstances usually a fight occurs. But we don’t fight as much any more, it’s, we used to fight like mad but usually now it’s like political instead of physical, so like bribery and stuff. (George 11, oldest)

It has been noted (and is perhaps a common experience for many of us) that within the family unequal power relations are more marked in child-parent relationships than in relations of power between siblings (see Furman and Buhrmester, 1985). Parents have recourse to disciplinary power and hold significantly more control over household resources (Mayall, 2002; Punch, 2005). Furthermore as Valentine argues: ‘parents’ superior age, size and life experiences means that their power over their children is literally embodied’ (1999: 150). Within intra-generational sibling relationships power tends to be less asymmetrical and more evenly dispersed. The effect of this can result in more opportunities for bargaining and negotiation. Consequently, there tends to be increased ‘power-struggles’ and forms of resistance amongst brothers and/or sisters who often can resort to a less legitimate and ‘cruder form of



power, of threats and offers' (Dowding, 1996: 64). Our research bears out the notion that the daily routines of siblings are characterised by the ebb and flow of such interactions. However these, as we have pointed out, are often not simplistic but can involve a high level of intricacy and a nuanced understanding and application of equivalence and reciprocity such that they could be understood as 'skilled accomplishments' (see Garfinkel, 1967). This emphasises that such strategic interaction involves a repertoire of skills and knowledge which are learnt and applied through and within sibling interaction.

The 'clever' thing to do was to learn to develop strategies and tactics to deal with 'annoying' sisters and/or brothers. Given this we would argue that Mitchell's (2003) use of the term 'lateral' in connection to sibship implies sets of relationships which involve greater degrees of parity and symmetry of power relations than we found in our research. Sibling strategic interaction involves complex and dynamic weaves of power which can revolve around age, birth order and, we found to a lesser extent, gender.

**'He said go away, and I said only if I can borrow your Beano':  
Knowledge, time and space in sibship interactions**

Often it was not a tangible good or obvious 'service', such as getting their room cleaned, that was being bartered or offered for exchange. Bargains were often struck over the use of time and space, or getting their sibling to stop being annoying and/or to go away. The general pattern, but not in every occasion, that emerged from the data was that such requests tended to be

initiated by older siblings to their younger siblings. We can get a sense of this from the following example where two boys attempt to gain some peace by trying to get a younger brother to stop his annoying humming:

Well, George makes up an imaginary chocolate bar and sometimes George winds Andy up by saying 'oh this is really nice' or by playing one of Andy's favourite tunes but pretending to play it and saying 'oh this is really good'. Then we say 'we'll let you listen to your favourite song if you stop it'. ... 'We'll give you some chocolate or we'll put on your favourite music, if you go away for an hour'. (Tim 9, middle child – George 11, Andy 5)

It has been argued that a defining feature of sibship is conflict (Raffaelli, 1992) often because siblings perceive each other to be 'annoying' (Edwards et al., 2005a). During childhood siblings who live together in a relatively small space know much about each other's bad habits. This sharing of time, space and knowledge can create conflicts (Punch, 2008). Consequently, one of the key aspects of sibling's strategic interaction is to accrue some peace and quiet by getting the other sibling to stop being 'annoying': "Give them something so they'll go away" (Lisa 16, oldest – Maisie 12, Alison 8). It is more difficult for them to weigh up the equivalences and obligations involved in such an exchange but, as with more tangible goods, both sides have to bargain to achieve their desired goals:

Well this morning I went into Barry's room and he said 'go away', and I said 'only if I can borrow your Beano'. And then he said 'no' and I said 'then I won't get out'. ... Sometimes my brother says 'well if it gets you out and shuts you up then take it and go'. (Beatrice 7, youngest – Barry 9)

*Tony:* If we want to get them, like me and my friends, want to get them to go away then we'll have to do whatever they want.

*Kathryn:* ... Well we just annoy them so much that they do it.

(Kathryn 9, youngest - Tony 15, Erica 10)

Our research shows that sibling relations are as much about conflict resolution, negotiation and compromise as about stark 'conflict' (Punch, 2008). Endeavours to barter or strike a deal could be accepted and complied with in a co-operative manner or could be faced with attempts to compromise, negotiate or resist. Thus sibling interactions are not unlike the cooperative conflict experienced in spousal relations whereby there is 'scope for openly expressed conflict to coexist alongside areas of cooperation' (Kabeer 1994: 130). Siblings develop a 'stock of knowledge' (Schutz, 1972) that can be tapped into and called upon when necessary and they can also bring to bear a close and detailed knowledge from home, and often from school, that can become an integral part of any exchanges, deals and forms of strategic interaction. The following quotes help to illustrate this:

*Craig:* If you did something bad that you didn't want anyone to know. Say I got sent to the office at school and Roxanna saw me in the office, she would tell mum and dad and they would go mad at me. I would tell them but in my own time.

*Sam:* Is there anyway you can get her not to tell?

*Craig:* Threaten her

*Sam:* Threaten her?

*Craig:* Say 'I'll beat you up if you tell'

*Sam:* And does that work?

*Craig:* No. Sometimes you can bribe them. Say 'if you don't tell, I'll give you a shot on my computer' or you give them a sweetie or something.

(Craig 11, middle child – Roxanna 9)

The keeping of secrets and threatening to 'tell', particularly parents, was a common strategy:

*Linda:* But if he wants me to do something and I say 'no I don't want to do it', he'll say 'I'll tell mum about our little secret'. And I do that to him as well so I think it's a bit the pot calling the kettle black but...

*Sam:* What sort of stuff would that be then?

*Linda:* Like if he made a mess in the sink or something and he said that he hadn't done it but then he told me or I was with him when he did it and something like that. But like on a more major basis where he could get in trouble if mum found out. (Linda 12, middle child – Giles 14)

Thus in return for not 'telling' parents and withholding knowledge a reward may be given and deals done. Often goods would be traded or the offer of carrying out chores would be suggested. Younger siblings in particular seemed to take great delight in using knowledge about an older sibling to strike a bargain whereby the older sibling has to fulfil tasks for them:

Like if she does something at the house ... I can use that against her and she's like 'don't tell anybody.' ... Some things she doesn't really bother but some things she's like 'right, right, I'll do whatever you want.'  
(Marina 12, middle child – Sally 15)

*Lisa:* Like just say I broke something and I didn't want my mum and dad to find out, and I told her then she'd like say 'oh you can do this and I won't tell you know.' ... She'd just keep using it and using it until I told them or she told them.

*Sam:* What sort of stuff might she want you to do?

*Lisa:* She gets me to like get her juice and stuff and clean her room our and clean her shoes and that kind of stuff. (Lisa 16, oldest – Maisie 12)

Such, albeit relatively less frequent, opportunities for younger siblings to boss their older sibling about, making them run errands on their behalf, provides evidence of the flexible nature of the birth order and the more equitable distribution of power between siblings in comparison to the more hierarchical relations between parents and children (Punch, 2005). Given this, there is

more space for younger siblings to resist the 'authority' of older siblings and gain a measure of control in their daily routines and interactions.

**'You've still got an older person to look up too but then you've also got a person to look down on': Exploring the birth order**

The impact of the birth order is fundamental to the nature and extent of strategic interaction between siblings and often the most common way in which sibling relations are portrayed and understood. Explanations of sibling behaviour are often read off in a direct way from birth order, which is assumed to be ascribed and fixed, but we found that the birth order is a much more fluid 'hierarchy' (Edwards et al., 2005a).

Birth order differences are often utilised, incorporated and worked through in sibling practices. Issues of status, power and the ever present presence of parents (for those children in our sample) often work their way into, and become evident in, more strategic forms sibling interaction. Similarly, in achieving an acceptable level of reciprocation and equivalence in their dealings with one another they will often have to overcome, or put into practice, the various advantages and disadvantages of being the oldest, middle or youngest sibling. Thus notions of reciprocity and equivalence are worked out against a background of responsibility, power, knowledge and a hierarchy of seniority often implicitly bestowed by the birth order. In essence, the children interviewed had a strong understanding of the relative advantages and disadvantages of the birth order:

*Sam:* You said that you like being in the middle, why's that?

*Nick:* Because then you've still got an older person to look up to but then you've also got a person look down on.

*Sam:* And when you look down on them, it's...?

*Nick:* Demanding, overpowering, things like that.

*Sam:* In what kind of ways?

*Nick:* Like getting Joanna to tidy up my room for me and things like that.

(Nick 11, middle child – Joanna 9)

The thing that's good about it is because I like being the smallest sometimes because well sometimes they help me and I don't have to help them usually because they're older than me. And they're older than me, and I'm the smallest so I don't usually have to help them 'cos they know more than me. (Sylvia 6, youngest – Daniel 13, Judith 11)

The general pattern that emerged from the data showed that being the oldest sibling gave a number of advantages in relation to doing deals and overseeing exchanges. Knowledge in this case was most certainly power, as indicated earlier in the extract by nine year old Robin who acknowledged that he was likely to attain a 'best trade' from his five year old younger brother but he would have to give his twelve year older sister a 'good swap'. Thus older siblings were often seen to be too clever to be tricked or deceived: "sometimes I can get Joanna ... to do things, but never Nicola unless she wants to" (Nick 11, middle child – Nicola 14, Joanna 9). Furthermore, older

siblings had the added advantage of being more likely to be trusted and believed by parents.

*Helen:* I always tell but sometimes they deny it. They say 'we didn't do it, it was her, it was her.' And they give the blame to someone else.

*Sam:* And what happens then? What does your mum say?

*Helen:* Well, she normally believes me 'cos I'm older and I can be put in charge. (Helen 10, oldest – Ken 8, Scott 6)

In particular the oldest siblings could benefit from the increased status conferred on them by their parents when they were temporarily left in charge of their younger siblings:

Because when mum's at work I always make him do things, so if he's left his bowl in the playroom and stuff I ask him to bring it through to the dishwasher. And he says 'no I don't want to do that', and so I shout at him because mum gives me a row if the place is messy when she comes back from work and so. ... Well I just tell him I'm not going to make his lunch and then he takes his things through. (Rosemary 14, middle child – Douglas 9)

The following example shows how, by anticipating potential difficulties of baby-sitting her younger siblings, the oldest sister gave them treats in order to encourage them to behave well:



*Josephine:* I think I done quite a good job because they didn't argue once or get on my nerves. ... They had a wee den in their room, bed covers over the bunk beds and everything. I told them they could have a wee picnic up there and then watch a video and everything so I think they get quite excited at that and so I could just stay downstairs and just run up and keep an eye on them. 'cos they're getting allowed to do stuff they're not allowed to do, they like me more.

*Sam:* And why do you let them do stuff they're not normally supposed to do?

*Josephine:* So they're not arguing with me and getting on my nerves, they're quite happily playing. (Josephine 15, oldest – Marcos 9, Jackie 5)

This illustrates how siblings can operate strategically with each other and also the importance, in this case, of being able to buy 'peace and quiet' in return for a reward. On the one hand, the responsibility of 'being left in charge' by parents increases older siblings' 'authority' temporarily which may add to their bargaining power during sibship exchanges. Yet, on the other hand, older siblings experience the additional pressure to maintain order and enlist their siblings' cooperation. Mauthner (2005) also found that the expectations and obligations surrounding sibling care tends to involve a mixture of power, emotions and pressure.

In our study, generally there were advantages to being older which consisted of increased power in the forms of knowledge and responsibility. Older siblings enhanced position of power includes both the social power they get

from their status in the birth order hierarchy, as well as physical power as Graham suggests:

I could probably say, 'if you do ... I'll something', I'd probably do that to Isobel but I couldn't do it to Janice 'cos she would just do it back much harder. 'if you don't, I'll hit you', and Isobel would probably be scared but if I did that to Janice, Janice would probably just hit me back harder. (Graham 11, middle child – Janice 13, Isobel 8)

The greater physical size and strength of most older siblings gave them an additional weapon which they could use when negotiating deals. Furthermore, as Graham's quote suggests, when siblings engaged in strategic interaction birth order and age tended to be more significant than gender. Gender is important in shaping some, but not all types, of sibship interaction (Punch, 2001). For example, Edwards et al. (2005b) demonstrated that gender was particularly important in determining the nature of siblings' shared activities and talk as well as in the ways they deal with change. However, in our research we found that notions of reciprocity and equivalence, that are negotiated through responsibility, power (physical as well as social) and knowledge, are linked more to children's location in the birth order than to gender.

Whilst generally the older siblings had an advantage in strategic interaction with younger brothers and/or sisters, they were also aware that their birth

order position did not automatically grant them more bargaining power with their younger siblings:

I suppose I'll be able to baby-sit and get money. You can bribe them much more easily! It doesn't always work though. (Jeni 13, oldest – Gordon 11, Andrew 10)

She's like 'I'm in charge so you do this' and we're like 'no we're not doing that' so she just gets annoying sometimes. (Marina 12, middle child – Sally 15, Bridget 9)

Thus potential benefits from being an older sibling cannot be translated in a mechanical way from the birth order (Edwards et al., 2005a). Our research indicates that age and birth order can be experienced at times as a constraint on sibling behaviour and at other times as a resource that can be utilised in a dynamic and creative manner. Birth order is important in shaping children's experiences of sibship, but relative benefits have to be actively maintained and the limitations of each position in the sibling order are not passively accepted and are often contested. Advantages can accrue and be utilised by younger siblings and in our study, there were many examples of younger siblings resisting the demands of older siblings and managing to cope with their nominally weaker position in the birth order hierarchy:

If Beatrice gets a new Polly Pocket, Barry and I will be 'what's it like, what's it like?' and she'll be like 'no it's new, I'm not going to let you look at it'. (Ashley 11, oldest – Beatrice 7, Barry 9)

Our findings concur with those of Brannen et al. (2000) who found that children's sibling relations were shaped by the hierarchies of age and birth order, but that 'Sometimes they challenged and sometimes they invoked these social hierarchies, depending upon their position within them, and their ability to negotiate them' (Brannen et al., 2000: 129). Thus, birth order and age can be structuring but also flexible and dynamic in practice. Children, as competent social actors, negotiate their sibship positioning on a daily basis during interactions with their brothers and/or sisters as well as over time. Hence, there are no set rules regarding the ways in which children's sibship experiences of birth order are worked out in their everyday lives (see also Edwards et al., 2005a).

## **Conclusion**

This paper has focused on a particular aspect of sibship: an exploration of what can be described as forms of strategic interaction between siblings. The social world of siblings can be a closely bounded one. Parental authority over the use of time and space and the physical confines of the home can have the effect of giving sibling relations a high degree of intensity and density (Punch, 2008). Within such, albeit porous, 'confines' deals, bartering, bribes and threats can take on a magnified importance. This is a realm of interaction

amongst siblings that is characterised both by a degree of calculation, self-interest as well as understandings of reciprocity, equivalence and fairness in their dealings with brothers and sisters. This is of course not the only kinds of relations and interactions that siblings indulge in and we have downplayed the role of, for example, emotion, humour, companionship and loyalty in our discussion. However, as Bauman suggests, even most 'love relationships contain elements of business-like bargaining for the fair rate of exchange in the 'I'll do this if you do that' style' (Bauman 1990: 106). Our research has explored the importance of such transactions within children's sibships and has demonstrated the fluidity of birth order, power and status in sibling interactions.

The dynamic nature of birth order position and age was a key finding in our research and this came out clearly when siblings were engaged in forms of strategic interaction. Whilst, on the one hand, children had a clear understanding of the stereotypical expectations, roles and power hierarchy in relation to birth order, on the other hand, they also recognised and demonstrated that in practice the roles and power of their birth order positions were not static but could be negotiated and transformed. This coincides with the *shifting positions* discourse which Mauthner (2002) describes in her research on sistering where role reversals take place between the 'big sister' role of carer and the 'little sister' position of being cared for. However, in our study we found less evidence of Mauthner's *positioned* discourse because, although the workings of the hierarchical sibling order during childhood are

very influential in everyday sibling practices, there are nearly always moments when power fluctuates and birth order status is challenged or overturned.

Edwards et al. (2005a) also observed that children's birth order hierarchy could be questioned, but mainly in relation to issues of care and protection, such as when a sibling was ill or being bullied, or in relation to the perceived (im)maturity of their sibling. However, in our research the reversing of the sibling status order was not only dependent on specific situations of care-giving or adherence to ideas of maturity, but could be much more fluid, occurring during fleeting moments of strategic interaction.

The opportunities and constraints of a particular location in the birth order can be used as a resource within sibling practices. Yet, as this paper has shown, birth order and age are not fixed hierarchies but can be subverted, contested, resisted and negotiated in children's everyday lives. It is also worth bearing in mind that sometimes children accept their sibling status position and do not try to compromise or choose not to resist. Just as Finch and Mason (1993) argued that responsibilities and notions of reciprocity are worked out rather than fixed in inter-generational family relationships, we found that processes of negotiation within intra-generational family relationships are also more important than normative rules.

Furthermore, in this study birth order and age were more important in shaping the type and extent of exchanges and negotiations than being a 'girl' or a 'boy'. This is not to say that gender is not significant in sibling practices (for

example see Edwards et al., 2005b; Mauthner 2005) but that it has a relatively lesser role to play in sibling strategic interaction compared with birth order and age. Thus sibship involves a continuum of shifting power relations where the balance of power between siblings moves back and forth according to different contexts and multiple factors, including birth order, age, gender, parental intervention, and access to other economic and social resources.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> We use the word 'sibship' as a shorter term for 'sibling relationship', having first read the term in Powell and Steelman's work (1990).

<sup>2</sup> This research was carried out by one of the authors during a three year British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship.

<sup>3</sup> The sample does not include families from minority ethnic groups which is partly a reflection of their distribution of 1.6% in the total Scottish population (Scottish Office, 1999).