Sibling Coercion in Collectivist Families: A Structural Case for Boundary Work

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ABSTRACT

Sibling aggression and abuse are common, harmful, and consistently associated with broader family violence dynamics, yet the focused search conducted for this paper identified limited studies directly examining the configuration in which an older sibling recruits a younger sibling into concealment from parents. This paper proposes "coerced concealment" as a descriptive pattern within sibling psychological aggression and argues that structural family therapy offers a potentially useful relational formulation for intervening in it, because the configuration is organized around subsystem boundaries, hierarchy, and coalitions rather than around any individual's psychopathology. Drawing on a focused narrative review of studies from North America, Europe, and Africa, the paper examines how selected studies from these regions document sibling obligation and its risks differently, ranging from family-violence framing in United States scholarship to value-transmitting sibling caregiving documented in African settings. A focused narrative search without a publication-year restriction combined fourteen public-web queries, two PubMed queries and one directly verified additional record. After recognized duplicate occurrences were removed, 166 records were screened using titles and available excerpts or metadata; 23 source works were inspected and 20 retained. Subsequent access verification yielded fifteen full-text, one partial-text and four abstract-only sources, with no retained metadata-only sources. A safety-led structural intervention framework is proposed as an evidence-informed conceptual extension, in which assessment of threats, dependence, retaliation risk, and caregiver safety precedes any boundary work, and in which the primary outcome is the cessation of threats and the younger sibling's safe freedom of refusal rather than increased parental knowledge. A constructed composite vignette illustrates the framework's application within a collectivist family, with citations in the vignette identifying conceptual antecedents rather than evidence that fictional events occurred. The paper closes with testable propositions and an evaluation agenda.

Key words: Coerced Concealment, Sibling Coercion, Collectivist Families, Narrative Review

INTRODUCTION

Sibling relationships are among the longest-lasting and most emotionally intense relationships in human life, and their quality of life is robustly associated with adjustment across childhood, adolescence, and adulthood (Edels et al., 2024). When those relationships turn harmful, the consequences are serious: the first global meta-analysis of sibling aggression and abuse found pooled victimization prevalence of 37.7 percent and perpetration prevalence of 35.8 percent, with trauma-related symptoms showing the strongest outcome association (r = .434) (Tian & Chen, 2026). The same review concluded that sibling aggression and abuse are best understood as occurring "within broader family violence dynamics, rather than as an isolated sibling-dyad problem" (Tian & Chen, 2026). This family-level framing converges with a definitional argument that sibling aggression and abuse should be labeled and treated as family violence (Tucker et al., 2025). Taken together, these findings mean that sibling aggression and abuse are common enough and family-entangled enough to be a routine concern for family therapists.

The sibling abuse literature has documented threats and intimidation as part of the broader construct (Tian & Chen, 2026), and the adolescent secrecy literature has documented distinct disclosure-secrecy profiles with differential well-being correlates among adolescents (Tang, 2024). However, extant scholarship have barely

examined what happens when concealment is not freely chosen by an adolescent but is imposed on a younger sibling by an older one (Tian & Chen, 2026). This paper, therefore, proposes "coerced concealment" as a descriptive pattern within sibling psychological aggression, grounded in the sibling-abuse evidence rather than presented as a validated diagnostic entity. The question is urgent in collectivist family settings, where sibling obligation is morally loaded, and older siblings may hold quasi-parental authority over younger ones (Angu, 2025; Nnama-Okechukwu & Okoye, 2024). In such settings, the older sibling's recruitment of the younger may be experienced not as deviance but as a legitimate exercise of seniority, while the younger sibling's compliance may be experienced as loyalty rather than victimization (Angu, 2025). As used here, collectivism refers to family systems in which obligations to kin are endorsed as morally binding and seniority organizes authority, a property of family systems rather than of nationalities or ethnicities (Angu, 2025; Nnama-Okechukwu & Okoye, 2024). The clinical danger is therefore twofold: therapists may pathologize culturally meaningful sibling responsibility or miss coercion hidden within that same responsibility (Kline et al., 2024; Stanić, 2025).

Evidence that sibling caregiving can be identity-supporting in some contexts and that parentification can harm adolescents in others shows that the distinction is real rather than rhetorical (Angu, 2025; Stanić, 2025). Therapists working across cultures, therefore, need a formulation that honors obligation while naming coercion precisely (Angu, 2025; Tian & Chen, 2026). Building on this evidence, the paper makes three contributions. First, it maps the conceptual boundaries between coerced concealment and adjacent phenomena, including bullying, ordinary secrecy, privacy, and sibling caregiving. Second, it offers a structural formulation of the pattern, specifying what the sibling subsystem, boundaries, and hierarchy each contribute to its maintenance, and identifying what the structural literature does and does not establish. Third, it proposes a safety-led intervention framework that adapts structural techniques for culturally diverse families, with explicit attention to how sibling obligation is documented differently across North American, European, and African studies. Each contribution is offered as a conceptual extension of existing evidence rather than as a claim that these specific propositions have already been tested.

Conceptual Boundaries

Coerced concealment, as proposed here, is a pattern in which an older sibling uses threats, intimidation, exploitation of loyalty or dependence, or manipulation of family obligation to secure a younger sibling's participation in keeping information from parents or other caregivers (Tian & Chen, 2026). The definition deliberately includes three elements grounded in the sibling-aggression literature: an imbalance of power or authority, a demand for secrecy that the younger sibling cannot freely refuse, and an implicit or explicit consequence for refusal (Tucker et al., 2025). The pattern is relational and systemic in the strict sense that it requires at least three parties to function, namely the older sibling, the younger sibling, and the adults from whom information is held (Lee, 2024). Its closest evidence base is the family-violence literature on sibling aggression and abuse, which documents both threats and the family-level dynamics in which they occur (Tucker et al., 2025). The pattern is therefore proposed as a descriptive formulation within sibling psychological aggression, not as a trait of any individual child or as a validated diagnostic category.

Coerced concealment must first be distinguished from ordinary sibling conflict and from freely chosen secrecy (Tang, 2024). Sibling conflict and hostility fall outside the sibling aggression and abuse construct, which is reserved for harmful behavior involving distress (Tian & Chen, 2026). Adolescent secrecy toward parents, for its part, is developmentally normative: a person-centered study of 253 Chinese adolescents identified five distinct disclosure-secrecy profiles and linked them differentially to depression and loneliness, indicating that secrecy is a heterogeneous behavior with heterogeneous correlates rather than inherently pathological (Tang, 2024). The proposed pattern targets only the subset of secrecy imposed on one sibling by another, rather than secrecy chosen by an adolescent regarding their own affairs (Tian & Chen, 2026). This boundary protects therapists from treating ordinary adolescent privacy as a symptom while still naming the imposed variant (Tang, 2024; Tucker et al., 2025).

Second, coerced concealment must be distinguished from sibling bullying as conventionally defined (Tian & Chen, 2026; Tucker et al., 2025). The bullying framework, following the widely used definition of repeated aggressive behavior involving harm and imbalance of power, imports criteria developed for peer relationships

(Tian & Chen, 2026). The meta-analytic authors themselves caution that some scholars consider power imbalance less central in sibling bullying than in peer bullying because sibling roles may be reciprocal and shifting, and that applying peer-bullying criteria uncritically may obscure the distinction between abuse and less serious meanness (Tian & Chen, 2026). A single credible threat to a dependent younger sibling could fall within the proposed pattern even without repetition, which is one reason the bullying frame fits imperfectly (Tian & Chen, 2026; Tucker et al., 2025). The definitional argument that sibling aggression and abuse are family violence supports locating the proposed pattern in family-dynamics terms rather than in peer-bullying terms (Tucker et al., 2025).

Third, coerced concealment must be distinguished from legitimate privacy and from supportive sibling caregiving (Kline et al., 2024; Tang, 2024). Privacy, understood as a younger person's own information about their own affairs, is a developmental good to be protected in therapy (Tang, 2024). Sibling caregiving, documented across cultural contexts, is frequently value-transmitting and identity-supporting rather than harmful: retrospective reports from 350 Latinx young adults showed that adolescent sibling caregiving predicted ethnic identity resolution and responsibility, with ethnic identity resolution in turn associated with fewer depressive symptoms (Kline et al., 2024). The clinical task is therefore not to treat sibling responsibility as pathology, but to distinguish responsibilities that support the younger sibling from those that imprison them, a distinction that the caregiving literature supports conceptually but has not yet operationalized (Angu, 2025; Kline et al., 2024). Misreading that distinction in either direction carries clinical costs: pathologizing obligation risks alienating families, while normalizing exploitation abandons the younger sibling to it (Angu, 2025; Stanić, 2025).

The distinction turns on freedom of refusal, which this paper proposes as the operational hinge of the construct (Angu, 2025; Kline et al., 2024). In the Cameroonian setting of Bamenda, a mixed-methods study involving 100 adolescents and 31 parents found that sibling caregiving was associated with adolescents' internalization of cooperation, sharing, responsibility, empathy, and mutual help (Angu, 2025). That study's account of sibling caregiving is framed in terms of value rather than threat, though the published account does not itself establish that no participant complied under pressure (Angu, 2025). The Latinx retrospective evidence links sibling caregiving to identity and responsibility rather than to depressive symptoms in that sample (Kline et al., 2024). Coerced concealment names the configuration in which the moral language of sibling obligation is present, but the younger sibling's participation is secured through fear rather than consent, and establishing which configuration is present is an assessment task in each case (Tian & Chen, 2026). By extension, while a parental child assume authority typically associated with a parent and can function without experiencing harmful role reversal, it becomes an issue when that authority is abused or displaced. Also, unlike coerced concealment, abuse-related silencing does not necessarily require an explicit instruction to remain silent (Stanić, 2025).

METHODS

This paper is a conceptual analysis informed by a focused narrative review, an approach suited to configurations that have not been directly reviewed, as is the case for the pattern proposed here (Tian & Chen, 2026). The search underlying the review is drawn from the author's log of platforms, dates, queries, and verification, because first-party records, rather than published articles, are the appropriate documentation of an author's own operations (Karadağ, 2026). The eligibility window of four years means foundational structural and family-violence concepts are engaged through recent scholarship that cites and extends them rather than through their original texts (Cădariu & Rad, 2025; Tucker et al., 2025). The review's limitations, including the geographic concentration of the sibling evidence and the absence of existing studies of the exact configuration proposed here, are addressed in a later section (Tian & Chen, 2026). The following comparison of regions is, accordingly, a comparison of selected studies rather than of regional cultures (Karadağ, 2026).

Academic database searching via an AI-assisted research platform was conducted in October 2026. Eligible articles included works published between 16 October 2022 and 16 October 2026. Query themes used were: sibling aggression; sibling bullying; sibling abuse; coercion; secrecy and concealment; parentification; sibling caregiving; structural family therapy; cultural adaptation; regional terms (North America, Europe, Africa). Publisher pages or indexed records were checked for retained sources; full or partial text read was conducted

for most sources; and metadata-only verification for several sources was performed. Candidate sources were excluded when publisher records could not be checked; some publisher sites blocked automated retrieval, and affected sources were retained only when indexed records sufficed. A focused narrative search without a publication-year restriction combined fourteen public-web queries, two PubMed queries and one directly verified additional record. After recognized duplicate occurrences were removed, 166 records were screened using titles and available excerpts or metadata; 23 source works were inspected and 20 retained. Subsequent access verification yielded fifteen full-text, one partial-text and four abstract-only sources, with no retained metadata-only sources. Selection was not independently duplicated, no standardized risk-of-bias assessment was performed.

The paper is written from the position of a clinician and scholar working at the intersection of Nigerian Igbo heritage, Kenyan professional life, pastoral ministry, and systemic practice, and that position informs the questions asked rather than serving as evidence about any community; declaring positionality in this way is consistent with reflexive methodological practice (Ademolu, 2023). Reflexive scholarship cautions that insider identity neither guarantees access to participants' meanings nor exempts the researcher from the obligation to provide evidence (Ademolu, 2023). The author's vantage point motivated the paper's comparative scope, but it does not substitute for the reviewed evidence (Karadağ, 2026). Claims about families in any setting rest on the cited studies rather than on the author's biography (Ademolu, 2023).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Sibling Aggression, Abuse, and Family Dynamics

The empirical foundation for taking sibling harm seriously is now substantial (Edels et al., 2024; Tian & Chen, 2026). The first global meta-analysis of sibling aggression and abuse synthesized 117 studies, 87 with child or adolescent samples and 30 with adult retrospective samples, ranging from 47 to 32,586 participants, and followed PRISMA guidelines with prospective registration (Tian & Chen, 2026). Its prevalence estimates, each pooled from analysis-specific samples of studies, were 37.7 percent for victimization (95 percent confidence interval 29.2 to 47.0, 31 studies), 35.8 percent for perpetration (95 percent CI 21.8 to 52.8, six studies), 33.3 percent for overall involvement without role distinction (95 percent CI 23.2 to 44.9, 25 studies), and 30.2 percent for mutual bully-victim involvement (95 percent CI 15.8 to 49.7, nine studies) (Tian & Chen, 2026). These are pooled estimates as reported by the review, and readers should consult the review's own tables for assessment frames, measurement periods, and heterogeneity, since the pooled samples differ across estimates (Tian & Chen, 2026). The scoping review of sibling relationship quality reaches the compatible conclusion that sibling negativity is a primary correlate of adverse social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes (Edels et al., 2024). The scale of the evidence base supports family-level theorizing, while remaining correlational in character (Tian & Chen, 2026; Tucker et al., 2025).

The evidence on the correlates of sibling aggression is unambiguous about its family-level character (Tian & Chen, 2026; Tucker et al., 2025). Across 68,044 participants in predictor analyses, the strongest correlates were parent-child violence and conflict ($r = .503$) and inter-parental violence and conflict ($r = .372$), both substantially stronger than negative parenting styles ($r = .180$) or peer bullying victimization ($r = .154$) (Tian & Chen, 2026). The review's authors interpreted this pattern as evidence that sibling aggression and abuse may occur within broader family violence dynamics rather than as an isolated sibling-dyad problem (Tian & Chen, 2026). Positive parenting styles showed a protective association with victimization ($r = -.101$), suggesting that the family climate surrounding the sibling dyad is associated with harm in both directions (Tian & Chen, 2026). The strength of the parent-child conflict association indicates that vertical relationship conflict is associated with horizontal harm (Tian & Chen, 2026; Tucker et al., 2025). A family-focused formulation of sibling patterns is thus consistent with the evidence rather than only with theory (Tian & Chen, 2026; Tucker et al., 2025).

The outcomes of sibling aggression and abuse are equally family-relevant (Edels et al., 2024; Tian & Chen, 2026). Across 114,011 participants, trauma-related symptoms showed the strongest association ($r = .434$), followed by externalizing behaviors ($r = .358$), intimate relationship problems ($r = .339$), peer relationship

problems (r = .312), delinquency (r = .243), and parent-child relationship problems (r = .236) (Tian & Chen, 2026). The presence of parent-child relationship problems among the outcomes indicates that sibling harm is associated with the vertical relationships in the family, not confined to the horizontal ones (Tian & Chen, 2026). A separate scoping review of 23 studies found that sibling negativity plays a primary role in adverse internalizing, externalizing, and social outcomes, while sibling positivity can be protective, particularly in the context of adverse life events such as trauma (Edels et al., 2024). Protective findings of that kind matter for intervention design because they suggest the sibling relationship is worth restructuring rather than dissolving (Edels et al., 2024). The outcome profile as a whole is consistent with the view that sibling harm is a family-relevant phenomenon (Tian & Chen, 2026; Tucker et al., 2025).

The sibling relationship also functions as a channel of influence in its own right (Dong & Chen, 2024; Whiteman et al., 2024). A three-wave longitudinal study of adolescent sibling pairs found that older siblings' earlier alcohol use predicted younger siblings' later alcohol use through direct and indirect influence pathways (Whiteman et al., 2024). A cross-lagged study of Chinese adolescents found that perceptions of sibling relationship quality and sibling influence were longitudinally associated and moderated by birth order, with older siblings' positions conferring differential sway (Dong & Chen, 2024). These findings ground the structural intuition that the older-younger axis carries real interpersonal power that can be used for socialization or for exploitation. This kind of influence is consistent with evidence on sibling caregiving, which shows that older siblings bear real responsibility for younger ones in many cultural settings (Angu, 2025; Kline et al., 2024). The same authority that transmits values can plausibly be bent toward coercion, which is the central clinical proposition of this paper (Angu, 2025; Tian & Chen, 2026).

A further strand completes the evidence picture (Eckert et al., 2026). In a longitudinal international sample of 497 caregivers each reporting on two children, parental differential treatment predicted later sibling relationship quality, with no evidence of the reverse path in that study (Eckert et al., 2026). The proposed coerced-concealment pattern sits at the intersection of sibling harm associated with family dynamics (Eckert et al., 2026; Tian & Chen, 2026). It’s conjunction in the coerced-concealment pattern constitutes this paper's proposed synthesis rather than a located finding (Tucker et al., 2025).

A Structural Formulation of Coerced Concealment

Structural family therapy conceptualizes families as systems organized into subsystems with boundaries, hierarchies, and coalitions, and it treats symptoms as products of dysfunctional structure rather than of individual pathology (Cădariu & Rad, 2025; Lee, 2024). Recent applications demonstrate the model's continued clinical vitality across settings, including structural-strategic work with families in the transition to emerging adulthood and case-based syntheses of the approach with adolescent behavioral problems (Lee, 2024; Martins et al., 2026). The structural lens is therefore not a historical curiosity but an active framework with current scholarly support (Cădariu & Rad, 2025; Martins et al., 2026). Its core propositions map naturally onto a configuration defined by who may speak to whom about what, which is the grammar of boundaries and subsystems (Cădariu & Rad, 2025; Lee, 2024). The formulation below should be read as an application of structural concepts to a proposed pattern, not as a claim that the model's founders described this pattern.

Within that lens, the sibling subsystem is a horizontal subsystem whose protective boundary serves a developmental function: it is where children practice cooperation, conflict, and mutual support away from adult scrutiny, and its integrity is a condition for healthy individuation (Cădariu & Rad, 2025; Lee, 2024). Coerced concealment represents a specific corruption of that subsystem's boundary rather than an excess of it (Cădariu & Rad, 2025; Tian & Chen, 2026). The boundary that should separate the sibling subsystem from the parental subsystem is bent into service of the older sibling's concealment, while the boundary that should protect the younger sibling inside the subsystem is violated by the older sibling's threats (Cădariu & Rad, 2025; Tian & Chen, 2026). In this formulation, what appears as sibling closeness or loyalty may be the subsystem's boundary doing the older sibling's work. Distinguishing protective sibling privacy from boundary corruption is precisely the kind of structural assessment this formulation is designed to support.

The pattern is structurally maintained by three interlocking transactions (Cădariu & Rad, 2025; Lee, 2024). First, the older sibling occupies a position of delegated or assumed authority over the younger, which in collectivist settings may be continuous with genuine caregiving responsibilities (Angu, 2025; Nnama-Okechukwu & Okoye, 2024). Second, the younger sibling's compliance is policed through threat, which converts the sibling bond into an instrument of control and generates the fear documented in the sibling abuse literature (Stanić, 2025; Tian & Chen, 2026). Third, the parents' access to information about their children is filtered through the sibling dyad, which means the parental subsystem is being regulated from below, potentially without its knowledge (Lee, 2024). Each transaction is a legitimate structural object of intervention (Cădariu & Rad, 2025; Lee, 2024). The three together offer a structural account of how such a pattern could persist over time.

A parallel caution applies to the term coalition (Cădariu & Rad, 2025; Lee, 2024). In structural language, a coalition is an alliance between family members against another member, and a cross-generational coalition joins a parent and child against another parent, whereas an alliance between two siblings against the parents is a within-generation coalition (Cădariu & Rad, 2025; Lee, 2024). Coerced concealment often presents clinically as a sibling coalition against parents, but its defining feature is that one member of the coalition is involuntarily involved (Tian & Chen, 2026). Calling it a coalition without the adjective "coerced" risks distributing responsibility equally between the siblings and thereby blaming the victim, which is why precise language matters clinically and legally (Tucker et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2025). The family-violence framing of sibling aggression supplies the vocabulary for keeping responsibility located with the person who threatens (Tian & Chen, 2026; Tucker et al., 2025). Structural and family-violence languages are thus complementing rather than rivals in describing this pattern (Lee, 2024; Tucker et al., 2025).

The structural formulation also clarifies what would count as change (Cădariu & Rad, 2025; Lee, 2024). Boundary work, in the structural tradition, involves actively strengthening, softening, or redrawing the rules governing who participates in which subsystem, and case-based scholarship documents its use in adolescent behavioral problems (Cădariu & Rad, 2025; Lee, 2024). In coerced concealment, the corrective boundary work would be threefold: re-establishing a safe adult channel for the information the family needs, which may or may not be the parents depending on assessment; re-establishing the younger sibling's freedom to decline inside the sibling subsystem; and re-routing the older sibling's accountability through an appropriate adult relationship (Lee, 2024; Martins et al., 2026; Wang et al., 2025). Each of these is a structural move, and none requires the younger sibling to become a different person, which is the model's chief advantage over individual formulations (Cădariu & Rad, 2025; Lee, 2024). Structural-strategic work with emerging adults illustrates that explicit renegotiation of dependence and autonomy is feasible in sessions with adolescents and parents (Martins et al., 2026). The same logic of negotiated structure extends, as a proposal, to the sibling axis.

The Cultural Loading of Sibling Obligation

Sibling obligation is not a uniform phenomenon, and recent research documents both its benefits and its costs across cultural settings (Angu, 2025; Kline et al., 2024). Retrospective accounts from Latinx young adults in the United States showed that sibling caregiving during adolescence predicted ethnic identity resolution and responsibility in adulthood, and that ethnic identity resolution in turn was associated with fewer depressive symptoms (Kline et al., 2024). In Bamenda, Cameroon, adolescents' sibling caregiving was associated with the internalization of cooperation, sharing, responsibility, empathy, and mutual help, which parents and adolescents alike understood as the transmission of core socio-emotional values (Angu, 2025). These findings warn against treating sibling responsibility as inherently burdensome or coercive, since in the studied communities it is a primary vehicle of moral formation. Obligation is thus the culturally normal state of the sibling relationship in the settings studied, not a deviation requiring explanation (Angu, 2025; Nnama-Okechukwu & Okoye, 2024).

At the same time, obligation can shade into exploitation when it is combined with family stress, though the reviewed studies do not test this as a moderator (Stanić, 2025; Tian & Chen, 2026). A study of 701 Croatian adolescents found that psychological abuse was linked to emotional parentification, which in turn was related to internalized problems, indicating that children's premature assumption of adult emotional responsibilities

carries measurable risk (Stanić, 2025). The clinical concern is that the same cultural script that makes sibling caregiving meaningful may also make its exploitation harder to detect, because compliance looks like virtue (Angu, 2025; Stanić, 2025). Whether stress turns obligation into harm is therefore a hypothesis grounded in these adjacent findings rather than a tested mechanism (Stanić, 2025; Tian & Chen, 2026).

The moral loading of sibling obligation is particularly visible in Igbo and broader West African family systems, where children are raised within extended kinship networks in which caregiving circulates beyond the nuclear household (Michael et al., 2026; Nnama-Okechukwu & Okoye, 2024). Research on kinship fostering in Igbo communities of southeastern Nigeria documents belief systems in which the community functions as a collective caregiver and children are, in principle, the responsibility of a wide kin network (Nnama-Okechukwu & Okoye, 2024). Within such systems, an older sibling's claim on a younger sibling's loyalty has deep cultural resonance, and the older sibling may legitimately hold delegated authority (Angu, 2025; Nnama-Okechukwu & Okoye, 2024). Igbo identity itself is actively transmitted across generations, as diasporic naming practices show, though the study of naming practices does not, by itself, establish that sibling obligations travel with migration (Michael et al., 2026). The therapist working with such families needs to know that this authority is real and valued, because interventions that dismiss it risk losing the family.

Family obligation in African settings also has material and transnational dimensions that shape sibling dynamics (Anaweokhai, 2024; Rakgwata & Tshifhumulo, 2026). Studies among South African emerging professionals show that financial obligations to extended family function simultaneously as social capital and as social pressure, shaping identity and family dynamics in the transition to adulthood (Rakgwata & Tshifhumulo, 2026). Transnational Nigerian families experience what one study calls the emotional cycle of indefinite separation, in which siblings and parents manage obligation across borders (Anaweokhai, 2024). Nigerian diaspora parents who send children "home" for schooling describe intergenerational negotiation of loyalty and good parenting, African immigrant mothers describe transnational mothering at a distance, and Black African migrant parents in Canada report the parenting and psychosocial costs of separation (Cheung Judge, 2025; Muruthi et al., 2025; Semagn et al., 2026). These dynamics matter clinically because coerced concealment in migrant families could plausibly be sustained by sibling networks extending beyond the household, a possibility the located studies do not directly examine.

The role of religion and help-seeking pathways further conditions how sibling conflict surfaces in African settings, as documented in the located studies (Kumbet et al., 2023; Uroko & Ezenweke, 2025). Research on urban Nigeria reports that adults generally prioritized religious and spiritual pathways before consulting formal services for distress, suggesting that sibling distress is often routed first through religious structures (Uroko & Ezenweke, 2025). Studies of adolescent mental health in Ghanaian and Nigerian family medicine clinics show that adolescent distress is common in primary care settings in those countries (Kumbet et al., 2023). In Kenya, an integrative review of trauma therapy for gender-based violence survivors shows growing attention to cultural context in mental health care, but sibling-specific intervention research remains scarce (Githenya, 2026). The practical implication proposed here is that family therapists in such settings frequently encounter sibling coercion that has not previously been named professionally, a possibility grounded in these help-seeking patterns rather than in direct evidence.

Comparing Regions: North America, Europe, and Africa

A comparison across regions must ask the same analytical questions of each, and the questions adopted here are how sibling harm is defined and framed, how sibling obligation is understood, what makes refusal possible for a younger sibling, and what protective and therapeutic responses are documented (Tian & Chen, 2026; Wang et al., 2025). The studies available for this comparison are unevenly distributed and not representative of regions, and the comparison below is accordingly a selection of studies, not of regional cultures or protection systems (Karadağ, 2026; Tian & Chen, 2026). The available studies do not permit comparisons of prevalence, obligation, or protection-system functioning across regions. What they permit is an examination of what selected studies from each region have documented and what remains unstudied. This limitation is stated at the outset because comparative claims in family therapy are easily overread.

On definition and framing, the quantitative evidence about sibling harm is largely generated within high-income settings: the global meta-analysis drew 57 of its 117 studies from the United States, 18 from the United Kingdom, and 6 from China, and the definitional argument that sibling aggression and abuse constitute family violence was made by United States-based scholars (Tian & Chen, 2026; Tucker et al., 2025). This concentration means that prevalence and association estimates are largely pooled from high-income samples (Tian & Chen, 2026). The review of mandatory reporting across 21 low- and middle-income countries confirms that the reporting literature is concentrated in high-income contexts, limiting what can be inferred about protection elsewhere (Wang et al., 2025). A US-dominated evidence base is a documented limitation that any comparative use of these findings must carry (Tian & Chen, 2026). North American evidence also includes the Latinx sibling caregiving study, which documented value-transmitting caregiving within the United States, indicating that the risk-versus-resource contrast is not regionally exclusive (Kline et al., 2024). The comparison below, therefore, treats these as selected studies conducted under particular institutional frameworks rather than as representatives of regional cultures.

The European studies located for this review examined policy and clinical questions rather than sibling prevalence (Marmor & Devaney, 2025; Stanić, 2025). A grounded theory analysis of the United Kingdom's debate over mandatory reporting of child sexual abuse documented deep stakeholder disagreement about what mandatory reporting would do (Marmor & Devaney, 2025). European intervention research also includes culturally adapted family programs, such as a co-designed digital platform supporting a culturally adapted family intervention for people of sub-Saharan African and Caribbean descent living in the United Kingdom, illustrating engagement with delivering family work across cultural differences (Whelan et al., 2026). The Croatian parentification study examined the burden side of family obligation with 701 adolescents using structural equation modeling (Stanić, 2025). These selected studies indicate that European scholarships engage both protection policy and culturally adapted family work. They do not characterize Europe as a whole, and the sibling-specific evidence from Europe in the meta-analysis is dominated by the United Kingdom.

The African-context studies located for this review document the value-transmitting character of sibling caregiving rather than sibling harm (Angu, 2025). The Cameroonian study linked sibling caregiving to the internalization of socio-emotional values, the Igbo kinship research documented collective caregiving beliefs, and the brother-sister program implemented in Jordan and Niger engaged whole families in gender-transformative work (Angu, 2025; Nnama-Okechukwu & Okoye, 2024). These selected studies frame the sibling dyad as a potential resource within family programs, which is a property of the studies rather than a regional fact (Angu, 2025). A review of school-based bullying victimization among African adolescents indicates an active research field on peer aggression in the region, though it does not address sibling aggression (Rtbey et al., 2025). The gap in African sibling-harm evidence is therefore a gap in the focus of the located studies rather than evidence of absence.

Regarding what makes refusal possible for a younger sibling, the reviewed studies examine different institutional contexts rather than a common phenomenon (Wang et al., 2025). The mandatory reporting review examined formal protection systems in low- and middle-income countries and found substantial barriers to their functioning, including professional uncertainty and systemic constraints (Wang et al., 2025). The African-context caregiving studies examined kin- and faith-embedded family life but did not adequately examine protection systems (Nnama-Okechukwu & Okoye, 2024; Uroko & Ezenweke, 2025). The available studies, therefore, do not permit conclusions about how refusal is scaffolded across any region as a whole; they differ in what they examine. Clinically, the reviewed evidence converges on the principle that refusal requires a credible alternative to compliance, regardless of the family's location (Wang et al., 2025). Where that alternative lies in a given case is an assessment question about that family's actual protective landscape (Wang et al., 2025; Whelan et al., 2026).

A Safety-Led Structural Intervention Framework

The framework proposed here proceeds in six steps and is explicitly an evidence-informed conceptual framework: its individual recommendations are grounded in premises from structural technique and the reviewed evidence, but neither the recommendations nor their combination has been tested as an intervention

(Cădariu & Rad, 2025). Step one is a separate safety assessment, conducted before any joint family session is contemplated (Wang et al., 2025). The therapist meets the younger sibling alone to assess the nature of threats, material and emotional dependence on the older sibling, the credibility of retaliation risk, and the sibling's own wishes about participation, because coerced transparency is itself a form of coercion and must not be replicated in therapy (Tian & Chen, 2026; Wang et al., 2025). The assessment extends to the caregiving environment itself, because parental violence or punitive control can make disclosure to parents unsafe and can make secrecy protective rather than pathological; the therapist therefore assesses whether a safe caregiver or safeguarding professional, not necessarily the parents, should receive information (Tian & Chen, 2026; Wang et al., 2025). The assessment also screens for disclosures that trigger jurisdiction-specific reporting duties, and the therapist explains confidentiality limits before the younger sibling discloses (Marmor & Devaney, 2025; Wang et al., 2025).

Step two is contextual inquiry into the family's sibling obligation norms, conducted with genuine curiosity and without presuming that culture explains coercion (Angu, 2025; Nnama-Okechukwu & Okoye, 2024). The therapist asks how seniority, caregiving, and loyalty are understood in this particular family, and how the older sibling's authority over the younger came to be established (Angu, 2025; Nnama-Okechukwu & Okoye, 2024). This inquiry distinguishes obligations that the younger sibling experiences as meaningful from those experienced as captivity, a distinction the caregiving literature supports conceptually (Angu, 2025; Kline et al., 2024). It also equips the therapist to frame interventions in the family's own moral language rather than importing foreign categories, a practice consistent with the culturally adapted framing of family group work in Ghana (Boakye et al., 2026). Where the family is religiously engaged, faith concepts may be invited as resources if the family holds them, consistent with evidence that distress in the studied Nigerian settings is often routed through religious structures first (Uroko & Ezenweke, 2025).

Step three is structural formulation, drawn as a map and shared with the family as a working hypothesis (Lee, 2024). The map marks the sibling subsystem, the delegated-authority line from parents to the older sibling, the violated boundary within the sibling subsystem, and the filtered-information path to the parental subsystem (Cădariu & Rad, 2025; Lee, 2024). The formulation deliberately does not distribute responsibility equally: the older sibling is accountable for threats and for the concealment demand, while the younger sibling is understood as coerced rather than complicit (Tian & Chen, 2026; Tucker et al., 2025). Sharing the map openly allows the family to correct it, which both improves the formulation and begins the restructuring, since families who see the structure can examine it (Lee, 2024; Martins et al., 2026). The map is thus simultaneously assessment and intervention, in the manner of structural practice generally (Cădariu & Rad, 2025; Lee, 2024).

Step four is boundary work and carefully selected enactment, undertaken only when step one has established safe participation and a safe recipient for any disclosed information (Wang et al., 2025). Boundary moves include physically and interactionally re-marking the sibling subsystem so that adult questions to the younger sibling no longer route through the older one, and, where parental caregiving is assessed as safe, re-establishing the parents as the executive subsystem for decisions about the older sibling's conduct (Cădariu & Rad, 2025; Lee, 2024). Enactments invite family members to speak directly to one another about real issues so the therapist can observe and redirect the transaction, with prompt interruption of threats, intimidation, and character attacks (Lee, 2024). The therapist must not engage in threatening exchanges or require the younger sibling to demonstrate progress through disclosure, because disclosing coerced secrets on demand would replicate the coercion in the room (Wang et al., 2025). Unbalancing, used sparingly, may support the younger sibling's voice, including the voice that declines to speak (Cădariu & Rad, 2025).

Step five is specific accountability by the older sibling, structured rather than spontaneous (Tian & Chen, 2026). The structural-strategic work with families in transition to emerging adulthood illustrates that explicit renegotiation of dependence and autonomy can be conducted in session with adolescents and their parents (Martins et al., 2026). In coerced concealment, the parallel move proposed here is a concrete acknowledgment that names the threats, takes responsibility for them, and explicitly releases the younger sibling from concealment and intermediary duties (Tian & Chen, 2026). A general apology is considered insufficient because it lets the pattern off the hook; the repair lies in the specifics (Tian & Chen, 2026; Tucker et al., 2025).

The therapist blocks interruptions and intimidation during this exchange, using the session's structure to make a new transaction possible (Lee, 2024).

Step six is follow-up with proposed indicators, which the therapist monitors in subsequent sessions. The primary outcome of the framework is the cessation of threats and the younger sibling's safe freedom to refuse, not increased parental knowledge, which may, in some cases, be neither safe nor clinically indicated (Wang et al., 2025; Tian & Chen, 2026).

The proposed indicators are the younger sibling's demonstrated freedom to decline secrecy demands, the younger sibling's reported reduced fear of retaliation, and the absence of repeated threats, all assessed through direct questioning rather than surveillance (Tian & Chen, 2026; Wang et al., 2025). These indicators are proposals rather than validated measures, and their status is stated as such because the framework itself requires evaluation. Documentation of the acknowledgment and release has conceptual antecedents in narrative practice, and its role in this specific framework is a proposed optional application that requires evaluation rather than being a tested component (Jagatdeb et al., 2024). Follow-up sessions also revisit the sibling obligation map, because the goal is a family in which seniority protects rather than imprisons the younger sibling (Angu, 2025; Nnama-Okechukwu & Okoye, 2024).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A Constructed Vignette

The following vignette is a constructed composite created for illustration, not a report of a clinical case, and citations within it identify conceptual antecedents of the techniques described rather than evidence that the fictional events occurred (Wang et al., 2025). Consider a Nairobi-based family of Igbo heritage, fictional parents and two sons, in which the seventeen-year-old has been truanting and has threatened his thirteen-year-old brother with harm and with the withdrawal of affection should the parents learn of it (Angu, 2025; Nnama-Okechukwu & Okoye, 2024). The presentation is the younger son's declining school performance and anxiety, which is consistent with how sibling harm often arrives in clinical settings, namely through the victim's symptoms rather than through the pattern being named (Edels et al., 2024; Tian & Chen, 2026). The family explains that the older son supervises the younger one after school, which they describe as proper seniority, and this framing is consistent with the documented role of older siblings in the region as value transmitters (Angu, 2025; Nnama-Okechukwu & Okoye, 2024). The therapist's first task in this construction is therefore not to confront the family's values but to locate the coercion inside them.

Applying step one, the therapist sees the younger son alone and learns that the threats are specific and feared, and that he has been keeping his brother's truancy secret for months (Tian & Chen, 2026; Wang et al., 2025). The same assessment confirms that both parents are safe recipients of disclosure in this constructed case, a determination the framework requires rather than assumes (Wang et al., 2025; Tian & Chen, 2026). Applying step two, the therapist explores with the parents how supervision of younger siblings is understood in their family and wider kin network and discovers that both parents were their families' eldest children and regard sibling oversight as a duty (Angu, 2025; Nnama-Okechukwu & Okoye, 2024). The structural map drawn in step three shows the parents' delegated authority bent toward concealment, and the therapist shares it as a hypothesis for the parents to correct and enrich (Cădariu & Rad, 2025; Lee, 2024). The parents' reaction, that they delegated supervision and not intimidation, becomes the therapeutic opening, because it distinguishes the culturally valued authority from its coercive exploitation (Angu, 2025; Tucker et al., 2025).

Steps four and five are then proceeded in a session judged safe by the criteria of step one (Wang et al., 2025). The parents, seated together as the executive subsystem, question the older son directly about his truancy, and the therapist blocks his attempts to route the conversation through his brother (Lee, 2024). The older son is supported, not ambushed, to name his threats specifically and to release his brother from secrecy-keeping, with the therapist interrupting any minimizing or intimidating transactions in the moment (Lee, 2024). The session closes with the parents restating what seniority means in their family, namely protection rather than exploitation of the younger sibling, which is a re-authored version of their own stated values (Angu, 2025;

Nnama-Okechukwu & Okoye, 2024). In the constructed follow-up, the younger son's freedom to decline is tested and supported, and the indicators proposed in step six are reviewed in subsequent sessions rather than assumed (Tian & Chen, 2026; Wang et al., 2025).

Implications and Testable Propositions

The paper's first implication is for assessment: family therapists may consider asking separately and privately whether any sibling has been threatened or pressured to keep information from parents, a screening proposal grounded in the prevalence of sibling aggression and abuse generally rather than in evidence on coerced concealment specifically (Tian & Chen, 2026). The second is for training: cultural competence in collectivist family work should include the ability to distinguish value-transmitting sibling obligation from coercive exploitation, a distinction the caregiving literature supports conceptually but does not yet operationalize (Angu, 2025; Kline et al., 2024). The third is for research: the construct of coerced concealment is offered as testable, and the following propositions are stated for evaluation (Tian & Chen, 2026). Each proposition pairs a claim about mechanism with the evidence base that would make it worth testing (Eckert et al., 2026). None of the propositions has been examined in the configurations proposed here (Tian & Chen, 2026; Tucker et al., 2025).

Proposition one: In families where an older sibling holds delegated authority, coerced concealment will be associated with the younger sibling's internalizing symptoms at levels comparable to other forms of sibling victimization, given the documented association between sibling victimization and emotional problems (Stanić, 2025; Tian & Chen, 2026). Proposition two: parental differential treatment will predict which sibling dyads develop coerced concealment, given the longitudinal entanglement of favoritism and sibling relationship quality (Eckert et al., 2026). Proposition three: the strength of the association between sibling obligation norms and compliance with coerced concealment will be mediated by the younger sibling's material and emotional dependence on the older sibling, consistent with the dependence mechanisms identified in the sibling influence literature (Dong & Chen, 2024; Whiteman et al., 2024). Proposition four: an intervention that includes separate safety assessment, boundary re-marking, and specific accountability will reduce the proposed indicators of coercion, a hypothesis requiring evaluation with designs suited to small clinical samples, since the existing studies barely test such protocols (Boakye et al., 2026; Jagatdeb et al., 2024). Together, the propositions translate the formulation into a research program.

An evaluation agenda follows from the propositions (Boakye et al., 2026). Studies should be conducted in the settings where the construct is proposed to matter, including West African, East African, and diaspora communities, rather than exporting instruments validated elsewhere (Boakye et al., 2026; Githenya, 2026). Qualitative work with adolescents who have experienced the pattern should precede quantitative measurement, both to honor the ethical requirement that constructs be grounded in lived experience and to refine the definition (Angu, 2025). Intervention studies should report safety events and refusals as outcomes, since the framework's core claim is that safety-led sequencing matters. The culturally adapted family programs studied in African settings provide design precedents for this agenda, though not evidence for this specific framework (Boakye et al., 2026).

LIMITATIONS

The evidence base for sibling aggression and abuse is dominated by the United States and the United Kingdom, with 57 and 18 studies respectively in the global meta-analysis against 6 from China and very few from African settings, which means the prevalence and association estimates may not reliably generalize to collectivist family systems. Limited studies have examined coerced concealment as a defined construct, so the formulation rests on conceptual integration rather than direct evidence and is offered as a hypothesis-generating contribution. The intervention framework is evidence-informed but untested as a package, and no claim is made that its individual recommendations or their combination have been evaluated. Also, the vignette does not draw on real practice. Methodologically, the regional comparison relies on selected studies rather than regional samples. The four-year eligibility rule excluded foundational structural texts, which are engaged here through recent scholarship that extends them, and readers should consult those originals directly for the primary formulations. The window also leaves out earlier sibling-abuse and intervention reviews and

Minuchin's own work, so the structural part rests mainly on two secondary sources. Together, these limitations offer opportunities for further research extension. A future conceptual review should rerun the search without the four-year limit in a standard database such as PsycINFO, taking into account the sibling-abuse and structural-therapy classics. Such a review should also include a brief vignette where the parents are not safe. In addition, discourse on how the younger boy consented to disclosure would test the proposed framework where it is hardest.

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